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Of Maras and Mortal Doubt
Violence, Order, and Uncertainty in Guatemala City

By

Anthony Wayne IV Fontes

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Geography

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2015

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Everyday brutality in Guatemala City shocks and numbs a society that has suffered generations of war and bloodshed. Much of this violence is blamed on *maras*, gangs bearing transnational signs and symbols, that operate in prisons and poor urban communities. I will explore how the *maras*' evolution in post-war Guatemala has made them what they are today: victim-perpetrators of massive and horrifying violence, useful targets of societal rage, pivotal figures in a politics of death reigning over post-war society. However, while *maras* and *mareros* play starring roles in this account of extreme peacetime violence, they are not the problem. They are a hyper-visible expression of a problem no one can name, a deafening scream, a smokescreen obscuring innumerable and diffuse sources of everyday brutality.

The *maras* will be my entry-point into a world defined by mortal doubt, and my guides as I navigate the rumors, fantasies, fears, and trauma swirling about criminal violence in post-war Guatemala City. The specter of violence has become so utterly entwined with the making of lived and symbolic landscapes that it cannot be extricated from the very fibers of everyday life. I will illuminate the myriad of spaces this violence infiltrates and reorders to expose the existential uncertainty haunting efforts to confront, contain, and overcome violence. In the process, I provide an alternative, intimate understanding of the violence and suffering for which *maras* speak, or are made to speak, and the ways this violence and suffering affects individual consciousness and communal life, orders urban space, and circulates in public discourse. Thus, I have arranged my arguments and stories in such a way as to capture the destabilizing psychological, affective, and visceral impact the conditions of extreme violation at work in post-war Guatemala City have on knowledge- and meaning-making. The veins of uncertainty fracturing this account are meant to rupture the pretense of knowing, and so break through into the treacherous and largely unmapped territory that is life lived in the shadow of constant violence.

For Gwendolyn my love

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Preface

A boy with dead eyes
Knows he's going to die. And soon.
I'll put you in a book, I say,
And you will live forever,
Far from the streets that killed you.
Simón, he nods,
Lifts his shirt to show
A woman's face wreathed in flames.
For my mother. They shot her 8 times.
For Celita, she was my angel.

How was that for you?

He leans back in a gray government chair,
A boy just grown.
At 8 years he raised a pistol too heavy for his thin wrists
And shot his friend in the face and chest.
Blau blau. Blau.
He never thought we'd come looking for him.

How was that for you?

A protected witness to crimes of which only the bones remain
Prosecuted by lawyers with nervous hands
Flanked by pug-faced bodyguards
licking fried chicken grease off their fingers.

We are bathed in halogen light
and the world is screaming.
I hear it echo off the polished linoleum.

High cheekbones, dark fuzz, beautiful lips.
Descuartizar. Matar. Morir.
To dismember. To kill. To die.
We buried the bodies beneath the living room floor.
Listen. You can hear their voices full of worms.
This happened, they say. I belong to you.
My brother, my lover, my child,
my dreams, my secrets,
my duties, my history...
are yours too in the endless night.

How *was* that for you?

The sun sets on the heaving

Metropolis.
The light within remains
marking time like a metronome
so I will know it was real.

I embrace the boy killer,
His dead loves and 10,000 victims.
I press my lips to his and whisper.
We drink our tears
And walk arm in arm
Into the sky bleeding light
From a billion mortal wounds.

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I send my deepest gratitude and my most heartfelt prayers to you, Walter, Yulissa, and the all of your family. May you survive this and future trials. I wish I could have helped you more.

Many journalists and Guatemala-based researchers provided me with invaluable insights and help. Special thanks to Peter Marchetti and Jennifer Casolo, who caught me when I landed in Guate, and never let me go. Mike McDonald, you are the best journalist I've ever met and a fine companion to get in trouble with, and thank you Sofia Menchu as well as Carlos Martinez and Jose Luis Sanz of *el Faro*. Thank you Marcelo Colussi, Rodolfo Kepfer, Megan Thomas, and Daniel Barczay for your depth of knowledge in all manner of historical and contemporary arenas.

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Of course, I owe the deepest depth of gratitude to my family. Gwendolyn and Norah, thank you for loving and supporting me through all these years of trial and separation. You are the lights of my life by which I find my way out of the darkness again and again. Thank you Mama and my dads Tony and Georges for teaching me about dreams and how to follow them. Marc and Paul, my brothers, you have always been and always will be my greatest companions of the soul. Grandma Priscilla, your support throughout my graduate career has been key to any success I can claim. Thank you Grandma Audrey for your never-ending curiosity, even as you float into the fog of forgetfulness.

*Prologue:
Farewell Guatemala City*

*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.
And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.
-Friedrich Nietzsche¹*

A few days before I left Guatemala City, I threw myself a going-away party. I invited all my friends, all my contacts and fixers; social workers, journalists and government functionaries, ex-cons and police, scholars and taxi drivers. Tommy arrived without his band of solvent-sniffing extortionists.² Elizabet and Elu, who gave me passage into the prisons, also came. But Gato, my best friend and most trusted gatekeeper in Guatemala from the beginning, did not. I called him a few times through the evening, and each time he said he was about to get a taxi and come over, but somehow I knew he wouldn't. There were a few international journalists from Reuters and AP, as well as local crime-beat reporters I met in court. A smattering of government functionaries—a national boxing team coach, a few lawyers from the prosecutor's office, but no police. Smiley and Secret both called in to thank me for the invitation. Neither felt safe outside their homes at night. They knew what could happen. But Calavera came with Eddy, his adopted brother. Towards dawn, I would walk in on Eddy curled drunk and sobbing on my bedroom floor, Calavera swaying over him, whispering that God sees all things.

Sometime before midnight Elu handed me her cell-phone. It was Juande, a former Mara Salvatrucha leader calling from prison, sending me the well wishes of Mo, Shaggy, Ervin, and the rest of the boys in Pavon. Earlier that week I caught the bus up the Carretera El Salvador to see them—one last trudge down the rutted, muddy road from the outer gate to the prison proper. The fog was thick, and I could see perhaps 30 yards ahead. I walked past the army base, where soldiers leaned against an armored vehicle and smoked one cigarette after another. Past the women's prison, silent except for guards in gray uniforms talking quietly as they queued up to buy hot breakfast from an old woman with a woven basket. Perhaps Pavon prison had disappeared altogether, I thought, not without an odd sense of hope, swallowed by the rain, sunk into the earth. I might walk a repeating loop forever, passing the same men in uniform coalescing and dissolving in the gray. But it was not so.

For more than a year I made regular visits to Pavon and other prisons to talk to the men trapped inside, chronicle their life histories, delve into their stories and fantasies. I quickly learned that the prison is the most secure entry-point into the underworld. But I took no notes that day, smuggled in no camera, recorded no dialogue. I just wanted to say goodbye. Without the distraction of trying to collect information, the boredom, the tension, the immense sadness of the place bore into me deeper than ever before. Every day the same, lives wasted in that limbo. And I had milked their desperation all this time. After one last lunch at a restaurant run by two gay men who once posed for pictures before a floral still life, hands on chubby hips, I took a stroll along the perimeter fence.

¹Nietzsche (1966): 89

² All conversations occurred in Spanish and have been translated by the author. Throughout the dissertation, all names, except those of public figures, have been changed to maintain anonymity.

The sun had burned away the last of the fog. Men gathered in small groups, talking and looking out into the blue, blue sky.

Standing on my rooftop terrace talking to Juande, city lights glowing yellow on every horizon, I felt again the terrible expectation of purgatory, waiting for that freedom that might one day come. Or never. I wondered again at Juande's dignity and strength that he does not give in, and felt my own freedom clamoring at me. "I'm going to see you get out of that place," Is all I could say. "I'm gonna see you on the outside." "If God wills it," is all he replied. We said goodbye and I returned to the festivities.

It was an awkward party. The only large, cohesive group was made up of upper middle class professionals—doctors and businessmen and bureaucrats—with whom I played rugby once a week on the military grounds a few blocks from my apartment. A carefree, hard drinking crowd of young and middle aged men, some of whom brought their wives, but none of whom would deign to talk to the less well-heeled guests. They quickly closed ranks, forming a broad circle at the edge of the terrace. These *kakeros*—as the relatively rich are known in Guatemala—became nervous at the prospect of rubbing shoulders with the *shumo*, the poor and unrefined. The guests from the ghetto were hyper aware of their discomfort and quick to take affront.

The night lurched on. They drank up my beer and whiskey quickly. I stuck to cheap red wine, my grin a deepening purple through the night.

The storm broke and cold gusts of rain drove us off the roof garden and into my apartment, industrial chic in design, austere to the point of emptiness in arrangement. There were only two chairs, a table, and a few handcrafted rugs and wall hangings, announcing "Gringo does Guatemala".

Here in the dim lamp light, cigarette haze wafting out the balcony window, Tommy emerges from a shadowed corner to greet me. He is dressed in a cream cashmere sweater. The last time I saw him, he was whiskey drunk in a 1960s-themed karaoke bar with his 16-year-old girlfriend and another girl in tow. Now, he is sober and thinner, dark circles beneath his eyes. He has become more... reptilian somehow. We stand together, and I watch him watch the *kakeros*, who have colonized the middle of the room, laughing at some inside joke. "You know fine people," he says, an unexpected awe in his voice. He seems unsure of how to conduct himself with such a crowd.

He leans in close, his head almost touching mine. "I am having troubles," he says in a stage whisper, glancing over his shoulder. "They put four bullets into one of my women. Sandra. Do you remember her? She was so beautiful. And they put five in one of my little girls. All because some business went bad, very bad, and I had to kill somebody. And since then they have been after me." He pauses for a moment, as if measuring the effect of his words.

Before I can reply, he says. "You should have asked me more questions. So I could tell you more things for your book. Tommy knows so many things. We should have spent more time together. Gato and all these others you interview," he snorts derisively. "They live everything in their imagination. But I, I live in reality. I have been involved in some serious shit. Look up the *Tikal Futura* shooting. I organized that. That was me. Look it up on YouTube and you will see how I am."

I tell him I am sorry for his loss. He shrugs, flashes a ghostly smile. "We should have spent more time together." I tell him I agree. But the truth is, and it comes to me all of a sudden, I don't want his confessions, his dark secrets, or anybody else's for that

matter. Not anymore. They are exactly what I came here to find, but I have had enough. I do not know if he is telling the truth, and I do not care. I am lost in all that I have learned, in that labyrinth of second-guessing and rumor, the senseless suffering, and the gnawing uncertainty. I am caught once again between the urge to know and the urge to look away. I stand there among the confused coterie, silently struggling with the fear, the doubt, the disgust that have worn a hole somewhere deep inside, this hollowness growing in my chest...

A few days later, I gave away my furniture and kitchenware to the men who worked as guards watching over my apartment building and who, each time I walked out my door, would call out to me to be careful. I packed up the few things I wished to keep, and flew away—to my fiancée who had waited for me, a measly university stipend, a quiet office among the redwoods.

Introduction

The apparent motive, the principal motive was, of course, single. But the crime was the effect of a whole list of motives which had blown on it in a whirlwind (like the 16 winds in the list of winds when they twist together in a tornado, in a cyclonic depression) and had ended by pressing into the vortex of the crime the enfeebled “reason of the world.”

-Carlo Emilio Gadda¹

This dissertation contains stories of children and young men who have learned to prey upon each other and upon innocents. The stories take place in Guatemala City in the two decades following the end of Latin America’s longest and bloodiest civil war—a time and place in which crime and the fear of crime have risen to engulf daily life. These are stories about the *maras* (transnational gangs), and the world that makes them what they are today: victim-perpetrators of massive and horrifying violence, useful targets of societal rage, pivotal figures in a politics of death reigning over post-war society. However, while *maras* and *mareros* play starring roles in this account of extreme peacetime violence, they are not the problem. They are a hyper-visible expression of a problem no one can name, a deafening scream, a smokescreen obscuring innumerable and diffuse sources of everyday brutality. *Maras*, the boys and young men who make up their ranks, have become cultural emissaries and harbingers of seminal political messages announcing a catastrophic present.² If only their message could be made intelligible.

What happens when we try? What happens when we dig beneath the nightmarish image the *maras* make to analyze their roots, their reasoning, and what they have come to represent? This is what happens: it turns out that *maras* have been made through a vast and tangled array of causes and conditions entwining their evolution with local, national, and transnational histories, rooting “their” violence deep in the firmament of contemporary western civilization. A quick survey of the best research available brings this point into sharp relief.

The array of local, national, and regional factors driving criminal violence in Central America is dizzying in its variety.³ These include “... rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking, and authoritarian family structures.”⁴ Legacies of authoritarianism and armed conflict feed and feed upon the pervasive *machismo* of Central American societies, which *maras* distill in their hyper-masculine ethos and rites of passage.⁵

¹ Gadda, 2007: 5–6.

² Feldman 1991: 8

³ Hagedorn (2007) roots the “institutionalization” of gangs across the world in a wide array of localized factors, including ethnic identity, urban conditions, and local drug markets.

⁴ Jütersonke et al (2008)

⁵ It is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America. (Rodgers, Jutersonke, Stevens: 6)

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Maras are often framed as a specter rising out of the ashes of failed social movements for progressive change.⁶ The history of civil war militarization has also left a huge cache of small arms in circulation throughout the region, making gang war, and social conflict in general, all the more deadly. The transition to peace has been messy and incomplete; since the early 1990s, gangs and other criminal groups have arisen in spaces left ungoverned by weakened, hamstrung post-war security apparatuses.⁷

And when they do respond, Central American governments have been unwitting accomplices in driving the *maras*' evolution into more organized and violent entities. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, heavy-handed policing and massive incarceration of suspected gang-members—policies enjoying widespread popular support—forced the *maras* to organize and gave them a space in which to do it.⁸ Central American criminal violence and United States politics are linked at the hip. The anti-immigrant hysteria of post-Cold War America led to the massive deportation of Central American born gang members to their countries of origin. The symbols, language, and imagery traveling via migrant bodies, Hollywood films, and the internet still contribute to Central American *maras*' style and structure, and to their allure for poor youth.⁹

US foreign policy played an integral role in creating the conditions of violation from which the *maras* arise. Cold War support for Central America's repressive, even genocidal regimes ensured that these highly polarized and unequal societies would remain so. Since the 1990s, economic reforms connected to free-trade agreements between the United States and Central American governments have helped drive destitute rural populations into the cities, where newly arrived youth become easy prey for the *maras*' allure. Finally, over the last decade the US War on Drugs in Mexico has pushed cartels to transfer more of their drug transport operations to Central America. Since the cartels often pay middlemen in product, supplies of inexpensive cocaine and crack have greatly increased across the region. *Mara* violence has intensified as rivals strive to dominate the burgeoning urban markets.¹⁰

Transnational and global factors link with and help shape personal desire and communal dynamics driving children to join gangs. The *maras*' evolution is tied to the growth of a globalized consumer society and its inherent brand name fetishism. As Donna DeCesare writes of gangs in El Salvador, "...kids desperate for 'real' Nike kicks will spend a family's whole remittance check, sell crack, or steal to buy them. Acquiring style is costly and requires some effort. Clearly, poverty is not the only thing drawing ...youth into gangs."¹¹

⁶ Sanford (2003). Put another way, *mareros* are foot soldiers trapped in the "slumwars of the 21st Century," (Rodgers & Jutersonke) a "new urban insurgency" (Manwaring 2005) born out of "the failed promise of peace" (Zilberg 2007).

⁷ Gangs arise in spaces suffering from "the comparatively weak presence of the state and concomitant governance deficits." (Rodgers 2006)

⁸ Cruz, JM. 2010

⁹ Zilberg 2007. More generally, street gangs' increasing reach and organization is linked to rapid growth in internet access and cellphone technology (Sullivan).

¹⁰(Pineda 2012) The US War on Drugs in Mexico has pushed narco-cartels to transfer more of their cocaine transport operations to Central America, most notably Guatemala. Since both South American producers and Mexican distributors often pay local help in product, this has greatly increased the supply of inexpensive cocaine across the region.

¹¹ DeCesare 1998: 25

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While absolute levels of urban poverty are not significantly greater than in prior epochs, widespread access to globalized media has made poor youth keenly aware of their position on the proverbial totem pole. Gang membership can provide a “pathway to manhood” for ambitious youth with few options of finding dignified licit employment.¹² Children growing up in poor urban neighborhoods have plenty of other reasons to join gangs: for self-protection, for revenge, to make money, to become desirable, to gain a sense of belonging, to survive.¹³

In short, *maras* have become an *answer* to the conundrums facing vulnerable youth surviving under deepening conditions of social fragmentation, inequality, and insecurity. “When a drunken father comes home and beats a kid’s mom and molests the kid’s sister,” explained a long-time social worker and youth advocate. “And the boy tries to fight back and gets kicked in the stomach, the gangster is across the street. He offers the child a toke of his joint, and smiles at him. ‘The whole world is shit,’ he says. ‘The only thing to do about it is to have more power. You want to fight your father? Here. Take this gun. Fuck that bitch. He deserves to die. Welcome to *la vida loca*.’”¹⁴

Inequality, globalization, violent masculinity, civil war legacies, corruption, transnational drug markets, US domestic and foreign policy, failed families, authoritarian social and cultural structures, personal desperation, the weak, troubled shell of democratic government, social prejudice, hyper-aggressive capitalism... the list of causes and conditions producing *maras* and driving them towards ever greater violence goes on.¹⁵ And so, it would seem that the “incomprehensibly dark reality” that *maras* symbolize for so many is, in fact, all too explicable.¹⁶ The 10,000 explanations for gang violence show that it is a *civilizational* problem— an overdetermined symptom of a sickness infecting human society as a whole. Little wonder, then, that every effort to quell the *maras* has failed, often miserably. The tributaries feeding their rage are too diverse, the contradictions giving rise to daily conflict too deeply submerged in the basic structures of society to be resolved without tearing it all down. This says a lot about democracy-in-practice, present-day capitalism, and the ways that human society shoves its brutality into the image of an easily discerned Other—an Other who, in this case, wears the tattooed mask of the *marero*.

I went into fieldwork armed with the 10,000 explanations. As I delved into the murder, rape, torture, mutilation and massacre taking place in Guatemala City each day, I often fell back on them to somehow make sense of what I was witnessing, to combat the depression and despair, to escape the nightmares and insomnia. Even if I couldn’t handle the immense suffering, at least I could root it in identifiable sources as a way of mooring myself against a relentless tide. When confronted with such inscrutable, totalizing violence, the 10,000 explanations— carefully parsed out or clumsily reduced to the image of a barbaric Other—can provide a false panacea assuaging the doubt, anxiety, rage and despair that threaten to overwhelm. In a sense, they provide only a *pretense of knowing*,

¹² Baird 2012. Meanwhile, media scapegoating of youth from poor urban neighborhoods has made it even more difficult for them to find jobs and vulnerable to targeting by police and vigilantes, and so driven more kids into the *maras*. (Huhn et al 2006)

¹³ cf Breneman (2013), Baird (2012)

¹⁴ Bolivar 2011a

¹⁵ Linking economic destabilization with civil war history, Benson et al write, “Gangs are a symptom of neoliberal reforms and amplified by residues of trauma from decades of armed conflict.” (2008)

¹⁶ Goldman (2007)

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because they are also a means of distancing oneself from the void such violence and suffering expose by imposing a false sense of order upon events and experiences—upon a world—that refuse such easy tidying up. And I was a mere tourist in this world. I always had an escape route.

The power of violence in places like post-war Guatemala City cannot be conveyed purely through reasoned analysis, no matter how nuanced and well-researched, because conditions of extreme violence create a vortex transforming the terrain of experience and knowledge production so deeply that its repercussions cannot be measured in discrete, vertically fused chains of causation. Therefore, I will not adjudicate between the 10,000 explanations for gangs and gang violence. In any final reckoning, they are all relevant. They entwine and blend almost indivisibly in every act of violence raging across the headlines.

Rather, I will explore how the power of this violence is rooted in the ways it inflicts and regenerates *radial uncertainty*. In Guatemala City today, radical uncertainty—over the source and cause of violent acts, the state’s collusion with criminal networks, the possibility of judging innocent victims of violence from deserving ones—defines collective perceptions of contemporary insecurity. The struggle with overwhelming uncertainty arising from the specter of violence orders space and communal relations, invades individual and collective consciousness, and infiltrates politics and state institutions. Such mortal doubt—profound misgivings over the terms of survival—will not be assuaged by nuanced reflection on roots and rationales.

Acts of brutality do not begin with individual grievance or agency, and they do not end with physical damage and suffering. Each brutal act enters into communal or public consciousness and moves through the social body along countless fractures and fissures. This is violence that cannot be contained, that bursts out of every structure (physical, discursive, epistemological) built to fix it in time and space. The specter of criminal violence continually transgresses and remakes spatial boundaries—from violations of the flesh to rumors coursing through a community to newspaper headlines disseminating images of horror across the public sphere—crossing back and forth between brutal bodily acts and disembodied rumor and discourse in infinite, quicksilver transmutations which infiltrate and saturate everyday life, politics, and individual and public consciousness. Along these tortuous lines of flight, after-images of brutality multiply in a chaotic species of alchemical transmutation and regeneration. The threat of imminent bodily harm organizes the way residents of Guatemala City think and live, worming into casual conversation, corroding communal trust, invading daydreams and nightmares. It is written into urban neighborhoods and emblazoned upon the bodies and psyches of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses both distant and near.

The *maras* will be my entry-point into a world defined by mortal doubt, and my guides as I navigate the rumors, fantasies, fears, and trauma swirling about criminal violence in post-war Guatemala City. The specter of violence has become so utterly entwined with the making of lived and symbolic landscapes that it cannot be extricated from the very fibers of everyday life. I will illuminate the myriad of spaces this violence infiltrates and reorders to expose the existential uncertainty haunting efforts to confront, contain, and overcome violence. In the process, I provide an alternative, intimate understanding of the violence and suffering for which *maras* speak, or are made to speak, and the ways this violence and suffering affects individual consciousness and communal life, orders urban space, and circulates in public discourse. Thus, I have arranged my

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arguments and stories in such a way as to capture the destabilizing psychological, affective, and visceral impact the conditions of extreme violation at work in post-war Guatemala City have on knowledge- and meaning-making. The veins of uncertainty fracturing this account are meant to rupture the pretense of knowing, and so break through into the treacherous and largely unmapped territory that is life lived in the shadow of constant violence.

The Problem of History



The Northern Triangle of Central America

The problem of explaining violence—analyzing its rationales, tracing its reproduction, judging its legitimacy—begins with the problem of history. The past does not flow smoothly into the present. It is instead a treacherous battleground for contemporary political struggles in which all sides seek to first define and then leverage historical injustice into influence over the present. So every version of history is in fact a political discourse through which the status quo is justified, questioned, or disrupted. In societies that have suffered long histories of war, political repression, and extreme social inequality, as Guatemala has, the struggle over the meaning of the recent past can be particularly divisive and bitter. The historical account I offer up here is meant to highlight the continuum of violence linking Cold War geopolitics, authoritarian repression, and civil war with transnational migration, globalization, and unprecedented levels of contemporary urban crime. It is one more among many discourses contending for influence over the present. While it does provide a contextual foothold for the stories to

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follow, I will later show how ongoing violence can limit, deform, and even destroy access to this history for the individuals and communities for whom it is most relevant.

Endless Civil War

Guatemala has long been the crossroads at which globally circulating violence erupts in nightmarish proportions. Guatemala's civil war—which officially ended in 1996—was Central America's longest and bloodiest: 36 years of intermittent bloodshed reaching its zenith in the early 1980s with genocidal scorched earth campaigns. The numbers alone—reproduced ad nauseum in every newspaper article and human rights publication written about Guatemala—tell a brutal tale: 250,000 killed, 45,000 disappeared out of a population of 7 million. The body count outpaces every other Latin American Cold War conflict by 10s and 100s of thousands. This history of violence is important because the post-war order arose stuttering from its ashes, and remains to this day mired in its legacies and the failed struggles to make a more just and equal society.

The roots of the conflict can be traced back to the United States engineered coup against Guatemala's second elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, to punish his administration for endangering US business interests in the region.¹⁷ The United States secretly armed renegade military officers, trained them on the Honduran border, and used the Voice of America radio to intimidate the Guatemalan government and sow fear and dissension throughout the small country. After Árbenz realized that the United States was behind the attacks on his administration, he quickly capitulated. The US' success in toppling Árbenz and replacing him with a regime more amiable to its interests inspired similar strategies against a wide range of governments that refused to fall in line with US hegemony.¹⁸

In the wake of the US-engineered coup, the newly appointed military-led government, backed by US Cold warriors honing counterinsurgency tactics that would soon be applied on a world-scale, cracked down on the social movements and intellectual support that had brought Árbenz to power. Such harsh treatment pushed the opposition movements to radicalize. In the 1960s, disillusioned military officers, poor indigenous and ladino peasants, and leftist intellectuals began forming armed groups to challenge elite dominance and military dictatorship. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church, indigenous communal alliances, urban trade unionists, among others, attempted to peacefully lobby for progressive social and economic legislation.

Through the 1970s, Guatemala, along with Nicaragua and El Salvador, saw an abrupt escalation in popular calls for change. Like its neighbors, the Guatemalan government reacted by killing the leaders of these movements. Targeted assassinations of union organizers, priests, and other community leaders failed to quell simmering unrest and drove harassed social movements to unite in support of armed rebellion. By the late 1970s, armed guerrilla groups operating primarily in the western highlands had linked up

¹⁷ Allen Dulles, head of the CIA, and his brother John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, colluded to convince President Eisenhower that toppling the Arbenz government was a primary national security issue. John Foster Dulles was also former legal counsel for the United Fruit Company, which owned 70% of arable land in Guatemala and controlling shares in the nation's railroad and electrical infrastructure. Allen sat on it's executive board. Arbenz's plan to purchase 40% of these lands at the values declared in United Fruit Company's tax forms amounted to a "communist takeover" and prompted the Dulles brothers and other powerful political figures to argue for invasion. (Kinzer 2006)

¹⁸ Grandin (2010)

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they could be raised by another family and grow up to be good Guatemalans. The lieutenant made us tie them to a tree, and then he shot each of them in the head. They were stained with the guerrilla, he said. They had to be killed with all the rest. It was terrible.

In the civil war's urban theater, the state performed a more clandestine form of terror. Rather than commit massacres that the revolution's political wing might use as public relations fodder against the government, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the military engaged in massive disappearances. Guatemala City became the epicenter of this terror. At the height of the violence, death squads kidnapped and killed an average of 200 people/month. Some of the victims they left at the bottom of steep ravines. Others never appeared at all. The pseudo-secret nature of these disappearances allowed the Guatemalan government to deny responsibility, and gave the United States political room to continue funding the counter-insurgency. The massive disappearances, and the faceless death squads operating throughout the city, had an extremely destabilizing effect upon the insurgency and upon urban life. This violence created an aura of terror such that reality fell outside the bounds of common sense. "No belief system could explain the death squads and disappearances," writes historian Deborah Levenson. "A frequent commentary was "*es una lica*" (it's a movie)."²¹

To this day, Guatemalan society is still struggling over the meaning and significance its civil war history. Most urban Guatemalans—rich and poor alike—believe that the Guatemalan military committed unfortunate atrocities, but their evil was no worse than that of the insurgents themselves. So, the military is absolved of its purported crimes (including genocide), the insurgents are demonized despite their only having been responsible for 7% of the war deaths,²² and the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed are "good victims" of a bad war. In this version of history, insurgent rural communities and urban "subversives" were victims not of a brutal, paranoid counterrevolutionary juggernaut, but of Guatemala's "culture of violence."²³ The remedy for the past violence is, then, to promote a "culture of peace" and to leave the past in the past. So, while "...the horrors of the counterinsurgency war are revealed and the barbarism of the past is offered up..." in piecemeal fashion through USAID sponsored education manuals, *telenovelas*, and cursory apologies from visiting US dignitaries, civil war violence is labeled "...as the very opposite of the current order instead of an essential part of the birth of that order."²⁴ This is the "neoliberal bargain"; the ruling elites get to maintain their stranglehold over the political and economic order, the counterrevolutionary brutality is forgiven if not forgotten, and the insurgent masses are remanded to the dustbin of history. Walter Benjamin's words seem prescient here; "...even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."²⁵

Still, this history of war and violence remains etched upon post-war society in countless ways both conspicuous and clandestine. The conditions of violation that gave rise to revolution in the first place have not withered away. Post-war progress promised in the peace accords has done little to heal the wounds left by so much bloodshed, deeply

²¹Levenson 2011: 303

²²CEH 1998

²³Oglesby 2007: 90

²⁴*ibid.*: 91-92

²⁵Benjamin 1978: 255

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rooted inequality, and authoritarian rule. This history left gaping holes in the social body and in peoples' lives. The *maras'* meteoric rise in post-war Central American societies was, at least in part, due to their capacity to fill these holes. And, as a long-time researcher of criminal violence in Central America commented, "If it hadn't been the *maras* and their influence that arrived, something else would have come, and not necessarily less violent."²⁶ But it *was* Barrio18 and La Mara Salvatrucha that would become the face of post-war violence, and so their history—an odd history of transnational displacement and return—has become entwined with post-war Guatemala's struggle to find peace.

Migration and Return

Between 1970 and the early 1980s, more than 1 million Guatemalans joined the flood of Central Americans migrating to the United States in search of work and a safe haven. The US government's support for the military regimes waging war against the "communist" threat in Central America made the possibility of political asylum for many of these refugees thin indeed. Less than 2% of Guatemalans gained legal status through the asylum process, leaving the vast majority in a state of legal limbo.²⁷ Most Central American refugees settled in the poorest neighborhoods of Los Angeles, California where generations of Latino (mostly Mexican) immigrants had already made their home.²⁸ The neighborhoods where most newly arrived refugees and immigrants settled—Pico Union, Rampart, and others—were claimed by Latino, black, Asian, and white gangs engaged in ongoing turf wars with one another.

By and large the dominant Latino gangs would not allow Central Americans to join their ranks—ridiculing them as "yokels" lacking in education and with little in common with their northern neighbors. Central American youth were left doubly isolated. One gang, however, eventually accepted these newcomers — 18th Street—known as Barrio18 in Central America today. In Los Angeles it is one of the oldest and largest Latino gangs. 18th Street welcomed non-Mexicans, but on the condition that the new-comers adhere to the established norms, copying the "*cholo*"—Mexican American—style, symbols, and slang. Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and other Central American youth joined in growing numbers. Eventually, however, some Salvadoran gang members began to chafe at their Mexican brethren's cultural domination, and chose to establish their own gang with their own name and their own symbols. La Mara Salvatrucha was born, and would eventually grow to include immigrant youth from throughout Latin America.²⁹

La Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street were initially nothing more than two of dozens of Los Angeles street gangs fighting each other for turf and respect. They would not transform into a transnational gang phenomenon until the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.³⁰ Pushed by the Moral Majority's anti-crime, anti-immigrant zeal, the California and federal governments passed a series of draconian law and order initiatives beginning with the 1992 Violent Gang Taskforce and ending with Clinton's passage of the Illegal Immigration and Welfare Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996. These laws enforced strict anti-gang and tougher prosecution policies while greatly expanding grounds for deportation (which grew to include offenses as minor as shop-lifting). Within

²⁶ Savenije 2012

²⁷ Manz 2004

²⁸ Zilberg 2004

²⁹ Martinez & Sanz 2012

³⁰ IIRIRA 1996; see also De Genova 2007

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a decade the number of Central Americans deported each year tripled, rising from 8,057 in 1996 to 24,285 in 2004.³¹ Between 1998 and 2005, the US deported 46,000 convicts and an additional 160,000 unauthorized immigrants to Central America, with 90% of them sent to the northern triangle nations.³²

The “war on terror” only increased the targeting of criminal and criminalized minorities, and in 2007 the US government deported more than 74,000 Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans to Central America.³³ Though official numbers cannot be entirely trusted, it seems that between 2000 and 2004, the US deported an estimated 20,000 gang members to the northern triangle of Central America. So, from the early 1990s and on through to the present, tens of thousands of gang members— or men bearing the tattoos, clothing style, and slang associated with gang belonging— arrived in their “home” countries. They may have been born in Central America, but most were raised in Los Angeles, and the youngest among them could barely speak Spanish. These deportees returned to societies reeling from decades of civil war and in the midst of painful and unresolved struggles to form functioning democracies and viable economies. The situation they confronted in the poor urban neighborhoods where many settled would lead to an unprecedented symbiosis and exchange between US gang culture and Guatemalan youth struggling to find their place in post-war society.

Out of Civil War, and Into the New Violence

Deported US gangsters arriving in Guatemala towards the end of the 20th century found themselves in the middle of a new kind of chaos. The civil war’s end did not bring peace.³⁴ For its involvement in disappearing and torturing suspected subversives, the Guatemalan National Police force was dismantled by order of the UN peace accords. They also mandated that two thirds of the military be decommissioned. A nation governed by the strict edicts of martial law for the better part of the century was all of a sudden supposed to transform into a functioning liberal democracy.

The hopes of a successful transition out of war dwindled quickly, replaced by a widespread sense of disappointment, rage, and despair. As of 2015, 18 years after the government and guerrilla signed the UN peace accords, Guatemala has become an epicenter of what scholars have labeled the “New Violence”³⁵ sweeping through much of post-Cold War Latin America—brutal criminality fueled by illicit drug markets, state weakness, institutional corruption, and widespread poverty and inequality.

The speed and ferocity with which this new violence has metastasized in Guatemala City and other urban centers is difficult to comprehend and convey. Over the last decade, Guatemala’s overall homicide rate climbed to 39 per 100,000, third highest world-wide behind neighboring El Salvador and Honduras.³⁶ This violence is most acute

³¹Johnson 2006

³² Rodgers 2009: 954

³³ Seelke 2008: 7

³⁴ The civil war ended officially in 1996, though there was little pitched battle after the 1980-83 scorched earth campaigns.

³⁵ Krujtit and Kooning 1999

³⁶ “Central America features amongst the highest rates of reported homicidal and criminal violence in Latin America and indeed the world. The annual global homicide rate was approximately 7 per 100,000 in 2004, while in South America it was 25 per 100,000 and in Central America it soared above 29 per 100,000 (Geneva Declaration, 2008; WHO, 2008; UNODC, 2009). In contrast to virtually every other region, South and Central America feature the fastest and most dramatic temporal escalation of (homicidal) armed

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in cities. Between 2000 and 2008 Guatemala City's homicide rate doubled, and today it stands at 60 per 100,000. In the city's "red zones", many of them dominated by gangs and other organized criminal groups, that number shoots up to well over 190 per 100,000.³⁷

What makes the New Violence new? Essentially, it does not fit any of the old categories of conflict. It is diffuse, with few clear distinctions between rival actors. The list of "usual suspects" in every murder, extortion, kidnapping, and robbery is long and badly defined. Police regularly exchange places with the narco-traffickers, kidnapping rings, gangs, and other organized criminal groups they are meant to arrest. The new violence is composed of lines of opposition that are shifting and hallucinatory, unmoored from the political platforms and ideologies that dictated when, where and against whom violence could be legitimately performed in the civil war past.

Less than 10% of murders are ever successfully prosecuted, and many urban citizens are too afraid to even report crime for fear of reprisal from the perpetrators. Contemporary criminal violence is also marked by the increasing use of exceptional, spectacularized acts of brutality; massacre, dismemberment, torture, rape and public display of murdered corpses occur with disturbing frequency. Graphic representations of such acts, accompanied by sensationalist reporting, only inflate public dismay, despair, and horror.

Meanwhile, the out-of-control crime works as a convenient smokescreen for ongoing "political" violence—murdered protesters, beaten unionists, harassed human rights organizations—even as rightwing politicians blame democratization, human rights, and other liberal currents of the post-war era for the deepening chaos. With each new murder the police, press, and public all search for some explanation to make sense of what has become, for many, a war without sense. Each murdered body gives rise to innumerable images, rumors, and hearsay that circulate through the public consciousness, perpetuating the deep and abiding sense of insecurity coursing through society.

The collective fear resonates far beyond any given crime to infect every waking moment. It is an omnipresent thing. I could not walk anywhere in the city without a sense of anxiety—nagging at the edges of my awareness if not squarely before my mind's eye. Many Guatemala City residents do not feel safe anywhere but inside their homes, and there are many zones of the city where "no one goes." Potential victims of crime desperately try to measure and make sense of the risks they take by walking out their door. The incalculability of everyday danger corrodes the collective sense that security is possible.

The violence of everyday life in Guatemala City shapes and is shaped by the shifting architecture of the city itself. It is written into the landscape; 12 foot barbed wired walls protect even humble homes, anyone who can afford it lives in an enclave community, and shot-gun toting private security guards patrol every mall, gas station, and hotel.³⁸ Even small businesses—toy stores, family owned restaurants, stationary vendors—

violence since 1999." Rodgers, Jutersonke, and Muggah 2009

³⁷ Pineda 2012

³⁸ Caldeira 2000

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often have an armed guard in uniform.³⁹ Police stations in certain neighborhoods are barricaded behind leaking sandbags, bullet holes marring their exterior walls.

This is not to say that there are not clear continuums linking the “old” violence with the “new”. Indeed, even as the so-called “apolitical” violence of crime has taken center stage in this post-war tragedy, the cast of victorious civil war actors (the military, the rich elite) have continued to operate with impunity to enrich themselves and stifle the struggle for progressive political change.⁴⁰ And the lines of opposition that dictated civil-war violence were never so clear-cut as they appear cast in the light of collective nostalgia.

In any case, there is no violence that is not somehow political. The unprecedented rise of criminal violence over the last 20 years has left Guatemalan society reeling, desperately searching for moral, psychological, and political responses that might bring peace, or at least a sense of peace. And *mareros* have come to stand at the center of societal fears, rage, and despair during a time in which the collective hopes invested in democratic progress have turned to widespread and bitter disappointment. As such, they form an ambiguous link between age-old anxieties swirling through this highly polarized society and the contemporary experience of uncontrollable crime. In the words of one Guatemalan technocrat,

“...Gangs fit too perfectly into all sorts of pre-existing fears and prejudices: the history of extreme racism towards the dark Indian, the class fears still clung to by the rich and the ambitious middle classes... Everyone find their answers in gangs: business interests and their fear for continuing profits, the middle class fear of the raging poor, politicians searching for a topic that will mobilize their populace.”⁴¹

Peacetime Violence, Space, and Mortal Doubt

This dissertation has built upon the work of other scholars’ efforts to map how violence shifts and transforms as it moves through the social body, and how it remakes lived and imagined space. In civil war Guatemala, for example, Franco (2004) analyzed how counterinsurgent operations targeted “sanctuary spaces”—the church, the home, the monastery—long considered safe from conflict, and thus shattered the bedrock of indigenous communal life. Feldman’s (1991) seminal study of political violence in Northern Ireland maps how the body becomes an essential surface upon which violence in the name of political ideology transcribes across history and into the public sphere. The violence of communal conflict over identity and belonging “reorganizes the material world into a phantasm, into a spectacle of historical transformation.” (80) Likewise, Caldeira’s (1999) exploration of criminal violence and democracy in Sao Paulo maps the transcription of seminal political messages through linkages and disjunctures between victims’ and bystanders’ experiences of criminal violence, the “talk of crime” in casual conversation and public discourse, and the reordering of public space.

³⁹ Private security is the single largest growth industry in Guatemala today, if one does not count narco-trafficking. (UNDP 2011)

⁴⁰ See, for example, Peacock and Beltran’s *Poderes Ocultos* (Shadow Powers) (2004), which chronicles military intelligence officers’ involvement in narco-trafficking as well as continued attacks against human rights organizations pushing for progressive change in post-war society.

⁴¹ Jimenez Irungaray 2011

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Taking the work of these writers and others as points of departure, I have also sought to capture the circulation and transformation of violence across space. But rather than narrowing the analytic lens to make the body or certain kinds of public discourse central nodes through which violence defines and transforms social relations, I have sought to show how the specter of criminal violence invades, transgresses, and infiltrates everyday existence, escaping prescribed vectors and passageways to engulf and saturate the world.

Violence and Mortal Doubt

I have therefore constructed an account of peacetime violence that illuminates the radical uncertainties pervading and shaping urban life, institutions of law and order, and individual and collective efforts to survive. In post-war Guatemala City the specter of out-of-control violence to which, it seems, nearly anyone can fall victim, looms constantly—in politics, in the media, in everyday conversation. This state of insecurity and violence undermines and reorders the ethical, social, and psychological structures that residents harness to make sense of their world. Grappling with the threat of violence is integral to the formation of contemporary political thought, the nation state, and modernity itself.⁴² The threat of violence is an organizing force in all societies. In a sense, the levels of violence and sense of insecurity in Guatemala City, and the desperation of collective and individual strategies used to cope, are unique only in order of intensity.

Violence looms at the horizon of escalating social conflicts and antagonisms; violence is the very counterpart of the inherent fragility of human communities which... are sustained in existence not by the operation of some natural laws but by a precarious social consensus, vulnerable to disintegration and collapse.⁴³

A growing sense of uncertainty is essential to the experience of late modernity, and its paroxysms of communal violence.⁴⁴ “Radical social uncertainty” drives ethnic violence and genocide.⁴⁵ Such violence can be understood as efforts to bring order back in by destroying certain kinds of people who disrupt the purity of social hierarchies required for a sense of social well-being.⁴⁶ Communities suffering from high levels of crime often resort to extrajudicial methods of bringing a sense of order back in, and, in the same vein, support elected leaders who promote violent state intervention against suspected criminals.⁴⁷

The violence and insecurity destabilizing and reordering everyday existence in Guatemala City are exemplary of a global trend. Across post-Cold War Latin America and beyond, the “democratic wave” and the triumph of market fundamentalism has been accompanied by a “...gradual erasure of received lines between the informal and the

⁴² Hoffman 1989

⁴³ *ibid.*: vii. The desire for order, and the ways that certain social figures or populations trouble conceptions of that order, weaves through the work of Zygmunt Baumann (1997) on vagabonds and other social types and Julia Kristeva’s (1991) reflections on xenophobia.

⁴⁴ Daniel (1996) Devisch (1995) Malkkii (1995) Nordstom (1997)

⁴⁵ Appadurai (1998: 2)

⁴⁶ Daniel 1996; Devisch 1995; Malkki 1995; Nordstom 1997

⁴⁷ Arias and Goldstein 2010

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illegal, regulation and irregularity, order and organized lawlessness.” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 5)⁴⁸ In an era marked by renewed ambiguity and increased uncertainty, the state has become criminal, criminals counterfeit the state, and for those caught in the middle, distinguishing between predator and protector is often impossible (Bayart, Ellis, Hibou 1999). Likewise in business. Commodity chains—from the local to the global—entangle licit and illicit transactions from start to finish, dissolving the already murky line between the law-abiding world and the underworld upon which it rests (Nordstrom 2007). In communities left vulnerable by the vicissitudes of state power and global markets, what Arendt (1969) calls the “all-pervading unpredictability” of violence only deepens a pervading sense of existential doubt (cf Caldeira 2000).

In the midst of peacetime chaos, criminal organizations can also provide answers to disorder and insecurity. Groups of young men labeled “gangs,” in Guatemala and elsewhere, take control of spaces and communities left vulnerable by the vicissitudes of state power, global capitalism, and other forces operating well beyond the reach of most victims and perpetrators of violence. In these spaces, forces of order and disorder often make distorted reflections of each other. No one can be sure whom or what is to blame for the violence so deeply embedded in daily life, and people cast about for the most discernable target for their rage and despair. Police and criminals take on similar roles, clandestine powers infiltrate the practice of official authority, and mortal threats can intrude at any time. It is this sense of radical uncertainty and mortal doubt corroding communal relations, practices of law and order, and access to knowledge I strive to illuminate. My intent is to rupture, as best I can, the structures of thought and feeling which allow us to keep this violence, and the suffering it creates, at a safe, comfortable distance.

A Structure of Violence

The crucible of post-war Guatemala has forged *maras* into the “limit-point” of criminal violence.⁴⁹ As symbolic figures in the media, in politics, and in everyday conversation, they have become vessels conveying the worst excesses of peacetime violence, all too easy answers to the desperate questions the terror provokes day in and day out. They provide a target and anchor for popular disgust and political intervention. But violence is not a fixed object. It is not a “thing.”⁵⁰ It is a cultural construct that is continuously made and reproduced. Violence is “crafted into action by those seeking to control others.”⁵¹ So, scratch the surface of the symbolic façade, or trace the networks linking gangs to corrupt

⁴⁸ See also Kruijt and Koonings. Post-Cold war Latin America has experienced a “democratization” of brutality such that violence is not longer “the resource of only the traditionally powerful or of the grim uniformed guardians of the nation... [and] increasingly appears as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kinds of goals.”

⁴⁹ Benson et al 2008

⁵⁰ See Nordstrom 2004 for how commonly violence is perceived as “thing-like”. “In the west, violence is subtly but powerfully presented as “thing like”. This is evident in the linguistic habits surrounding violence. The following phrases are common currency in the west: violence is avoided; violence is controlled; violence is surmounted; violence is turned inward or outward in anger; violence is released in cathartic mock aggression... support the conclusion that violence is a fixed phenomenon. ... it becomes a manifest *thing*.”

⁵¹ Nordstrom 2004: 2017

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state officials, organized crime, and “law-abiding” civilians and private businesses, and the *maras* become something else: they become a lens through which to glimpse an immeasurably vast and complex structure of violence.

By structure of violence, I mean the array of political and economic forces, individual and collective agents, social and ethical mores, and the vast web of relationships criss-crossing the licit-illicit divide feeding and feeding off the use of violence. The structure of violence blurs taken-for-granted divisions separating the licit from the illicit, the innocent from the guilty, the sacred from the profane, the human from the inhuman, and the state institutions meant to safeguard society from the violent agents and organizations feeding upon it.

Deconstructing the structure of violence is profoundly difficult. It is enmeshed with the operations of state power and economic activity. It exists in fluid symbiosis with the law-abiding world. It too often operates beyond the reach of public inquiry. With few exceptions, murderers and their motives remain hidden. So when a murder becomes publicly visible, it is immediately embroiled in a field of contending “truths” as society struggles to judge its legitimacy, identify the perpetrators, and assign assured blame.

As stated earlier, such complexity and confusion is not unique to Guatemala, or to Central America, or even to impoverished, “third world” societies. It exists everywhere. But in places like Guatemala City where constant, gnawing fear of violent crime has become the norm, efforts to maintain the façade separating the law-abiding world from the structure of violence appear almost absurd in their shrill desperation. Guatemala City, then, presents ideal conditions for identifying and exploring the different kinds of “symbolic labor” employed to make sense of violence that at times appears almost incomprehensible.

Victims and Perpetrators

In spaces and societies in which extreme violence has become a fact of life—here more subtle and corroding, there more spectacular and bloody—taken-for-granted categories dividing right from wrong blur and breakdown. The strict boundaries dividing innocent from guilty and good from evil cannot hold, and an “epistemic murk” clouds every attempt to analyze.⁵²

Struggling to come to terms with his experience in WWII German concentration camps, Primo Levi identified this blurring as a “gray zone”. Levi shows how black and white categories of victim and victimizer blend together. For the barest privilege, for the least advantage in the fight for survival, his fellow prisoners took part in subjugating their peers. The concentration camp transformed abject bodies into useful cogs ensuring that the institution—built for the sole purpose of extermination—functioned smoothly. The gray zone is a space of perversion in which the burden of guilt for horrible brutality is shifted to victims, “so that they <are> deprived of even the solace of innocence.”⁵³

The concentration camp is an example par excellence of carefully institutionalized processes by which victims become victimizers. The concept of the gray zone, however, applies to communities and even societies caught under regimes of terror in which everyday violence has become normalized in far less ordered fashion.⁵⁴ Philippe

⁵² Taussig 2004

⁵³ Levi: 37

⁵⁴ cf Bourgois 1995, 2005, Nordstrom 1997

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Bourgois, among others, has adapted the concept to both civil war conditions and impoverished, violent urban space. He writes “...those who are condemned to survive under conditions of extreme hierarchy and cruelty jockey for survival at one another’s expense. The gray zone itself is a continuum permeating to a greater or lesser extent any social setting where inequality and suffering is imposed by structural and symbolic forces.”⁵⁵

Indeed, where violence—connected to political terror or out-of-control crime—has become an organizing logic of everyday life, inherent ambiguity and uncertainty only exacerbate already intolerable experiences.

Actor and Audience

The way we respond to acts of violence reveals the tendency, indeed the *need*, to impose clear, carefully constructed categories separating good from evil and right from wrong. The sense of certainty such efforts strive for is a socially constructed fiction, of course, but a useful one. Such efforts tend to individuate, isolate, and root injustice and violent deviance in particular subjects while ignoring or obscuring the histories and relationships weaving violence and suffering into the basic structures of society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our systems of law and order. Through courts and jurisprudence, western legal tradition has invented myriad means of parsing the guilty from the innocent and admissible truths from inadmissible hearsay while assigning assured blame and punishment. The means of explanation, linked with the urge to punish, become subtle mechanisms distancing the violence of others from the rest of us. We want to root a violent act in the perpetrator—pathologize him, and make his brutality his and his alone. And legal fictions are just one set of discourses that keep the horror at bay with a bulwark of carefully defined categories through which to judge and make sense of violence.

In my fieldwork, continual ruptures of intensifying cyclical violence—perpetrated by the state, between and within gang structures, and by myriad others— and the attendant everyday horror created a deeply unstable terrain in which to analyze, understand and judge acts of brutality. The terrible physical violence *maras* wreak upon one another and upon innocent victims, so often calculated to impose their will upon a particular space and population, reflects violence’s utility as a political instrument. This kind of violence “...isn’t intended to stop with the crippling of bodies. Violence is employed to create political acquiescence. It is intended to make terror, and thus political inertia. It is intended to create hierarchies of domination and submission based on control of force.”⁵⁶ However, while violent perpetrators may intend their actions to have a specific political effect, that intention is not always realized, and the repercussions will always range far beyond what they may have conceived. An act of violence is always a performance, and few violent actors have the capacity to control how their actions appear on the public stage. Ultimately it is the audience and not the actor or the victim who decides what that performance means.

For this reason, the ways that we “make sense” of violence—interpret it, analyze it, judge it—are important because this is what shapes violence’s political force and meaning. Whereas the meaning of violence that is “obviously” political—armed rebellion,

⁵⁵ Bourgois 2005: 428

⁵⁶ Nordstrom 2007: 53

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terrorist attacks, total war— is more often than not easily discerned, criminal violence is more opaque. As Comaroff and Comaroff observe, in the 21st century,

...criminal violence has become an imaginative vehicle, a hieroglyph almost, for thinking about the nightmares that threaten the nation and for posing “more law and order” as the appropriate means of dealing with them. And everywhere the discourse of crime displaces attention away from the material and social effects of neoliberalism, blaming its darker undersides on the evils of the underworld.⁵⁷

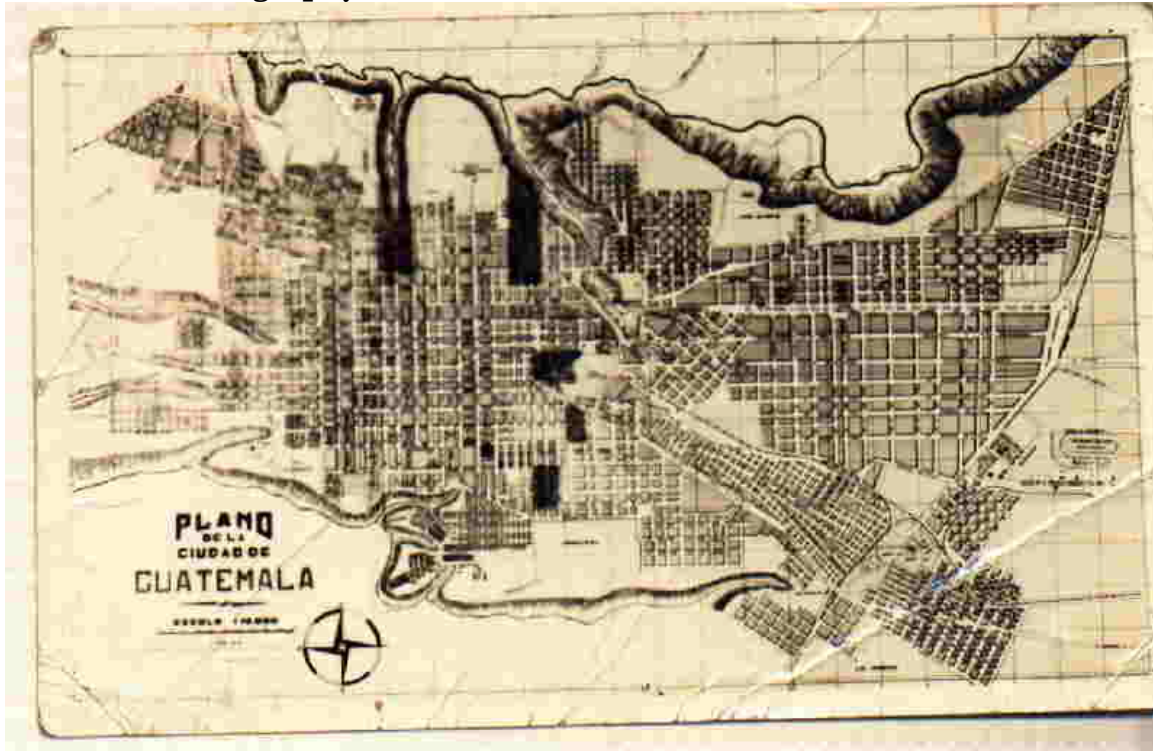
In grappling with how we make criminal violence mean something, I employ Caldeira’s conceptualization of the “talk of crime.” She writes, “problems of signification posed by violence are not simply a matter of stabilizing distinctions and trying to establish order. The talk of crime and the increase in violence ... indicate the existence of intricate relationships among violence, signification, and order in which narration both counteracts and reproduces violence”.⁵⁸ I will explore how acts of violence entering public circulation immediately become embroiled in a field of contending values defined and expressed through the talk of crime.

Because they have come to symbolize the worst excesses of peacetime crime, *maras*’ violent acts and the weaving of these acts into the talk of crime are inseparable. The loops and feedback effects linking material violence with its discursive renderings are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to map. Tracing the chasms and connections between the agent, a violent act, and the act’s reverberating effects in society means wading into the messy world of rumors, half-truths, canned responses, and outright lies swirling about the daily murder and mayhem. The talk of crime, both within and outside of criminal networks, obscures as much as it reveals about the “reality” of violence in Guatemala today. Everyone—experts and laymen, politicians and pundits, bystanders, victims and perpetrators—struggles to understand and explain what it all means. This struggle layers meaning upon meaning, saturating and distorting the violence with confusion and internal contradictions. The radical uncertainty that ensues multiplies and refracts its influence into every realm of daily life.

⁵⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff: 41

⁵⁸ Caldeira 2000: 38

Blackhole Ethnography



Guatemala City, circa 1930

How close to the clandestine criminal networks I was investigating could I get? How can I identify and analyze the source of specific acts of violence when the only available information was a morass of rumors, half-truths, and outright lies? How might I navigate this morass without losing my intellectual, psychological, and emotional footing completely?

My ethnographic fieldwork often felt like a awkward dance along the borders of a blackhole. Blackholes—celestial bodies so dense that they create gravity wells sucking up everything within their reach—can be identified only by examining how light bends and refracts in their periphery. And be careful not to get too close. Once one passes a certain threshold—the event horizon—there is no escape. One becomes trapped within the blackhole’s gravity and all the rules of classical physics become warped.

I use the term “blackhole ethnography” to metaphorically capture the strategies I employed in exploring criminal networks and violent urban space. It is a form of participant observation emphasizing open engagement with- and close attention to the vortex of rumors, lies, and half-truths swirling about everyday violence and contributing to its terrifying inscrutability.

The authorities’ inability to capture—or even identify—the vast majority of violent perpetrators has fed the intense confusion and fear swirling through society. *Maras* are extremely violent entities, but much of the time it is nearly impossible to disentangle their “real” violence from that imputed to them. At the beginning of this project, I set out to document what *maras* are, where they come from, and why they do what they do. However, after grappling with the hallucinatory effects of daily brutality, my purpose for investigating the *maras* has changed altogether; they are an entry-point, a

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set of coordinates, an opening in my effort to navigate the vortex of violence and suffering post-war Guatemala City has become.

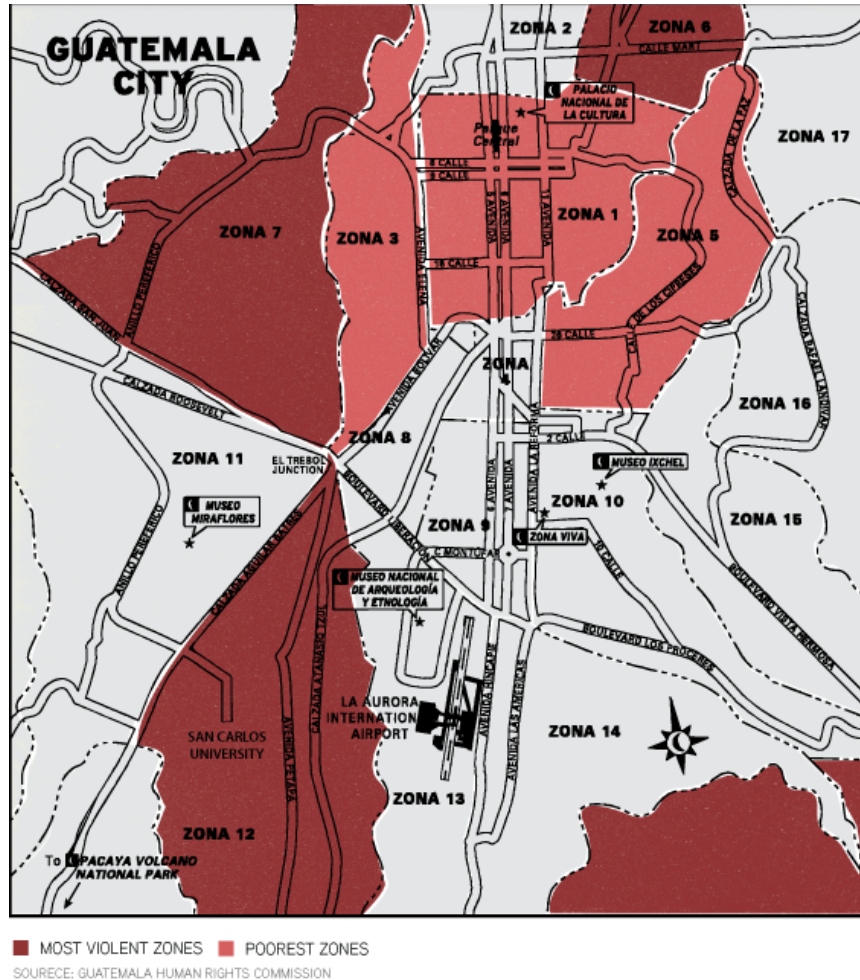
It *is* undeniable that Guatemala City—and urban Central America more generally—is more violent now than it has ever been. Homicide rates have steadily grown over the last decade, levelling off slightly in the last two, but with no real sign of diminishing. At the same time, the *fear* of crime, a widespread and deeply held sense of insecurity, has increased beyond all measures. Perhaps we could say that while violent crime has risen geometrically, fear of crime has expanded exponentially. Facing this fear was an important part of my fieldwork. I walked places in the city where others of my social and economic class would never dare go, and where the residents themselves admonished me for my lack of caution.

But how could I analyze the effects of insecurity and rampant crime without tasting them? Each time I walked out my door into my relatively tranquil neighborhood,⁵⁹ I would scan the street for anyone “suspicious.” Coming home late at night, every figure silhouetted in the streetlights was a potential thief, murderer, kidnapper. Of course, the real predators would never stand beneath street lamps. And so I stared vainly into the shadows too, and saw things there that were not. I made constant calculations using variables of my own invention to judge which route was “safer” than another, which *tiendita* less likely to be marked by thieves, which taxi-driver more trustworthy than the next. It was an absurd game of probability without any rules or hard numbers at all upon which I daily staked my well-being, and perhaps my life.

A similar charade of creeping paranoia and false assurances undercuts efforts to assess criminal violence at the macro-level. The impossibility of *knowing* the true measure of the “real” violence in Guatemala City streets makes any study of crime and criminal groups an exploration of half-truths, unverifiable data, rumors floating in and out of focus. Homicide counts—the number of murders per 100,000 citizens—have become the go-to litmus for measuring violence in neighbourhoods and nations alike. Counting bodies gives us only the barest contours of the problem, however, and perhaps obscures more than it reveals. It is just as, if not more, important to know *who* is being killed and *why* in order to understand which bodies, in the last instance, actually count.

Given the immeasurable difficulties of investigating such matters, however, a retreat to cold numbers is not surprising. There are bodies in the street, they have been killed, some have been tortured, some have tattoos. These are the only material facts available. Most everything else is hearsay, including much of the so-called “data” produced by state offices and NGO watchdogs. When less than 10% of reported crimes are ever prosecuted and many crimes are never even reported to police for fear of retribution from the perpetrator(s), the information that is supposed to be the most accurate measure of how well the fight against crime is going becomes just one more half-truth among many.

⁵⁹ I lived in an upscale apartment in zone 4 of Guatemala City. Armed security guards were posted 24 hours at every entrance



As a homicide investigator for the National Police said, “Think about it—a death may occur for a failure to pay extortion. A death, well, may occur because of a drug-related settling of accounts and have nothing to do with the gangs- and that’s all one can say. You might die because your brother got caught up with the gangs. Who can say with more specificity? There are many acts that have such consequences.” Or, in the words of an exasperated chief prosecutor when I asked her what part of the daily crime in her district could be verifiably connected to gangs, “It has become impossible to know because it is always changing. Neither can we differentiate between *maras*, narcotraffickers, and other organized criminal groups.”

And so, the state is also subject to the “regime of rumor” so integral to how so many urban Guatemalans experience insecurity. As Feldman writes, “under the regime of rumor everything becomes patchwork; an infrastructure of hidden bricolage floats to social consciousness like a submerged, stitched together body.”⁶⁰ Exploring the real and imagined violence of the *marero*, who has become the nightmarish face of collective fantasies about out-of-control criminality, I am performing a live autopsy upon this stitched together figure—tracing how disparate parts have been sown together, the weave

⁶⁰ Feldman 1995: 231

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of the threads, and, in certain moments, interrogating how young men suture themselves to the image of this modern day Frankenstein.

Nowhere is the power of rumor more influential than inside *mara* networks and the neighbourhoods and prisons they inhabit. After all, “rumor is the language of risk”, and gang members face more mortal risk on a daily basis than most of us will see in our lifetimes.⁶¹ Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that less than 20% of *mareros* survive into their 20s. As among any population caught up in constant violence, a Hobbesian “state of warr” where the *possibility* of imminent violence whittles away any sense of security and produces immeasurable anxiety, “torture and assassination frequently are rumor materially enacted on other people’s bodies.”⁶² During my fieldwork, I heard countless stories of gangsters and gang-involved youth murdered because of rumors concerning their loyalty, negligence, or some real or imagined sleight. Not only do rumors produce dead bodies, but dead bodies produce rumors, as stories bloom from every corpse to explain (away), justify, or otherwise make sense of the death.

I was not beyond rumor’s reach. My personal safety, and that of my informants, depended upon my remaining, somehow, “above” or at least outside, the messy exchanges of vicious, sometimes deadly rumor circulating in the prisons and among my friends and informants. I almost managed to come out clean. But then, after a year in the field I was at a conference in San Salvador talking to a respected Salvadoran crime journalist I had been trying to track down for months. I asked him if he would give me an interview, or at least have a drink with me and exchange notes. After a long, calculating look, he said, “Before I talk to you I have to know one thing. Are you Interpol?” I laughed, struggling to hide my consternation. “I have heard that you are working for Interpol, passing them the information that you get. Is this true?” “No!” I exclaimed, perhaps a bit more forcefully than I meant to. I wanted to seem nonchalant, like “*que ridiculo!*” but I could hear my pulse throbbing in my ears, and my mind was racing—flipping through all the people I knew that he might have spoken to, all my gatekeepers, friends, and informants. Who would have said such a thing? Who was this journalist? Who would he have talked to?

I never got the interview. Upon returning to Guatemala I attempted to trace how far the rumor had gone, how much damage had been done. Months later, I learned that one of my most trusted gatekeepers—a key “fixer” for interviews— had fed the journalist the lie. I had initially been dependent upon him for making connections with incarcerated gang members. But over time had formed my own network of informants. Protective of his role and power, and perhaps wanting to clip my wings, he started the rumor that could have gotten my informants and me in deep trouble.

So when accurate, trustworthy information is so hard to come by, and the danger of being sucked into the black hole of violence and rumor ever-present, investigating gang violence with a “whodunit”, legalistic approach cannot work. To learn about the *maras*’ evolution in the post-war era, and explore their role in making and mooring the collective horror, I used a more expansive, multi-pronged method. I had to assume many roles and manage a schizophrenic existence. I underwent training to become a “Facilitator of Projects” leading groups of incarcerated *ex-mareros* in community building exercises. I spent weeks in police precincts and accompanying police raids on criminal safe houses. I

⁶¹ Green 1995

⁶² Feldman 1995: 234

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applied for and received an international press pass (writing under a pseudonym for UK's *The Guardian*) to gain access to the top floor of the Tower of Justice, where I spent months sitting through somnambulant 8-hour extortion and homicide hearings. And so on.

Because informants and opportunities to enter prisons or *mara* dominated zones could arise and disappear so quickly, I had to jump down every rabbit hole I found. Such was my “research plan.” Through all this, I developed an extensive network of gang-associated contacts. Many were trying to escape gang-life; they became protected witnesses in high-profile murder cases, evangelical converts, anti-violence activists, freelance hitmen, and drug addicts. During my research, several were killed by the police, their rivals, or their old gangs. Others struggled (and continue to struggle) to navigate communities unwilling to forgive or forget their crimes.

In multiple interviews with each informant, I recorded their life narratives before, during, and, in some cases, after gang membership. Out of these narratives emerges the gangs' oral history from the civil war into the present. It entangles transplanted US gang codes gone awry, children educated to kill other “innocents”, Hollywood-inspired myths, and struggles to control drug and extortion rackets. To counter and corroborate these histories, I developed contacts among local and international journalists, evangelical gang-pastors, police, judges, prosecutors, and human rights organizations. Through interviews, participant observation as a part-time crime journalist in court trials and regional inter-gang truces, and a crime media-archive I created from local and international news, I explored how violence imputed to the *maras* transcribes into public discourse. And so personal and popular gang myths, yellow journalism, presidential stump speeches, murder- and war crime trials, and gang-film scenes all become texts through which to read *maras*, their violence, and their circulation in the social imaginary.

Finally, human beings, as subjects, are always already deeply malleable and multifaceted creatures, shifting and adaptable, exposing distinct facets of the ungraspable whole depending on the moment, the space, and the social milieu. Caught up in such extreme violence and struggling to come to grips with the suffering they experience and provoke, my *marero* informants' oh-so-human liminality was exposed again and again as I tried to plumb the depths of their experiences. Likewise, my identity as an educated, white *gringo* outsider and my own capacity to shift and transform—consciously or no—in each new setting made it possible for me to navigate between disparate “worlds” and now gives me the privilege to speak and be heard. No knowledge is produced unmediated by the social relations of its production. I am embedded in all that you read. And since the ways that we understand or try to make sense of violence become part of its meaning and power, I am implicated in all that I seek to interpret. We all are.

Layout of the Dissertation

I seek to provide an intimate understanding of the violence and suffering for which *maras* speak, or are made to speak, and the ways this violence and suffering affects individual consciousness and communal life, orders urban space, and circulates in and transforms public discourse. Thus, I have arranged my arguments and stories in such a way as to capture the destabilizing psychological, affective, and visceral impact the conditions of extreme violation at work in post-war Guatemala City have on knowledge- and meaning-making. The veins of uncertainty fracturing this account are meant to rupture the pretense of knowing, and so break through into the treacherous and largely unmapped

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territory that is life lived in the shadow of constant violence. At this stage, I am only able to provide an opening, a set of coordinates to guide you into the spaces, lives and experiences I strive to illuminate. Ultimately, I aim to capture and convey how the specter of extreme peacetime violence, reflected by and distilled in the *maras* of post-war Guatemala, transgresses every category erected to hold it at bay.



Aerial view of Guatemala City

I have organized this dissertation around key moments, spaces, and activities that define the *maras*' postwar evolution and shaped their dystopian trajectory. Each chapter explores the deep interpenetration between this evolution and social processes, ideologies, and ways of being circulating far beyond *mareros*' short, violent, violated lives. I have tried to navigate between—and sometimes through—the impotence, indifference and horror I witnessed and experienced over the course of my fieldwork in Guatemala City. Ultimately, I strive to tell stories that crack open the moral, psychological, political, and theoretical frameworks we rely upon to interpret acts and conditions of extreme violence.

These stories splice together informants' personal anecdotes, experts' and laymen's reflections and opinions, newspaper and television reports, and my struggle (and frequent failure) to slip in and out of spaces and relationships marred by the paranoia, desperation, and deep injustice feeding and feeding upon everyday violence.

I also utilize photographs—some culled from the media, others I shot myself—arranged to highlight the play of images before the public eye and their role in the production of violence and the reproduction of the mara identity in the social imaginary. As Susan Sontag writes, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something

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else. They haunt us.”⁶³ I strive to capture the haunting, hallucinatory power of contemporary criminal violence, and its distillation in the image of the *marero* circulated in the media and in everyday conversation.

Some of the images, especially those from newspapers, belong to the category of “death porn”⁶⁴—tortured, quartered, and otherwise undone bodies made into spectacle. Some critics would have it that by presenting them here, I become complicit in reproducing the stereotypical image of Guatemala (and other developing nations suffering from crises of criminal violence) that these photos so blindingly transmit. However, such images circulated daily before the public are integral components of the violence itself. To ignore them or attempt to sidestep them with political correctness only elides a key mechanism by which daily violence flows through the social body. Will you, too, experience the sense of alienated fascination, horror, despair, rage and numbness they provoke in so many?

The dissertation is thematically divided into three parts.

Part I. *Truths and Fictions* (Chapters 1-2)

These chapters delve into epistemic conundrums that arise in lives and spaces defined by extreme levels of violence. Chapter one explores a promiscuous exchange between “truth” and “fiction” in the life and death of a single *marero*, highlighting extreme violence can fracture and destabilize narratives and knowledge-making. In the same vein, chapter two delves into the *maras*’ collective history, illuminating how murder and despair disrupt the possibility of telling this history at all.

Part II. *World and Underworld* (Chapters 3-4)

These chapters expand out from the *maras* and into porous prisons and extortion networks to illuminate how blurred and fading the boundaries between law-abiding society and the structures of violence feeding off it have become. Consequently, uncertainty over who or what is causing everyday suffering abounds, and *all* of us can become implicated in the production of violent acts.

Part III. *Unjust Suffering and Deserved Death* (Chapters 5-6)

Here I focus on collective and individual efforts to carve out a psychological and physical sense of certainty and order out of conditions of extreme insecurity. Through an act of spectacular violence performed by La Mara Salvatrucha, chapter five explores how *maras* distill notions of unjust suffering and deserved death circulating throughout Guatemalan society and beyond. Stories, rumors, and assumptions about gangs and their violence reveal a desperate need to moor fears over insecurity and death onto an identifiable figure, and *mareros* fit the bill. And, finally, chapter six focuses on the treacherous path *ex-mareros*’ must navigate to escape their gang past, convince the world in no uncertain terms that they have changed, and survive.

⁶³ Sontag 2004: 3

⁶⁴ Alaniz 2005

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1. Portrait of a Marero

Before his former homies killed him, Andy was a protected witness in the prosecution of high profile murders he helped execute as a member of La Mara Salvatrucha. His story is fractured by his death and by the “surreal” violence he witnessed, performed, and experienced. I trace the confusing exchange and overlap—between the doing and the telling, experience and imagination, the event and its narrative through the story of Andy’s life and death. The conditions of extreme violation under which this tale takes place make judging truth from fiction all the more difficult. Andy’s story is sunk in the “epistemic murk” of everyday terror,⁶⁵ in which Andy is both victim and perpetrator of mind-numbing brutality, and his story is shot through with suffering that is, no matter what details remain out of reach, all too real. Andy’s portrait provides a window into the catastrophic present and the existential uncertainties coursing through it.

Chapter 2. History of Death, Death of History

With less than 20% of Guatemalan *mareros* surviving past 20, the *mara* myths and origin stories handed down from generation to short-lived generation are unstable, shifting, and disappearing. This chapter explores the history and origins of the *maras* of Guatemala with special attention paid to its fluctuations and inconsistencies tied to so much violence and trauma. Through the memories of those who survived gang membership in the early 1990s to the present, I trace the early *maras*’ protean social consciousness echoing the battle cries of a failed revolution, the mystique and power of the US gang style and symbols brought via deported gangsters and Hollywood films, and the loss of codes of solidarity which fueled the *maras*’ initial rise.

Chapter 3. Porous Prisons

Prisons have long been the concrete manifestations of western democracies’ efforts to isolate deviant and dangerous bodies.⁶⁶ By identifying, detaining, and punishing criminal subjects, the state reifies its role as society’s caretaker, quarantining criminals to protect the social body from the contagion of crime. However, my ethnographic research reveals how some prisons are in fact central nodes in the chaotic and shifting continuum linking the state, the incarcerated, and the free into a single, uninterrupted whole. Like the infrastructure of any frontier, I show how prison walls form a porous membrane across which all kinds of exchange—both licit and illicit—take place. They are spaces of constant exchange and flow. But, since prisons are generally imagined as hermetic containers of criminal contagion, their porous nature requires constant policing to reproduce, re-perform, and prop up commonsense distinctions between the lawful and the criminal, the Good and the Evil. I show how efforts to enforce the ideal of law and order, or what passes for it, often transgress the precarious *détente* that keeps prisons peaceful, leading to great violence.

Chapter 4. Extorted Life: Protection Rackets and Post-War Order

⁶⁵ Taussig 2004

⁶⁶ See Foucault 1977, Goffman 1961, Irwin 1980, Gilmore 2007

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Widely blamed on transnational gangs (*maras*), the rise of extortion has been central to deepening urban segregation, extending and reifying spatial and socio-economic polarization while further fracturing communal solidarity in poor neighborhoods. But *maras* are only the beginning. The expansion and diffusion of extortion beyond “traditional” criminal networks links the terror in poor neighborhoods with considerable profits for individual and collective agents who will never need to carry out violence. *Maras* may have perfected the contemporary extortion model, but it is financial institutions, agents of the state, private businesses, and countless civilians nurturing and feeding off protection rackets who make extortion what it is today: a post-war zeitgeist and socio-economic regime reorganizing city life beyond gang territory and at the most intimate of scales. *Mareros*, the extortionist subjects par-excellence, are merely the leading edge of a cannibalistic approach to survival that threatens to tear already frayed social fabric apart.

Chapter 5. Dismembering Discourse

In post-war Central American society, the figure of the *marero* has come to play a pivotal role in perceptions of deserved death and unjust suffering; he is a usual suspect in every new murder or dismemberment, and an easily excused and widely condoned target for acts of extreme violence. As post-war violence has risen to unprecedented levels, and the discourse of bodies descended into semantic chaos, the *marero* has become a crucial “limit point” through which the public seeks to make acts of violence become legible.

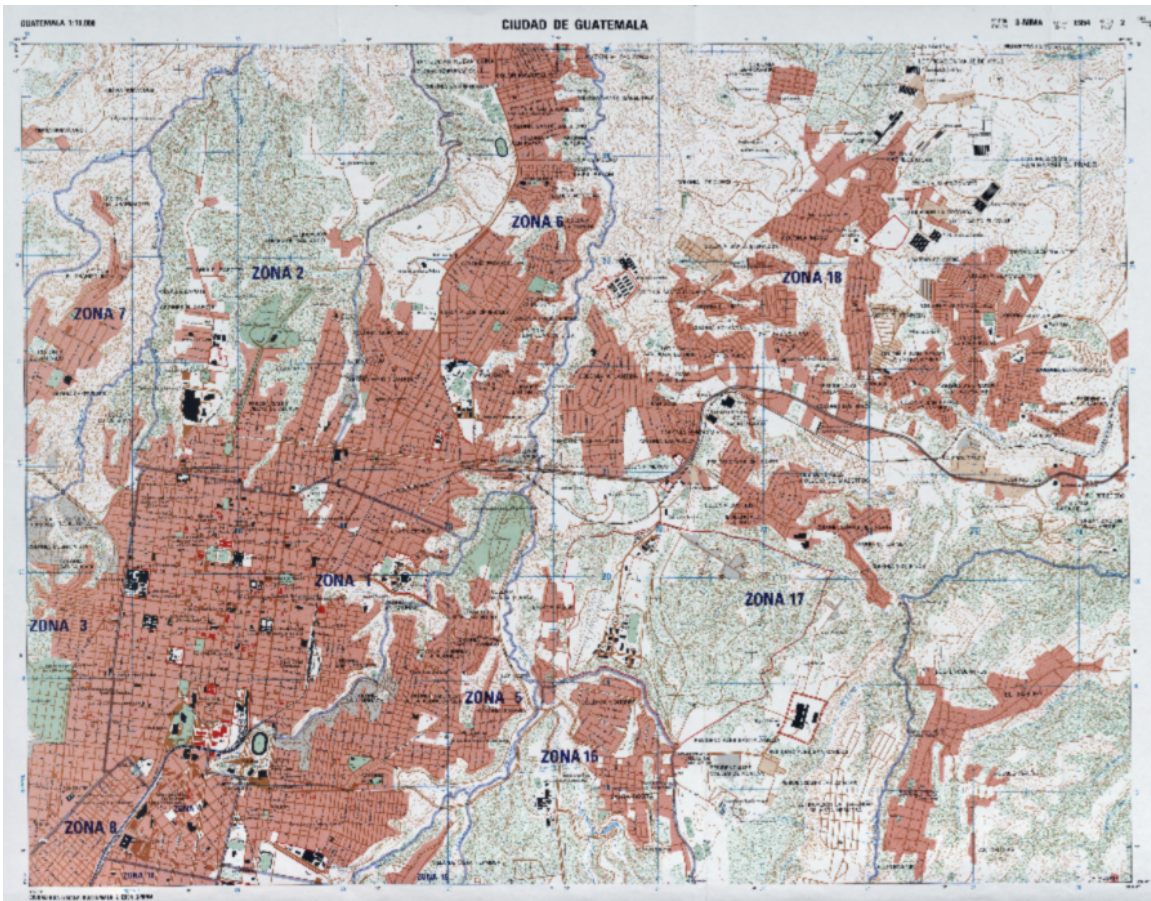
Through a quadruple murder and decapitation ordered by incarcerated members of the Mara Salvatrucha, I explore how the use of spectacular, media-oriented violence has become a common practice in gangs’ repertoire of violence, and how such spectacularly brutal displays have become key signifiers in post-war Guatemala’s social imaginary. Rather than simply reduce gangs’ and others’ use of body messaging to its utilitarian motives, I go beneath and beyond the murderous spectacle to examine the multilayered rationales, play of images, and social scripts—the texts and context—that emerge in MS’ killing and instrumentalizing innocents’ bodies in order to make their demands visible to the government and to society. I expose how *maras* reflect and operationalize rationalities of violence that have come to dominate post-war politics, albeit in specific and twisted ways.

Chapter 6: Liminal Redemption: Leaving La Vida Loca

In this final chapter, I explore the experiences of a few young men who committed, witnessed, and experienced extreme violence as gang members and left the gang to forge new identities that both harness and resist their violent pasts. The stories speak to what Nietzsche has called human’s “plastic power.” “The power of specifically growing out of one’s self, of making the past and the strange one body with the near and the present, ... of healing wounds, replacing what is lost, repairing broken molds.” I examine how subjects shift and transform in relation to historical processes and spatial contexts and our capacity to establish new symbolic relations to the past and to a changing world. In order to survive, *ex-mareros* must find ways to make legible their break with the past and the violence that has come to define the *marero* in society and which they embraced (willfully, or otherwise) while actively part of the gang. But, whatever internal transformation they have undergone, the signs of gang belonging remain congealed in

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myriad signs that are not so easily erased. Their history is written in the tattoos and scars staining their bodies like the mark of Cain. It remains in their physical and social habits. Most importantly, the violence they claim is behind them continues to shape the spaces and communities they inhabit. So, when a *marero* seeks to be something other than a *marero*, what scripts can possibly make this transformation legible—to himself and to his community—and what routes can lead away from a death so overdetermined it seems like fate?



Guatemala City

Part I
Truths and Fictions

Chapter 1 Portrait of a Marero

Guatemala City, May 11th, 2012

“What can you give me?” the boy asks, slouched in a desk chair in the corner of a cluttered prosecutors’ office. He has a wispy mustache and smooth olive skin, a Miami Marlin’s baseball cap pulled over long black hair tucked behind his ears. The sliver of a roughly etched tattoo peeks out from under a short-sleeved button down.¹

“Not much,” I say. “I can tell your story far from these streets where you have seen so many like you die.”

For several seconds he just looks at me, and then nods. “*Órale* (Right on). Ask me your questions. You ask and I answer.”²

So began my first interview with Andy, 17-year-old member of *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS) and protected witness for the Guatemalan government. Since he was 8, Andy had extorted, killed and tortured for the *Coronados Locos Salvatrucha* (CLS)—the most powerful clique of Guatemala’s most feared transnational gang. As a protected witness in the prosecution of gruesome murders he helped commit, he trespassed the blurred boundaries dividing the “criminal underworld from the law-abiding world that rests upon it.”³ Straddling the uncertain divide between a weak, corrupt judicial system and the criminals it is meant to bring to some kind of justice is dangerous business. When we met, Andy seemed to be making a stand against—or at least reconsidering—the overwhelming violence that shaped so much of his life. But if there was a metamorphosis taking place, it was cut short. A little over a month after our first interview and three days after our last, *La Mara Salvatrucha* found and executed him.

Andy died before he saw the “justice” he made possible come to fruition. He died before I understood all the roles he was playing at once. A protected witness against the *Mara Salvatrucha* while undergoing initiation with their rival, the Little Psychos of Barrio18, in another part of the city.⁴ Saving his skin from prosecution for quartered corpses found in front of his house while claiming revenge against the *Mara Salvatrucha* for killing his family, who were Barrio18 members. Bragging about killing enemies and innocents and in the next breathe cursing his old clique for hurting children.

In Andy’s short life, it seems, nothing remained sacrosanct and inviolable—not his most intimate relationships, or the sanctity of human life, or the protection of innocence,

¹ Velazquez Cuellar 2012.

² A note on translation. The Central American gang vernacular is laced with English and spanglish terms imported with the Los Angeles gang symbols and structure via deported US gang members, gang films, and other conduits of cultural transfusion. When possible, I have tried to retain some of Andy’s and others’ original language, which includes both terms like “*watchear*”—to watch or look and Spanish slang like “*paro*”, “*canal*”, “*la onda*” etc, which have no direct English translation.

³ Taussig 2003

⁴ *Chequeo* is the name given to the testing period a youth hoping to join a gang must go through before he is *brincado*, or “jumped in” and made a bone fide “homey”. The *chequeo* period can last anywhere from a week to years, during which the *chequeo* must carry out various tasks or favors for the gang that, in present-day Central America, almost always includes murder.

much less a concept as vague and unstable as “justice”. His agility in navigating unstable ethical terrain and constant mortal danger helped him survive as long as he did. He claimed to be beyond the remorse that would plague “normal” people. Perhaps he really didn’t care about hurting others. I do not know. But beneath the mask of nonchalance I saw (or thought I saw) desperate, quicksilver leaps of imagination and consciousness, glimpses of a struggle to make sense of the brutalities he witnessed and performed.

The prosecutors who led me to Andy introduced him as a “real *marero*”, an articulate young man who could provide an accurate, in-depth perspective into the Mara Salvatrucha’s inner sanctum. Before he died, he gave prosecutors detailed testimony describing his gang’s modus operandi, their strategies, the motives behind many unsolved murders both quotidian and spectacular. For my part, I ventured into his personal history and tried to map out his life, to understand what he did and why he did it. But, of course, I failed. Submerged in his chaotic present and shrouded in unresolved anguish, shame, and rage, Andy’s narrative offers only fleeting glimpses of clarity, which in turn serve only to draw us still further into a labyrinth from which I have found no escape.

All I have to illuminate this labyrinth are several recorded interviews, his declarations in court, and photographs of him alive and then suddenly dead. They are shards of a life now shattered, and while he lived he shattered his own share of lives, from little boys like himself to extortion victims who wouldn’t pay to... who knows? These shards, strung together, make a hall of mirrors. At times his tale swings into the surreal, and yet... his secret testimony provided the locations of real cadavers, decapitated and quartered, and revealed in courtroom detail acts of violence no more gruesome or farfetched than the deeds he claimed as his own. Nightmares bleed into waking life on a regular basis in the underworld of gangs, and everywhere else for that matter.

It is this indiscriminate exchange—between the doing and the telling, experience and imagination, the event and its narrative—that I explore through the story of Andy’s life and death. The conditions of extreme violation under which this tale takes place make judging truth from fiction all the more difficult. Andy’s story is sunk in the “epistemic murk” of everyday terror,⁵ in which Andy is both victim and perpetrator of mind-numbing brutality, and his story is shot through with suffering that is, no matter what details remain out of reach, all too real. The rumors, half-truths, flights of imagination, and outright lies Andy tells in his story of his life are inextricably tied to the violated bodies, murder weapons, and other material evidence he helped investigators dredge up and present in court.

Perhaps if he had lived, I could have distinguished more “truths” from untruths. But this is precisely the point. Andy’s story is a parable for how extreme violence can create a vortex erasing its own traces, and in my effort to explain who he was and why he did what he did, I too am sucked in. This, it seems to me, is entirely appropriate, since coming to terms with the radical uncertainty of life lived in the shadow of constant violence is a key aspect of surviving it, living with it, and, perhaps, overcoming it.

Andy’s story will also provide an opening into the catastrophic present. It is a present in which children have become the perpetrators and targets of murder, the institutions meant to safeguard society seem incapable of doing so in any meaningful way, and the spectre of violence looms over daily life. In the chapters to follow, I will explore the history and the conditions of violation—in prisons and on the street— from which

⁵ Taussig 2004

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this present emerges. For now, I want to paint as unstinting a picture as possible of the brutality boys like Andy engage in and fall victim to.

Finally, I have written this story to keep my promise to give Andy a poor kind of immortality. I do not know what mourning Andy's loved ones were able to carry out. After his death, I went to the city morgue to track down his surviving kin, but someone had already claimed his body, and all efforts to find them failed. I'm certain that his gang, which he swore was the closest thing to a family he had since becoming an orphan at 7, only regret failing to kill him sooner. Though it was a quick death and so, by his standards, a good death, Andy's murder still bore into me in a way I could not comprehend. I mourn him, if only because he struck me as an intelligent and even, to my everlasting wonder, innocent young man who never knew peace or its possibility. I mourn his life, and his death. This is my elegy for both.

Guatemala City. April 18, 2012

I climbed the 15 stories of the Tower of Justice to witness the sentencing of Rafael Citalan, a 23-year-old *guero* with slicked back hair and a jutting chin. He was one of many MS members allegedly responsible for murdering four people, decapitating them, and placing the heads at various locations around Guatemala City. He sat in chains in a glass and metal cage wearing a white tee shirt, jeans and plastic clogs, head bowed before his own reflection. As the judge droned out his crimes, his guilt, his sentence in minute detail, Citalan kept shaking his head.

Back in 2010, el Diabólico, a Mara Salvatrucha leader doing time in el Boquerón, a maximum-security prison housing only active members of the Mara, ordered operatives on the street to decapitate five people. In the end, they only managed to capture four—one clique failed and was subsequently punished by the others. In the early morning of June 10th, gang members placed the four victims' heads at various locations around the city: one in front of a popular shopping mall, one at the entrance to the Congressional building, one at a busy commuter exit, and the last in a poor urban neighborhood. With each head they left a note—supposedly written by Citalan's hand—attacking the government for “impunity” and “injustice” in the prison system. Media outlets across the country flocked to publicize the grisly affair.

Earlier I'd spoken with Edwin Martinez, the lawyer for the prosecution. He is a tall, balding man, amiable and ready to talk. “This is the most spectacular and frightening gang case I have been involved with,” he said. “This was a political act. They wanted to terrify the populace and intimidate the government so they would get better treatment in the prisons. It's the first case I've worked on that has had such political overtones. It's like terrorism.”

For nearly two years, the crimes remained unsolved. Maras are notoriously difficult to infiltrate. “They have their own language, their own style,” said an eager young Guatemalan gang expert working with an FBI taskforce. “It is their sub-culture that makes them harder to infiltrate than even organized crime or *narcos* (drug traffickers).” And, besides, by their own admission, Guatemalan security officials have very little experience in undercover operations. Martinez told me that the case broke open with the testimony of a secret witness, another MS member who, for reasons he did

not explain, confessed and turned on his compatriots. This witness, I would learn later, was Andy.

“He’s really something. He’s a *real marero*,” Martinez exclaimed over fried chicken, his pug-faced bodyguards sitting stolidly beside us, his eyes wide with excitement. “And a good witness. A fine witness.”

Andy’s Utility

I found Andy because he was useful to prosecutors who believed he could be useful to me. The only reason he mattered to Martinez and nearly everyone else with whom he worked was his *utility*. For the government prosecutors reveling in his authenticity, he made possible a deeper understanding of MS’s command structure, strategies, and methods of communication than they had ever had before. Guatemalan investigators are often woefully ignorant regarding the criminal structures they face. The chief investigator in Villa Nueva, where Andy’s MS clique and several others operate, laughed bitterly when I asked what her office knew about the gangs’ modus operandi. “It has become impossible to know because it is always changing,” she said. “Neither can we differentiate between *maras*, narcotraffickers, and other organized criminal groups.”

The gleam of excitement in Martinez’s eye when he touted Andy to me—“a *real marero!*”—spoke volumes. By giving the government the case of the four heads, Andy offered prosecutors a chance to show they are more than the corrupt, incompetent bureaucrats that most Guatemalans believe they are.

But even as Andy helped prosecutors take apart MS’s most powerful clique, the government failed to give him cover. As part of the witness protection program, officials locked Andy and three other gang associates who followed him into exile in a room for three days with very little food. The stipend money they promised never materialized. When the boys complained, no one listened, and when they complained more loudly, officials kicked them out of the program. After Andy’s murder, Federico, a young, earnest prosecutor who had taken the boy under his wing, waved a sheaf of papers in my face. “These are applications to get him back in the safe-house,” he said, shaking his head. “All rejected. He hadn’t even begun to give us 1% of what he knew...”

I also used Andy. I am using him now. When Martinez mentioned the possibility of meeting him, I jumped at the opportunity. “A *real marero!*” It took a couple weeks of repeated phone calls to Federico to finally set up an interview. My offer to tell his story far from those streets was enough for Andy to open up to me. Or perhaps he just wanted to talk to someone who would listen.

Andy knew that his usefulness to the government was all that kept him out of prison, even as he befriended investigators who wanted to do more than simply play-act the tragic farce that law and order has become in Central America’s Northern Triangle.⁶ He was used to being used. Before I used him for my book, before the government used him to take apart the Mara Salvatrucha, gang leaders used him to commit many, many murders. Children who kill do not risk the same legal consequences as adults. For years, his usefulness kept him alive when everyone about him was dying. And a week before his death, Andy fantasized that *he* was using the government to wipe out his enemies.

⁶ Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have, respectively, the #1, #3, and #5 highest homicide rates in the world, while conviction rates for violent crime remain very low (4.2% in Honduras, less than 10% in Guatemala, and less than 5% in El Salvador)

“More than anything... look I’ll explain,” he said. “What I want is that they catch all those assholes so that I remain as the commander. To govern, you understand! Once I’m in charge it’s gonna be another deal, *loco*. No more extortions. ...well, there will be extortions, but you won’t see any deaths. We’ll go to the homes and tell them, ‘Look, we’re going to take care of you, but we don’t want the violence.’ To reach an accord without the violence.”

Up until the very end, Andy competed in the game of survival, carving out what advantage and shelter he could, struggling to maintain a pretense of control. But his world was not yet ready to “reach an accord without the violence.” How could it be?

Finding Andy

Andy, *aka* El Fish, *aka* el Niño, *aka* El Reaper, *aka* Jose Luis Velasquez-Cuellar. Before she died, his mother called him Andy, and that’s how he introduced himself to me. Each of his names addressed an aspect of his self and his history. His neighbours and family called him *El Fish* when he was a toddler because of a funny hairstyle he wore for a time. El Niño because he was the youngest of the “*homitos*”, the little gang-bangers emulating the Barrio18 members who controlled his neighborhood before MS killed them all. El Reaper, as in the Grim Reaper, when he was a gang wannabe trying to pass his *chequeo*—an initiation period in which the gang measures a wannabe’s worth—with the Mara Salvatrucha. He claimed they also called him El Enigma, because they could not fathom his true desires. To the legal system and the press, he was Jose Luis Velazquez-Cuellar.

I have two pictures of Andy mounted on the wall of my office. The first I took two months before he died in the public ministry building. Federico had introduced us perhaps an hour earlier. In the photograph Andy looks into the camera without expression- no smile, nothing, as if he were looking through me. I had asked to see his tattoos, and he lifted his shirt up to his skinny shoulders, exposing his chest. There were two: a gaunt female face wreathed in flames and a roughly etched marijuana leaf. The latter I have seen many times- it is a popular “subversive” symbol among disaffected youth.

“My first tattoo,” he says, proudly. “I got it when I was 8.”

“And the other?”

“My mother. They shot her 8 times.”

The second photo was taken about an hour after he was shot dead with five bullets to the back of his skull. It’s a grainy black and white image snapped by the police who retrieved his body a few blocks from the McDonald’s where we had our last interview. He is on his back, eyes staring off to the right, lips parted, exit wounds swelling the left side of his face. A triple slash across the front of his black sweatshirt looks at first like some brutal injury, but on closer inspection is merely the trademark logo for Monster Energy drink. Monster Energy... the irony is just too much. Federico gave the photo to me along with the rest of the police report on Andy’s murder. “Here, do something with this for your book,” he said. “Don’t let him be forgotten.”

A month before his murder, Andy said he knew he must die. “Anyway, I don’t give a shit. I’m already dead. I lose nothing. When my time comes, they better come at me from behind, because if not...” And this was precisely what they did. “These are my streets,”

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he had said to me as we walked out of the McDonald's into the 5 o'clock sun low over the concrete boulevard where his body would be found. He wasn't looking, but he must have known they were coming. An hour earlier they'd taken out his friend, El Gorgojo, a 15 year old kid who was often slouched in the corner of the prosecutor's office while Andy made his declarations. After they shot Gorgojo, Andy called Federico.

"They killed my *camal* (bro).⁷ They killed Gorgojo." He was sobbing.

Federico told him to go home, but Andy kept repeating, "They killed him, those sons of bitches. He never did anything to anybody."⁸

The phone went silent mid-sentence and Federico heard no more from him. An hour later, Andy was also dead. That's when Federico called me. "I have bad news for you," he said. I saw him sitting in his office, linoleum floors cluttered with case-files, stamped requests for Andy's re-entry into the protected witness program sitting denied in a cardboard box. And I already knew Andy was dead. Of course he was. He shouldn't have lived as long as he did. "He told me they're going to come for me too." Federico said. "They have videotapes, he said. They know my face and they know where I work."

I told Federico to be careful. After hanging up, I sat down in my shoddy wooden chair, back slats come loose and nails slipped from their slots. Stupid boy, I thought, and clutched my stomach and cried. But only for a second. A few seconds. "The odds were always against him," I wrote in my journal that night.

Chances ticking down towards zero like a tired metronome until he stepped out of his house and they shot him in the head. Why didn't I hear it? That death whispered lovingly when he was born, caught his life in its ivory arms and cradled him to its ribs. And couldn't I see it? Wasn't it there staring me in the face through the eyes in his skull, so close to him when we met that they had become indivisible, the boy and his death layered like snakeskin. I guess I didn't want to believe, taken in by his teenage swagger, his brash talk before the death settling into his skin and sinking down into the bone and marrow.

Looking back through these notes now, I see how quickly I created a narrative arranged backwards in time before his death, a storyline composed of crucial moments and fateful crossroads that were always leading to this (un)timely murder. Making sense of his death meant arranging his life into a linear history, moments of choice and decision that put those bullets into his head on the 20th of June at approximately 5:30 in the evening. It was so easy to impose a narrative on his life that made his murder into fate.⁹

⁷ *Camal*- Brother, comrade, with a deeply visceral connotation. "Blood brother" is the most literal translation, but lacks the sense of casual friendship.

⁸ Federico related his last conversation with Andy to me that same evening.

⁹ Members of La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 in Central America speak with resignation towards the possibility of death by violence. Among mareros, the "*tres puntos* (three points)" tattoo, named after an old Los Angeles Hispanic gang made famous in the Hollywood gang film, *Blood in Blood Out*, has taken on new meaning. The three points represent the hospital, the prison, and the cemetery— by joining the gang member are assured they will pass through each of these places sooner rather than later.



Andy dead. June 20th, 2012. (PNC)

Andy's Story

Andy grew up in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva, an urban sprawl bordering Guatemala City's southern edge. His parents were both Barrio18 gang members. He never knew his father, but his uncle was of the same "Clanton 14", one of Los Angeles' original *sureño* gangs that still has mythological status among Barrio18 folk in both US and Central American cities.¹⁰ He started with Barrio18 when he was just 6 years old, and said he was leader of the "homitos", the little homies, the gangsters-in-training hanging around their older, bloodier brethren. When he was 8 the MS clique *Coronados Locos Salvatrucha* (Crazy Kings, often called CLS)—led by El Soldado, a man who would become nationally famous before he died at age 23— captured Ciudad del Sol in a hostile takeover. Andy's mother took 8 bullets and died a few days later. His uncle killed by a gunshot to the head. Nearly everyone gone. So, at 8 years old, he said he decided to go on a mission to infiltrate the MS clique that took out his people. He joined with a plan to bide his time and kill the people that killed his family. At least this is what he told me

¹⁰ *Sureño* is the catch-all term for Latino gangs in southern California united under the Mexican Mafia (La Eme), a powerful Latino prison gang operating throughout the American southwest. Both La MaraSalvatrucha and Barrio18 originated as Sureño gangs in Los Angeles and abided by the Sureño's codes of Latino solidarity known as the SUR (Southern United Raza) until La MaraSalvatrucha broke the pact in august 2005.

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after he'd become a government witness. I was never sure whether he was trying to justify—to me or to himself—betraying MS by becoming a secret witness. I suspect the truth was rooted somewhere else, somewhere deeper and too painful to admit. I believe that after orphaning this boy, El Soldado took him under his wing. The Coronados killed off Andy's family, and then replaced it.

I asked him what the Mara meant to him while he was still part of it.

"It was a family that didn't leave me to die," he said. "When I needed most they gave me a hand and gave me food to eat, you understand. So I couldn't bite the hand that fed me."

"So they were your friends?" I asked.

"Not my friends. They were *family*," he insisted with what strikes me now as an ineffable sadness in his voice. "They were my family when I had no family. It was all I had. I had no father, no mother, no siblings. They were my family."

With no one to turn except the very authors of his disaster, the massive contradictions 8 year old Andy had to reconcile boggle the imagination. Rendering the ordeal into a simpler storyline such that his betrayal became a successful conclusion to a tale of righteous revenge ties up the loose ends quite elegantly. In this version of his history, both Andy's past and present selves retain agency and control that must have been absent from his lived experience.

In any case, he said that for years he couldn't get his revenge because they knew where he came from and kept him closely monitored. So he underwent a particularly long and strenuous "*chequeo*," testing him with ever more difficult missions. At age 9, already a year into his *chequeo*, he had to kill another kid who had tried to run away.

They dropped the kid from *chequeo*, and for his failure they were going to drop me too. It all went to shit because of this dude. He took off and was in a *discoteca* here in zone 5. He never imagined that I would come to zone 5 to find him, and I came, and another homey came with me. He was like,

'*Wachea* (look at) that dude, look alive and go hit him.'

"*A la gran*," I said. "No way *carnal* (bro), the *vato me hizo paro* (dude backed me up).¹¹"

"What do you mean "no" you sonofabitch." He got on the phone with the chief, El Soldado. "Look, Soldado, *la onda* (the vibe) is that the Reaper doesn't want to hit Casper."¹² And then he turned to me, "Look here you sonofabitch, if you don't shoot him I'm gonna shoot you."

"*A la gran*, okay..."

And I had to shoot the guy. I shed a tear because he was just a baby. I still had a heart, you know. Since then they showed me how to not have a heart, so I didn't have feelings about anything.

¹¹ *Carnal*- Brother, comrade, with a deeply visceral connotation. "Blood brother" is the most literal translation, but lacks the sense of casual friendship.

Vato: Common slang meaning guy, dude, fellow.

A la gran: A contraction of "A la gran puta" or "to the great whore", an expression of dismay.

Hacer paro: To help, to do favors for. *Paro* is also the term for a "gang associate", a person who does favors for the gang.

¹² *La onda*: the vibe. "Que onda"—"what's up"? The term can have a spiritual connotation—"the way" "the feeling".

This was Andy's first murder, and killing the boy became a matter of self-preservation. This was the "choice" Andy's victim had refused to make by running away, a move the gang interpreted as a decision to die. Such zero sum calculus thrust upon a nine-year-old is difficult to contemplate. Age-old philosophical puzzles—the parsing of guilt from innocence, the possibility of rational choice and free will, to name a few—become moot, even absurd, when applied to the moment in which Andy took the gun too heavy for his thin wrists and shot another child.

Andy blamed El Soldado for making him into a killer. Like Andy nearly a decade later, the CLS chief would die while apparently cooperating with the government to reduce gang violence in Guatemala City. The reasons for his death remain unclear to all but those who ordered it. El Soldado had played some very dangerous games—becoming a lead negotiator with the government to start gang rehabilitation programs, meeting with and giving talks to the police, the media, and low level government officials in which he preached the need for reconciliation, that gangs could be part of peace-making, and that police profiling was violating poor youth's human rights. A year before he died, an AP photographer snapped his photograph hunched over his baby son in his home in Ciudad del Sol—the neighborhood where Andy's family once lived—one hand on the child's head and the other holding a .45. For a short time, national media referred to him, with poorly veiled sarcasm, as the next "savior of Guatemala" for his role in trying to bring peace to the streets.¹³



El Soldado and his son in front of their home in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva. (AP)

El Soldado, the savior of Guatemala, was also, according to his contemporaries, a central player in institutionalizing the practice of *descuartizamiento* (dismemberment),

¹³ Zepeda 2005

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torture, and other forms of “corporal” punishment against captured rivals as well as homies who betrayed the gang, homies who wanted to leave, homies who couldn’t cut it anymore. This kind of violence is performed in a group, a communal act in which aspiring or newly initiated members must take part to prove their mettle. Andy participated in a *descuartizamiento* for the first time when he was 10.

“I had to kill a homey from my old *barrio* (gang).¹⁴ We had to dismember him, just me and the *ramflero* (gang leader).”¹⁵

“You had to kill and quarter him?”

“Nope. Dismember him alive. Torture him, make it a party.”

“Where did this happen?”

“Over in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva in a *chantehuario*. *Chantehuario*, that’s what you call the houses of war, you understand, where all the homies will be, see.”¹⁶

“Were the others around when you were doing it?”

“Yeah. All the homies of my clique- el Extraño, el Huevon, el Shadow, El Brown, el Maniaco, el Delincuente, el Fideo, el Aniquilador, el Hache, el Chino. All of them, you understand.”¹⁷

“What were they doing?”

“*Marcando la ira* (measuring the wrath), seeing if I had heart, mind, and balls. All they ask of you in the barrio is that you have mind, heart, and balls, because if you don’t have any of them you’re not worth dick. That’s right, and I had been a little *vato* since I was 6 with Clanton 14. Now they were seeing what I was capable of, testing me. So with faith and joy I had to do it.”

“How did you feel?”

“Look, *carnal*, the way I grew up, I grew up in the gang. My dad was 18, my mother was 18, you understand, ok, I had already grown up with a gangster’s outlook, so I took pleasure in killing dogs, going around killing cats. So when I killed a human it was like I was killing an animal. I was already a *bestia* (beast or Devil) for that kind of thing.”¹⁸

I still find it difficult to stomach Andy’s glib reproduction of himself as beast, as the Devil personified. I wanted some other explanation— something more nuanced and reflective, perhaps. But none was forthcoming, at least not from him. Again and again, he claimed the virtues of a “real *marero*.” The idea that *mareros* are essentially different from other criminals, and from other human beings, is an important part of their public persona. It is also a notion the *maras* have taken on and self-consciously cultivated. The key distinction,

¹⁴ *Barrio* in general terms means “neighborhood” or “neighborhood community”, but in *mara* vernacular it refers to the gang itself. In some sense an atavistic term that recalls when gangs proactively protected the neighborhood communities from which they sprung instead of preying upon them.

¹⁵ *Ramflero*: The leader of a gang clique. A transnationally constructed word that literally means the pilot (*flero*) of the Dodge Ram.

¹⁶ *Chante*: slang for “house” or pad” and “huario”, pronounced “wario”, a bastardization of the English word “war”.

¹⁷ All gang *apodos* (nicknames), also known as *takazos*, have been left in their original language.

¹⁸ Andy uses the term “*Bestia*”—which means both beast (brutal animal) and the devil

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the way to “recognize” a *marero*, is his capacity for violence without the psychological baggage that would paralyze a “normal” human being.

In our last meeting, Andy sat across from me in a McDonald’s, a chickenburger and fries untouched before him, middle-class parents eyeing us nervously while their children shrieked in the ball-pit some 30 feet away. He said,

Human beings have five senses. The *marero* will have a sixth. The sixth will be that he has no heart, that he doesn’t give a damn about anything. You will dismember for your gang, you will kill for your gang, you will die for your gang. This is how you describe a *marero*.

It was as though he was reciting from a script. The cadence measured and precise, emphasis on the action verbs- *descuartizar*, *matar*, *morir* (dismember, kill, die). He seems to be describing a sociopathic subject freed of the empathies expected of “normal” humans— for others’ suffering, for the value of human life, for the need to be considered human at all. Andy’s parroting of the *mara* motto exemplifies the gangs’ self-conscious embrace of their own carefully cultivated alterity—what Jon Horne Carter in his work on Honduran *maras* has called an “anti-idealist epistemology;” the *maras*’ self-mutilation and satanic iconography in their tattoos, their brash celebration of death and violence, their triumphant mimicking of societal discourses that label them fit only for extermination.¹⁹ “I am more than human,” Andy is saying, “Because I am less.” To identify so closely with the inhuman, the beastly, the demonic is to reject all facets of belonging in wider society—worldly, spiritual, and otherwise—since “one’s worthiness to exist, one’s claim to life, and one’s relation to what counts as the reality of the world, all pass through what is considered to be human at any particular time.”²⁰

Such wholesale alienation cannot be invoked with mere words. It must be constructed through ritual and repetition. The urge to fetishize the violence of Andy’s world is strong—to hold it at arm’s length and convince ourselves it is not ours, it belongs to some other realm, some other time, some other species. I know. I have done it. The image of grown men performing similar acts— in a warzone, under military orders, perhaps—seems more palatable, or at least less world-rending. Children committing this kind of violence invoke a deeper degree of *horror*—an internal scream pleading “How could this happen in the world I live in?” And yet, reacting this way, we ignore how children like Andy learn to do what they do through an *education*. Their behavior is *taught*. Accepting this fact means accepting that we could be molded in exactly this way, and that Andy’s education is no more or less “natural” than our own formation.

No matter who Andy was before he performed the violence the gang forced upon him, afterwards he could not remain the same. Through the brutal acts the Mara made him perform, Andy made himself in the image of the unfeeling killer that *mareros* are so widely imagined to be. He became not only a child who has killed, but a child who assumes he must be a killer in order to be anything at all. And once caught up in this image of himself, all possibility of a different life, a different world, a different way of being seemed to disappear. But, every once in a while, Andy let slip the suffering he tried

¹⁹ Carter 2014

²⁰ Biehl: 40

so hard to hide beneath the façade of the unfeeling killer, admissions quickly swallowed back again.

“I’m already grown and I’m always shedding tears, *loco*.” Andy said the last time I spoke with him. “Because one knows that loneliness attacks, and one has a heart. Maybe not for caring for other people, but for caring about oneself... To not have a person who will listen to you, to be able to talk and have a peaceful life... But whatever, it’s the life that I chose and so it has to be cared for.”

“Choose? Do you think at the age of 7 you can really choose?”

“Like I said, I didn’t know the deal then, I didn’t know what I would get myself into. But here are the consequences, you understand, and I’m grown. All that’s left to me is to tighten my belt and continue forward, with my chest high. This is what destiny wants.”

“Would you say you were a victim?”

“No way, I’m no victim. No way, *carnal*.”

“A victimizer then?”

He paused for a moment, and then laughed uncertainly. “That’s it. Other people are my victims.”

Killing Innocence

As Andy grew from a child into an adolescent, gang war in Guatemala intensified. In August 2005, MS’s leaders made the definitive move to break the SUR, a pact with Barrio18 that kept inter-gang warfare out of prison.²¹ In a coordinated strike in prisons across Guatemala, they killed 36 Barrio18 *clecheros* (veteran members with authority in the gang structure).²² The consequences on the street was more blood, the last poorly kept boundaries regulating gang war swept away in the deluge.

During this time, which coincided with El Soldado’s reign, CLS grew from the territory in Ciudad del Sol won from their rivals to running extortion rackets in La Paz, El Alyoto, Linda Vista, and numerous other *colonias* (neighborhoods). CLS became the dominant gang in Villa Nueva. Their success was underpinned, at least in part, by turning the violent techniques used against enemies and traitors onto extortion victims residing and doing business in the territories that fell under MS control.

Killing extortion victims who refuse to pay up, threatening their livelihood and the lives of their family members, has a moral valence distinct from hurting and killing other gangsters. Gang members self-consciously define themselves as soldiers. “Soldiers for the *Barrio*,” as Andy and many others put it. A *marero*’s sudden, violent death is always a possibility, and, at least in conversation, many are resigned to such an end. So killing a member of a rival gang follows the rules of combat and, morally speaking, is no great sin. After all, he’ll kill you if you don’t kill him first. But killing innocent people for money is a different affair altogether. This is not combat. It’s murder, plain and simple.

In conversation with me, Andy made no distinction between innocent victims and enemy combatants. When I asked him if it was difficult to kill people who posed no threat to him, he replied, “No way. It was a luxury for me. It was a luxury to go killing people, go collecting. In the clique we had this thing of seeing who would kill more people. So

²¹ The SUR stands for *Southern United Raza*. It is a pact of prison non-violence between Latino gangs in the United States meant to create solidarity and strength against other racially based gangs in prison.

²² I explore the history of this pact and the reasons MS reneged in Chapter 2.

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every day we would go. One day I would kill two and another guy comes and he's killed three."

"So it was a competition between you?"

"Exactly. It was "who's the best?" the best sniper, you understand. That was the game."

"What type of arms did you use?"

"Guns. M16, AR15, 9.40, 380, 357," he said, ticking them off on the fingers of one hand. "Whatever there was, even machetes, to use to take a person's life when the time came."

This was his expertise. Not for nothing, he said, did they call him El Reaper. He was for a long while one of the youngest in his clique, and as the youngest he was often given the dirtiest jobs. El Soldado and those working beneath him knew that the police could do little against a child. Another informant recalled getting hauled in a half dozen times as a minor for homicide. Once, a policeman jerked him by the handcuffs off the pavement, muttering, "Just wait til your 18, you son of a bitch," while the boy grinned in his face. The police picked up Andy a few times, but no witnesses came forward to testify against him, and he never spent more than a few days in police custody before the charges were dropped for lack of evidence.

This is about more than poor policing or scared witnesses. Quite simply, children who kill distill violent contradictions in collective perceptions over agency and the meaning of innocence. Liberal watchdog groups like the United Nations International Children's Rights and Emergency Relief Fund (UNICEF) refuse to allow children an ounce of agency, framing them as pure and innocent victims caught up in violent networks run by others. Meanwhile, conservative politicians, social cleansing organizations and vigilante groups target suspected gang youth for arrest, torture and assassination. Since the 1980s, cadres of off-duty policemen have operated clandestine social-cleansing outfits that capture and execute *niños de la calle* (street children) across Central American cities.²³ Begging and stealing to survive and huffing solvent against the cold, these children band together in abandoned lots for mutual protection. For many, the power and security the *maras* seem to offer is an unimaginable luxury. But the *maras'* rise, and their penchant for preying on the poor communities from which they spring, has only turned public opinion more violently against children and youth surviving on the street. Children like Andy, forced to kill in order to live, inhabit a liminal space between the tragedy of lost innocence and the cold pragmatism of survival. If their violence is not their own, then who does it belong to? Their parents? Their community? Their country? All the world? Ultimately, children represent the future, and so children capable of performing horrific violence appear as truly terrifying harbingers of what is to come.

Once killing becomes an expected mechanism for "resolving" conflict, for imposing one's will upon a situation, then the distinctions between the "innocent", the relatively sacrosanct, those-who-deserve-to-live and "justified" targets blur and, for many perpetrators, disappear. Andy learned a lesson that many educated adults never grasp:

²³ Each country in the Northern Triangle of Central America has its own brand(s) of social cleansing groups. La Mano Blanca (the White Hand) in San Salvador, Battalion 3-16 in Honduras (Pine 2011), and various clandestine groups in Guatemala (the most talked about and feared being the "panal blanco", the white vans circulating through 1980s Guatemala).

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the categories of innocence and guilt and right and wrong cannot be and never are stable. This is why Derrida (1990), among others, calls law an abomination, since through its narrowly prescribed logics we attempt to divide the unquantifiable concept of justice into measured portions. Through the law, the state claims the right and capacity to divide not only between those who deserve punishment and those who do not, but deciding *how much* punishment each violation should receive. Anyway, what innocence was Andy allowed in his short life? The justice that he would later claim in turning on his gang—based in the innocence of children—was for most of his life a house of cards collapsing at every turn. Before he died he would reconstruct this fragile morality for himself—or perhaps just for me—out of the shards of his violated life.

When Andy was 12 years old, fellow gang-members killed his girlfriend.

“I had my *heina* (girlfriend) who belonged to the *barrio*.²⁴ She was the Reaper too, like me— they named her Reaper too for being my *heina*. She went along with it but got into too much shit until it was known she had to be hit and dismembered. She was pregnant.”

“Jesus. Why did they do it, then?” I asked.

“Because she was going to leave. They overheard a conversation when she was saying she was gong to leave the Barrio, fly away. Yup, they had to hit the girl.”

“How did that hit you?”

“Hit me hard. I was angry. I wanted to take the shit out of the *ramflero* because it was his order. *Simón*, the girl was a little princess, I had never seen a girl as beautiful as she. And, since she didn’t want to give anything to *el Soldado*, the *vato* was pissed. So it was the jealousy of that fucking bastard who’s burning in hell.”

“They dismembered her?”

“That’s right. And they buried her in the pad. When I arrived I was like, ‘Sonofabitch, what’s all this dirt and cement and everything?’

‘Well we killed a dude.’ The *chequeos* told me.

A month later I asked El Soldado, ‘What’s up with my girl, dude?’

‘*Se le llevo la bestia* (the devil took her),’ he told me, and when I asked he said, ‘The truth is she’s buried there.’ When I dug it up there were only bones.

Not until long after Andy was killed, as I listened over and over again to this recorded passage, did I detect the ambiguity woven through this story. There’s the confused motive— was she killed for blabbing about leaving, or because she refused el Soldado’s advances, or is one explanation used to buttress or disguise the other? More importantly, Andy described her death as a *necessity*. “It was *known* she had to be hit and quartered” and “they *had* to hit the girl”. As with his first murder, Andy’s anger centers on el Soldado for what he perceives as the gang leader’s abuse of authority. This is not surprising, since rage will always find its object. In the eye for an eye ethos Andy learned so very young,

²⁴ *Heina*: slang for girlfriend, but more casual than the word “*novia*”.

his suffering could have no expression but rage, and it is easier to rage against a single person than against an entire authority structure or life itself.

And the reality may be far worse than Andy was willing to share. I suspect he himself participated in the girl's death, and this story is meant to cover up his guilt and remorse. But in the end, I cannot know. A little girl was killed. The true reasons are buried with her bones. And with Andy's. And El Soldado's. And all the rest.¹

Being Somebody

The most cogent summary of what death and violence does to and for boys like Andy came from another former MS member named Mo. He has been incarcerated for over a decade, and with 40 years left of his sentence, will likely die in prison. Sitting in the prison yard, staring at his hands, he said in a quiet voice,

“This world is not like your world.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here death plays into to so many social necessities, to your very identity, that it becomes an addiction—addiction to the money, the pleasure of it, but it's a pleasure that comes from the respect you get, from your name entering the myth of the street. This is the way to be somebody—but as you build up your name on the street you are also building up your own prison, because the bigger you become the more of a target you become. And then you're only thinking that if they do come to kill you, they shoot you in the head. That's the best way out.”

Money and addiction, myth and identity, pleasure and death, all woven into a single tangled skein. Desire and death entwine when hurting and killing become the ultimate means of fulfilling a sense of power and importance. Encoding oneself into the myth of the street means becoming one more doomed rider of the self-consuming Ouroboros, hitching a ride on the never-ending cycle of death and revenge that gang war has become. Among *mareros*, killing, and making sure the world knows you are a killer, have become key to being somebody.²⁵

And yet, the telling is never an exact copy of the doing. The entangled causes and conditions that drive a person to commit a violent act, or any act for that matter, are not the end products of some rational choice game. We do things, we get caught up in events and we react without knowing exactly why. Later, if we have to explain ourselves, to describe an experience and be answerable for it, we look back and find a coherent narrative, a chain of events that made the act inevitable. But these explanations rarely do justice to what actually happened. The act of killing—to choose who lives and who dies, or to seem to make that choice—can, in the right time and place, make a boy a man and a man feel like a king. It is precisely because violence has become a point of pride and the fodder of myths that the excessive brutality so many *mareros* claim as their own must remain suspect. If the circulation of personal myths, if *being somebody* is a key aspect of why *mareros* kill, then stories of killing may simply be the raconteur's fantasies grown from the desire to reflect this bloody paradigm.

²⁵ Baird 2012

Andy goes to Las Vegas

How do we tell ourselves to one another? What do we reveal and what do we keep hidden? Who is worthy of receiving a complete and truthful confession? Who knows? One oft-repeated “truth” is that no one escapes the Mara Salvatrucha. The exit routes once open to Central American *mareros*—having a kid, going straight, becoming a devout Christian— have crumbled in the face of heavy-handed policing and society’s unwillingness to forgive *mareros*’ tattooed skin and stained souls. Andy mouthed the words he had heard hundreds of times, “You can run, but you can’t hide.”²⁶ Years before, *el Smokey*, the CLS leader before Andy became part of the gang, had run to the United States. Andy says *El Pensador*, the man who took control after *El Soldado* died, issued the order that *El Smokey* be tracked down and killed.

This was in 2006, the SUR had broken the year before and it was a new, harsher world. Former *mareros*, labelled “Gayboy Gangsters” and *pesetas* (meaning “pennies”, because they aren’t worth a damn) by their old comrades, who might have slipped away, who did slip away in the preceding years, would no longer be so lucky. “The *culero* (asshole) who runs gets a green light. Period.” A green light is like the Mark of Cain. A message filters out along via cellphone and word of mouth between every clique in the country announcing open season on your ass. Every homey, *chequeo*, and gangster wannabe has the duty to shoot you on sight. This is why *El Smokey* had run to the North, to escape the web that surely would have ensnared him had he stayed.

El Pensador wanted that loose end tied up. He sent Andy, along with a boy named *El Picarro*, to kill *El Smokey*. Andy had been in *chequeo* for almost four years due to his age and suspicions that he might still have loyalties to his Barrio18 roots. “If you want to end your *chequeo*, go find that son of a bitch and kill him. That’s your mission,” the *ramflero* told Andy. The homies in Guatemala knew *El Smokey* had gone to Los Angeles. According to Andy, it was his women who gave him away.

On their way north, Andy and *El Picarro*, now *missioneros*, passed from clique to clique across the Guatemalan border and into Mexico. From Tecun Uman across the river in a truck driven by Mexican MS members. Then up to Veracruz, Mexico and so on. Always escorted by a local MS member who knew the area and could navigate the local authorities, always checking in with *El Pensador* back in Guatemala, who dealt with the local Mexican clique, ensuring the two boys had food and money. It took three months for the *missioneros* to complete the trans-Mexico journey and enter the United States.

When Andy and *El Picarro* caught up with their target in Las Vegas, some local homeboys pointed him out and gave Andy a knife. *El Smokey* was wearing a turtleneck to cover the Mara Salvatrucha tattoo etched in gothic letters across his neck.

“They told me, ‘Look at him, that’s the dude over there.’ Then one says, ‘Hit him here and he’ll die slowly. Hit here and here and he’ll die instantly.’ One time *bimbimbim*.”

²⁶ As an *ex-marero* recalled, “The saying of the clique: you can run but you can’t hide. That is, you can run for five years, but the world is small. We went on missions to take them out, and you would always find them somewhere. That was the policy of *La Mara*. Shoot any sonofabitch, you understand. For that reason when you enter they tell you there will be no turning over another leaf, your soul already belongs to the barrio, to the devil.” (Calavera 2012)

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“Do you remember where you were?”

“In front of a casino. I hit the guy and he went like this—” Andy clutches the right side of his neck. “He took a halfstep, and boom, he fell. When I left there was a helicopter tatattatatata.”

“What kind of gun did you use?”²⁷

“No man! Over there you use a knife. Like I told you, we didn’t have permission to take him with bullets. It was a place of *mero juras* (bona fide police) so finfinfin!” He stabs the air with an imaginary knife. “So he was just left there. Yup. It was a job for the *Barrio*.”

El Smokey died from the knife-wounds in the neck he had tried to hide in front of a Las Vegas casino. At first, the passersby thought he was fallen-down-drunk, a common enough sight in that city. Andy returned to Guatemala and finally ended his long *chequeo*.

A month after Andy was killed, I finally got around to watching the film *Sangre por Sangre* (translated in English as *Blood In, Blood Out*). It is a fictional account of the birth of the Mexican Mafia—a Mexican-American “super gang”—in Southern California prisons, written by Jimmy Santiago Baca, an accomplished ex-con writer and poet who found his muse in the early years of incarceration. The film—produced and distributed by Disney—can be found all over urban Mexico and Central America. I bought a pirated copy in a Guatemala City market. Alongside *American Me*, it ranks as one of the most popular and “accurate” accounts of the Mexican Mafia, a prison gang that to this day holds sway over Latino street gangs like 18th Street and La Mara Salvatrucha in Southern California and parts of the US southwest.²⁸ I watched it alone in bed drinking a beer.

A third of the way into the film, the main character, Miklos, a half-caucasian half-Latino youth desperate to join the prison gang “La Onda”, must demonstrate his worth by killing a white prisoner who has double-crossed the gang. “Show him the book,” the gang leader tells a tall moustachioed prisoner named Magic. The book looks like a small, black Bible, but hidden in its pages is a human figure marked with black dashes. The dashes are kill points.

“Hit a man here and here,” says Magic, pointing to the stomach and the chest. “And he will die slowly, painfully. Hit a man here or here,” he continues, pointing to the neck and the head, “and he will die instantly.” I rewound the scene and watched it again and again. Astounded. Angry. Laughing in confusion.

²⁷ I was trying to catch Andy in a lie with this question, to make him contradict himself, because the story sounded so fantastic.

²⁸ John Edward Olmos’ debut film. Before making the film, he offered it for review to Joe Morgan (depicted in the black and white photo below), a real life *consiglieri* to the Mexican Mafia’s founding chief. Morgan approved it, but subsequent changes Olmos made while shooting the film—depicting Mexican Mafia members committing violent homosexual acts, among others—so angered the gang that they allegedly killed three of Olmos’ “advisors” who grew up in Latino gang neighborhoods, and put a green light on Olmos. To save himself, Olmos purportedly paid \$50,000.



The original Mexican Mafia (left, photo taken circa 1973)²⁹
and “La Onda” in *Sangre Por Sangre*

Did Andy see *Sangre por Sangre*? Did 12-year-old Andy travel all the way to Las Vegas to kill an escaped *ramflero*? Did he knife the man in the neck on a busy street in front of a casino, and escape before the police helicopter arrived? Does it matter whether this boy did this thing in this place, or whether he and his homeboys spun it out of a collage of their experience and the Hollywood myths of *el Norte* and the internal stories circulating and transforming endlessly in the unstable myths of La Mara Salvatrucha?

Of course it matters. Let’s assume, for a moment, that his story is true. That Andy did make this trip to the north, and his US compatriot parodied the film scene to the young *missionero*. The film itself is based loosely on the very real spaces, events, and even personalities that spawned the Mexican Mafia. It is also a “foundational text” of gang culture. Central American cliques pertaining to both MS and 18 present the film to new recruits to teach them the ethos, history and meaning of the Latino gangs. It became the script through which Andy performed this murder. All of them—Andy, the US homeboy, and El Smokey—became actors reinventing a piece of theatre that itself is a simulacrum of real events. Art imitates life, life imitates art, in a chaotic circuit that never seems to end.

Or he lied to me sitting in the prosecutor’s office. Why would he tell it so? So that the poor chance at immortality I offered would be commensurate to his imagination? Because the invented story shines so much more than the daily drudgery much of his life in actual fact was? I will never know. The “truth” is ever out of reach, strung along the ragged, shifting chains linking the killed bodies to the stories invented and re-invented to explain the violence, mourn the losses, exalt in the sensation of power, no matter how fleeting, that the story can provide the teller who, no matter how he tells it, may or may not be the doer. I will never disentangle the truth of this story and dozens more like it woven through layers of lies and confusion. And, since these layers lock into the rationales behind each death, encase the flesh that is alive and then suddenly dead and the bones that are buried, they too will elude comprehension. We can watch the bloody drama and

²⁹ The black and white photo was supposedly taken in Duele Vocational Institution (DVI), Tracy, California. The color photograph is directly from the film.

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count the dead, and we can sometimes identify the actors and even analyze their roles, but who wrote the script?

In the end, the meaning of this story goes deeper than whether Andy actually did this thing in this place the way he said he did. Andy, speaking to me, answering my questions, caught up in the maelstrom of his last days, explained his life to me this way, using these words and these symbols as anchors in the story of himself. The film did indeed become one more script writing Andy's world, but it was also a story through which Andy told himself to me, and through which I tell him to you. In this sense, the film is a lens—one among countless—through which Andy becomes visible—to himself and, through my interpretation, to us. Whether the Las Vegas story was true, a flight of whimsy, or an allegory for something else too painful or too mundane to tell, it exposes a brief fragment, a tiny facet, of Andy's inner world.

But this facet is also a shard in a shattered mirror, as the various possibilities and iterations of what was and is emerge through stories that multiply the endless exchange between truth and fiction, experience and artifice. Andy was forged, and forged himself, out of a maelstrom of very real violence and suffering, alloyed by his imagination, transformed in his telling to me. And in my effort to weave his stories into a narrative of life and death, I have added one more degree of separation, sown one more set of sutures to keep the whole thing from coming apart at the seams. Still, I cannot stop the narrative from unravelling into an unholy patchwork. Every facet of Andy's life, every version of his life-story that he told and that I inferred, every lie, flight of fancy, and grim confession, recede into the event horizon of his murder from whence they cannot be reclaimed. That Thursday afternoon in mid-June, 2012, when another boy about his age put 5 bullets into his skull, forms both the beginning and the end of Andy's story.

After killing el Smokey, Andy returned to Guatemala and finally became *brincado* (jumped in)—officially accepted into the gang. He was 13 years old, a bona fide homey belonging to La Mara Salvatrucha's bloodiest and most powerful clique in Guatemala. In three years he will help organize the crime of the four heads. Shortly afterwards, he will walk in on El Pensador, his *ramflero*, snorting a line of coke, an act prohibited by MS internal rules (alcohol and pot are okay, anything else receives swift punishment). Andy will report his *ramflero's* violation to the other homies and El Pensador will deny everything, threatening to turn Andy into *ceviche*. Andy knows well enough not to hang around after his *ramflero* makes this kind of threat. He will split with four other guys, young *chequeos* dissatisfied with their indentured servitude, leaving CLS forever.

A year later, a dismembered female in a trash bag will show up in front of Andy's house in zone 5 of Guatemala City. His "*marero*-ness" is obvious to his neighbours, and someone will finger him to the cops. He will roundly deny his guilt—"How could I be so stupid as to leave a corpse in front of my own house?" but no one will listen. Fearing the real possibility of going to adult prison, and seeing an opportunity to get back at La Mara Salvatrucha, Andy will tell the police he can give them the case of the four heads. In exchange, they promise to make him a protected witness and he provides them with detailed, blow-by-blow evidence on how it was planned and carried out.

Three months later, under armed escort on his way to give testimony in the Tower of Judgment, Andy catches sight of a CLS member waiting outside the underground entry watching the media and prosecutors streaming in. His collar pulled up

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high to cover the tattoos across his neck. They locked eyes for a second, and Andy knew. He walked on through the warren of tunnels beneath the Supreme Court, into the cramped, stuffy court room. Sitting before the sweating judge, he put it all down on tape, all he knew of his old *mara*, the leaders, the structures of command, the weapons caches, the fronts, the accountants, the soldiers. Extortion networks. Murdered children. Bodies buried in basements. All of it recorded in careful detail.

ⁱ El Soldado, the savior of Guatemala. While he was killing and quartering enemies and little girls he was also playing games with the cops, NGOs, the media. The center could not hold, and, inevitably, things fell apart. They shot him down in zone 5 of Guatemala City, not far from where Andy kept a residence. Who “they” is remains unclear. The public record has nothing, and few reporters inquired deeply. *Mareros* kill and *mareros* die. The rumors floating in the prisons tell various versions. Some say it was the police. Some say it was Barrio18 *chequeo* who got lucky, a good kill for an aspiring homey. Finally, some say it was other MS leaders and *segundos* who, along with willing elements in the police, double-crossed El Soldado. His plan for peace in the streets would ruin everything—extortion rackets, police-run black market weapons sales, etc. Maybe it was a charade, maybe it wasn’t. Other MS leaders procured some PNC uniforms from some crooked cops and took a police truck for a joyride. They came upon El Soldado who, having no reason to fear the police, did not see the ambush coming. He died quickly, his body left in the street and 5 bullets in his head, leaving behind a crack addicted wife and five small children. Their leader dead, *Los Coronados* chose as their new leader a man known as El Pensador. (Calavera 2012)

Chapter 2 History of Death, Death of History



Calavera eases open the door and eyes the street he grew up on.¹ Blurred figures slip beyond his peripheral vision. Two little boys darting into an alley. Or perhaps not? Tinkling laughter. Nothing to fear. Then again... he knows well enough the demons lurking in children's smiles. They make the best lookouts. Watching, just watching they go. And didn't Casper once call you his little chuchó. Just let you off the chain, and see...

Across the street, the tiendita he knew as a child has been painted blue, "TIGO" stenciled in white block letters. His own Mara Salvatrucha tag is somewhere beneath those layers of paint. Behind the tiendita's black metal grate, a small dark-skinned girl sits on a stool among Doritos and Lays potato chip bags strung up like baitfish. Sacs of fried pigskin, plantain chips, powdered detergent, and suaro for babies sick with fever piled in a glass case. A refrigerator glows behind her, brown glass bottles sweating within, and beside the refrigerator rusted propane canisters are stacked like abandoned ordinance from a forgotten war. The girl regards the street without blinking, lips pulled back in a half-smile, gold teeth glinting in the sunlight slanting over the tin rooftops.

¹ Calavera is a nickname meaning "Skull"

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Calavera steps out and shuts the door carefully behind him. For a few heartbeats he lingers, tracing with his memory the constellation of bullet holes above the door long plastered over. Then he's on the street, watching the neighbors' shuttered windows as he walks. Few of his old compatriots remain who could recognize him. Except for Casper, and he hardly ever leaves his safehouse in El Trebol. Still, Calavera wouldn't have even come here if he didn't long to see his sister and nieces. He walks more quickly. A handful of boys kicking a rumpled blue plastic ball stop their game and watch him disappear down a cement footpath winding beneath snarled electricity wires strung like sad nets to catch the falling sky.

The Gringo stands before the cemetery entrance, waiting for Calavera. He has a small silver voice recorder, camera and journal in a green United States Army surplus satchel. Flower vendors clog the sidewalk, the air heavy with carnations and roses in wilting piles. The stench of burning garbage on the breeze. Further down the boulevard, the city morgue abuzz. Men in white lab coats haul forensic equipment in and out. A line of silent visitors stretches out onto the sidewalk. They are here to identify the newly dead. Funeral home operators—dark glasses and tattered blazers—linger among the aggrieved, handing out business cards. In less than a month's time, the Gringo will pose as a mourner and come to find the body of a boy named Andy. The officials will not answer his queries. Eight years ago, Calavera stood there holding his sister's hand as she waited to identify her murdered husband. Then as now, coffin makers and stonemasons bend to their labors across the boulevard. Hammering and drilling echoes through the traffic. The Gringo mulls over his plan: walk with Calavera to his brother's grave and record his memories of growing up, his brother's death, their time running with La Mara Salvatrucha.

These are stories of the *maras'* rise in post-war Guatemala. This history, like so many histories in which violence and suffering play such powerful roles, does not arrive into the present intact. Indeed, since the 1990s *mara* youth have tended to live so fast and die so quickly the recent past often seems transformed into ancient, irretrievable history.

Some of the stories are personal parables distilled from nostalgia for a bygone sense of power and prestige. Some have been passed down from generation to generation, tweaked and embellished countless times before reaching me. Some are simply fragments of memory fitting, like roughhewn puzzle pieces, more or less awkwardly with what passes for the “historical record.” But none of these stories are confirmable fact. Nor are they a coherent set of myths that could make up a stable *mara* cosmology.² Made of tall tales and rumor, fantasy and fiction, this past only arrives in this present as a heap of fragmented narratives repeated and circulated haphazardly.³ The history I strive to map is a shifting, unstable terrain, and many of the accounts I excavate are swallowed back

² “Myth is perhaps fable, but this fable is placed in opposition to fiction if one looks at the people who dance it, who act it, and for whom it is living *truth*. A community that does not carry out the ritual possession of its myths possesses only a truth in decline; it is living to the extent that its will to be animates the sum of mythical chances that represent its intimate existence. A myth thus cannot be assimilated to the scattered fragments of a dissociated group. It is in solidarity with *total* existence, of which it is the tangible expression. —Bataille, Georges “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, *Visions of Excess*, pg 232

³ A small example of the problem: many protagonists are known only by their *apodos-* gang names like El Smurf of Little Psychos, El Chooky of Vatos Locos. These nicknames are often taken from popular culture, and different individuals will take the same *apodo* so that positively identifying an event’s characters and era was often impossible. For example, there are three characters named “Snyper” who play important roles in this history. I also heard accounts of four Chookys, three Smileys, and several Chinos, Maniacos, Cholos, and so on.

again as quickly as they emerge. But, in the end, who can say whether the events narrated in these stories took place as they are told? An event, in the end, is what can be narrated.⁴

Most of these stories came to me from current and former gang members rotting in prison or struggling to survive on the street. This past emerges filtered—consciously or not—through memories twisted by time and trauma, and refracted through all kinds of cultural and personal mediums: Hollywood films, revolutionary sentiments of a bygone war, nostalgia for the spring of youth, disgust with the present, or simply the need to tell a good story. These various “scripts,” through which memories of the distant and even recent past survive in the present, are impossible to disentangle from the tales themselves. As Malkki writes, “the ‘worlds made’ through narrations of the past are always historically situated and culturally constructed, and it is these that people act upon and riddle with meaning.” The fragmented and contradictory collection of stories that pass for the *maras*’ “mythico-history” speak of a world shot through with violent uncertainty. The ambiguity and doubt swirling through this history informs the present as much as the events themselves do.

The inherent instability of history and memory applies far beyond the *maras*’ recent past and present. Admittedly, the patterns of violence shaping Guatemala’s post-war trajectory are so extreme that the profoundly fragile nature of *mara* history may seem nothing more than a “limit case” with little meaning for those of us residing in more secure, less chaotic environs. However, we live in a world that seems to be moving faster than ever before into uncharted and very possibly catastrophic territories, a world “characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space.”⁵ In this sense, the *maras*’ history in Guatemala exposes processes of historical creation and erasure which make *all* of human history but usually remain hidden, sublimated into the smooth, facile readings of the past primarily dictated by history’s victors to dominate the order of the present.

Sifting through Post-War Killing Fields

The peace that arose from the ashes of Guatemala’s civil war has been anything but peaceful. In 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings famously quipped, “Guatemala is a good place to commit murder, because you will almost certainly get away with it.”⁶ No one—not the state, or the United Nations, or proliferating anti-violence NGOs—has been able to stem the tide of brutality. This violence has metastasized in cities, and most acutely in poor urban neighborhoods.⁷ Guatemala City is today one of the most dangerous places in the world—boasting homicide rates that surpass levels of violent mortality during all but the worst years of war. No one is safe. Even the richest and most well-protected urban residents live in constant fear of robbery, carjacking, and kidnapping. Homicides targeting women, involving sexual abuse and torture have risen so precipitously in the last decade that a whole new category of crime—*femicidio*—has been invented, as well as new laws to punish it. But given the porousness of the prisons and the torturously slow justice system, legal remedies have done little to quell the collective sense of insecurity and even horror.

⁴ Feldman 1995

⁵ Gregory: 11

⁶ Painter 2007

⁷ Following patterns of insecurity observed throughout the world (Davis, 2004)

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As both the primary targets and perpetrators of murder, it is poor male youth who bear the brunt of the mortal violence. By one count 15-17 year old boys constitute 80% of all those killed by bullets.⁸ According to the press, police, and popular opinion, the majority of murdered and murdering youth are involved in or associated with the *maras*. Whether this is confirmable fact or well-circulated rumor is impossible to know.⁹ Official estimates make the *maras*' responsible for somewhere between 10-60% of daily murders.

My own research shows that since the late 1990s mareros have died quickly and in massive numbers. Jose M. of Barrio 18 claimed that, of the 90 homies he saw who jumped in between 1998 and 2000, only three are alive today. Little Fat of La Mara Salvatrucha is among five men surviving out of the 60 he ran with in the early 2000s. Cholo may be the last man alive from his Barrio18 crew active in the early 1990s.¹⁰ In recent years, the killing has only accelerated. The “*tres puntos*” (three points) tattoo, trademark of Southern California Latino gangs for decades, has been resignified in *mara* circles. It stands for the only three certainties in *la vida loca*: the hospital, the prison, and the cemetery.¹¹

I went to Guatemala City to recover, from those survivors willing to tell it, the history that created these killing fields. I interviewed *veteranos* who survive serving out their life sentences. I met young men still in the *rollo* (game) who lived long enough to give me a few stories before they too ended up dead. I thought that, by cobbling these oral histories together with journalists' and scholars' accounts and what documentary evidence was still available, a coherent history of the *maras* in Guatemala would emerge.

And I found so much of what I was looking for: recycled revolutionary sentiments—protean and shortsighted—espoused by the first “*mareros*” in the 1980s; memories of deportees speaking Chicano slang taken straight out of the streets of Los Angeles, sporting the same styles they had seen in Hollywood gangster films; gang novitiates who took on the imported tenets of the *SUR*—the code of racial solidarity uniting rival Latino gangs' in US prisons—and who proudly called themselves *sureño*, (a member of *SUR*), delirious with a newfound sense of pride and power.

But while the raconteurs tried to salvage their connections to the past, these stories reveal how frayed and fading these connections have become. Images of the ever-receding golden past are forged in the crucible of the present. And in this present, all the pacts and codes and ethics which once seemed to order gang violence have been remanded to the dustbin of history. Today, it seems as though this fall from grace was the only future, overdetermined by so many powerful drivers. The unforgiving paranoia of

⁸ Oficina de derechos humanos del arzobispado de Guatemala, “Prevencion y abordaje de tratos crueles, inhumanos, o degradantes en las carceles de Guatemala,” 2005

⁹ In neighboring El Salvador, where gangs are even more central to the structure of everyday violence than in Guatemala, a gang peace pact enacted in mid 2012 dropped the daily homicide rate from ~15/day to ~5/day. While these numbers are not absolutely trustworthy (reports of “disappearances” and anonymous graves have become more common), clearly the *maras* were responsible for a large majority of daily murder, and made up the majority of those killed. (see Fontes 2012, *The Guardian* (published under pseudonym))

¹⁰ Most of those who survive do so because their bodies are preserved in prisons.

¹¹ Who kills mareros so quickly? The police. Social-cleansing outfits. Rival gangs. And today, more and more end up dead at the hands of their own compatriots. But still, the official numbers of “gang-associated youth” grow, replenished as quickly as they're snatched away. — style of footnotes a bit casual for me

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state and society targeted poor “subversive” youth for social cleansing. Machiavellian calculation and the Devil’s own profit motive broke down the ethos of solidarity. The *maras* became tools of narco-traffickers, police, politicians. Thousands of youth killed each successive year in the name of imported symbols tattooed on their bodies and graffitied on neighborhood walls, while the survivors became perpetrators of deepening violence. All of this and more has contributed to a hyperventilated mortality rate mowing down the *mara* rank and file, constantly replenished with youth too brash, too ignorant, or too vulnerable to refuse the *maras*’ allure.

The history I present will move in three parts. First, I explore former *mareros*’ memories of gang life in the late 1980s and early 1990s before the *maras*’ took on the transnational signs and symbols by which they are recognized today. Second, I trace the transfusion between US gang culture and urban youth in Guatemala that transformed the style, structure, and public persona of the post-war *maras*. This transfusion worked as much through Hollywood films and fantasies as it did through the bodies of US gangsters deported to Central America. Third and finally, I explore the collapse of the *maras*’ codes of solidarity which once limited the scope and trajectory of gang violence. Their demise gave way to a present defined more than ever by unmitigated brutality.

“Oye, Gringo.” He turns and Calavera is standing before him. They clasp right hands in a quick embrace.

“Que onda?” the Gringo asks.

Calavera shrugs. “All good.”

“Well, uh, shall we go?”

“Órale.”

Nodding, the Gringo turns and strides through the cemetery’s vaulted entrance. Calavera follows. They walk down a long paved boulevard lined with ornate mausoleums, cypress and walnut trees. The street noises fade quickly.

“So...” The Gringo pauses, trying to hide his confusion. The night before he wrote down a list of questions—probing, intelligent questions with a subtle, penetrating arc. But now he feels clumsy and callous, a stranger prying into another’s pain. He holds the recorder awkwardly between himself and Calavera, the red light blinking. “Have you been here since you got out?”

“No,” Calavera says, shaking his head. He passed the last six of his 25 years languishing behind bars. The previous five spent snorting and selling drugs and shooting at rivals. They told him it was the way to avenge his brother’s murder.

They walk past mausoleums of the rich. A forty-foot tall knockoff of an Egyptian pyramid looms on the left, replete with a pharaoh’s head and stylized hieroglyphs. It belongs to the Castillo family, who, it is said, became fantastically rich by monopolizing the national beer industry. Gallo, la cerveza mas gallo! An old woman wrapped in a rainbow shawl and a man with deep wrinkles folded into his face sit looking out from beneath the pyramid’s granite awnings.

When they reach the end of the main boulevard, Calavera stops. “My brother was a good person,” he says, gazing down a pitted stone walkway lined with mausoleums crumbling into anonymity. “And a good ramflero. He joined the gang really believing in the whole brotherhood thing, and he didn’t run when all the rest abandoned him. But I know he was sick of it at the end too. Come on, this way.”

Nostalgia, Solidarity, Failed Revolution

When transnational gangs emerged before the public eye in the early 1990s, there were already street gangs and criminal outfits operating at various levels of organization in Guatemala City. Several robbery and kidnapping rings had developed in the late 1980s towards the end of the civil war—*Los Pasacos*, the *Kangooroo* Band, *Agosto Negro*, and the AR15s, to name a few. The AR15s became famous for using high calibre weapons in shootouts with urban police; its rank and file were probably deserters from the army. Youth gangs existed but were, for the most part, scattered, unaffiliated, and isolated from one another. There were groups of *Brekeros* (break dancers), decked out in Michael Jackson-esque glitz, tight-pants, jean jackets, dancing to US funk and hip-hop. There were (and still are) the *niños de la calle* (street children)—orphans and runaways living together for companionship and protection, huffing glue and gasoline, panhandling, snatching purses and picking pockets. In the mid to late 1980s, military police targeted them for social-cleansing. Stories still circulate of *el panel blanco* (the white van), into which police hustled street children and lesser thugs and sent them off to compulsory military duty or simply had them killed.

El Cholo Cifuentes entered adolescence in the late 1980s, and would eventually become the leader of a Barrio18 click in Zone 1 of the city. He also, so he claims, had a stint transporting drugs for Guatemalan cartels involved in the Colombian trade. For more than a decade, he has made his home in Pavon prison.

At first, he resided with the general population, co-mingling with other Barrio18 members and *paisas* (non-gang prisoners). However, as the end of his sentence drew closer, he requested a transfer to an isolation block. The younger gangsters he met entering the prisons were getting too crazy, too out of control, and he didn't want to risk getting caught up in their bad trouble. In mid-2012, when we spoke in his private cell in Pavon prison, he was sick with hepatitis, patches of skin yellow and inflamed, wearing a grease-stained secondhand Izod golfing shirt. I asked him how he first became involved in the maras.

“Ah, yes,” he said, showing yellow teeth. “I was waiting for that question. We were a *banda*, not yet a gang. We called ourselves *Los Guerreros*. This was before the maras had become the maras. We got a group together of 10, 15 guys. And when we saw a man acting dishonourably, like abusing a woman on the street, we shut him up.” He held up a chubby finger in mock admonition. “Calm down, man. Women are not to be touched.’ And we were young, but that’s how we were. Doing the work of heroes.”

I am suspicious of his and other aging gangsters’ accounts of their roots, sticky as they are with nostalgia and mourning for a more moral, even righteous past. To hear *Cholo* and others of his generation tell it, the early gangs hewed to a spirit of communal protection and ethical mores that have all but disappeared today.

In the mid to late 1980s, revolutionary zeal was still something palpable in Guatemala. The civil war had not officially ended, though the guerrilla had already been effectively defeated in the highlands and stamped out in the capital. The children and young men who would become involved with gangs *did* have a political awareness rooted in the remnants of working class solidarity and leftist politics which had helped spark and sustain the revolution. However, the terror of the counterinsurgency silenced most of the survivors of these movements, and so subsequent generations of urban youth would have few tools and little opportunity to understand the politics or legitimacy of the violence

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that made their world.¹² The protean street gangs in Guatemala City in the 1980s emerged in shanty towns populated with refugees displaced by war and terrorized working class neighborhoods. The refugee families had fled massacre and atrocity in the countryside, while death squads targeted urban trade unionists, students, and other urban-based “subversives” for disappearance and torture. The youth who joined the street gangs that would later be subsumed into La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 inherited the vestiges of progressive politics and shades of the nightmarish violence of the continent’s bloodiest, dirtiest war—a toxic cocktail of failed revolution and ingrown terror that still courses through post-war society.

They walk past the mausoleum of General Justo Rufino barrios, stone pillars mottled green and white with mold. A huge rusted padlock hangs from a wrought-iron gate, and shards of green glass make ragged teeth in the rotted façade. In 1885, General barri declared war on the isthmus to create a single great nation... and died in the first battle. Ambitions to unite Central America were buried with him. Huge green horseflies buzz through the broken windows.

“You know, it’s because of my brother that I have no tattoos,” Hueosos says. “he was covered all the way up to his neck—blue with ink. On one of his last visits to the orphanage, he said I should never make my body into a prison like his.”

“Did his tattoos have anything to do with his murder?”

“No... well, it’s not so clear. He was the leader and the last of Los Adams Blocotes Salvatrucha. The war with the narcos took the rest. They shot him on the patio of our house with an AK47. Only a leg wound—nothing fatal. My sister says Giovanni was laughing and joking when they loaded him into the ambulance. But when she went to the hospital the next morning they told her he was dead. They said it was an asthma attack. Or something. Sandra—she’s my sister—thinks that maybe the doctors let him die, or overdosed him or something.”

“Where were you when all this happened?”

“I was in the orphanage in Xela. My uncle put me there after our grandmother died. My dad was in prison and no one knew where my mom was. After she buried my brother, my sister came to tell me what had happened. But I already knew.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you know?”

“Well...” he smiles vaguely. “You might not believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Okay then. On the night he died I woke from a nightmare. They said I was screaming in my sleep. I felt this like emptiness, like something had been stolen but I didn’t know exactly what. After that, and when Sandra told me... well, it made sense.”

The Gringo gives Calavera a long, searching look. “I believe you,” and then adds.. “I also have brothers.”

¹² Levenson 2013: 46

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Silence, a *Barrio18* member who joined up in the mid-1990s, recalled how the gangs first rose into public consciousness as part of the popular protests against the first democratically elected government. Today, he is an ex-gang leader cum evangelical Christian convert who once had tattoo sleeves up each arm and across his neck announcing undying allegiance to Barrio18. He has spent the last decade burning them off with a USAID-funded laser. Blurred shadows and mottled skin are all that remain. He told me this story in a Wendy's across from the National Cathedral, its great orange pillars catching the day's last light:

Look, it was towards the end of the main violence of the civil war when Vinicio Cerezo came and... bus fare was at 15 cents and he changed it to 85 cents. An egg cost 5 cents, and he wanted it at 10 cents. How do I explain? It's like, if today they come and say bus fare is 1 quetzal, and we're going to put it at 5! Who of the people would allow that? But it was a transition government moving towards democracy. There still existed all that military repression. So people went out to protest and were attacked by the military police. There were many jailed and beaten, and some were even disappeared. In those days no one knew a thing about the maras of Guatemala, absolutely nothing...

But gang members had been arriving since the 70s and organizing in an anonymous way. And in the time of Vinicio Cerezo, the opportunity presents itself for the gangs to make themselves known in Guatemala... The gang, the gangsters who were organized here in zone 6 of Guatemala City, they came out to respond in favor of the people, to support the protest because, most of all, many of those who had been incarcerated or beaten or killed were their family members. So, the army is subjugating the people—and the gang comes out and pushed back the army. And that was when one heard about... there were searches from house to house, cars were upturned, busses set on fire, etcetera. This was, well, unstoppable.

So the news comes out, and it comes out that the Barrio18 gang were announcing that they weren't going to allow the rights of the people to be abused and that they were there to defend the *pueblo*. So when I heard that story I was five years old, and I told myself, "*Puches*, (damn) when I'm big I want to be like that." Not wanting to be a gangster, exactly, but to be someone who fights for the rights of others. That's how I conceived of the vision...

No historical record exists of Barrio18 members secretly organizing through the 1970s and 80s. But the term "*mara*" itself emerged in connection with the same urban protests which Silence remembers so vividly. In a press interview a police chief referred to the mass of youth taking part in these protests as "*marabunta*"—swarming army ants—and the term quickly caught on.¹³

Communal solidarity against an authoritarian and abusive state weaves through my informants' memories of this ever-receding golden past. During this period, Gato was the leader of a street gang in Zone 1, Guatemala City. One night in 2012, as Gato, his wife and I were drinking beers in their home, he recalled with fondness how his *banda* (band or crew) collected rent from the local drug dealers, prostitutes, and thieves working

¹³ Levenson 2013

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around Parque Concordia, about 10 city blocks from the capital building. His *banda* was strong enough—and he had enough personal cache—to have the respect of the local underworld. He could rob police of their guns with just a knife, he bragged, lithely twisting a fork in the air to demonstrate. His wife, who grew up with him on the streets, clucked her tongue and shook her head. “He gave all of that money away, or drank it.” Gato laughed, and told a story of getting caught by three cops in the Parque Concordia.

“One of them was a policeman we knew as Chino, who would extort the street kids <and> if they didn’t pay he would arrest them. Chino put his gun to my head and the gun went off. It was probably an accident, a misfire, or just nerves. It snapped my head back.” He put the fork down and rubbed a small white scar on the side of his head. “The bullet is still buried there. A crowd gathers around me, people from all over the neighborhood—shopkeepers and *transvesti* prostitutes, men and women crying, ‘Gato is dead.’ A little boy leans over me and Gato opens one eye. ‘Gato is alive,’ the boy shouts. He puts his hand on my other eye, “Ay Gato, your eye, it’s still there. It’s just covered in blood.”

When they heard the shot, the crowd attacked the police, sending them running. Gato’s people lift him up and whisk him away to the dump to hide him in the trash. He burrows into the garbage and smokes some glue and falls asleep. Hours or minutes pass— it is unclear, and he pokes his bloody head out. An old woman is there, sitting quietly, serenely. She shushes him, tells him it’s not safe and that he should go back to sleep.

Gato is a born story-teller, and never one to hesitate to blend fact with more convenient or entertaining fictions. This story has uncanny traces of *El Señor Presidente*, the opus of Guatemala’s nobel laureate Miguel Angel Asturias. In the book, el Pelele, an idiot and a clown, accidentally kills a military officer, and runs away to hide in the trash dump, where the vultures pick at his exposed limbs. *He* is a hapless victim who, in a moment of blind rage, strikes out against a figure of state power, and later dies ignominiously— part of Asturias’ allegory of life under military dictatorship. Gato was a thief and a drug addict who survived the streets and later prison to become a government social worker. Still, he mourns the past, when, he says, “things were better because we were in charge.” Regardless of the facts, Gato’s story is also an allegory—an allegory for a lost or imaginary past in which his community stood up to abusive police to defend its own. Today, such sentiments of solidarity seem lost indeed.¹⁴

A long corridor between massive sepulcher walls stretches out before them, plots stacked in columns eight high. There are dozens and dozens of these tenements for the dead making a vast labyrinth through the cemetery, and few signs with which to distinguish one tenement block from another. Giovanni lies interred

¹⁴ Such mourning for a lost past does not, of course, belong solely to former members of the maras disgusted with and fearful of the gangs’ present form. Rich or poor, leftist or conservative, urban Guatemalans from across the political and economic spectrum lament the loss of a certain sense of security, a certain set of controls that made life feel less precarious than it does today. Residents of gang-dominated communities lament the loss of “los codigos de antes” (the codes of before) which limited the scope and trajectory of gang violence (Saunders Hastings 2015). Many urbanites rage at the government’s present weakness, longing for the days when, backed by martial law, police could “disappear” anyone who looked like a marero. Others bitterly recall the loss of a collective political consciousness which made effective political action from below seem like a real possibility, whereas today the poor spend more time tearing at each other than working together to overcome their shared squalor. And so, it seems the ideal future has been lost somewhere along the way, buried somewhere in an irrecoverable and irrevocable past.

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in one of these edifices somewhere in the northwest corner of the cemetery. They pass an old woman in mourning, bundled carnations clasped to her breast, and a man on a wooden ladder polishing a plaque. They pass two girls, a tiny boy and a puppy cavorting down the corridor.

“A few months after my brother died, my sister got me from the orphanage. But when I got to the old neighborhood, she was afraid for me to leave the house. She enrolled me in school, and when I wasn’t in school I was supposed to be with her, helping her little business selling tortas. I didn’t know why until a couple weeks after I was back.”

“What happened?”

“I was walking home when a bunch of kids came out of an alleyway. The war between my brother’s gang and the narco-traffickers was supposed to have ended with his death, but my sister told me that things were still crazy. We all know it never really ends. Anyway, the kids started pushing me around. I was even skinnier than I am now, but quick. ‘It’s him!’ they shouted. ‘It’s true! It’s true!’ They made a circle around me. I could tell they wanted to beat the shit out of me, but they were also afraid. I saw my chance and rushed the smallest one and he jumped away like I was a leper or something. I ran all the way back to my house. They didn’t follow me.”

“What was it all about?”

“Well, I told my sister what happened and asked her what the fuck was going on. She wouldn’t look at me, and then she started crying. ‘Some people still believe that your brother’s death was fake—that he didn’t die in the hospital, and that we all hid the truth to protect him.’

I was shocked, you know, like I was almost crying, too. ‘But you showed me his grave,’ I said to her. And my sister looked so sad. She’s tough, and I’ve only seen her like that a couple of times—when she first told me about Giovanni, and when they killed her husband. ‘They say I only buried dirt,’ she said. ‘They say it was all a charade so that he could escape.’

‘Well was it?’ I yelled. And then she slapped me hard. I knew why. She never would have done that to me. Never, and I felt bad.” Calavera looks up. Far, far above, vultures turn slow spirals into the cloudless sky. He closes his eyes.

“So,” the Gringo says slowly. “They thought you were your brother? Or your brother’s ghost?”

His eyes snap open. “Yeah, one or the other. Or they just wanted to kick my ass because I was my brother’s brother. Anyway, soon after that I joined with Casper’s Northside crew and that sort of thing never happened again.”



Guatemala National Cemetery. June 16, 2012

Memories of Hollywood

Pavon Prison, Guatemala City. May 2012

A dozen or so prisoners gather around cement tables in the prison courtyard stringing plastic beads on fishing line to make tiny floppy eared dog ornaments. Juande, ex-Mara Salvatrucha member, who more or less runs the workshop, slouches on a bench wearing an immaculate bright yellow hoodie. He's 33, the age of Jesus when he died on the cross. If he makes it one more year, I say, he'll prove he isn't Christ's second coming. He laughs at that. Since he was 17, he's been in and out of prison 17 times. Now, he's a decade into what he hopes will be his last stint—a 25-year sentence for homicide. In three years he'll be up for a chance at parole. He flashes his gold-rimmed teeth at this, as if to say "what a farce." Anyway, he didn't commit that one, but there were plenty others, dozens, they never pinned him with.

He has a way of holding himself that let's you know he could pound your face into the pavement without thinking too much about it. I saw him once feign a backwards karate kick when another prisoner appeared suddenly behind him. He's quick for such a big guy. But he says he's left it all behind.

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“When you’re up in the mix, you got to be tough on the street.” He says. “You don’t ever show weakness. They’ll take advantage of you. But when you’re laid down in bed you think of all the ways they could kill you. And when a homey dies— well, you don’t cry. You find out who did it, and you make a mission to go kill them. And if you can’t find out exactly who, well you know which *banda*. Eventually you find out. Nothing stays secret.” For all his aggressive talk and performance, though, he is a kind and generous man whom other prisoners respect as a fair and disciplined leader.

In the 1990s, Juande’s family struggled financially, but his sister had a decent job as an accountant for a Korean-run factory, and she provided him with pretty much everything he needed. He was into clothes, style. “I already had my loose pants (*pantalones flojos*), my Nike Cortezes, which was the style back then.” When he was 14, she offered to pay his way to the United States because he was getting picked on by a group of guys in the neighborhood. Either that, or buy him a gun so he could protect himself. He chose the gun. He didn’t want people to think he was scared.

After we’d been hanging out for almost a year, Juande told me the story of how he joined up with La Mara Salvatrucha. We were sitting out on the prison patio, my recorder hidden beneath a baseball cap between us, the sun blazing onto the concrete and a cool breeze wafting through. His storytelling style is intensely cinematic. I felt like I was listening to an improvised script of *West Side Story* set in post-war Guatemala City. He was 15 when he first made contact with MS—back in 1993, when hardly anyone in Guatemala had even heard of MS or 18. There was a girl in his high school that he really liked, and he was always bothering her, trying to get her to pay attention to him.

“I can’t go with you,” she would tell me.

“But why? You’re a woman and I’m a man.”

“No! It’s that there are other people behind me.”

“What, you’re parents don’t let you have a boyfriend?”

“No, that’s not important.”

“Then what? You don’t like me?”

“No, I like you. I just can’t.”

He kept pursuing her, and pursuing her. Finally, she told him that if he really liked her, he should come to a party where she would be.

When I got there, I saw at the back of the room a ton of *cholos* standing around. But since I had come for her, I went in, and walked to the back of the room, and found her.

“*Órale* (Right On),” I said.

“You came.”

“Like I wasn’t gonna come?” <I say.> So I was in the middle of all the *cholos*, and they’re watching me, right. I see that they’re riding with beanies, baseball caps, earrings, all tattooed. They dressed like I dressed. “These are my people!” I thought. I’m looking at them. The guy who had the *ramfle* (leadership) in those days was the *finauto* (deceased) Ice. *El Frio* of Normandy.¹⁵

¹⁵ Leadership of the gang. “*Ramfle*,” short for “*Ramflero*,” means, literally, “Driver of the Dodge Ram.” *Finauto* refers to the “deceased”, shorthand for “may he rest in peace”

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“Voz, *morro* (moor), come here.”¹⁶

“What the hell?” I say. I thought that... well, in Guatemala *huecos* (faggots) are called *morros*, but in El Salvador *morro*, or *bichitos*, are boys or kids. Like “*huiros*.”

“No,” he says. “It’s just our *calua* (slang). Like saying, ‘voz *patujo*.’¹⁷”

So I come up to him. She’s standing there with him. “And so you like Clowney?” That’s when I learned that she was Clowney of MS of Normandy. She had hidden it. Later I saw underneath her bellybutton the letters MS.

“This was why I couldn’t *hacerte caso* (pay attention to you). Because I am la Clowney of Normandy. And who are you?”

“My name is Juande,” I said. “And I am not anything.”

“Really you’re nothing?” She says. El *finauto* Ice is watching me.

“No, I’m nothing.”

“Then why do you dress like that?” El *finauto* Ice asks me.

“Because I like it.”

“But who have you seen dressed like that?” He was trying to find out where I come from.

“Look, I’m from section A,” I say. And all of the dudes are looking at me now. “And my friend Pocholo lives there... He dresses like this with *ropa floja* (loose clothing). And I like how he looks. But it’s not a sin to dress like this, is it?” And everyone laughs.

“It’s all good, don’t worry.” And he says to Clowney, “Ok then, the dude is pleasing to you?”

“*La neta* (the truth) is that yes, he is pleasing to me.”¹⁸

“So then, do it. Let him inside, and you see what you do, but don’t be careless. You know the process to follow. Tell him.” It was about bringing me in, involving me with the gang.

So I’m dancing with her. “*Simón carnal* (Yeah brother)!” they’re all yelling.¹⁹

“*Carnal?*” I say to myself. They aren’t my brothers, but okay.

Juande went to more parties, and brought in kids from his neighbourhood. The fact that he had a gun and knew how to use it impressed gang leaders, and he had a natural flair for giving orders and intimidating people. He took part in the business side of things—robbing stores and setting up modest extortion rackets, and became a bone fide member of MS de Normandy. Eventually he helped raise and discipline other MS cliques.

Juande was one of tens of thousands of youth across urban Central America enamored of the style, the exotic language, the confidence and coolness he saw in the cholos he met and associated with the image they struck. In the cholos at that party he glimpsed a vision of himself, a reflection of what he was, he thought, already aspiring to be. The exotic language, the girl, the clothes— “These are my people!”

¹⁶ *Morro*- Darkie, moor, arab

¹⁷ *Patojo*—Slang for youth ie “youngster”

¹⁸ *La neta*—slang for the truth, the reality, the “real deal”

¹⁹ *Simón*—Emphatic assent Carnal-Blood brother, literally, “flesh of my flesh”.

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They walk past concrete boxes as gray as purgatory, and come upon an old man wearing a worn cowboy hat and fine-tooled leather boots. He slouches on a wooden stool, dozing, surrounded by half-carved stelas, protean angels, incomplete Virgins, and a roughhewn Jesus hauling a bulbous cross. The crude savior crouches beneath his terrible load. He has no face. A mongrel of uncertain parentage is curled at the old man's feet. Their eyes snap open as Calavera and the Gringo draw near. Without moving, the old man tracks their progression. As they pass, Calavera and the Gringo nod and say good day, and the old man nods. The dog sniffs the air before curling once again into its tail. The Gringo has a passing vision of the blank headstones and plaques filled with the names of dead friends and informants. Jose Luis "El Fish" Velazquez. Juan Carlos "Chooky" Rodriguez. Maria Tzoc Castañeda.

The old man watches after them until they disappear around another corner. He picks up a marble plaque and lays it across a wooden palette nailed between two wooden horses, and begins polishing it with a bit of rag. It is for a woman named Maria Elena Vasquez de Citalan, wife to Walter Citalan Barrios, mother to three girls and one boy. Most of her life she worked selling rat and cockroach poison at the outdoor market in El Trebol, where Casper still levies "war taxes" from storeowners, drug dealers, prostitutes. All day long she called out her wares, pitching her voice like a carnival hustler above the reggaeton pumping from the pirated DVD stalls and diesel busses pulling through the market. She wore thick purple eyeliner and had gold rimmed teeth and bleached hair. A 15-year-old boy shot her in the face. They say it was because she refused to pay the extortion monies demanded of her. The old man studies the plaque in his hands. From whence flows the divine will? To what purpose?

How did US style gangsters become the archetypes of "cool" for Juande and so many others like him? Where did this aspirational image come from? In the early 1990s, groups of youth calling themselves La Mara Salvatrucha, Barrio18, White Fence, Latin Kings, and a panoply of other titles taken straight out of inner city and East Los Angeles, were suddenly a major security concern across the Northern Triangle of Central America. The *maras'* transnational roots were and remain deeply significant. It is impossible to understand their rise in Central America without including civil war stories of refugees fleeing to the United States, migrant youths' struggles to defend themselves in the midst of Los Angeles gang wars, and the massive deportations and cultural transfusions in the 1980s and 90s that brought "US gang culture" to Central American countries. Today, the two most powerful *maras*—Barrio18 and La Mara Salvatrucha— still take their namesakes, jargon, organizational structure, and symbols from gangs born in Los Angeles.

When they first emerged before the public eye, politicians, security watchdogs, and the media quickly labelled the *maras* "a transnational phenomenon." Worries of an internationally networked "super" gang mushroomed. However, cribbing and copying imported gang styles and structures is not the same as forming a transnational criminal network. While it is true that deported gangsters were important conduits for this transnational transfusion, they were not the only conduits, and official estimates of their initial presence were deeply inflated. A series of studies conducted in late 1990s and early 2000s in El Salvador—the Central American nation with the greatest gang presence— showed that less than 17% of gang youth had ever been to the United States, and less

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than 11% had even been gangsters when they lived there.²⁰ In Guatemala, where many of the founding gang members were in fact Salvadoran migrants, proportions would have been even less.

The *maras*' transnational qualities were always more about style and emulation than about a strategically integrated, border-defying organization. Reports of their purported "transnational links" as networked, top-down command structures in which Central American gang cells take orders from and coordinate with Los Angeles based leaders have proven to be the paranoid fantasies of security hawks and contemporary *mareros*' delusions of grandeur.²¹

Still the speed of transnational *maras*' initial expansion was awe-inspiring, not least because it was rooted in the power of the image they made for poor urban youth.²² And this image had as much to do with Hollywood films, clothing style, and the dream of *el Norte* as it did with deported gangsters organizing new gang cliques in urban neighbourhoods. The image of Los Angeles style gangs gripped urban youth in the 1980s and through the 1990s. Fantasies bred of gang films nurtured the new transnational identity. This new way of being a gang would have all too real life consequences for the poor urban communities of Guatemala.

Calavera and the Gringo turn right onto another long, straight corridor. Bright flowers and succulents grow in plastic planter boxes hung upon the cubbyholes of the dead. Their washed-out portraits gaze back solemnly at the living. A young man with a goatee and shaved head, stained blue with rain and time, poses grimly in a dark suit. A girl child smiles, one hand raised as if in greeting or farewell, from beneath a carved elegy. The wall rises up 20 feet, and many of the cubbyholes are covered over in rough plaster, service numbers scrawled in black paint. Others are empty and open, mortar and broken brick, here and there a scrap of faded crinolin. They await the newly deceased to replace those whose families have stopped paying their cemetery dues. Each day cemetery workers haul the desiccated remains of the indigent dead in wheelbarrows and toss them down a 40-foot hole at the edge of the cemetery, where it borders the ravine of trash.

²⁰ Cruz, JM. Central American Maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets, *Global Crime*, 11:4, 379-398

²¹ And yet, the shared dream/nightmare of transnationality has still had wide-ranging effects despite—or because of—its misconstrued foundations. Not least significantly, the emergence of transnational gangs provoked renewed cooperation in national security between the United States and Central American governments linked in what Zilberg (2011) has called a “transnational imaginary of... crime and insecurity” with *maras* providing the spectacular center.

²² At a conference held in San Salvador, El Salvador in 2012, Jose Luis Sanz, crime journalist for *El Faro*, a Central American investigative news agency, said “The gang phenomenon, in a matter of years, achieved a virulence beyond anything else that has followed. Probably not even the phenomenon of the epic revolutionary movements that shook the 70s and 80s spread like such wildfire, leaving its mark on so many generations in such a powerful way as the gang phenomenon has done.”

Gang Films as History

The phenomenon of criminals copycatting their Hollywood doppelgangers is not unique to Central American *maras*. The Sicilian Mafia never left decapitated horse heads in victims' beds' before they saw *The Godfather*, and members of the contemporary mafia often take their stylistic cues from *The Sopranos*.²³ Indonesia's 1960s paramilitary henchmen would often watch Hollywood westerns—the genocidal genre par excellence—before executing suspected communist sympathizers.²⁴

Still, though, the degree to which early *maras* modelled themselves on gang films is unprecedented. Gang films have been key conduits in the *maras*' transnational transfusion since at least the early 1990s. At the end of the previous chapter, I told Andy's story of an assassination he carried out in Las Vegas which seemed scripted—in his imagination or in reality—by a scene from the Walt Disney film *Sangre por Sangre*. Andy was not the only *marero* I spoke with who drew aspects of the image of himself and his history out of a movie. *Sangre por Sangre* and *American Me* were, and still are popular among *mareros*. Some cliques still used the former as “training material” for new recruits. Mobster classics like *Scarface* and the *Godfather* films also rank high in the Guatemalan underworld—well above the Mexican gang films which, though many *mareros* and other poor urban youth watch them assiduously, are not generally considered “authentic” enough to deserve their respect.

The *maras*' homage to Hollywood history is only one telling example of the incalculably powerful influence the US has in Central American society. From Hollywood movies to Maytag, the Cold War to the War on Drugs, this influence is inescapable. Guatemala was the testing grounds for the first use of mass advertising techniques by the US military in the 1954 US engineered coup. In subsequent years, the US government nurtured anti-communist demagogues and generals who would rule Guatemala until the return of democracy in the late 1980s.²⁵ And, ironically perhaps, throughout Guatemala's long history of civil strife, the United States has also been the primary destination for Guatemalans fleeing poverty and violence. The dream of *el Norte*, the land of decent wages and a chance to “get ahead,” is deeply etched into Guatemalan society.

Though no longer conscripted into proxy war between East and West, US cultural and economic influences over Guatemalan society have only deepened. The nation's economy is tied to providing raw commodities—sugar, coffee, silver—to primarily US markets. Jobs in factories making clothes and electronics for US consumers are highly prized. Customer Service telemarketing, employing only fluent English speakers, are a dynamic growth industry. It is estimated that over 80% of cocaine bound for the United States' noses passes through Guatemalan territory, transforming both urban and rural economies.²⁶ Guatemalan authorities must fight, or collude with, narco-traffickers enriched by US dollars and armed with weapons manufactured on US soil. Meanwhile, the richest Central Americans go on weekend shopping trips to Miami, Florida. Guatemala's development as a nation and as a society has taken place beneath the long shadow the United States casts across Latin America.

²³ Gambetta 2011

²⁴ Oppenheimer 2012

²⁵ See introduction

²⁶ Insight Crime 2012

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I was talking to Eduardo—approaching the end of a six-year sentence for involvement in an extortion ring—about a recent prison riot when he abruptly shifted the conversation to the clique he joined 20 years earlier. It was the first Barrio18 affiliate in zone 5—and they called themselves *Los Vatos Locos*.²⁷ In *Sangre por Sangre*, *Vatos Locos* is the name of the protagonist's street gang caught in turf battles with the *Tres Puntos*. Neither gang existed in Los Angeles when the movie was made. Instead, they were fictionalized amalgams of early Los Angeles Latino street gangs. And yet, soon after *Sangre por Sangre*'s 1993 release, groups of youth calling themselves *Vatos Locos* emerged in different zones throughout Guatemala City.

David, an ex-MS soldier blinded by a bullet that destroyed his optical nerve, recalled his clique's feud with another *Vatos Locos*. They held down nearby territory in El Paraiso II, Zone 18 of Guatemala City. By 1995, he said, his gang *Los Huracanes Salvatrucha* had “almost eliminated all of them and sent the survivors into hiding.” I also met a middle-aged taxi driver from Zone 7 of Guatemala City who, during the course of our conversation about *mara* violence, suddenly erupted, “Things only got really bad in my neighbourhood after the kids started watching that movie—what's it called?—*Sangre por Sangre*. Suddenly they were running around pretending they were gangsters. And they had guns! Homemade guns and old revolvers. I don't know how they got them...”

Hollywood films helped shape Guatemalan youths' conception of what it meant to be a gangster, and helped create the glamour and allure which attracted so many to the new way of being a gang. This was initially about style, but not just about style. It meant having more solidarity, more brotherliness, and a distinct form of self-expression. For poor urban adolescents, many of whom had been abandoned on the street, Hollywood style gangs became a manner of living a distinct life. Hewing to an imported ideal of deathless brotherhood, *barrio* pride, and sporting the clothing, language, and, of course, tattoos of the North became a new way of being a person, and on a massive scale.²⁸ As the crime journalist, Jose Luis Sanz said at a 2012 international conference on the maras, “The gang phenomenon, in a matter of years, achieved a virulence beyond anything else that has followed. Probably not even ... the epic revolutionary movements of the 70s and 80s spread like such wildfire, leaving its mark on so many generations in such a powerful way as the gang phenomenon has done.”²⁹

So much of his past Calavera wishes he could forget, and so many memories slip away no matter how hard he fights to hold them close. In prison, it was easier to simply not think of the dead or of problems beyond his capacity to solve. Having witnessed so many men lose themselves raging against their past and the present it made, he became adept at forgetting. But since walking free, his past has mounted a clandestine assault. Ghosts marking him from the shadows, from just around a corner, in strangers' sidelong glances. Whispered reminders of all he survived and the unlucky bastards who didn't. The cemetery is rife with these ghosts and their stories. Some of their stories he lived too. Others he heard from his sister, Casper, and others, repeated so many times they became his own, slipping into his dreams.

²⁷ UNODC 2011

²⁸ see Hacking 1999

²⁹ Sanz 2012

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One such story begins with Giovanni walking through the old neighborhood. Where the path forks a man sits on a broken cement bench. It is Casper as he was when he was young. He grimaces, hailing Giovanni. "What do you think they have waiting for us, carnal?"

"We'll find out. I'm just glad you came."

"Of course I came," Casper blurts, then catches himself. "Anyway, where the fuck could I run? They'd come after me too."

Giovanni looks at Casper and then beyond him into the ravine of trash and the slums clustered against the steep hills rising into the hazy horizon.

"Come on," he says. "It's time." The left fork cuts between two weather-beaten tin warehouses boasting graffiti of varying crudeness. It drops precipitously to a packed gravel road worn by iron scow tire tread and the soles of men and women and children who scavenge their livelihoods below. Giovanni starts down the right fork twisting across a desolate space pocked with crab grass, broken bits of masonry and scrap metal. Casper follows. More and more debris appears as the path winds on, as if they approached the foundation of some blasted edifice, until it swings up sharply and into the cemetery's outer border.

Soon, a plateau of broken and eviscerated crypts comes into view, a cluster of dark figures gathered there among the ruins.

"Wait up a moment." Casper says.

"What is there to wait for?"

"Just hold on, will you."

"Ok."

They huddle against a mossy concrete slab. The sun has dropped into the hills cresting above the ravine of trash, swinging beams of light upwards through the warship clouds strung raggedly into the horizon. Suddenly the clustered figures throw their heads back and a shout of laughter echoes faintly. Traces of a deep voice speaking in rapid cadence. Then all rise, throwing up their hands in salute, fingers cocked like claws over their heads.



Fantasy into Flesh

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In the early 1990s, the Moral Majority in the United States targeted Latinos suspected of gang membership for arrest and deportation. They were an “alien threat”—foreign criminals destroying the inner cities of America. The deportees, once back in their “native” land, had a marked cultural cachet among poor urban youth. They came from *el Norte*, the land of power and opportunity, speaking English, sporting the clothes, hairstyles, and slang advertising their belonging to something deeply American.

Most Guatemalan citizens rejected the gangster phenomenon wholesale. These deportees represented the deeply entrenched troubles of the new democracy, the libertine-ism spawned by the arrival of liberty. For their part, the deportees, many of whom had never visited their “country of origin” since leaving as small children, found themselves adrift in a harsh, alien environment. Setting up gangs in the style of those they had left behind was a strategic means of survival. And they found many willing and eager to join. For youth struggling to find a place for themselves in this rapidly changing society—for kids from broken homes with no one to rely on, for rural migrants to the city unable to recognize themselves in this alien world, and for kids just struggling to fit in, the *maras* presented a new and alluring form of protective solidarity and the chance to be part of something greater than they had ever had before.³⁰

When I asked about his introduction to Barrio18, Secret recalled how he and other boys he knew growing up poor and abandoned were “ready for a future in which we could join a transnational gang, “but we were really just aficionados. It was more like a hobby.” But what began as a new means of subversive self-expression quickly became something much more. Deported gang members from the United States, capitalizing on their cachet with local youth, taught their newfound gangs the logistical organization and strategies which had made Latino street gangs in the United States sustainable, even multi-generational organizations. As one of three surviving members of an early Barrio18 clique in zone 18 recalled,

Snyper was his name. He was an 18 of Hollywood Gangster... from the United States. When we met him he came talking half Spanish, half English. He would tell us that we had to learn to speak like that to be more *metidos y concentrados* (involved and focused) with the gang. So he came with this ideology of expanding ourselves, to make our territory bigger. We only had the actual park, it was the only point that we had. And we were living on the brink of war all the time... From there, it was only about 4 blocks to where the MS were. El Snyper organized us. He began organizing the money to gather when somebody got arrested and needed a lawyer to get him out, or to buy weapons. Because our clique had no guns. I had a shotgun, but it was *hechiza* (homemade)... And so we started making contacts with the police, and they would sell us arms and bullets.

The logic of solidarity and organization eventually went beyond allegiance to a particular gang cell. By joining up with La Mara Salvatrucha or Barrio18, the two gang franchises that would come to dominate and subsume the rest, newly minted *mareros* were supposed to take on their gang’s codes of enmity and amity imported from the streets and prisons of Southern California. The first was the feud between Barrio18 and La Mara Salvatrucha, which would map onto and transform already present street rivalries in Guatemala City.

³⁰ See Levenson 2012

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The second was the ideology of the SUR, an unstable but influential article of faith dictating where, when and against whom Latino gangs in southern California could commit violence. The introduction of these two doctrines in Guatemala City and other Central American cities would integrate into and transform the “architecture of enmity” carving up urban space, prisons, and post-war society itself.³¹

“Vivo te quiero,” Giovanni whispers to himself, and turns to Casper. “Let’s go.” He steps out onto an uneven dirt path. Casper hesitates, mutters a prayer and crosses himself, and then hurries to catch up. As they cross a barren decline the voice ceases and the figures turn together to mark their approach.

The one who has been speaking is El Soldado. He stands apart from the others, shaved head shining in the fading light.

“You are here.” He says.

Giovanni shrugs. “I told you.”

“Why did the others run?”

“They do not want to kill their neighbors. We’ve known those boys since we were kids.”

“They would kill you if it suited them.”

“Perhaps.”

“Órale.”

Soldado signals to the other homies. Several duck behind a concrete mausoleum and emerge dragging three figures, wrists and ankles bound with wire. Their faces are so bloodied and beaten it takes Giovanni a moment to recognize them. They are all that remain of the Boyz 13.

“The SUR is genesis.”

I met Triste while he was serving out a five-year sentence for armed robbery in Canada Prison. We spent hours hanging out in his quarters—a tin-roofed shack—talking in between the erratic flow of fellow prisoners coming to have him etch tattoos into their skin with his homemade rig. When he was nine years old, sick of the squalor and his abusive father, Triste made the journey solo from a Guatemala City slum to Los Angeles to join his mom. He got into trouble in middle school and more in high school, and, after a few years in juvenile hall, he joined a gang called Widmer St. At 22 he ended up in adult prison for selling drugs, and it was there that he had his first contact with the Mexican Mafia (La Eme) —a prison “super-gang” controlling black markets throughout the California prison system. La Eme founded and enforces the SUR. “In prison (in California) they teach you discipline, they teach you respect,” Triste said. “You graduate from just being a gang member”. He had no personal contact with known members of La Eme, who were in isolation lockdown. But the entire prison population understood the *raison d’être* of the SUR. “The Mexican Mafia are the ones that made the SUR,” He explained.

The unity. Us Hispanics, if everyone of us stands on his own in prison, we won’t stand up to anybody. Hispanics are small, fat, *chaparritos* mostly. You have to stick

³¹ Gregory 2006

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together to have power. If you're on your own everyone knows. If you don't stick together you'll get raped, become somebody's bitch.

Long, sordid histories of distilled racial hierarchies and officially sanctioned violence in US prisons are packed into Triste's remark. The Mexican Mafia's history and role in California prisons is complicated and deeply significant, but now is not the time for an in-depth exploration.ⁱ However, it is important to understand how La Eme and the SUR provide the promise of protection to Hispanic gang members incarcerated in California through the threat of imminent violence. The SUR—*Southern United Raza*—is the crystallization into “law” of a strategic solidarity between Latino gang members in prison who, on the street, would be at one another's throats. “Southern” refers to southern California, the geographical hub of Latino gangs and home to most Mexican Mafia members.³² “Raza” (race), as in “*la Raza*”, encompasses all those who identify as Hispanic, and conveys the central role of race in casting the lines of opposition between warring factions in urban California and in the prison system itself. And as for “United,” the SUR dictates that blood feuds between rival Hispanic gangs operating in southern California must be left at the prison gate. They have no place inside, because in prison everyone is already suffering. Those gangs who pay homage—in loyalty and other currencies—to the Mexican Mafia have long been known as *sureños*. *Sureño* gangs often attach the number “13” to their title to show their affiliation with La Eme (M is the 13th letter in the alphabet).

La Eme upholds the SUR primarily as a means of maintaining its dominance in California prisons, and the protection La Eme offers to incarcerated Latinos is also an imminent threat to those who refuse to accept their rules. The logic is quite simple, and ironically, depends upon effective law enforcement. Given the intensive police targeting of gang members in California, every gangster knows that sooner or later he will end up behind bars. It might only be a few weeks in county lock-up, or it might be a life sentence in a state penitentiary; but once incarcerated they are in Eme territory. If a gang member or his gang has done anything to offend La Eme—refusing to pay the requisite kickbacks, cheating on a drug deal, or failing to carry out the Eme's orders—he will have a rough time of it during his stay, if he even survives.

As Calavera tells the story of the Boyz 13, he and the Gringo climb a stone staircase to stand atop a low rise overlooking the grounds. The look down across the long corridors of the dead cutting through dense stands of broken pillars and concrete crucifixes. The cemetery ends abruptly above the ravine.

³² In opposition to La Eme's heavyhanded control of latino populations in prison, other Latino prison gangs, most notably *Nuestra Familia*, have risen up to challenge La Eme's dominance. In California, *Nuestra Familia* is comprised mainly of latino gangs based in northern California, and have become known as *Norteños*, affiliated gangs utilizing “14” to show their allegiance. The geographical dividing line is said to be in Soledad prison, near Salinas in central California. Other racially organized prisoner associations/gangs rose up in the California prison system in the 1960s and 1970s and still operate today. The Black Guerrilla Family (BGF) began in San Quentin prison, founded by George Jackson and W.L Nolen and inspired by the teachings of Marcus Garvey. The Aryan Brotherhood formed around the same time (late 1960s and early 1970s) espousing a (obviously) white supremacist ideology and often aligning with the Mexican Mafia against the BGF in fights over control of prison black markets.

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In this telling, Calavera has put himself in Giovanni's place. He points towards a plateau at the cemetery edge, hazy in the distance. "It was right over there, on that patch of grass just before the garbage dump. El Soldado called the two of us over, Casper and I, while the others kept watch on the Boyz 13. El Soldado had this terrible smile on his face. 'Look here,' he said in a low voice, 'Right now you have a choice to make. Put an end to this charade once and for all, or...' he nodded at the boys all bloody and tied up and said, 'This has gone on long enough.'

"Wait, who were the Boyz 13?" the Gringo asks.

"They were another clique belonging to the Letters like us, and they had gotten deep into drug trafficking, but for a dude named el Marino. El Marino controlled Barrio Gallito, over there, on the other side of the cemetery. We fought with them for years over drug puntos." Calavera pauses, looking out over the ravine. "So I say, 'Orale pues.' And ba ba ba.- guajes for the two of us. Just revolvers, 38s. 'Vivo te quiero,' El Soldado said. 'Blast'em, because if not I'll be right here behind you and you too will stay here.' Then he turned back to the other homies and told them to free the Boyz 13, that they could go.

'Your mother,' I thought. And so the meeting ended and the locos started to leave, and the three started walking back along the way we had come. And we're walking after them, and el Shark and El Soldado are walking behind us. And I'm like that, almost trembling with that feeling. And when those locos turn back and look at us, 'Que onda dude?' 'Nada.' I said. Then I started firing. One of them fell, I made one fall. And then Casper started firing, and he put down another. But one of them got away."

"Up that path there?" The Gringo points to a footpath leading back towards a cluster of rundown warehouses.

"Yeah, up that way, but it was higher then, less eroded. I could hear the sirens, the police already coming and I knew I had to get out of here, so I ran towards 26th and jumped the cemetery wall and from there to my house. But with the idea that one of them was still alive. 'Por la gran puta, what a shitshow,' I thought. They're going to come for us. But it wasn't so. The last one had three bullets in his stomach, and he died. He couldn't take it. Ah."

Several seconds pass in silence broken only by the Gringo scribbling in his notebook. "I should have recognized then that it was all bullshit. That all the talk of blood brotherhood and loyalty and giving your life for the Barrio was just a charade. Soldado and the others were just trying to get El Marino's influence out of zone 3 so they could control the drug puntos. That's it. So they made us kill each other like dogs." He shakes his head, grimacing. "I'm just glad it wasn't me who took three bullets in the stomach."

Peace in the Prisons, Blood in the Street

A retired ex-gangster who had learned the codes of the SUR back in the early 1990s told me:

The northerners know the why and how of the philosophy, the colors, the history—why the control, why we are not mafia, because they are constantly inside their history, what the objective is of being here, why we are a family, a family of kings, and that we have blue blood, and that we are revolutionaries because we are constantly against the established norms.

Hewing to the SUR in Guatemala meant believing in *maras* and *mareros* as a cohesive community abiding by a separate set of laws, product of a history alien to their environs. It meant taking on the *sureño* identity and investing in the mythic history of

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Southern California gangs badly transplanted to a society bereft of the racial rivalries around which Los Angeles-style gangs originally organized.

The stories circulating on the street and in the prisons about the SUR recall an era in which *mareros*, as a nascent community, all danced to the same myth of deathless brotherhood and mutual defense against a hostile world. It was far more than simply a pact of prison non-aggression. It was a central tenet of gang *clecha*. *Clecha* means, roughly, “gang wisdom” or “knowledge of the gang.” *Clecha* is about more than strategy—it is a *philosophy*, a way of seeing the world, an ideology formed by a deep relationship with the history of Hispanic gangs in California. It is composed of stories, parables, codes, signs, ethics, handshakes, clothing styles, language, attitude—in short, and entire script for how to be a *marero*.

This code of racial solidarity in California prisons, violently enforced by a prison gang with a powerful presence throughout the state, became a defining code of ethics for gangs in Guatemala. This happened despite the fact that the racial rivalries in the US prison system do not exist in Guatemala and no “super” gang like La Eme existed to enforce the peace. In August 2005, La Mara Salvatrucha unilaterally broke the SUR in a planned series of riots and assassinations that killed 36 Barrio18 leaders across nine prison facilities. But until then, Barrio18, MS, and a few smaller gangs observed it more or less faithfully. This enforced peace in the prisons was a delicate peace, and, in retrospect, could not last. Still, for a time, *mareros* from opposing gangs would repeat, “the SUR is genesis,” and maintain a careful *détente* in prison while gang war raged on in the street. While the SUR was intact, the *maras*’ united front in prison became a force to be reckoned with, and was able, for a short time, to upset longstanding prison hierarchies.³³

The story of the rival leaders Psycho of Alpha and Omega (MS) and El Spyder of Barrio18 captures the mythic status of the SUR and the early gangsters who upheld it. It came to me in various versions from *marero* and *paisa* (non-gang) inmates incarcerated during the years leading up to the SUR’s destruction. Carlos, an ex-military man imprisoned for stealing cocaine from a government depot, served time with both these men in various prisons. He told me the following version of the Psycho and Spyder legend.

El Spyder... He was *sureño*. Spyder had been a cholo who fought in Los Angeles, in the US 18th Street gang... He was one of the first to be deported and one of the first to come and strengthen the gangs here in Guatemala.... He gained much respect in Guatemala. El Psycho of Alpha and Omega became famous for doing one of the first decapitations in Guatemala. He was a well-known leader of La Mara Salvatrucha. Military intelligence kept el Spyder and el Psycho of Alpha and Omega... in the same cell so that they would eliminate each other because they knew that on the street these men were mortal rivals. ... But because of the pact of the *Dominado* SUR, they didn’t touch each other or do each other any harm. <The authorities> kept them together in el Infiernito (a maximum security prison). They sent them to Canada <prison> and kept them *embartolinado* (in isolation lock up) the two together with the idea that they would kill each other. But they didn’t do it, because they kept the brotherly pact, because they were of the two barrios. They kept the pact of the SUR in force, and all the other homies

³³ See Chapter 3 “Porous Prisons” for more on *mara*-led riots and the united *sureños* in prison

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did the same. Psycho and Spyder gave an example of brotherhood between what are known as the MS and the 18... Eventually <in 2004> the authorities separated the two leaders. Spyder, my little buddy, they killed him in Mazatenango... They hung him and stabbed him. They put Psycho of Alpha and Omega in el Infiernito and there they strangled him.

Calavera and the Gringo walk back down the stairs and turn onto a narrow path twisting between modest family plots overrun with creeping vines, some so degraded by time and the elements they look like ancient midden mounds. They turn a corner and overtake a ragged figure, bent over the pitted stone, pushing an empty wooden wheelbarrow. A boy walks before him carrying an empty battered metal bucket in each hand. The path is too narrow for Calavera and the Gringo to pass, so they slow and fall in line behind the two laborers. A long knife in a cracked leather sheath hangs from a belt around the man's waist, softly slapping against his thigh with each step. Both man and boy are covered in a chalky dust from attending to the resting places of the dead. It is they who excavate the paupers' graves, ferry the bones and rotted funereal finery, and fling them down the hole, dust of human floating in a final wake.



“La Mara Salvatrucha is the Eve of 18th Street.”

While *mara* leaders kept the peace in the prisons, the imported rivalries between Los Angeles gangs entangled with and mapped onto gang wars on the street. The nearly

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mythic rivalry between La Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street— based in the history and geography of inner city Los Angeles—redefined urban violence in post-war Guatemala City with unprecedented speed and ferocity. The history of violence between 18th Street and La Mara Salvatrucha is a contested one, with competing narratives for the why and how of it.ⁱⁱ The basic story, however, follows the same arc in all versions.

In the late 1970s 18th Street was the first gang to go against tradition and accept Central American immigrants into their ranks; a group of Salvadoran members broke away and formed their own gang, calling it La Mara Salvatrucha; the two gangs, so intimately related, became mortal enemies.³⁴ These gangs became dominant in Central America because most gang deportees came from their ranks.

As gangs claiming allegiance to Barrio18, MS, and other franchises spread throughout Guatemala City, imported feuds largely fell along the lines of division that were already present. But, in some cases, hardcore gang members, zealots of the new order abiding by the “rules” of enmity espoused in *mara* codes, spread the violence any way they could. Secret, the retired gangster cum evangelical, told me this story as we sat drinking coffee in my apartment.

Two years after I joined I met a clique that kept the SUR with MS on the street.

“Fuck,” I say. “This is illegal for a gang”. I come and I say, “You guys are wrong.”

And they say to me, “No, you got nothing to say here. Sorry but we keep our own rules.”

“No way, bro, you all are blind and are gonna get beat down. And look, better not to be insulting but to just walk away, cuz we won’t leave one of you standing.”

I was known to 7 or 10 cliques, and I told them about it, and they tell me the whole clan *se van a caer todo el clantón*. (will fall on them) And so I say, “How about this, how about I go and *reventar pedo* (blow shit up), and you give me the privilege of raising this clika up.”³⁵ And so they tell me ok, that I have the mission and if I don’t fulfill it, I die. So it’s the final word.

So I go to pull in six or seven soldiers, and I go to the MS *punto* to blow shit up. To plug them up, to make them run and hide in their ratholes...And those that we found, well, they didn’t live to tell it. So. So we return to the <18> *punto* (territory). And I say, “Look bro, the *mera neta* (only truth) is that now things are going to blow up here.”

“Why?”

“Because we just got back from doing this and this. And now if those fucking dogs don’t do anything, it’s because they’re *tapados chavalas* (worn out pussies). So now you know that here and now blood will run.”

And they say to me that I had fucked shit up.

And behind me there were *vatos* who were *ramfleros* and more than this, men who had *demostrado sus huevos* (shown they had balls) in different zones and different cliques. They had authority, and they had the backing of the *Barrio*. So I say, “You know what bro, the only truth is that here the SUR will no longer flow. The SUR flows only in the prison. Here outside it’s illegal in the Barrio to keep the SUR.

³⁴ see Freud—“the narcissism of minor differences”

³⁵ “Pedo” literally means “fart”.

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We are different gangs.” And I say, “Look here, the only truth is he who doesn’t want to *hacer huevos* (break any eggs) walks away. The only truth is that we are not playing with water pistols. Here we are playing with real life mortars. And here there will be war, and war means death. And he who doesn’t want to break any eggs, he who wants to just play around, let him show himself openly. Once and for all, let him go to his mama to suck milk...

“The truth is we’re not going to put up with your charade.” One of them said.

And those who came with me jumped up. “So the whole clan is gonna fall on you if you don’t line up.”

And so they decided to change, they had their eyes opened. They realized what the vision of the gang is. They say, “The truth is I have a lot of years living here and I won’t leave my *punto* like that. And now I understand what the *corra del barrio* (heart of the barrio) is. And I want to stay. Forgive me, homies, if I offended.” And others, too, said, “The truth is that I didn’t agree with how we were doing things, and I want this vibe too...”

Secret told this story with a kind of pride—obviously enjoying the recounting—but a pride twisted by his awareness of how absurd such violence appears.³⁶ The violence that he promoted as a gang leader, and the immense amount of killing—between gangs, within gangs, and at the hands of police and social cleansing organizations—of which he was both promulgator and target, would disintegrate the gang codes and ethos that he held in such high esteem.

Other veteran gang members agreed that the bloodshed eviscerated everything imagined as good and hopeful for the youth joining the gang. After talking of all the boys that he recruited into La Mara Salvatrucha, all his conquests and all his street cred, Juande shook his head sadly. “Most of the boys I brought up, almost all of them, are dead.” Most of those he came up with too. He rattled off two dozen names. I couldn’t catch all of them—Sleepy, Speedy, Dopey, Killing, El Extraño, el Cosa, Topo, Travieso, El Viejo... Today, they are all dead and buried, and most of them killed by their own gang. “That is the greatest shame,” he said. “If I had been there I would not have allowed them to be killed by their own Barrio”.

³⁶ The same process of imported rivalry occurred across the Northern Triangle of Central America, and with similar results (cf Zilberg 2011, Pine 2009). A deported gangster in El Salvador complained that, “Whoever brought my neighborhood back here in the 90s, they fucked up, really fucked up my country. Because man, you really see the writing on the walls in the streets. It’s like you’re seeing the freeways from L.A., and they don’t even know how to write on the walls. They write real stupid, you know. They put “Westside 18th Street” or “Northside MS,” and we’re not really on the Northside or Westside here. We’re in South Central. Or they put area “213.” Man, that’s a telephone call from downtown California, . . . or put “818.” That’s El Monte, you know. They get me real mad because they don’t even know about the Southside thing, or the Northside thing. They just know enemy 18th Street, or enemy MS.” (Zilberg 2007: 764)

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They turn down another long corridor, and then another. Calavera knows, or thinks he recognizes, several of the dead they pass. He points a few out to the Gringo.

“These are the vatos who weren’t lucky enough to get arrested.” He laughs ruefully. Calavera tells the Gringo how the police nabbed him at a checkpoint as he was moving crack across the city. Casper was leader of Los Northside by then, and promised to care for Calavera’s family. But the stipend Casper pledged never materialized, and Sandra was left to fend for herself and her daughters. Casper started going crazy, killing anyone who stood in his way. And he didn’t care when little kids or pregnant mothers got caught in the crossfire. Calavera read the newspapers and his sister told him what was going down. He tried to talk sense to some of his old homies, but they were all scared of Casper.

“The way I saw it, killing women and kids was bad for business, bad for our reputation.” He shakes his head. “Don’t we all have brothers and sisters and children we want to protect? But Northside’s territory grew, and you can be sure that the Big Homies who were still around didn’t give a shit. And no one else either. There was plenty of newspaper reporting, but no one did anything.”

They reach a break in the wall where Calavera signals for the Gringo to follow him to the right. The man and the boy walk on towards a water tower rising above the grounds. The boy joins a line of others stooping to dip their buckets in a well of murky water and draw them out again.

Ashes, Ashes, We all Fall Down

The bifurcated world created by the *maras*’ allegiance to the SUR would not survive. Through the early 2000s, elements in both gangs pushed to break the SUR and be done with the charade once and for all. But each time influential gang leaders argued to keep the peace. Finally, on August 15, 2005 members of La Mara Salvatrucha, using weapons secretly smuggled into the prison, opened fire on Barrio18 members performing their morning exercises in El Hoyon prison. Before they died, the 18s tried to get warnings out to their homies in other prisons, but it was already too late. MS leaders housed in all 9 prisons had held a conference call that morning, and attacked their rivals simultaneously throughout the prison system. In total, 36 Barrio18 members—including many of the most respected leaders—died that day, and the SUR with them.

In a little over a decade—from the early 1990s to 2005—a code of solidarity that was an organizing principle for the *maras* degenerated, and eventually, collapsed. Today, the SUR, the real or imagined transnational allegiances, the world they ordered, is utterly lost. All that remains are the bittersweet memories of its existence, and scattered, contradictory explanations for its demise.

Odio e Envidia- Hatred and Envy

According to many survivors, the idea of *sureños* as a cohesive community was undone by the violence, mutual rage and hatred reified in each murder, in each friend, sibling, and neighbor killed by the enemy. Once in prison, youth and young men from communities separated by a single city block at war with one another, engulfed in the pain and suffering pushing these feuds ever onward, found themselves face to face with their mortal enemies ... and were supposed to suspend their hunger for revenge. Many stories circulate among survivors to explain why the prison alliance fell apart, how the myth of *sureño* solidarity withered away, and the dream of transnational solidarity with Los Angeles gangs and the Mexican Mafia fell to the wayside. I was drinking *chicha* (prison moonshine) with Gato and several former Barrio18 members in El Jocote prison, talking

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of the old days, when Gato, red-faced and slurring, slammed his cup down on the makeshift table:

The SUR was just Mickey Mouse! An MS guy killed my brother. Bap bap! My brother is with God. And later, I see the guy in prison and all of a sudden it's "the SUR! The SUR! Gato, we're both sureños." Okay then, the SUR, homeboy! When he kills Gato's brother and the bitch cries from the pain of his dead brother, and the SUR doesn't allow me to kill him, even though he has killed my brother... <so> I have to bow my head to the SUR when my brother is dead. That's the SUR... But then, his own gang puts the green light on his head because he's robbed 500 *quetzales* worth of drugs... and I say ah! 500 *quetzales* is my brother, that's how much my brother is worth. But, really, how much is he worth? How much?

A police official who worked in President Berger's (2000-2004) office of security (G-2) claims that he and other security agents intentionally sowed mistrust and pumped up the mutual hatred between incarcerated members of the two gangs in order to break the SUR. He said that his office was deeply involved in creating the conditions under which the SUR crumbled, but when I pressed him for details he refused to explain any further.³⁷

Calavera and the Gringo enter a forest of concrete crucifixes, broken and bent at rakish angles. Calavera halts suddenly, looking first one way and then the other.

"What's wrong?" The Gringo asks.

Calavera shakes his head and resumes walking slowly down a path carving a slight descent to where the cemetery ends abruptly above the garbage dump. They reach the edge of the precipice. Motley debris is tangled in the vines and brambles carpeting the slope. Twisted rebar and concrete, battered coffins with bits of gray crinolin spilling out. A plastic baby doll sits upright among shards of shattered crockery as if a child's tea party has gone awry. Perched atop the trees and on every crucifix above every grave, are gray headed vultures. Black wings spread wide to dry in the sun. The Gringo inches out to stand on the exposed foundation of an abandoned mausoleum jutting out above the ravine. Below, diesel trucks rumble over the packed refuse delivering the garbage of the heaving metropolis. Trashpickers move across the waste, tiny figures stooping and rising beside pools of metal green water leaching through the dump and into a black river coursing into the bowels of the city.

³⁷ Ortega 2012



Money and Power

The breaking of the SUR was not merely an eruption of unmitigated rage and pain. Surviving leaders of La Mara Salvatrucha claim that they had long planned to end the prison truce. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, Barrio18 grew frenetically in Guatemala City's most populous urban neighbourhoods, and MS leaders feared that the balance of power—in the street, but most of all in the prisons—was shifting against them. Guatemalan prisons had already become the “corporate headquarters” for Barrio18 and La Mara Salvatrucha. The most respected leaders of both gangs managed mara business—extortion rackets, drug distribution on the street and in the prisons, and so on—from behind bars. The violence between MS and 18 was no longer solely about tit for tat vengeance or preserving Barrio honor. Citing a 2012 interview with MS leader El Diabólico, Sanz and Martinez claim that, more than anything, MS broke the SUR to ensure that Barrio18 would stop duplicating and moving in on the extortion networks MS pioneered from inside the prisons.³⁸

³⁸ Sanz and Martinez 2012

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The Gringo backs away from the edge. They walk slowly along a sepulcher wall facing out over the precipice. “He’s here, I know he’s here.” Calavera mutters to himself. “He must be.” He halts and stands for some time facing the wall, closely inspecting each plaque. A name, a simple prayer, a life reduced to a hyphen. This one is faded by the elements. This one favored with a flowering succulent. This one carved in flowing font. A few plots have been bricked up and plastered over. One remains open, a blank blackness occupied by a single vulture, head cocked at the two interlopers.



“I must have it wrong.” Calavera says. “Let’s go to the next one.” The path ahead ends abruptly where the cliff has crumbled away into the ravine. They backtrack and turn down another corridor, surprising an adolescent couple necking, the boy pressed up against the girl against the wall. She giggles. The boy looks up, and then nuzzles in closer. They cling to each other as Calavera and the Gringo pass. Vultures perch atop the walls on either side like sentries, wings rustling and talons scraping against the plaster.

For the next hour, as the sun sinks in the west, they wander like that, criss-crossing the northwest section of the cemetery vainly trying to find Giovanni’s plot among the thousands interred and innumerable missing. After a while, Calavera stops pointing out people he knows, and trudges along in silence.

Finally, Calavera and the Gringo stand side by side above the path leading to the old meeting place at the furthest corner of the cemetery.

“It’s confusing here,” the Gringo says. “And it’s been... well, it’s been a long time.”

Calavera just shakes his head.

“I’m sure your sister wouldn’t have let anything, uh, happen.”

“No.”

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The Gringo fiddles with the recorder and jots a few words in his journal, “Forgotten? Discarded? Dead or not?”

The Myth of Belonging Lost

The breaking of the SUR spelled the end of an era for the gangs of Guatemala. The united *sureños* were a thing of the past, and the last vestiges of the myth of solidarity, the imported gang traditions held so sacred by earlier generation of *mareros* also faded. Those who would become leaders of both gangs would self-consciously eschew such traditions. Movies like *Sangre por Sangre* and *American Me* would continue to be used as “training videos” for new recruits, but deported gangsters from the United States would no longer find refuge in Guatemala, since they had come to represent a way of doing things that no longer applied there. The history of transnational connections and brotherhood, once so respected and fetishized, faded away so quickly that it is difficult today to know the true extent of its influence or, indeed, reality.

This question lingers in one final story—or is it a fable?—told to me by my friend Calavera, who heard it from his brother and his brother’s homies. Sometime between 2000 and 2004...

...there was a dude who was coming from the United States named El Sniper. He was off Adam Blocotes, my brother’s clique. He was coming with a mission to eliminate el Shark of Normandy because El Shark was one of the influential leaders that wanted to break the SUR. That is, we were already talking about it, we were already interested to see this resolved. But anyway, there was still the vibe of like, “well, first we’ll see what we can do to keep things together. <That message> was coming from el Barrio over there in Los Angeles, because over there they still respected the SUR. So this guy Sniper was coming with the mission to eliminate el compadre Shark. But things being as they are, I don’t have to tell you- look how they just killed that poor kid, the protected witness... Things are always like that in the world and especially in the Barrio. Everybody talks. So, before he even got here, it was known he was coming. El Sniper had a tattoo here around his neck like a necklace “*La Mara Salvatrucha, La Reina Por Siempre*”, or something like that. So to keep from being recognized, he had a dragon tattoo drawn to cover it during the course of his journey. But the Barrio won’t be put to sleep.

El Shark came by my house to talk to some of the homies. He brings in this so and so and that so and so (*fulanito de tal y fulanito de tal*) from a clique in Mexico, and he sends them on a mission to kill el Snyder. They go and everything, but since the Mexican didn’t know who the dude was, and el Snyder, he isn’t gonna be fooled by the charade. Like I said, all is known, right? So el Snyder already knew what they were going to do against him. An absurd comedy, no?! So when they find him en-route through Mexico he just explodes on them. BAP BAP BAP. He kills six. Just him! But every man has his hour.

So, in Guatemala they already knew that Snyder was coming. Okay so when he arrives he comes by my house. It was a point where many were received, people coming from El Salvador, Honduras, from the US, from all over, and they

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came to my house. So el Snyder arrives, and El Shark is waiting to see if he could recognize him by his tattoos. ...

“So who be thou?”

And Snyder said I’m so and so.

“I see. From what clique?”

“I come from Adam Blocotes.”

“Why didst thou come here?”

“It’s just that I got into some trouble over there when I arrived wetback.”

“*Orale*.”

El Soldado de Coronados also received him... Look, I didn’t know anything about this killing, I didn’t find out until afterwards from my brother. They come and it’s *la gran puchica* (a big shitshow). Since the *vato* didn’t have his tattoos anymore- instead he had a dragon around his neck, the *vatos* weren’t sure if it was really him, and they weren’t going to kill someone just for the pleasure of it (*por gusto*) because before there was that brotherly feeling, that *onda* (vibe) of, “Yes, it’s a homey”. So they come, right, and a homey who had survived Snyder’s massacre, he had seen how the vato grabbed the shotgun (*el chacana*)- like this, and like this *bon bon bon!* And so, this homey came, a Salvadoran, and he was hidden outside the room. He tells el Soldado, “I think it’s him, but I’m not sure.” “Could be,” says el Soldado, but he goes on like, “The homey has my respect.” He’s here playacting (*juajuando*), throwing flowers at his feet, right. So the *locos* show up, and the *locos* are *chinche* (clever), you know. And they tell him, “So the *onda* is we’re going to do a job (*jale*). You’re going to carry the big gun (*juaje*).” And they throw him the shotgun like this, and the dude grabs it out of the air and “kra KRA!” “*Simón*, let’s go,” <he says.> So the dude who had survived, when he saw him with the shotgun (*escopeta*), said, “Ha! Your mother, this is the guy.” I’m telling you, with these dudes, *oyyyyyy*, be careful of their brains. And so they bring El Snyder along, and tell him, “Look we’re going to such and such a place.” The dude with his shotgun here, right.

“*Órale*,” right. And they take him to the cemetery in zone 3. There, all of the homies were present, the whole Barrio, because they had called a general meeting. And *órale*, there was talk of the hit that was gonna happen, and other stuff, everyone was already informed of what was going to happen. They take the shotgun from the dude.

“*Simón*, we want to talk to you.”

“Calm down man, aren’t we of the same *Barrio*...”

“*Simón*, but thou hast a lot of things pending, right, and the truth is here the SUR is going to break, and thou wants to stop this, right.”³⁹

“No, who said that?”

“What do you mean, ‘No’?”

And so they start to torture him. Taking out his fingernails, from here, right. And from his feet. The dude *yelled*. But he wouldn’t admit anything. Was it a bust? Because the dude wouldn’t admit anything.

³⁹ Calavera employs the formal “you” (usted) at this point, which has no direct translation in modern English. I’ve reverted archaic “thou” to mark the transition.

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So they start to go to work on his penis with a Gillette (razor). “Look brother”, he’s begging. “For the love of God, brother.” And he let out some screams. “You don’t have to do that. Yes ok! They sent me for this and this.” He revealed the charade.

“The truth is, you’re going to die.” <They say.>

“Look!” he says. “Forgive me!” I don’t know what. “I’m a Latino like you...” he says.

“It skinned your dick for you to come and take Latino blood, it will skin your dick to die for it.”

They bathed him in gasoline. They lit him on fire. And they threw him in the dump. That’s how our buddy el Snyder of Adam Blocotes died.

Calavera pauses, and then turns, walking resolutely down the path towards the old meeting place. “Vamanos, Gringo. Let’s see what’s down there now.”

A flock of vultures has gathered around a corpse of one of their own stretched out like a patient etherized upon a table beside a pillaged grave. They flap away lugubriously as the two men approach, leaving their fallen comrade askew among the scattered trash and headstones worn indecipherable in the undergrowth. Calavera pokes around, looking for his name and others he and his old compatriots graffitied long ago. The Gringo walks the perimeter, and stops suddenly before a ruined mausoleum.

“Oh shit.” He says, and calls out to Calavera. “Look here.”

Calavera joins him. The mausoleum wall has been graffitied in black spray paint. An M and an S, a 13, a cartoon crown and skyscrapers. A date is scrawled beneath. 21 May, 2012. Two days ago.

They both turn to look out from the plateau towards the footpath leading back to Calavera’s neighborhood. After a few moments, the Gringo says in a low voice. “Perhaps we should be leaving.”

Calavera’s gaze lingers on the graffiti. “Yeah, ok.” He shakes his head. “What a shitty tag. I tell you, kids these days don’t know shit.”



In a 2012 newspaper interview, the Mara Salvatrucha leader El Diabólico denied that any Snyder from Adams Blocotes ever came to Guatemala. Unsatisfied, Carlos Martínez and José Luis Sanz of *El Faro* went to Los Angeles to see if they could find more information on the breaking of the SUR in Guatemala. They found that *veteranos* of La Mara Salvatrucha in California recalled a homie named Snyder who disappeared from Los Angeles in the early 2000s. “<Snyder> was a weird dude, who thought he was *mas mente* (sharper) than he really was. One of those who speak thinking it is great knowledge, right? But it’s only bullshit,” said one of his old homies. “One time we gave him a big beat down because he didn’t come to the meetings and wasn’t acting right. That was the last time I saw him.” But Sanz and Martínez’s Los Angeles informants deny that La Mara Salvatrucha sent Snyder on a mission to kill Shark and defend the SUR, or that *sureños* in Los Angeles were the least bit concerned about the status of the mythical pact in Central America.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sanz and Martínez 2012

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As Calavera walks with the Gringo away from the meeting place at the edge of the cemetery overlooking the ravine of trash, one more memory rises up unbidden. It was the last time Calavera saw his brother. Giovanni was driving the Honda civic with tinted windows on the outskirts of Xela. The air coming through the windows was hot and dry. Casper— already ranflero of Salvatrucha Locos de Northside— sat in the passenger seat. Giovanni had invited him against Sandra’s wishes. Sandra was in the back with her infant daughter suckling at her breast next to Calavera. Calavera watched the baby breastfeed while pretending to look out the window. Her lips straining at the nipple, her eyelids squinched shut as if the light flitting through the car were blinding. Sandra was listening distractedly to Giovanni and Casper talking when Casper turned around and fixed Calavera with a grin.

“One more to feed the nation, huh.” He said, turning back to Giovanni.

Giovanni looked over sharply at Casper. “What did you say?”

“I said, one more little vato to make the mara strong.”

Giovanni jerked the car to the side of the road and skidded to a stop in the gravel. “Listen, cabron,” he said in a quiet, charged voice. “My brother will never join the gang. I do not want this life for him. He is better than this. Do you understand?”

“Calmate, broder. I was just—“

“I said, do you fucking understand?”

“Yeah yeah, of course. Don’t worry man. I was just joking around. Why don’t you smoke your porro and chill out, hey?”

Giovanni glared at Casper. Then he put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. Sandra and Calavera exchanged a startled look, both too afraid to speak. Casper stared stolidly out the window at warehouses of sheet metal. Unpainted boxy things where men covered in grease moved like ants among the carcasses of dead tractors, semis, and other less easily identified machines strewn about the gravel lot.

As they drove, Calavera watched his brother’s face in the rearview mirror, the tattoo tears etched at his eyes, the gothic script down his neck. In those days, he was always angry about one thing or another, stuff he never discussed with Calavera, or any of his family if what Sandra said was true. As he watched, Giovanni looked up into the mirror and for an instant they were caught in each other’s reflected gaze. What Calavera saw there he was never able to name. Something infinitely sad, some secret window into his brother that he’d never seen before and never would again. All Giovanni’s hopes and fears that would break him to pieces if he let them loose. Calavera wanted to wrap his arms around his brother’s neck and cry. Then Giovanni turned his eyes back to the road. For a long while, no one spoke.

ⁱ The Mexican Mafia (MM or La Eme) is said to have been born in Deuel Vocational Institute (DVI) in Tracy, California in the late 1950s. DVI was an adult facility, but also became the last stop for the California juvenile detention system’s worst youthful offenders. According to gang intervention specialists, youth entering DVI called it “gladiator’s school” because of the need to constantly fight in order to hold your own. Housed with adult criminals, youth prisoners were constantly picked on. A group of Mexican Americans are said to have founded La Eme—as the story goes Montoya, a 17 year old from East Los Angeles, recruited other young toughs into a cohesive group to defend themselves against older inmates—against the bullying, sexual molestation, and general victimization that was and remains part of everyday prison life.

Today, police officers and other law enforcement experts claim that the Mexican Mafia has modelled itself after the Sicilian mafia to maintain a covert identity as it grew throughout the California Prison system. The depth and range of its influence today is truly awe-inspiring. The Eme has become a major player in prison black markets, in the urban drug distribution, extortion and prostitution rings, and even the international drug trade. It taxes and requires kickbacks from drug distribution networks across the US southwest, deals with Mexican drug cartels to transport narcotics across the border, and has become an

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important enforcer in both regulating and intensifying gang violence in urban centers throughout the US southwest.

However, at the beginning, it was just a bunch of young Hispanic inmates trying not to get raped by hardened adult criminals, and looking to live as well as they could while in prison by preying on other prisoners and refusing to be victims.ⁱ This capacity to regulate and carry out violence *inside* prisons throughout California and much of the US southwest remains key to its continuing authority. The Eme's evolution over the last 50 years is in itself a damning critique of the US penal system.

ⁱⁱ Southern California's Hispanic gangs in the 1970s were dominated entirely by Mexican-Americans. For the most part, these gangs looked down upon and discriminated against Central American youth looking to join their ranks. They were too country, they had funny accents, they were easy targets of ridicule and had trouble fitting in with the standards for entry into the gangs. Neither were they allowed to begin their own gangs. However, in the 1970s Los Angeles saw a rising influx of Central Americans fleeing the poverty and the growing political instability that would lead to terrible war in the 1980s. Seeing an opportunity, one gang opened its arms to non-Mexican Hispanics and other non-chicanos-- 18th street. 18th street was not the largest Hispanic gang in Los Angeles, but among the largest, and among the oldest as well, claiming a direct lineage to the Clanton 14, one of the most prestigious latino gangs dating back to the 1950s.

Guatemalans, Hondurans, and especially Salvadorans began to swell 18th Street's ranks. Joining meant gaining the respect, the companionship, and most of all the protection provided by being part of one of Los Angeles' biggest gangs. But it also meant sublimating their distinctive national identities into the Mexican American subculture. They had to dress like cholos, speak like cholos, etc. Then, sometime in the late 1970s, a group of Salvadoran immigrants decided to go their own way. As an investigative journalist with *El Faro* told an audience of journalists, scholars, and security officials at a conference on gangs in San Salvador,

These Salvadorans decided they didn't want to do what other Salvadoran youth who arrived before them had done; integrate with the chicano gangs and conceal their Salvadoran identity speaking like chicanos, hiding or denying their origin, their place of birth, and dressing exactly like the cholos dressed—Sanchez pants, long dress shirts, a belt, slicked hair, this young man who has been caricatured so much and continues with the passing of time... an they are distinct as well because they don't look like gangsters, they are groups of youthful fans of heavy metal music. (Sanz 2012)

These kids wore jeans, jean jackets, grew their hair long, smoked marijuana, and listened to American heavy metal music—Metallica, AC/DC, etc. They would consolidate into their own gang and call themselves La Mara Salvatrucha, later adding the 13 to show their alignment with the *sureño* brand. They will become one more gang among many fighting one another for turf, drug distribution networks, and respect in Los Angeles.

Sometime later, not too much later, according to most accounts, La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 turned on each other. The exact history of how the break between the two rivals occurred, and how it escalated into an ongoing blood feud, is lost to history. It is said that Salvadoran members of 18th Street asked for permission to leave and begin their own gang, and when 18th Street refused, the Salvadorans left anyway, creating a schism that widened and hardened over the years. Another version has it that MS13 killed a Barrio18 member on accident in a drive-by, and the tit-for-tat killing never ended. Yet another version ties the definitive break to a fight between the two gangs' leaders over a particularly beautiful woman.

Perhaps none of these stories are true, perhaps they all are. The making of profound enmity between two entities never occurs in a single moment. Love and hate, alliance and distrust—these relationships become layered over many actions and many years until the layers of sediment harden into bedrock, until it is a natural, unquestioned thing. But gang history is an oral history, and as with so many oral histories, particular events are pulled out of the flow of time or thrust back into it, becoming watershed moments changing the course of history itself. But we know that history doesn't work like this, it only becomes so when we try to go back and reconstruct it to make sense of the present.

Part II
World and Underworld

Chapter 3 Porous Prisons

“Prisons and their inmates have too real an existence not to have a profound effect on people who remain free.”¹

The Gringo takes a deep breath and knocks on a black metal door.² A slow shuffling inside, and the door swings open. A squat, wall-eyed Mayan woman stands blinking in a pool of light. “Buenos Dias. Is Gato up?” the Gringo asks. She smiles, nods, and retreats into the shadows of the house leaving him alone in the foyer. It smells of dog piss and disinfectant. He sits down on an overstuffed couch, and a swarm of flies rises, settles once again. Dozens of cages covered in heavy gray muslin hang about the room and into a dark hallway. Some sway slightly. One cage is uncovered. From within an owl’s black eyes burn into the gloom.

A quarter hour goes by and the owl moves only once, swiveling its gaze down the hallway and then back again at the Gringo.

From deep in the bowels of the house someone is hacking and spitting and swearing. A few moments later, Gato emerges into the living room red-eyed, shirtless, belly hanging over his boxer-shorts, a tattoo of Emilio Zapata etched across his back. The tattoo, he always says, is from the days when he ran with the Mexican Mafia in Mexico City. When he was still a dedicated thief, before he went to prison, before he leveraged his street cred into a government job.

The Gringo laughs. “Borracho.”

“Culero.” Gato grunts, and ambles back to the bathroom. The Gringo gets up stiffly, walks out the door to lean against the chalky whitewash wall. The sun beats hot on his skin through the last of the morning chill. He closes his eyes and tilts his face upward, the light streaking orange across the inside of his eyelids. He checks his phone for messages. There are none.

When he comes back inside Gato seems to be engaged in a staring contest with the owl. He turns and grins. “You’re late again pinche Gringo.”

“Your mother. I’ve been here almost half an hour. You told me we were leaving for the prison at 7:30.”

“Looks to me like you just walked in.”

“You shithead.”

“What’s the matter, Gringo. You okay?”

“Ah... just problems with my woman.”

“She found out you’re a big GAY?”

“Something like that.”

¹ Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, p. 35; Oeuvres completes 2: 249

² I have woven the story of a prison visit through the entirety of the chapter. I do so in order to provide to give a sense—psychologically and emotionally as much as intellectually—of the multiple scales across which the porosity of the prison is made.

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“Well, don’t get mad at me. I didn’t tell her.” Gato laughs and claps the Gringo on the back. A knocking at the door, and a small figure stands silhouetted, peering into the gloom as if waiting to be invited further.

“Cheeky! Culero!” Gato exclaims.

Cheeky is Gato’s loyal assistant, and the butt of his cruelest jokes. Cheeky’s mother volunteered for syphilis injections administered by American doctors in the 1960s. Cheeky’s father is from Chernobyl. Cheeky likes little boys. And so on. After a moment, he limps the rest of the way in and stands awkwardly among the cages. His right leg is twisted from a motorbike accident, a mottled red scar spread across his shin, the muscle withered down. One night he and the Gringo got drunk in a lonely cantina with a huge Wurlitzer flashing like the days of disco. Shouting above the raucous oompapa, Cheeky told of his drunkard father who would only come home to beat his mother because there was no dinner. And so Cheeky grew up huffing solvent and robbing yokels commuting from the highlands to sell their wares in the city. He lurched out of his chair and embraced the Gringo from behind. “Grab them like this! And the knife like this!” shoving his hand under the Gringo’s ribs.

He’s been out of prison for two months. By the smell of him, he’s been up drinking all night. The Gringo tells him so and Cheeky twists his orc’s face into a rueful grin, knotting the pitted scars across his forehead, puckering the web tattoos around his mouth. The man is missing half his teeth.

He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a plastic bag of clear liquid that smells like rubbing alcohol.

“For my hangover,” he says. “No problem.”

At Gato’s order, Cheeky fetches the goods destined for mareros stuck in the isolation block of Canada prison, in the hot lowlands some 60 kilometers southwest of the city: two garbage bags of deflated soccer balls and tee shirts with “Ministerio de Cultura” stamped on each side. He pauses uncertainly before the owl’s cage.

“Cheeky,” the Gringo asks. “Are you okay?”

Cheeky shrugs. “I’m okay.” He says. “But I think the owl is sad.”

Out in the street, the sun has burned off the morning mist and beats down on the Gringo, Gato, and Cheeky as they wait for a bus. A drunk huddled against a shuttered storefront, pants around his ankles, calls out to them. Gato knows him. He knows all the drunks, street urchins, prostitutes, and drug addicts residing in this part of the city. He was once one of them. He started as an 8-year-old runaway stealing to survive on the streets. When he was 24 he held up an old man at knifepoint. The man had a heart attack and died. The judge convicted Gato of manslaughter and sentenced him to 15 years behind bars. After seven, he came up for parole. He spoke of intent and repentance, of man’s mutable soul and divine will. The judge let him free.

“Gringo, can you give him some change?” Gato whispers. “I have none.”

Prisons have long been the concrete manifestations of western democracies’ efforts to isolate deviant and dangerous bodies.³ By identifying, detaining, and punishing criminal subjects, the state reifies its role as society’s caretaker, quarantining criminals to protect the social body from the contagion of crime. Prison walls undergird the foundations of liberal society by performing a useful illusion: the good can be divided from the evil, and punishing evil will protect the good. Overwhelmingly, the “evil” are drawn from society’s poorest and most marginalized populations. The law has judged that they pose a threat to

³ See Foucault 1977, Goffman 1961, Irwin 1980, Gilmore 2007

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others, to society, to themselves, and must be excluded. Through spatial separation, prisons thereby reinforce and intensify the ideal of sovereign order and clearly defined social and moral boundaries they are meant to serve. “Ideally,” Baumann writes, “<prisons> finalize and embed the deviant other’s isolation from the personal networks and intimacies that alone could speak against his estrangement from society.” These concrete and barbed wire constructions materialize the moral panics that create folk devils⁴ and the talk of crime that (re)produces the category of the criminal.⁵ Prison walls mark the boundaries of the social world itself—like the blank spaces on the maps of old: “here there be monsters.”⁶

Over the last several decades, the prison’s role as an essential tool of state power has seen a marked increase with the “irruption of the penal state” around the world.⁷ However, more often than not prisons fail to live up to their image. They cannot be considered “total institutions” (Goffman 1961) in the sense of keeping the incarcerated completely isolated from the free world (Berg and Delisi 2006). This is especially so in developing countries. In many Latin American countries, for example, prisons have come to represent “a hole at the center of the state” (Lessing 2013) as imprisoned gang members and organized criminal groups make them staging grounds for projecting their influence and authority beyond prison walls.⁸

La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 are paradigmatic examples of the world that prisons make. Since the end of the Central America’s civil wars, the ebb and flow of prison life—the constant game of tug of war (*tira y floja*) between prisoners and agents of the state—has been a key crucible in making *maras* what they are today. Through their prison-street networks, the *maras* expose the state’s abject failure to uphold its promise to protect society. The conditions of violation imposed by prison life have been essential to turning *maras* into perpetrators of massive and horrifying violence and useful targets of societal rage. For *mareros*, the prison has become both an expected way-station in their life’s journey and a central point of organization and cultural reproduction. But this is only the beginning. Exchange between the incarcerated and the free goes far beyond the

⁴ Cohen 1972

⁵ Caldeira 2000

⁶ In the United States, the carceral state *par excellence*, state and federal governments have built more prisons and incarcerated more bodies than any other nation on earth with little effect on overall crime rates⁶; it seems the illusion of security and the brutal satisfaction of punitive justice (and punitive injustice too) have appeared more convincing than prisons’ “real” effects on society. In Guatemala, the prison system was never a significant state concern until the end of civil war became the beginning of unprecedented waves of violent. Levenson (2012) p. 112. Before the end of the civil war, the authorities in cooperation with paramilitary groups, would often “disappear” or execute suspected criminals rather than submit them to legal proceedings.

⁷ Wacquant 2009. This has not been the driving factor for the overall decline in violent crime over the last two decades. Prison, according to many experts, *never* do what they, in theory, are supposed to. Bauman (2000) for example, argues, “No evidence of any sort has been thus far found and collected to support, let alone to prove, the assumptions that prisons performs the roels ascribed to them in theory, and that they achieve any degree of success if they try to perform them—while the assumed justice of most specific measures which such theories propose or imply fails the simplest test of ethical soundness and propriety.” (208)

⁸ Researchers have documented the failures of prison and punitive justice to quell criminal violence across Latin America and increasingly in the United States. For empirical research on prison-gang power in Latin America, see Denyer-Willis (2009), on Brazil, Martinez and Sanz (2012) on El Salvador, Cruz (2010) for the Central American Region, and Lessing (2013) for a general overview of various Latin American countries.

gangs and their criminal networks. What's more, this exchange is essential to both prisoners' survival and to the continued functioning of the prison system itself.

Prisons are in fact central nodes in the chaotic and shifting continuum linking the state, the incarcerated, and the free into a single, uninterrupted whole. Like the infrastructure of any frontier, prison walls, barbed wire, electrified fencing, and armed guards form a porous membrane across which all kinds of exchange—both licit and illicit—take place. They are spaces of constant exchange and flow. But, since prisons are generally imagined as hermetic containers of criminal contagion, their porous nature requires constant policing to reproduce, re-perform, and prop up commonsense distinctions between the lawful and the criminal, the Good and the Evil. Efforts to enforce the ideal of law and order, or what passes for it, often transgress the precarious *détente* that keeps prisons peaceful, leading to great violence.

To explore just how multivalent prison porousness can be, and how essential it is for prisoners' survival and the prison system itself, this chapter maps the flow of bodies and goods, suffering and desire, information and influence across prison walls in and around Guatemala City. Struggles between prisoner factions and state agents to control and profit from these flows dictate conditions of life behind bars, and these struggles create endless frictions that, left unchecked, can lead to moments of violent rupture.

Prison guards and *paisas* (non-gang prisoners), the media and politicians, the military and high-level government officials, and, yes, this researcher, all play a part in building and bypassing prison walls.⁹ Still, the illusion of containment remains essential for the survival of the prison, the system of law and order it represents. Without it, the symbiotic relationships between state agents, the law-abiding world, and the underworld upon which they rest become painfully obvious, and we lose the pretense of moral and physical order that the law is meant to uphold.

Flow

Concrete walls, electrified fences, decaying guard towers, high wattage search lights, and hundreds of miles of coiled razor wire form the physical boundary between the law-abiding world and the space of the prison. Masked guards wielding M16s, cellphone signal blockers, and a vast and vastly ineffective bureaucracy buttress and extend this boundary. Everyday, countless acts both licit and illicit penetrate this highly policed border. The primary vector of exchange is the stream of visitors crossing in and out of the prison. In prison parlance, these visitors—most of whom are the wives, lovers, parents, siblings, and children of the incarcerated—are known as "*la Visita*." Through *la Visita* money and drugs, illicit cellphones, goods wrought by prisoner labor, and so on, pass back and forth. But also love and desire, devotion and bodily fluids, babies conceived inside the prison to be born and raised on the outside.

They catch a rust-red bus trailing black plumes of smoke, and disembark in a labyrinthine bus station at the southern edge of the capital. Busses pull up and roar off on three tiered platforms, overpasses snaking

⁹ *Paisa*- Prison term for non-gang prisoners. Probably etymologically rooted in the military term for non-combatants during wartime—ie, civilians.

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above sprawling concrete apartment blocks. Diesel engines, screeching brakes, teenage boys calling out destinations in high-pitched chants. They jump on a chicken bus as it pulls out for the lowlands between the capital and the Pacific Ocean. It will pass the prison entrance, and most of the other passengers are the wives, mothers, and children of the incarcerated. They carry heavy bags of food, clothing, and other sundries, packing the seats of this decommissioned Yellowbird school bus, painted purple and red and hung with gaudy Virgin Mary talismans and Looney Toons stickers. The Gringo remembers these same vinyl seats sticking to his 7-year-old thighs on hot, just-before-summer-vacation afternoons in Watsonville, California. The steel hull vibrates with the thumping bass of a reggaeton top 40 station.

After grinding through the last of the suburban sprawl they quickly descend out of the mountains and onto the hot lowland plains. Ugly sheet-metal and concrete buildings give way to tin and mud shacks and then to fallow fields, sugar cane, and dense jungle. The bus stops every few minutes while passengers wait or disembark.

An adolescent girl, sapling thin, with long wispy hair to her waist, walks slowly up the aisle. She turns and steadies herself on a seat with her left hand and raises her right hand before her as if blessing a congregation. She begins to speak. Her voice is small and reedy like her body, her words all but lost beneath the music, the engine, the wind.

Then the bus driver brakes violently, all of the passengers lurching together. In the momentary hush, the Gringo hears her prayer— “... in each of our veins. The Virgin Mary protects with her sorrowful hand. The agony in the garden is ours, for it is we who scourged him on the pillar. He was crowned with thorns so that we might live in peace. Carry the...” and then the engine cranks, the bus lurches forward and her voice is lost beneath the roar of the Yellowbird.

La Visita

Violent struggles over *la Visita* betray its absolute necessity for prisoners and for the prison system itself.¹⁰ Access to *la Visita* is prisoners’ most valued privilege. It is the first one that prison authorities rescind when punishing recalcitrant inmates, and this is the punishment most likely to cause prisoners to revolt. Unlike US prisons, where visits from the outside are largely limited to legally married spouses, immediate family, and legal council—and then only once every few months¹¹—the Guatemalan prison authorities (known as “*el Sistema*” in prison parlance) allow visitors to come several days a week in all but a few maximum security facilities. The regular stream of visitors keeps the denizens of overcrowded, under-staffed, and underfunded prisons alive while nurturing an entire underground economy as prisoners and agents of the state seek to straddle and profit from the frontier the visitors must cross each day. *La Visita* is prisoners’ family and loved ones triaging the state.¹²

What do the visitors bring? They bring food, soap, toilet paper, toothpaste, razors, magazines, batteries, stereos, tools, watches, jewelry, and raw materials (wood, metal,

¹⁰ For observations of the importance of prison visits for US prisoners, see Carlson and Cervera (1991); Jose-Kampfner (1991); Lloyd

¹¹ Comfort (2002)

¹² Guatemala’s prison system is not so desperately underfunded and overcrowded as its immediate neighbors Honduras and El Salvador. But obtaining an accurate prison population count is quite difficult. McDonald of Global Post puts the total population at around 13,200 in 2012, 160% over the prison system’s planned capacity. President Perez Molina (2012-present) has vowed to build 7 new prisons and raise total capacity from 7000 to 10,000 (McDonald 2012).

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concrete) for inmate artisans. The food—from fresh vegetables, to home-cooked meals, to candy and snacks—supplements the poor and often unsanitary fare provided by *el Sistema*, and stocks the shelves of prisoner-run stores.

Visitors also bring much-needed cash to the currency-starved prison economy. Those inmates without support from their families or criminal networks must earn money if they hope to survive inside. Prisoners run restaurants, bakeries, barbershops, laundry services, shoe repair shops, and portrait painting studios. In Pavón prison, located some 15 kilometers northeast of Guatemala City, there are inmate-run animal feed stores, tortilla vendors, and hammock weaving factories. These laboring prisoners do their best business on days when prison gates are flung open to welcome *la Visita*.

Prisoners who run their own businesses depend heavily upon *la Visita* to restock their materials and equipment. In all but two maximum security facilities, one can buy electronic equipment, paintings and furniture, the latest Hollywood films on pirated DVDs burned on prison computers, gold and silver jewelry, raccoon pelts, fighting cocks, hammocks, home-made cakes and pastries...The list goes on.¹³ Even if the visitors don't bring their own cash, they inspire prisoners with money to purchase gifts on their behalf. Juande, a former leader of *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS) imprisoned for homicide, maintains himself by fashioning children's nightlights out of wood and plastic, which he sells to guards and other inmates to give to their families.¹⁴ They feature cartoon characters—Spongebob Squarepants, Tweetie Bird, Disney princesses, and so on.¹⁵

Prisoners with no outside support must labor for others, many as underpaid workers for entrepreneurs looking to cash in on inmates' isolation. Denizens of Pavón prison earn about 6 *quetzales*/day (~75 cents) gluing plastic soccer balls, weaving nylon nets, or knitting hammocks for sale by vendors on the outside. Many entrepreneurs who use prisoner labor present their work as philanthropy—providing desperate prisoners with much-needed work to pass the time. However, given how abject the inmates are—how little they earn, how long they labor, and how few their options—their work smacks more of indentured servitude than wage labor.

The Gringo closes his eyes and leans against the window. It vibrates against his skull. A rosary strung along barbed wire floats out of the darkness and dissolves into a naked woman with dark hair and blues eyes huddled and crying on yellow sheets. Pressing his thumb against the rose-gold ring on his finger, he swears beneath his breath, shuts his eyes tighter. Then Gato is speaking into his ear.

¹³ In Pavón, there was a minor scandal when a government inspection found that a dvd burning computer was housed directly next door to the guards' barracks.

¹⁴ In the Guatemalan penal code, homicide is equivalent to what the US system recognizes as 1st degree murder, that is murder with premeditation and intent.

¹⁵ Indeed, Disney characters are particularly common among prisoner made artifacts. During a visit to Pavon prison, located outside of Guatemala City along the mountainous route to El Salvador, an ex-Sureño thrust a panel of plastic Disney princess refrigerator magnets at me. Ariel in her Prince's arms, Jasmine and Alladin on a flying carpet, Sleeping Beauty gazing into Prince Charming's eyes, — five *quetzales* for the lot of them. I bought them for my stepdaughter in the United States.

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“Listen, Gringo, listen.” Gato says, leaning in close. “Do you want to know a secret? That is why you came here, no? To take our secrets and write them down and become famous? I know. I know your kind. Well here’s a secret. At the end of every sector in every prison a Devil has been scratched into the wall. Sometimes a Christian, one of these evangelicals, will find it and erase it, but always it reappears within a few days. Do you know what it does? It has a dark magic. Do you want to know? Do you? Ah you don’t believe me? You think I am a liar?”

“I know you’re a liar, Gato. But I like your lies. They have a lot of truth in them.”

“Ah! Very good, very good,” Gato chortles. “You’re smarter than others of your kind. So here it is—if properly asked, the devil will bring anyone into the prison. Cause them to arrive inside—willfully or no. It is the tool of last resort for the men whose lives leak out of them day after day trapped inside. All you have to do is take an old shoe in your left hand, holding it just so, and say the person’s name three times while—ah, we’ve arrived!” Gato jumps up and signals to the driver while the Gringo and Cheeky hurry after him, lugging the garbage bags down the aisle as the bus pulls into a gravel lot before an empty cantina. Several other passengers follow them out. A torn canvas banner of a huge black rooster lolls in the hot breeze. The assistant thumps the side of the bus, whistles and the yellowbird pulls out again, leaving the visitors in its dusty wake. The Gringo looks down. At his feet, a ragged rooster struts back and forth, pecking savagely at its own raw, pink neck.

Illicit Exchange

Not that earning a living wage is easy for the free either. Prison guards are infamously underpaid, earning the national minimum wage of less than \$220/month. To offset the chance of corruption, *el Sistema* rotates guards between facilities around the country. Forced to live and work far from their homes and families, they cannot rely on the home-cooked meals, shared living spaces, and other support that family networks provide. To dull the pain of this dislocation and pad their salaries, guards take advantage of the flow of goods in and out of the prison, often levying informal “taxes”. For example, some will reap what they can from the charitable donations that flow in from church groups, non-governmental organizations, and other do-gooder groups for the imprisoned population.

Just inside Pavon prison, I once watched a gaggle of guards standing around a pile of second hand shoes delivered by a church group. A male guard picked up a pair of black faux leather stilettos, and, turning to a female guard beside him asked rather shyly, “Do you think these will fit my wife?”

The entry of illicit goods is, of course, far more risky and far more lucrative for guards, prisoners, and visitors alike. Visitors and guards regularly smuggle drugs (mostly marijuana, but also crack and cocaine), cellphones, and cellphone parts into the prison. These goods enter stowed inside visitors’ bodies or, perhaps more often, smuggled in by guards for a steep price. As in any illegal market, prices rise in relation to the risk of transport and distribution. Licit goods like food, soccer balls, hammocks, and second-hand watches can be purchased inside the prison at street-market price and sometimes even below.¹⁶ Marijuana is generally priced at about three times street-level value, and cellphones, cellphone batteries, and SIM cards go for at least 10 times what they cost on the street. In “random” searches, guards regularly discover and confiscate cellphones and

¹⁶ Prices for these sorts of goods in the prison market can fluctuate drastically, depending on visiting day schedule, charitable donations, and the vendor’s desperation.

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marijuana, punishing prisoners with prolonged stays in isolation blocks. However, these momentary disruptions only serve to stimulate further sales of the confiscated goods, while maintaining the performance of state control.

The jacked-up price for a cellphone speaks to its extreme value for prisoners. Cellphones provide the best means of staying in communication with one's family, especially for those whose relations are too poor, too preoccupied, or too far away to make regular visits. However, the cellphone is also the chief technology for the most lucrative prison business—extortion rackets. As I will explore in the next chapter, in urban Guatemala, and throughout the region, extortion rackets originating in prisons have become the most feared and despised criminal activity, fueling popular support for the extrajudicial murder of prisoners and suspected criminals.¹⁷

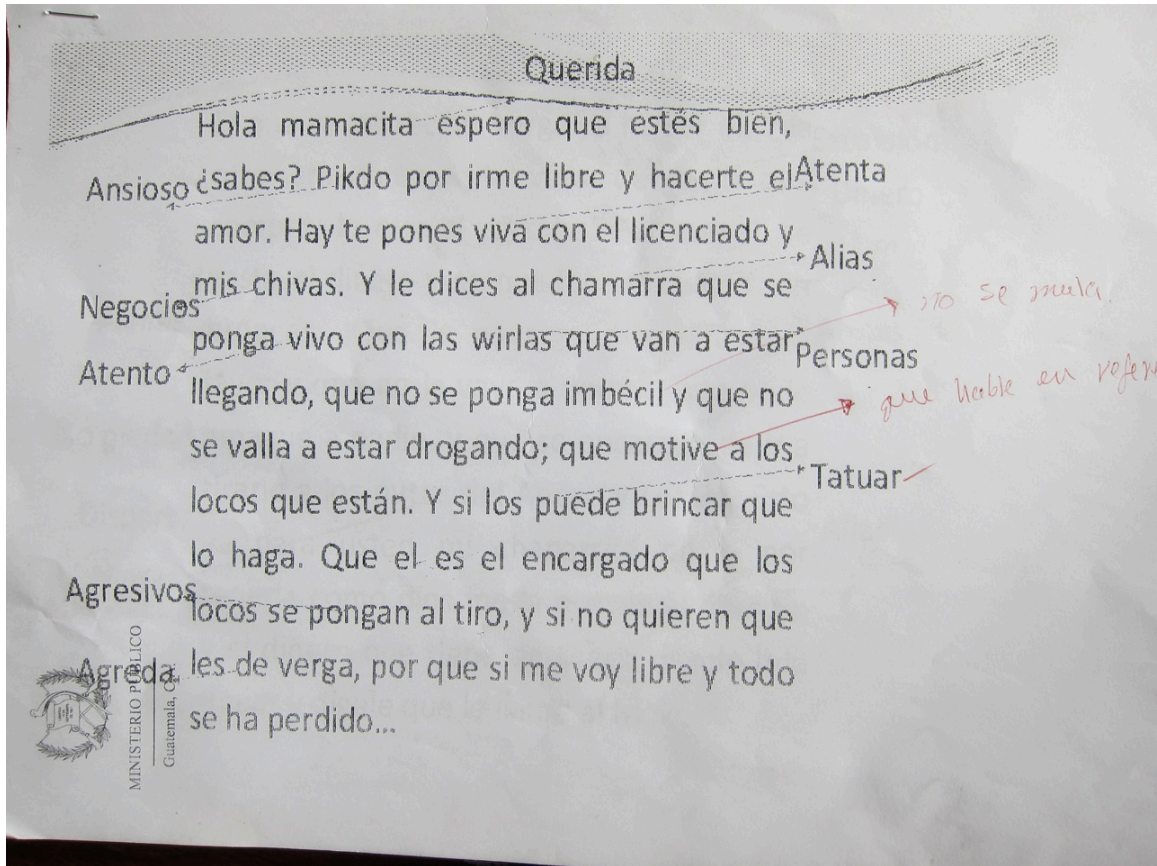
Efforts to shut down prisoners' capacity to communicate beyond prison walls have proven ineffectual. While in many facilities *el Sistema* has supposedly set up devices which block cellular communication or even "burn" SIM cards when used from inside the prison, inmates have found myriad ways to bypass the state's feeble attempts to halt their communication with the outside world. In some cases, gang leaders and other powerful inmates have simply bribed or cowed prison directors into surreptitiously shutting down the signal blockers for certain periods. More common, however, are improvised mechanisms for bypassing the state's efforts to cut off cellular communication. In one prison, inmates constructed a telephone "booth" from scrap metal in a hidden corner of the grounds, which blocked the blocking signal. And, while special police units dedicated to tracking down imprisoned extortionists have had a modicum of success, the ease with which guards are corrupted, extortion networks raised, and new cellphones smuggled puts the state at a decided disadvantage.

In maximum security prisons where the state has successfully curtailed cell-phone use, *la Visita's* significance for prisoners is even more pronounced.¹⁸ This is especially true for leaders of gangs and other criminal organizations who continue to direct business on the streets. Incarcerated leaders of La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 continue to be key decision-makers in extortion rackets, murders, and other gang activities. Their visitors often carry messages—known as *wirlas* in prison argot—for operatives in the street secreted away inside their clothes or, more often, inside their bodies.¹⁹ A copy of one of these messages is reproduced below. Prison guards discovered it among the belongings of a Barrio18 chief's girlfriend as she left Sector 11 of *Preventivo* prison, and investigators transcribed it for use as evidence in court.

¹⁷ The most well-organized extortion rackets depend on street operatives to carry out threats against recalcitrant victims. Transnational gangs (*maras*) are the most accomplished at these sorts of operations. But most prison run extortion rackets are simply "cold-call" schemes—prisoners riffling randomly through telephone directories and demanding deposits into anonymous bank accounts from their victims without the capacity to carry out the threatened violence. (see chapter 4)

¹⁸ *Fraijanes I, Fraijanes II, El Infiernito*, and others

¹⁹ The term *wirla* is slang originating with US-based Latino prison-gangs.



A transcribed “wirla”. Prosecutors have translated gang slang into formal Spanish.

Dear One-

Hi *Mamacita*, I hope you are well. You know what? I’m going crazy to get free and make love to you. You got to look alive with the lawyers and my papers. And tell *Chamarra* to get busy with the wirlas that will be arriving, that he doesn’t act like an idiot and doesn’t be doing drugs, and that he motivates the locos that remain. And if he can jump in more guys, then do it.

He continues with instructions to collect tithes (*la renta*) from extorted neighborhoods and businesses, to acquire weapons with the money collected, and to not screw up because he will punish his second-in-command if he gets out of prison and everything is lost. The message ends with a threat and a promise to his girlfriend, “and you already know, if you cheat on me, I will kill you.”

A mixture of love letter, rambling threat, and concise directives to street operatives running protection rackets in Guatemala City neighborhoods, the message reveals how varied and entangled the exchange across prison walls is. Indeed, gangs’ and other organized criminal groups’ dependence on extortion rackets for survival has made *la Visita* a strategic tool, entwining prison policy and criminal command structures with love, the bonds of family, and physical desire.

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The Gringo hoists a garbage bag to his shoulder and Cheeky grabs the other and the three men walk past the cantina and up a dirt road, joining the ragged column of visitors en route to the prison. A hand-painted wooden billboard announces EL INFIERNITO MAXIMUM SECURITY FACILITY. Twenty meters further and the Gringo is soaked with sweat. They come upon a concrete guard station, uniformed men sitting around a low metal table in the shade. The black metal gate hangs open. A prison guard in a black uniform stretched tight across his belly stands up from the table and hails Gato with a toothy grin. Two young soldiers in fatigues stand behind him, M16s slung low over their shoulders. A shirtless boy in flip-flops remains in a chair, staring blankly at the newcomers.

“Ah Gato, welcome once again.” The mustachioed guard says.

“Mi Capitan! A pleasure of course.” Gato reaches over and grabs a deflated soccer ball from Cheeky’s bag and hands it to the guard.

“Ah thank you Gato.”

“Of course, of course.”

They rejoin the procession trudging through the shimmering heat along the road deeply furrowed by rain and tire tread. Like good mules, the Gringo and Cheeky lean forward under the weight of the bags they carry. El Infiernito, the Little Inferno, is on the left. Thirty-foot high electrified barbed wire fences mark the outside perimeter. Atop baby blue concrete walls stand prison guards in ski masks and bullet-proof vests, Israeli Tovaars and M16s trained on inmates sunning themselves in the prison courtyard.

“Gringo!” Gato hisses in his ear. “Stop looking!” He turns his gaze back to the ground and trudges on.

Prison Time and Desire

Incarceration dilates time. Again and again, my imprisoned friends and informants spoke of how time spent with someone from the outside is a chance to escape, or enjoy the illusion of escape, from the torturously slow passing of one moment into the next. *La Visita* is as essential for providing this sort of relief, especially for those with life sentences, as it is for the prisons’ (il)licit markets.

I was sitting in an old Guatemala City bar with my friend Calavera, an MS soldier recently released from a six-year sentence. Calavera reflected on his companions still serving out their time. Mo, another MS member facing a double life sentence for multiple homicides, had recently disappeared from an NGO rehabilitation program after a brief romance with one of the social workers went sour. Every morning for six months he had been at the gates to greet her and the rest of the NGO crew and escort us inside, until one day he was not. His compatriots said he’d gone back to using crack, and bullying other prisoners, even cheating an old friend out of money he owed.

“Ah, *mi compadre* (my buddy),” Calavera sighed. “His life is already given away. That’s not a good vibe. That one still thinks like he’s in the game. He can be really cold. But maybe it’s because of how many years he’s got. With that many years I don’t know what I would think.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I said.

“And that’s why I guess I understand why he is the way he is. These are things that one cannot withstand so easily. Day after day with a life sentence, every day passing feels heavier, right, instead of feeling like one day less.”

Staring down the barrel of a lifetime in prison can breed a dangerous kind of nihilism. Prisoners must find ways to pierce the unrelentingly slow passage of time. Some

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enlist in reforming their souls with the vision of Christ to become Evangelical zealots, or pass their time with secular rehabilitation programs in arts and crafts and “community building” exercises.²⁰ Some twist time with the help of hard drugs like crack cocaine and paint thinner. And some ensure that the suffering interminable incarceration causes will reach far beyond prison walls. Prisoners and police observed that since they have no hopes of walking free, gang leaders and other powerful inmates carrying life sentences intentionally ramp up the use of violence in their ongoing criminal activities. Since imprisoned rivals cannot strike at each other, gang war continues by proxy. To make their enemies suffer, said an former MS member, “*ramfleros* will order their boys on the street to go after <their> families.” Having swallowed the bitter pill of life behind bars, they have little to fear from further punishment. Intense, even spectacular violence has proven to be a useful tool for expanding extortion rackets and other illicit businesses, or simply for vengeance.²¹

The last time I saw Mo before he disappeared into drug addiction, he was wearing a t-shirt that read, “Sonic Blonde- We have more fun, just harder.” I asked him why his gang had become so violent. “The gang leaders facing life in prison are interested primarily in ensuring that they and their families can live well.” He said in the course of the conversation. “And they are willing to use anyone and do anything to make it happen.”²²

From distributing drugs inside prison to organizing extortion rackets on the street, criminal enterprises are, for many prisoners, the only possibility to earn enough money to soften the squalor of prison life and care for their loved ones on the outside. Preying on others becomes the best, if not the only, means of remaining a provider from behind bars. Whether engaged in criminal activities extending beyond the prison walls or not, prisoners must rely on the love and support of their mostly female visitors to make the time pass less harshly. The care, love, devotion, and physical contact *la Visita* provides is as important to inmates’ lives as the goods, money, and information that they pass in and out of the prison walls. The image of the sacrificing mother, who faithfully visits her incarcerated son and stands by his side through the years wasted behind bars, is deeply etched upon the prisoners’ collective consciousness. Meanwhile, wives, lovers, and prostitutes provide prisoners with the chance for female companionship, love-making, fucking. These visitors sometimes bring babies conceived on prior visits.

Given how important *la Visita* is to prisoners’ survival and sense of well-being, many incarcerated men work hard on developing their capacity to woo female visitors. “On the street, men treat their women badly,” said Mike, a few months before he was released from Pavon. “They only want them there so they will serve them. They do not take the time to care for their women. But we prisoners, we can be very romantic. We write love letters. We take baths with our women. That is why they come back and want to be with us.”²³ Mike spoke from experience—he was preparing to move in with his fiancée, who he met and wooed while incarcerated. Later that day, I watched a prisoner approach several female social workers and inquire in the most respectful of tones, “Are

²⁰ For in depth accounts of Evangelical Christian interventions in the name of security, see, for example, O’neil (2014), Brenneman (2012)

²¹ For in-depth analysis of maras’ use of spectacular(ized) violence, see chapter 5 of this dissertation—“Maras and the Discourse of Suffering Bodies”

²² Mo 2012

²³ Mike 2011

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you happy in your marriage? Are you sure? Does your man pay attention to you? Does he give you enough time?”

Such sentiments are not merely the false bravado of men struggling with their inability to earn money and fulfill the masculine role of the provider. For many female visitors, the prison has become a space of welcome transgression in a highly conservative and *machista* (misogynist and patriarchal) society—a place where they can express themselves in ways forbidden on the street. By trapping men behind bars, the prison becomes, in a surprising inversion, a space of rare freedom and emancipation for some female visitors.

“Watch the women cross the threshold of the prison,” a female social worker observed.

On the outside they are demure, staid, ‘yes sir,’ ‘no sir,’ good little women. But as soon as they enter something comes alive, something is awoken. They find freedom. As soon as they cross the frontier of the prison they can lose their etiquette. You won’t be judged. No one will judge you. Not for how you act... You can even desire a man with tattoos without your parents telling you it is wrong. On the street you are under constant surveillance. In the prison, no one is watching.

The prison, constructed to trap and keep a watchful eye on criminal bodies, is also a space of liberty and hidden pleasure for women trapped by the *machismo* of their society. Able to come and go as they please and dictate the terms of their relationships with men desperate for their companionship, they get a taste of equality rare for lower-class women in this country. But such artificially constructed equality only goes so far. These women must still bear the burdens of single-parenthood. I met several prisoners who fathered children while serving out their sentences; one smooth-talking hustler was said to have had four children by three different women over a two-year period.

Most prisoners, however, are not lucky or capable enough to woo new lovers, and many do not have families able or willing to care for them. For these men, life in prison is difficult indeed. They are known as *russos*—literally, Russians—Marxists, blighted commies, embargoed.²⁴ These men are left to fend for themselves and covet the women who come to be with others each visiting day, when the hushed gasping of lovers can be heard in the cramped cells and the dank hallways.

While state surveillance inside all but a few maximum-security facilities is extremely haphazard and easily sidestepped, it is not true that “no one is watching.” Agents of the state may be largely absent, but other prisoners are *always* watching one another. In this space where the smallest privilege can become a treasure worth fighting for, knowing your neighbors’ business is key to survival. Information, after all, can be the most valuable currency. The atmosphere of envy and distrust is palpable. The gifts *la Visita* can offer, the spell against the pall of prison time it can provide, are not apportioned equally. Appeasing one man’s hunger only feeds another’s.

“Envy controls everything in the prison,” said a prison old-timer. “This one eats well, this one does not; this one is always high, this one is not; this one has visitors, this

²⁴ While no official etymology of this term exists, it seems to bear the traces of civil war history, when Cold War polarization made any connection to communism dangerous.

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one does not; this one has a woman on the outside, this one has no family at all. This one is a *russo*, and this one runs an extortion racket.” The famous ideal of the panopticon—the carceral dream of making prisoners’ souls transparent before a disciplining authority—has become an inverted lens.²⁵ Ultimately, the only ones watching and keeping careful notes on the prisoners are the prisoners themselves. And, too often, it is the most ruthless and well-connected inmates—those most willing and able to use violence to get their way—who dictate the flow of prison life.

The pilgrimage stretches out along the hard-packed mud track, past empty checkpoint kiosks, white rocks piled in rough squares with slanted tin roofs for shelter against the sun and rain. A roughly hewn log weighted with a knot of twisted metal in clotted concrete at one end and a rope dangling at the other serves as a car gate. A woman appears up ahead and shambles past them hugging herself, quietly crying. The Gringo turns and watches her stumble under the weight of the cloth bag she carries.

Ten minutes later the prison gate looms at the end of the road. Women and children stand in a long line snaking out from the metal gate. They are the mothers, wives, lovers, sisters, and offspring of the incarcerated. Also, prostitutes arriving for work. It’s nearing 11 in the morning, and some among them have traveled through the night to arrive with the sun already burning high in the sky.

Many of the younger women wear halter-tops, short skirts and heavy make up. They steel themselves for the humiliation of entry. Before they meet their men the guards will search their orifices for drugs, weapons, cellphone parts.

A tripled barrier marks the prison perimeter. An inner fence of metal mesh, another electrified, the third festooned with barbed wire. A dozen prisoners stand within, peering anxiously into the knot of visitors at the gate. Their longing is palpable—so insistent and so strong. A woman’s touch, the sound of a child’s voice, the money or drugs smuggled in that will make the days, weeks, months, years, lifetimes pass less harshly. Each second brings freedom closer, death nearer, stretching the length of time erased by endless waiting. An anonymous inmate has scrawled the name for this place where the prisoners wait: “Porton de los Desesperados- Se Sufre y es Duro.” That is, Gate of the Hopeless- One Suffers and it is Hard.

As they approach the entrance, Cheeky pauses. He stares at the gate and the visitors knotted there, he looks back down the way he has come.

“Whatsup Cheeky?” The Gringo asks.

Cheeky looks up at the Gringo with a sad smile. He slowly shakes his head, and, handing his bag to the Gringo, says. “I don’t want to go in there.”

“Are you afraid you might get stuck on the other side again?”

“No,” he replies, hunkering down against an almond tree across from a ramshackle restaurant where an old man sits eyeing the women.

²⁵ Foucault (1977)



Gate of the Hopeless. One Suffers and it is Hard. Graffiti on inner gate of Pavon Prisonm, Guatemala City.

The flow of bodies across the physical and administrative infrastructure bounding the prison creates opportunities for constant exchange between the incarcerated and the free; money and drugs, illicit cellphones, goods wrought by prisoner labor, and so on, pass back and forth, forth and back. But also love and desire, devotion and bodily fluids, babies conceived inside the prison to be born and raised on the outside. Amidst all this exchange, agents of the state and powerful prisoners attempt to profit from the prison's porousness by imposing unofficial, unregulated control over the entangled flows.

Control

The state may create the prison's physical infrastructure, but once inside, state agents are only one of several groups vying for control over prisoners' daily routine and their exchange with the outside world. Authority over prison life flows along networks linking state authorities to powerful prisoners who together reap profits from the constant exchange between the prison and the outside world. But this authority is unstable, contingent. Groups of powerful inmates, often with tacit support from prison guards, directors, and other state officials, establish authoritarian hierarchies over the rest of the population through violent coercion. Controlling prison-space means more than simply wielding power inside prison; it means straddling the porous membrane between the prison and the outside world and regulating the constant flow of goods, bodies, and information across prison walls.²⁶

Behind the rusted metal bars of the prison entrance, guards in gray uniforms sit at old metal writing desks. After passing through the first gate, the Gringo flashes the Ministry of Culture ID card Gato made for him, and hands over his driver's license, house-keys, and cellphone in exchange for a small laminated piece of paper with the number 6 scrawled in felt pen. He writes his name, date of birth, and an invented passport number in a clothbound tome, the pages yellowed and curling with age and moisture. A wiry, mean-eyed guard slides his hands along the Gringo's shoulders, under his armpits, around the belt line, and down the inside of his pant-legs to his ankles. The guard misses the small camera tucked snug behind the Gringo's crotch. They always do, he thinks. Even so, his jaw slowly unclenches as he walks through the last gate, enters the guards' outhouse, unzips his pants, and transfers the camera from his underwear to a small green satchel. When he emerges again Gato is waiting for him, head cocked, a smile on his lips.

The men in the isolation block have already seen Gato and the Gringo when they walk out onto the courtyard. A few wave their arms and thrust their heads between thin metal bars. They start to shout. "Gato, Gaaaato. Gringo, Griiiingoo."

There is Doble Cara, half his boney face tattooed in a grinning skull, wearing the same DARE tshirt that a friendly policeman once handed out to the Gringo's 5th grade class. There is Soto, who shot a bus driver because his boss didn't make extortion payments. Mouse, tiny tattooed Mouse, who they say is gay, is somewhere inside nursing the HIV and tuberculosis that will kill him. There is El Buffón,

²⁶ Throughout the world, state authorities "outsource" various functions of prison governance to privileged inmates. The situation in Guatemalan prisons is distinct from, say, US prisons, only by an order of intensity.

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narrow-shoulders, potbellied, a wide mouth, sunken eyes. He is in for killing his 4-year-old stepdaughter with a drunken punch. They say it was an accident. And El Maniaco, who, they say, killed and ate part of the director of Chimaltenango prison on orders from incarcerated Barrio18 honchos. Or perhaps he simply killed him, if not something else entirely. He has a pronounced lisp and an empty crackhead stare. All of them expelled from the general population because of their tattooed faces, because they made too many enemies, because they angered the wrong people. Buffón betrayed his gang by helping its nemesis in a prison riot. The one called Blacky is a witness to a high-profile prison murder. Maniaco attacked a veteran Mexican Mafia member with a baseball bat on orders from the outside. It is known that Mouse has HIV. And so on. Stories of uncertain provenance whispered to the Gringo in cautious conversations, in boasts, in passing moments of trust or need. A question lurking in every exchange; who will the Gringo tell these stories to...?

“It all comes back to the prisons,” complained a police commander. “And no one wants to deal with it.” Prison administrators are quick to admit that the state maintains only haphazard control of prisons, and that the prison systems’ intractable failings have come to represent the state’s incapacity to secure its citizenry. The prison media spokesperson—a muscular, energetic former newspaperman named Rudy Esquivel—began his (mostly canned) responses to my questions by citing the severe lack of infrastructure. Guatemalan prisons were built to hold 12,000 prisoners, and in the last two decades the total population has grown to over 16,000. While less overcrowded than other Central American penal systems, he also cited the fact that the carceral institution itself, as it is designed, its logic and objectives, are all wrong. “The biggest obstacle we face to forming a decent prison system is *time*,” he said. “We’ve been working with these kinds of prisons and this kind of prison system for 100 years. How do you change it?”

Prison authorities often find themselves locked in an uneasy *détente* with prisoner populations, able to maintain only the barest shell of control. The director of Pavón prison, who gave me a lunchtime interview on one of his last days working for *el Sistema*, characterized the state’s tenuous control in particularly stark, personal terms. “I know perfectly well what is going on,” he said. He then proceeded to list all the illegal activities in which prisoners, with clear collusion from guards, were involved: the constant flow of drugs, cellphones, and other black market goods; the extortion networks organized and directed by prisoners; the illegal businesses run inside the prisons that take advantage of the inmates’ depressed wages. He understood some of this flow as a necessary pressure valve; “I know how much marijuana gets smuggled in here. But let them smoke their joints. It calms them down, makes the time pass. If I were to seize all the marijuana tomorrow, I would have an immediate riot on my hands.”

He also made it clear that if he tried to plug up the porous membrane, even his own guards would turn against him. As we spoke, a uniformed guard brought the director a *sopa de mariscos* (seafood soup) for lunch. The guard saluted, and as he left the room, the director nodded his head meaningfully towards his back, then down at the soup, then fixed me with a stare and muttered, “If I mess too much with them [the guards], what’s to stop them from poisoning my soup?”

The one thing that must at all costs be prevented, he said, was an escape. If even one inmate escapes, the director himself must take the blame, and he would end up

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incarcerated. And so, agents of the state maintain a careful facade of daily control in order to avoid the very real possibility of ending up behind bars themselves. Indeed, over the last decade five out of the last six Ministers of the Interior (the head officials of the state organ which oversees prisons and law enforcement) have ended up in prison for fraud and criminal negligence. I met one of them in *Pavoncito* prison. When I asked him how he got there, he shook his head ruefully and sighed, “As soon as I got in office they started sawing the legs off my chair.”

Powerful prisoners also represent a mortal threat to prison officials. Just weeks before my interview with the director of *Pavón*, masked assailants gunned down the newly appointed director of *Infiernito*, a maximum-security facility. The man had tried to tighten control inside *Infiernito* by limiting visits and increasing cell searches. He angered powerful inmates, and so they ordered his execution. *Pavón*'s director slumped back in his chair. “A week before he died, we tried to warn him that he was sitting on a time bomb. But he didn't listen.” Such events are common enough that prison directors and guards know that they must walk a careful line. Caught between the need to maintain the appearance of control to appease their superiors and powerful prisoners willing to kill to maintain their privileges, prison officials' authority is tenuous indeed.

Arms reach out between the bars to greet the visitors. Highfives and fistbumps all around, and the guard keys the padlock, motions for Gato and the Gringo to enter. The metal door clangs shut behind them. The concrete floor has recently been washed—the caustic smell of bleach mixed in with the stink of unwashed bodies and greasy leftovers. A flimsy sidetable in the corner with a TV and an X-box, jerry-rigged wiring spilling out. A fresh coat of peach paint drying on the walls near the entrance. Farther back, near the cell doors, are images drawn in pencil and charcoal on dirty whitewashed walls—a grinning grim reaper with scythe, the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, a cartoon gangster weeping on his knees.

The Authority of Abuse

Under such precarious circumstances, agents of the state periodically carry out spectacular or clandestine acts of violence against prisoners to reify their sense of control. This is not the kind of bio-political discipline associated with the “totalizing institutions” we have come to imagine in advanced industrialized societies.²⁷ In every prison, *el Sistema* regularly carries out searches for drugs, weapons, cell phones and other black market goods, but the targets are often only the most vulnerable prisoners, making such efforts seem more like symbolic gestures—or futile gesturing—than organized regulation. Still, the use of targeted violence against prisoners deemed too weak to retaliate is integral to the performance of control inside the prison. Even as such actions exemplify the effort to build authority through abuse, they are also about state agents lashing out against the constraints on their power. The line between instrumental, tactical violence and reactive rage is obscured with so many brutal acts alloyed with both.

When state agents intervene on a massive scale, it has often been in deeply violent and clumsy fashion. There have been plenty of well-publicized instances of such events.

²⁷ see, for instance Goffman (1961) .

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In 2009, for instance, the Guatemalan Ministry of Governance, in cooperation with the army, mounted a full-scale assault on Pavon prison. Among prisoners, Pavon was then known as the “Hilton” of the prison system. Rich inmates—many connected with narco-trafficking—had built cottages on the banks of a soccer field that became an artificial lake each rainy season. A prisoner known as *La Rosa* had a jacuzzi, and there was a nightclub connected to the central cafeteria. Prisoner mechanics ran an auto-body shop that allegedly received stolen vehicles for refurbishment.

The government invasion was dubbed the “retaking of Pavon” (*la retoma de Pavon*). Heavily armed troops led by an armored vehicle stormed the prison grounds. When it was all over, several prisoners were found murdered execution-style. In 2014, Austrian courts found former Police Chief Viellman, the man in charge of the raid, guilty of human rights abuses for his role in torturing and assassinating inmates in the midst of the chaos.²⁸

Such spectacular events obscure the clandestine and everyday violence that constitute the state’s “control” over prison life. On a visit to Pavoncito prison—Pavón’s more recently built neighbor facility—I inadvertently found myself sitting across a table from a man I will call Xavier, a short, muscular, *ladino* prisoner. Mottled third degree burns rippled across the left side of his neck and face, and his left ear was nearly gone. He lifted up his shirt to show where a mass of whorled scar tissue ran down his shoulder. For 15 days, he had been in Fraijanes II, a maximum-security facility just over the wall from where we were sitting. A prison guard wearing a ski mask and claiming to be chief guard oversaw his torture. Guards kicked him into submission and pulled out his fingernails. After stripping off his clothes they dumped gasoline on him. “I’m in charge here,” the chief screamed again and again, and stuck him in the shoulder with a cattle prod. In a flash of heat and light, Xavier lost consciousness. Other prisoners heard him screaming and tried to intervene, but the guards forced them back with kicks and rifle-butts.

Xavier claims, as do inmate witnesses, that he did nothing to incite this punishment. The guards were simply using him as an example for the rest of the population. He was a low-level drug trafficker in a prison reserved for some of the country’s most notorious criminals—gang leaders, cartel chiefs, and Zeta affiliates.²⁹ Unable to directly threaten these more powerful inmates for fear of retaliation, the guards’ fury—conveniently, tactically—found Xavier.¹

Gato takes the plastic bags of shirts and soccerballs from the Gringo and hands them to El Brown, a thick-set 18th Streeter with olive skin and bright green eyes. Brown signals to La Nica—who has 666 tattooed on his forehead in ugly block letters—and he disappears into a cell and emerges a few moments later with an empty 2-liter coke bottle. With a shy smile on his lips he hands it to Gato. Gato holds the bottle in two hands close to his face and breaks into laughter. Inside is a snake about a foot long, with black and green diamonds along its length.

²⁸ Facing death threats and criminal charges in Guatemala, Viellman fled to Austria, where he had dual citizenship. Human Rights organizations carried the case against him into Austrian courts.

²⁹ Los Zetas are one of the major Mexican drug trafficking cartels competing for dominance in Mexico, and, increasingly, in Central America.

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“It’s a cascabel,” La Nica says. “I caught it in the courtyard beneath the mango tree.”

“Ah yes, a cascabel.” Gato says, as if he knew the species well. He hands the bottle to the Gringo, who takes it gingerly, watching the snake flick its tongue against the plastic, and hands it back to Gato without comment.

“Be careful,” La Nica says, “It is only a baby, but it is quite poisonous. One bit my daughter and she almost died.”

For several minutes, Gato and Brown stand in front of the barred window talking in low voices. Holding the bottle horizontally in both hands, Gato turns it absentmindedly. The snake slides sideways again and again to rest on the shifting bottom. It writhes madly for several seconds, slithering in place, burrowing forward, its tongue flicking the plastic cap. Then it falls still, flopping stiffly as if a dead thing with each turn of the bottle. The Gringo leans against a wall, elbows resting on the rough plaster.

“Talacha”—Prison Taxes

The profits reaped from the ebb and flow of goods, information, and bodies in and out of the prison is the very glue that binds the networks of state agents and prisoners that dictate the conditions of prison-life. First and foremost among the commodities taxed by these networks are the prisoners themselves.

In every prison, prison strongmen (known as *voceros*, or spokesman) direct some version of what is known as “*talacha*”—a system of taxation and indentured servitude imposed upon the inmate population. When a new inmate enters a prison, the *vocero* or a consortium of *voceros* will require a one-time payment. The payment is usually dependent upon the new arrival’s perceived wealth, which *voceros* determine from his rap sheet. A prisoner accused of, for example, petty theft, will usually get off by paying a small fee or, more likely, will simply have to work off his debt.

Calavera was 19 when he was arrested and convicted for transporting crack cocaine. He was an MS soldier, but never got tattoos and was able to hide his gang affiliation. Upon his arrest, he was sent first to the *Preventivo* prison in zone 18 of Guatemala City to await his trial. “Well, my dad had already been a prisoner for many years,” he recalled shortly after his release.

He knew a man who was in charge there, and recommended me to him. Good, I thought. I’ll be in good shape here. *El Ruco* comes up, “Who is Samuel?” “Me!” I say. “Ah, you’re Gordo’s son. What *bronca* do you come with?” “Ah, for a little bag of marijuana,” I say. “Ah, that’s fine,” he says to me. He opens the door and I go below with him. In his little office he has my identification, my file, what I’m accused of, trafficking and all that. The old man looks at me, “*Tráfico!*” Ah, this one has money, he thinks. He says, “Here you have to pay 6000 quetzales, and you’re going to live well. If not, you won’t live well at all.” But I, obviously, came from the street, and as we say vulgarly here, I wasn’t going to tolerate their bullshit. “I’m not gonna pay you. I’m used to people paying ME the rent. I’m not the one who pays.”

Calavera resisted paying the exorbitant “rent” for a week. During that week, *El Ruco* and his henchman forced him to clean out the latrines and mop the floor on his belly. They did not allow him to sleep until his chores were done, and these chores often took most of

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the night. When he refused, they beat him. After a week of this, fearing he might be killed, Calavera gave in. Using his father's connections, he negotiated the payment to *el Ruco* down to 2000 quetzales. "But he told me not to tell anyone he let me get away for so little," Calavera told me. "He had to pay off the guards, the director, other *voceros*, and I don't know who else."³⁰

Calavera's story is typical for newly arrived prisoners—many of them not as well connected or as savvy as he.³¹ Across the prison system, *voceros* expect the families of newly arrived inmates to raise the *talacha* money. Anxious to protect their loved one, families that have the means inevitably come through with the demanded payments. Those who cannot pay must work off their debt, or face beatings, isolation blocks, and even torture. In return for tolerating these abuses—and supplying the information needed to assess how much each prisoner ought to be charged—prison directors and other officials often receive a cut of the profits. Some version of these state-prisoner assemblages dictate prison life throughout the prison system, and can only be displaced through coordinated violent rupture on the part of other prisoners willing and able to engage in organized revolt.

The one called Buffón sidles up to the Gringo, eyes flitting from the Gringo's baseball cap, to the rose gold ring, to his dusty Adidas running shoes. He cracks a smile. "Look, Gringo," he says, speaking quickly. "You know I'm alone here right? No one, not my family, not the homies, nobody cares if I live or die. I am a russo among russos. I have nothing, no visits, no work. Nothing. You come here to see our lives, right? Well this life is shit. Give me some quetzals, man. Make a donation."

"Buffón, sorry man, I don't have any money left. I spent it all coming up here." This is only half-true. The Gringo has about \$20 in quetzales in his frayed wallet. But no coins, no change, no small bills.

Buffón stares at the Gringo then turns away. The Gringo sees him again in grainy video shouting and gesticulating, bleeding from the head after escaping a riot in which his ex-homies tried to knife him to death. When the Gringo turns back to the rough semicircle of men, La Nica is there, waiting with eyes fixed on the floor. He speaks so quietly the Gringo can hardly hear. "My daughter will turn three next week and my woman is bringing her from Chimal to visit me. I have nothing to give them. Could you help me?"

"Man, I don't have anything with me now. I'm sorry. Next week—next week I'll bring you some photos okay? Photos you can give to your family if you like."

"OK."

Camera in hand, the Gringo offers to take La Nica's photo, but he wants to change his shirt first. He disappears down a corridor that smells of mold and wet paint.

³⁰ *Talacha* collection inside *Preventivo* prison—where Calavera found himself—was perhaps less strict than other prisons because of the abundance of newly arrested men flowing into the prison. *Preventivo* is the holding facility for all new arrests and for those awaiting trial—a period that can last as long as 3 years. Newly arrived inmates are often scared, their families shocked and deeply concerned about their loved one's welfare, and squeezing *talacha* money is generally easier than in other facilities.

³¹ The modus operandi of the *talacha* – the intel and guesses at available resources, the expectation that kin groups will pool collective resources towards payment, the ability to negotiate the demand – replicates the system of extortion rackets that gangs direct beyond the prisons as well.

July 5th, 2012, Visiting Day at Canada Prison, Escuintla, Guatemala.

On the surface, life in Canada prison—located 60 kilometers to the southwest of Guatemala City—appeared normal. The same interminable line of visitors knotted at the gate. The same quiet desperation on the prisoners' faces as they wait for their loved ones. The same suffocating heat. But rumors whispered to me through air vents spoke differently. The population was furious. *La Comité* (the Committee)—favored convicts appointed by Director Latona to ensure internal security—had committed unforgiveable abuses. It wasn't the kickbacks they paid to Latona from taxes collected from newly arrived prisoners that angered them. Such practices are more or less standard in all Guatemalan prisons. Nor were the newly imposed "sanitation control" levies cause for revolt. But in recent months, certain members had commandeered shops and other prisoner-run businesses. And, far worse, they demanded money from *la Visita* and had even molested women come to visit other prisoners. Abusing *la Visita* was the last straw. "We will see what happens," a disembodied voice muttered from inside an isolation cell.

Two days later, the storm broke, but, as often happens, nothing went as planned. Latona caught wind of the riot organized to kill the most hated members of *la Comité*, and in the night removed his allies from the general population. Then, during roll call the following morning, he threatened to permanently take away *la Visita*. Minutes after he returned to his office, a riot erupted. Several shots were fired, stores looted, and one man—a well-to-do shop owner named Javier—was killed. A deportee from the United States who I will call Triste related what happened next:

Latona came out of his office yelling like crazy and firing an AK-47 over our heads. Everyone hit the deck. He went down below with a team of guards and came back out with *Enano*³², the bald guy who everyone knew had killed Javier... Out on the street *Enano* had been an associate of 18th Street, but the dude wasn't anything inside. Latona came out holding *Enano* by his shirt with the AK pressed against the back of his head. The crowd started screaming for him. "Give him to us, give us *Enano*." They yelled. "He killed Javier."

"You want him?" Latona yelled, shaking *Enano*... like a doll.

"Yes, yes, yes." They yelled.

"You want him?"

"Yes. yes. YES.

"Here, take him." Latona yelled. "Eat him." He pushed *Enano* into the crowd of prisoners. They hit him, kicked him...hit him with sticks. I saw the skin peeling off his head and his face...They were going to kill him. He was holding onto the fence with both hands. A man was carrying a big rock, walking over slowly to smash *Enano*... But he tripped and dropped it too soon, and *Enano* got away from the crowd and ran towards the guards.

In this story, what passes for "control" inside the prison—the authority of powerful prisoners linked to corrupt officials—is momentarily fractured by the prisoners' eruptive resistance against this abuse. Director Latona, the official charged with maintaining

³² *El Enano*—the Dwarf

prison order fans the explosive spark to punish those attempting to throw off the oppression that he has helped organize and profited from. And then a single inmate becomes the scapegoat for the prisoners' helpless rage, a body made abject among a thousand abject bodies.

While the Gringo waits for la Nica to return, there is a sudden commotion at the barred windows. Doble Cara and El Blacky are catcalling at a woman crossing the courtyard. Peroxide blonde, heavy makeup, and a short skirt that shimmers with her high-heeled gait. Waving a hand dismissively back towards her admirers, she passes through the side-gate to where the general population resides.

Turning away from the window, Doble Cara addresses the Gringo from across the room. "You know what we really need?" he says. "What we really need is some putas man. That's what we need up in this place." Some of the others laugh, and Doble Cara starts gyrating, grabbing himself and rocking his hips. "This is how we do it you know, this is how." The others start in shouting encouragement. The Gringo laughs and joins in with the shouting. Perhaps a little too loudly.

Suddenly, Buffón appears again at the Gringo's side. "Yes Gringo, that's right. That's what we need. We need some whores man. You'll get us some putas, won't you."

"Putas!"

"A chilmar³³!"

"Yeah, putas, Gringo. We're fucking desperate in here. A man needs to fuck. A man needs to fuck a lady. It's not right. We have needs."

He laughs and shrugs, trying to hold Buffón's gaze.

"No Gringo- I'm serious." Buffón says. He breaks away and walks over to Gato, who is grinning and seems tremendously entertained by all this. They confer for a moment, and Gato, like a game-show host presenting the grand prize, announces, "Gentleman, the ministry will take care of everything. We can offer transport to and from the prison. I will collect the ladies..." he fixes the Gringo with a toothy grin. "...and all the Gringo has to do is put up the money."

Thanks Gato, the Gringo thinks. Thanks a lot you bastard.

Rupture

Prisons are central nodes in a continuum linking the state, the incarcerated, and the free into a single, uninterrupted whole. Thus far, I have explored how exchange between prisoners, state agents, and the free dictates the flow of everyday life inside the prison, and how conditions in prison reverberate far beyond prison walls. But the coproduction of law and outlaw goes well beyond everyday life behind bars, and the networks linked through the prison reach well above gangsters, guards, and their girlfriends. It is only through moments of violent rupture—moments when the façade of isolation and order is ripped away—that the deeper matrices linking prison power to state sovereignty become detectable, effectively dragging the state back into the pit designed to isolate criminals from society.

The history of conflict between two distinct prison populations—*maras* and former Guatemalan military—illuminates how prison power flows back and forth across prison

³³ *Chilmar*: To rut

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walls, infiltrates and reifies criminal capital, and can insinuate itself into the highest echelons of state power.

Maras and the Military

The majority of prisoners must remain servile before the prisoner faction-state agent alliances that maintain what passes for law and order within the prison. So who rises to the top of the prison hierarchy, and why? In Guatemalan prisons, there are two major prisoner “types” who stand out as particularly able in the struggle for control: these are *mareros* (members of transnational criminal gangs) and former military men. Over the last two decades, *maras* and ex-military have become vicious competitors, leveraging very different forms of violent capital in their fight to dominate the prisons. Their confrontations have led to the most spectacular prison riots in Guatemalan history.

The direct line on authority some military men gain in prison is based on a number of complex factors. Despite—or because of—its role in massacring and disappearing hundreds of thousands of suspected “subversives” and guerilla sympathizers during Guatemala’s 36 years of civil war, the military today remains the most highly respected and trusted government institution in the country (UNDP 2012). Respect for the military has only increased as the police have proven ineffectual against rising post-war criminality. This prestige is even more powerful inside prison, where many guards have themselves served a stint in the military, and where daily routine—from morning roll-call to sector clean up duties—mirror barracks life. With two thirds of the Guatemalan military decommissioned by order of the 1996 peace treaty, many former soldiers transferred into the burgeoning trade and transport of narcotics, formed kidnapping rings, and engaged in other illicit activities—some of them, of course, ending up behind bars. There are also those found guilty of war crimes in the wake of the civil war. Based on their shared identity and history, former military often band together to form a distinct strata among the prison population.

Former *Kaibil* Captain Byron Lima, the most infamous prison strongman in Guatemalan history, is a telling example. The *Kaibiles* are Guatemala’s most feared and respected special-forces. Trained by US and Israeli military, they were responsible for the worst massacres of the civil war. In 2000, Lima was sentenced to 25 years to life for the assassination of Archbishop Gerardi along with his co-conspirators Sergeant Obdulio Villanueva and Colonel Byron Disrael Lima Estrada (his father).³⁴ Within a year, Lima had become the de facto leader of 8 of the 10 sectors of *Preventivo* prison.³⁵ He controlled these sectors with an iron fist while dipping a hand into virtually all prison businesses and funneling money to himself, his father, and his lackeys. He taxed the *tienditas* (small “convenience stores”) and inmates had to obtain his permission to sell smokes, sodas, and snacks. He collected money from the restaurants, the production of twine and rubber soccer balls, and myriad other prison businesses. Prisoners incarcerated in *Preventivo* during his reign claim that he also gained control of the more lucrative drug and cellphone rackets by paying off the guards and strong-arming rivals. Just how he managed to do this so quickly is not clear. Prisoners and journalists (off the record) muse that his connections to the highest echelons of the Guatemalan military were essential in

³⁴ Goldman (2007) for the many competing theories regarding Archbishop Gerardi’s murder

³⁵ This was before the *maras* had been isolated into their own prison blocks, and Sector 11, where active 18th Street members are incarcerated together, had been built.

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his rapid rise to power in *Preventivo* prison and in the three other facilities he has since occupied. Bishop Gerardi's murder was a politically motivated military plot involving far more conspirators than the Limas and Villanueva, and their refusal to implicate others would have been rewarded with behind-the-scenes favors.

Prisoners who lived under Lima's reign in *Preventivo* prison recalled having no one to turn to for help against him.

We can't denounce him to the police, because [Lima and his men] were police. I can't complain to the guards, because he had the guards in his corner (*sombreaba a la guardia*)... He had control of the guards, and would order them about. "Ah! *Mi Capitán!*" they would say. I don't know how he got so much power being a prisoner, or what privileges he had... but he bought the guards boots, uniforms, everything. So, how to say to a guard, "Look, excuse me, but Captain Lima does this and this to us." "Ay, okay," says the guard. "We'll see what we can do about this..." and then a second later, "Look *mi Capitán*, so and so is complaining to us that you are harassing other prisoners, that you are hitting them for no reason..." "Ah thank you," says Lima. "Here's 100 *quetzales* for your trouble..."

Gato's words touch off a current in the room. The men gather in closer, forming a rough semi-circle, some shouting and laughing, others alert, curious. Buffón's eyes seem to be popping out of his head, and he leans in close to the Gringo, hissing into his ear. "Gringo, listen okay listen I'll take care of everything. I know the girls okay they're from my barrio, don't worry I'll just give them a call and you bring the money. We need..." he pauses. "We need four girls—that's one for five prisoners apiece, and 200 quetzales paid to each one."

"One girl for every 5 prisoners?"

"Yeah, that's it, Gringo that's it. No problem."

Doble Cara shouts, "Just get some girls in here for a show. Get some to dance for us, yeah boy!"

Buffón spins around. "No mames, cabron. Look at my hand. Do you see the blisters on my hand? What we need are some women to fuck."

"Okay okay," the Gringo says, "How about this- how about we dress Gato up as a transvestite and send him in here on a visiting day and you can all fuck him." Doble Cara and some others guffaw loudly.

But Buffón will not let it go. "Just make sure you bring them on a visiting day okay—you have to let me know in advance and it's got to be a Wednesday, a Friday, or a Saturday, okay?" The Gringo shakes his head, but Buffón continues. "Wednesday, Friday or Saturday so that I can get permission for them from the guards."

The Gringo holds up one hand in mock seriousness. "Guys," he says. "You all need some condoms if you're going to be sharing women. You have to protect yourselves."

The *maras* rose to power through careful coordination across prison walls between gang leaders and members on the street. Massive incarceration created conditions of possibility for gang cells with hitherto little or no communication to forge bonds of solidarity and

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advantage.³⁶ Targetted by law enforcement across Central America, young men calling themselves *sureños* and claiming allegiance to one of several transnational gangs (*La Mara Salvatrucha*, *Barrio18*, White Fence, among others) began entering prisons in growing numbers in the mid 1990s as the state followed the regional trend of targeting suspected gangsters for arrest and incarceration. Imprisoned gang leaders formed the first “Wheel of the Barrio” (*Rueda del Barrio*), through which the most powerful *ramfleros* met and coordinated trade in weapons, soldiers, and territorial claims on the outside. They also ordered homies on the street to intentionally get arrested. Through calculated misbehavior and disruption, they sought to have *marero* prisoners transferred to certain facilities in order to gain numeric dominance. By the early 2000s, *maras* had become a force to be reckoned with throughout the prison system.

The prison became a key crucible in the *maras*’ transformation from uncoordinated groups of youth imitating imported gang symbols into consolidated, networked, and strategically aggressive criminal organizations. Today, the *maras*’ role in the prison system is a complex and powerful one, and their capacity to disrupt prison hierarchies has made them anathema to state agents and fellow prisoners alike.³⁷ “The *cholos* (gang members) are the only ones who are down to ride,” said Triste. “If you ask anyone else, they’ll say they don’t want no trouble... Everyone else is scared, that’s just how it is. In riots they’ll do their get backs, but never face to face or in the open. But *cholos* will. And that’s one of the big reasons other prisoners don’t like them and treat them bad or try to get them kicked out.”

“Condoms!” Doble Cara shouts triumphantly. “You want condoms? Fuck man, we got condoms.” He crosses the room and disappears into a cell. In the sudden hush, a skinny light-skinned prisoner emerges from a cell leading a woman by the hand. She turns to him, brushing some lint off his tshirt, which reads “Senior Weekend 2010, Dubbington High School.” The man gives her a timid kiss on the cheek, and signals to a guard outside the window who unlocks the door and opens it for her. The men standing about remain silent until the door slams shut behind her. Then, as if on cue, Doble Cara returns clutching a black plastic bag in one hand. He reaches in and takes out a handful of silver wrapped condoms and lube, flinging them like confetti across the floor. “We got all the condoms we need, we just don’t have any way to use them.”

The *maras* turned the government’s policing efforts into strategic advantage by gaining overwhelming numbers inside the prison, and growing a highly coordinated network

³⁶ see JM Cruz (2010) for an in-depth look at Central American governments’ turn to massive incarceration to attack the “transnational gang threat”.

³⁷ “In the prison,” recalled a former prisoner incarcerated in the early years of the *maras*’ rise to prison power. “I saw that up through 2004 how Plan Escoba captured many for having tattoos and for dressing like gangsters... And they did manage to arrest a high percentage of real gangsters. There were already lots of imprisoned *paisas* from organized criminal groups. Los Pasacos, los AR15s, La Banda de Kangooroo, Agosto Negro. They were powerful criminal organizations... They formed structures in the prisons such that the homies couldn’t cross a certain line. In *Pavoncito* <prison>, for example, not a single gangster— no matter how intelligent, cooperative, or powerful— could become leader of a sector. They maintained this until the uprising (*levantamiento*) of the united *sureños*. After that, it was like 3 gangsters could assault 50 *paisas*. They had a great power, a power made by fear.”

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linking prisoners with the street. The military's prestige in Guatemalan society serves imprisoned soldiers well, and some, like Lima, can rely on help from outside the prison and from prison officials. In hindsight, their eventual clash was inevitable. In a series of riots between 2000 and 2005, gangsters and *paisas* alike decapitated, quartered, burned, and otherwise disfigured each other, parading mutilated bodies before the news cameras that gathered *en masse* outside the prison walls.

The first spectacular clash occurred on Christmas Eve, 2001, in *Pavoncito* prison against former army sergeant *El Negro* Beteta.³⁸ The media flocked to publicize it, and images of masked rioting *mareros* flooded the airwaves. Twelve years later, investigative journalists interviewed prisoner witnesses and recounted the event in gory detail.

On the 23rd of December a young leader of la Mara Salvatrucha, *el Vago de Coronados*, spearheaded a riot in Pavoncito prison, on the outskirts of Guatemala City. While a hundred sureños demolished walls and opened bars to take control of the prison block, *el Vago* launched himself in search of Julio Cesar Beteta, who for years had been the leader of the *paisas* in this prison. According to newspaper reports from those days, *el Negro* Beteta, as he was called, accumulated more than 50 thousand quetzals (more than \$6,000) a month in taxes on other prisoners, he had an office next to the director's, and those who did not follow his rules he enclosed in isolation cells in which they would stay for up to 15 days in water up to their knees.

... *el Vago* lashed mattress scraps to his chest and back as improvised armor, grabbed a machete in each hand and made his way to sector 5, where Beteta was quartered. A few hours later he posed in front of cameras from every news-station in the country with the head of the *paisas'* leader stuck on a long stake. This Christmas eve, *el Vago de Coronados* changed his *apodo* (gang alias) and decided that from then on he would be called *El Diabólico de Coronados*. His name would resound in the decade to come. It still does."³⁹

This was the first widely circulated *mara* decapitation, and the first prison riot to receive such intense media attention in post-war Guatemala. Toppling the prison strongman Beteta, along with the media-frenzy his decapitation engendered, helped transform *El Diabólico* from a minor player in La Mara Salvatrucha into a widely recognized and respected leader both within and outside the prisons. Not only had he spearheaded what became a prison coup d'état, he also increased the fame (and infamy) of *La Mara Salvatrucha* across the nation. For the Mara, such a decisive move, so spectacularized in the press, spread the kind of fear and intimidation that undergird the extortion rackets which are their bread and butter. *El Diabólico's* method also became a model for *mara* revolts against abusive prison strong men in other prisons.⁴⁰ A little over a year later, the *mareros* in the Preventivo attempted to take down Lima in the most spectacular prison riot in Guatemalan history.

³⁸ El Negro Beteta was the nephew of Sergeant Manuel Beteta, the man imprisoned for the political assassination of Myrna Mack. I interviewed Sergeant Beteta in Pavon prison, where he has a private residence. He refused to answer any questions about his nephew's death.

³⁹ Sanz & Martinez (2012)

⁴⁰ See Chapter 5 for analysis of decapitations, dismemberment, and other forms of spectacular brutality.



Jorge Yahir De León Hernández, aka El Diabólico. F-2 Maximum Security Prison.
(photo by Pau Coll/*El Faro*)

More shouting and jeering at the window. Another woman, perhaps skinnier than the first, but practically her twin from this distance, is crossing the courtyard with the same rocking gait.

“Bring her over here,” Doble Cara shouts to no one in particular. “The Gringo said he would get us some whores. She works here. Hey, Gringo—you talk to her.” The others are hooting and jeering behind him as they all peer out between the bars at the woman. A smile is frozen on the Gringo’s lips. Might she actually come over? But she only smiles and waves and disappears through the gate.

The Anatomy of a Riot

Riots are integral to the chaotic rhythm of rupture and reformation through which prison power is established, and moments in which the violence shaping prison life becomes spectacularly visible. They are also deeply confused, confusing events. They are often carefully planned, involving weeks or months of preparation, but are always carried out under and rely upon conditions of total chaos. They are moments of rupture and opportunity in which the motive claimed is rarely the most important one, and the ultimate goal is seldom attained. Riots are the end-product of the endless frictions and frustrations produced by the systems of domination shaping prison life. For prison officials, they represent a failure to manage the precarious balance of power inside the prisons necessary to maintain a façade of control.

Lima claims that he gained authority in *Preventivo*—and in the three other prisons he has occupied over the last decade—for his leadership qualities and his selfless

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dedication to improving prison life. But his fellow inmates remember things differently. As Juande, the former MS soldier, recalled,

“We wanted to kill Captain Lima because he was such an asshole... He had military training, and if one answered him disrespectfully, the dude would have you whipped—he would have all his dogs on you... He had a guy named el Buffón de Santos, who told him everything about the *maras*. So he thought, “ah, I can dominate them.” What Buffón didn’t know was that the moment would arrive when we would say, “No more, now you’re going to die too.” But Buffón was lucky, he escaped with Lima. He appeared in news photos with Lima yelling his head off.”

Lima’s most despised associate, however, was Sergeant Obdulio Villanueva, an enforcer who targeted newly arrived *mareros* for abuse. “He was terrible with the *cholos*,” recalled a prisoner who shared quarters with Villanueva. “Everytime a *cholo* was imprisoned he treated them horribly and hit them, threw them in the *pila* (isolation torture in a tub of cold water), broke broom handles over them... he tortured the *cholos*, and they hated him. They were waiting for an opportunity to kill him.

On the other hand, some witnesses claim that a hidden adversary manipulated the *mareros*. Some say that organized crime and cartel bosses in the two sectors yet to fall under Lima’s control paid *marero* leaders to kill him as a pre-emptive strike to protect their black market businesses. Lima himself claims that the same human rights organizations that had pressed charges against him pushed incarcerated *mareros* into a berserker rage.⁴¹ Whatever the case, on February 12, 2003 more than 300 *mareros* went on a coordinated rampage. They tore through the Preventivo prison on their way to sector 7 where Lima, Buffón, Villanueva, and dozens of incarcerated police and military men were housed.

“Hey Gringo, so—you’ll do it right? We’re suffering man. It’s not right.”

“Okay Buffón, Okay. Jesus man, calm down.” The Gringo thinks for a moment and then smiles. “Well, you know I am here doing a study. We have to do this scientifically. If we’re going to do this right, I would need to interview you before and after, and probably take pictures of the whole thing.” Their howling laughter drowns him out.

“We’ll make a pinche video!” Doble Cara shouts. “Prison pornography!” He commences dancing and grabbing himself again to much hooting and cheering.

But Buffón is undeterred. “Look Gringo. When are you going to bring the girls? 800 barras. That’s all we need.” He is staring hard into the Gringo’s face but the Gringo is looking at the object in Buffón’s right hand. The cascabel in its bottle. The creature starts wriggling madly as Buffón waves the bottle around like a baton. Planting himself squarely before the Gringo, he raises it as if in accusation. The Gringo attempts a sheepish grin.

“No man. I can’t.”

⁴¹ The organizations were the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman (*Procurador de Derechos Humanos*) and the ODHAG (Archbishop’s Office for Human Rights of Guatemala) which each spent years putting together the case against Lima and his co-conspirators. See Goldman 2007 for a detailed account of this historic case.

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“*Gringo.*”
“*No.*”

An ex-police officer I will call Carlos, who worked for and quartered with Lima in the *Preventivo*, witnessed and survived the riot. A decade later, he sat across the table from me getting visibly inebriated in an empty *cantina* with reggaetón music pumping.

“On the 12th of February, 2003,” he said, eyes flitting about the place as if someone might be eavesdropping, “If I’m not mistaken... at 9am they (the *mareros*) took advantage when a baker entered their sector. They took the *llavero* (holder of the keys) hostage and many gangsters got out. They organized themselves and went to free all the gangsters from their sectors... because every gangster already knew the mission and what was going to happen that day.”

Juande was an erstwhile participant in the riot against Lima. He says that two gang leaders—Psycho of Alpha and Omega (an MS clique) and Spyder of Barrio18—led the riot. “They were in front of everyone. Since they each had 50-year sentences, they told us they would throw themselves into the fight. ‘Don’t worry,’ they said, ‘but we want you to look alive.’” Other witnesses claim that the two leaders were already in sector 7 with Lima’s people when the riot started, and helped the homies enter.

Lima was their ultimate target, but the *sureños* had other get-backs in mind. On their way towards sector 7, *mareros* attacked others who had abused them. They targeted a man named La Vaca Pinta, a *Brekerero* thief on the street who in the *Preventivo* had become an enforcer for a pair of narco-trafficking brothers known as los Cruces.

They would beat you with wire whips—in the head, *plow!*... They mistreated you, they abused you, they humiliated you. ‘Ay, there’s Vaca Pinta- remember when you were with los Cruces?’ ‘No, *carnal*, those were different times,’ he cried. But he had had the time to put on a ski-mask (*encapucharse*) and mistreat the *cholos*. And this was our time.

They stabbed him to death. They had no firearms and few machetes. Mostly, they used *fizgars* (prison-made knives) and objects they found as they moved through the sectors toward sector 7. They killed an older narco-trafficker named Baudilio by severing his head at the jaw line with dumb bells.

Carlos and his sector-mates heard the *mareros* coming. An hour earlier, Captain Lima had disappeared. Some witnesses hint that he knew what was coming—having been informed of the impending riot by a guard—and only bothered to save himself. He had two pistols stashed among his things, but only he knew where they were. Others say he was simply lucky. He had already gone to greet visitors in the area reserved for conjugal visits on the other side of the prison when, as Carlos recalls,

The *cholos* descended upon sector 7 with the idea of eliminating most of the people who were located there. They tried to break open the doors of sector 7 but they couldn’t because we barricaded it with mattresses and lit them on fire. I participated in defending my fellow prisoners, and got hit in the face with a rock,

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broke two ribs... So, anyway, since they couldn't get in through the doors they started to open holes in the wall. While they did this, we, using some dumbbells Captain Byron Lima had, opened up holes to save the lives of most of the people who were there. Once we opened the holes, the older prisoners began to leave. Soon after, thank God, I left too. Obdulio Villanueva tried to escape, but he got stuck in the hole because he was very fat and was carrying a fannypack. So (the *cholos*) entered and they were like piranhas.

The *cholos* grabbed Villanueva's ankles and pulled. He wouldn't let go, so they cut at his thighs until he did and then hauled him back. Inmates taking shelter in neighboring sectors heard his screaming. "It was Psycho and Spyder who decapitated him," Carlos said. "They did it in less than two minutes. It was something with the devil inside it." Juande remembers them sawing off Villanueva's head with his own Rambo knife while other *cholos* swarmed in. I asked him what he was doing through all this. "I was there," he said, suddenly shy. "Watching, nothing more. Those guys were crazy. It was like, you couldn't even get in, neither to hit nor to help. There were so many, it was like they had become ants, ya know?" He remembers vividly how Villanueva's fannypack ripped open, and thousands of *quetzales*—allegedly Lima's *talacha* money—came spilling out, flying everywhere, soaking up the blood. Carlos says the fannypack held Lima's logbooks of all his dealings, who owed him what, and other information on new prisoners.

"Gringo." Buffón thrusts the bottle at the Gringo's face, cap first. There are three dots tattooed in a tiny equilateral triangle on Buffón's hand. "Gringo," he says again, more softly. "We need the girls. It is what we need more than anything in all the world. Do you understand me?" He shoves the bottle, cap first, up against the Gringo's sternum. "You don't know what it's like to be trapped in here. To know you're going to die without ever walking the street again."

The snake inside writhes with its flat head burrowed against the cap. A smile is fixed on the Gringo's face and his eyes fixed on Buffón's forehead, where a vein seems to be pulsing in time with the Gringo's beating heart. What a coincidence, he thinks.

"Ah Buffón, man, I understand. Believe me, I understand." He says, knowing he does not and knowing that Buffón and the rest of them know it too. "But I can't help you."

"Gringo. Please."

The Gringo shakes his head. Buffón turns towards the light and spits between the bars, wipes his mouth and walks away. The Gringo watches him go. The others, Doble Cara and the rest, are still for a moment, as if someone had asked a question to which no one knew the answer. Then they disperse singly and in pairs. Some disappear into their cells. A few approach Gato with whispered inquiries. Left alone in the corner, the Gringo finds he is holding the coke bottle with the snake in it. The creature lies still, its tiny eyes hooded. When the Gringo looks up, La Nica is there again, smiling timidly, ready for his picture. He has donned an immaculate white t-shirt with the words printed in English: "Stick a Fork in Me, I'm Done!"

In November 2013, I interviewed Lima in *Pavoncito* prison. He gave me a tour of the grounds with two of his bodyguards walking point, and I asked him what Villanueva had

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in that bag that made him hold onto it. “It was just his radio. He always carried it, and when he tried to escape, he panicked.” He said, pulling his lips back from his big white dentures.

When I asked Lima how he escaped the riot, with 300 gangsters gunning for him, he countered with a question.

“Do you believe in God?”

“What?”

“Do you believe in God?”

“Uh, some version, I suppose.”

“Well then,” he said slowly, that grin widening, “I walked out before all the cholos, and they didn’t see me. God made me invisible to them.”

Today Lima is the undisputed strongman of *Pavoncito* prison. He runs the prison cooperative, *Torre Fuerte*, which manufactures police and prison guard uniforms. Under Lima’s reign, Pavoncito prison has become a model facility, where prisoners can learn to use computers, receive English lessons, and earn a high school diploma. In mid-2013, El Diabólico and other Mara Salvatrucha leaders spent several days in Pavoncito to learn what could happen if they would cooperate with the authorities, even though, as a general rule, Lima allows no *cholos* or *ex-cholos* within his prison.⁴²

Prison officials and technocrats from around the world have paid him visits to learn from his success in making prison and prisoners productive. Under Lima’s command, all inmates must work, even those locked in the high security wing. The prison also boasts a Pizza Hut and will soon have a *Pollo Campero*.⁴³ Lima employs a full-time security detail of incarcerated former soldiers screening all incoming visitors just inside the prison gate. Unlike their official doppelgangers, these men use metal detectors. Meanwhile, Lima is working to secure his release. 6 out of the 7 sub-directors of the prison system graduated in his same class from the military academy, and he keeps pictures of himself with President Pérez Molina on his smart-phone. *Torre Fuerte* provided Pérez Molina’s *Partido Patriota* (Patriotic Party) with party shirts and flags for his victorious 2011 campaign.

Lima expects to be free in the next three years, and has publicly announced his intent to run for president in 2015 based on his success in bringing order to the prisons. One of his promotional videos—which he helped edit from prison—opens with scenes from the riot in *Preventivo* prison. You can find it on Youtube. Bloodied, distraught riot police tending to their wounds. Masked prisoners throwing rocks and brandishing machetes. Then, three severed heads arranged in a row against a prison gate at the feet of enraged prisoners screaming at the camera. The heads look like ruined wax masks, and anonymous hands gouge at their eyes. Above them, a man holds a doll dressed in army

⁴² Since *La Mara Salvatrucha* broke the prison peace accord in 2005 by attacking *Barrio 18* leaders in 9 prisons, most—but certainly not all—active mareros from the two major *maras* are kept in separate facilities dedicated to one gang or the other. After the Preventivo riot, authorities transferred Psycho and Spyder to Canada prison. They were eventually separated, and killed soon after the breaking of the SUR in 2005. *El Diabólico* is now in F-2 (a maximum security facility) with other gang leaders. Over the last two years, the state has attempted to isolate those they identify as leaders in maximum security facilities, where *la Visita* is officially limited to once every three months. So far, no prison officials have been killed in retaliation, so, a prison security adviser told me, they think it’s going well.

⁴³ Guatemala’s most popular fast food chain

fatigues. A child's doll garroted by the neck. "Liiimmmmaa" he screams, shaking it. "We come for you Liiiiimmmmaa".

But Lima has fallen on troubled times. A year-long investigation by the Attorney General's office has resulted in the seizure of dozens of cars and hundreds of cellphones allegedly belonging to Lima. For years he has allegedly been paying sub-directors of the prison system continuous kickbacks from *talacha* money he extorts from rich prisoners--narco-traffickers, government officials— who he arranges to have transferred into Pavoncito. So far, his connections to the president and the ruling party have not stopped the investigations against him.⁴⁴



Byron Lima's presidential campaign poster (<http://www.byronlimapresidente.com>)

Conclusion

Porous prisons dissolve any hard and fast boundaries dividing the incarcerated from the free, revealing how deeply the state, the law-abiding world, and the underworld overlap one another, how illusory the dream of their separation is. This porousness is manifold: prisoner labor produces goods for sale on the outside; the fluid bonds of love and desire link inmates and the women who come to visit them, who become vectors of exchange and movement, entering with money, licit and illicit commodities, and news, exiting with directives to operatives on the outside, and every once in a while with progeny conceived inside the prison.

The flow that ensues is necessary for the very survival of the system. Networks linking the incarcerated with prison officials regulate the terms of exchange between prisoners and the outside world, profiting from inmates desperation and the state's silent dependence upon families and loved ones to keep the system running. And these networks reach beyond everyday survival to coopt the highest echelons of state power. Who knows what webs of command and profit hide behind Lima's toothy grin?

Left largely invisible to the outside world and with few remedies for the weak against the strong, prisoners learn to survive with the ever-present possibility of violent eruption. The integral role violence plays explodes the very notion that prisons are an

⁴⁴ Cawley (2014) <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/bishops-killer-rain-prison-crime-ring-in-guatemala>

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effective means of protecting society, much less that they can reshape deviant subjects into productive and law-abiding citizens.

And yet, porous prisons and the promiscuous exchange they make possible cannot ultimately be blamed for the criminal violence haunting places like Guatemala. Rather, it is all of us who continue to rely on and believe in the idealized purpose for which prisons are built who must, in the end, take responsibility. This idea—that the carceral apparatus can divide the evil from the good, the law-abiding world from the underworld—falls apart when we face the situation on the ground. And without it, the symbiotic relationships between the state the law-abiding world, and the underworld become painfully obvious, and we lose the pretense of moral and physical security that the law is meant to uphold.

The Gringo will never look Buffón in the face again. Three weeks after the cascabel incident, I returned to visit the men in the isolation block and meet the new Comité that took over after the riot that got Latona fired, but they were on lockdown and were not allowed any visitors, period.

A sympathetic guard gave me entry to bring a message to Brown from his brother incarcerated in another prison. “Gringo, Gringo,” they called softly. “Gringo, pssssssst, Gringo!” their hands holding greasy bits of mirror thrust out of small air-vents in the cell doors. Disembodied hands extended to me. A soft high five. La Nica, I think it’s La Nica’s hand, hold’s mine for a second.

Light streams through a barred window into Brown’s cell. Green eyes shining out of his wide, placid face. He hands me a plate of fried brown rice.

“Give it to the guard.”

For a moment I’m confused. It seems incongruous. But Brown knows what he’s doing, and this guard is showing kindness.

The guard is leaning in the open doorway, and I bring him the plastic plate. He thinks it’s from me, but then I explain and he takes it and shrugs.

“Why are they locked up in their cells?”

“Ah,” he said, slowly. “Supposedly they had relations with a prostitute and they did not treat her well. Or some of them abused her. Who knows?”

“What happened?”

“Supposedly they did not pay her. It’s a shame because some of them are good guys.”

“So did they abuse her? Or simply not pay her?”

He shrugs again and chews the rice. “Who knows? But they weren’t all involved. Some of them are good guys.” Later, I find out that they had gang raped a girl who came to visit a skinny, shy prisoner named Carlos. When left to get her a coke several of them—not all, but several—had her in his room. They had done it to other visitors, apparently, but this time, the girl went directly across the courtyard to the director’s office and made an official complaint. Investigators from the prosecutor’s office arrived later that night.

The guard looks out onto the concrete plaza towards the gathering crowd of prisoners and government clerks. The vocero of the new prisoners’ committee, a grinning fat man with a heavily pomaded hairdo, is making a welcome speech to Gato and the other government folk. Someone makes a joke I can’t hear and they all burst into raucous laughter.

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“Did you bring soccer balls this time?” The guard asks me between mouthfuls. “I was promised a soccer ball.”

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 4 Extorted Life



Zone 8, Guatemala City. September 2011.

It's 2am. For the last several hours I have been hanging with Tommy and his workers in his carpentry shop. Tommy maintains a number of small businesses—this shop, a laundromat, several corner-stores, among others. He also runs cocaine and marijuana as a low-level, free-lance transporter with a consortium of cartels, and is, as I will learn much later, a middleman for *sicario* (hit man) contracts.¹ As a matter of charity, he says, he also gives ex-mareros temporary jobs. To get them on their feet, he says. But right now, Tommy is singing karaoke—mostly Mexican ballads and *narco-corridos* (drug ballads)—in what passes for his office.² Everyone else is bored stiff, which doesn't bother Tommy. A former *Barrio18* member sits in a plastic chair drinking coca cola, nervously tapping his foot. He has “Fuck God” and “Fuck Love” tattooed across his neck. He leaves early. Tommy's other

¹ *Sicario*—Meaning “hitman”, taken from Colombian narco-culture, which in turn took the term from the Turkish. The term is comparable to the Mexican “*Gatillero*”.

² *Narco-Corridos*- Ballads memorializing lifestyle and exploits of Mexican narcotics trade

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workers get drunk on the beer I brought. But once the last bottle empties, a few of them leave to huff solvents. With the room stinking of paint thinner, I decide to make my exit. But then “Linkon,” a guy with an Abraham Lincoln-style beard, asks me to follow, and leads me out to the car. Tommy is in the driver’s seat, letting the engine idle.

“Are you hungry?”

“Sure, but I spent all my bills on the beer.”

“Don’t worry about that. That’s not a problem.”

“And I have to get back to my apartment—”

“Ah don’t be a *gringo*, *Gringo*. Don’t worry. I’ll get you home.”

So I get in the front passenger seat and Linkon gets in the back. Tommy peels out. We drive a couple blocks to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. A bare yellow bulb lights the scene. A young boy mopping the floor looks up as we enter and then quickly down again. We sit down at the table nearest the street and an old woman in a checkered apron approaches from behind the counter.

Tommy orders soup for everyone. Linkon fixes me with a bloodshot stare and jerks his head towards a pair of police trucks parked 30 yards down the street.

“You see that? That’s a police station. The fucking pigs act like they’re in charge, but we’re the ones who rule here. You’ll see.”

I nod, unsure what else to do.

The soup arrives and we eat quickly. Tommy alternates between making jokes and singing snippets of his favorite melodies. He orders a coca cola he does not drink and needles me about my gringo accent. When it’s time to go, I search my pockets again for any remaining money and find none. Not good. You don’t want to be out of cash in this city—you never know when you’ll be robbed or have to pay off the cops. Tommy and Linkon are already in the car and I get up to follow. The old woman follows me out to the sidewalk and stops. She just stands there. I turn and say good night. She nods but does not smile.

“Sorry, Tommy,” I say, shutting the door behind me. “I’ll pay you back tomorrow when I can get to an ATM.”

“Pay?” Tommy shakes his head. “I don’t have to pay. They pay me a rent just to stay open.”

“That’s right!” Linkon crows. “We charge the rent while the pigs eat shit!”

It suddenly dawns on me. I’ve just participated in an extortion—a mild, everyday extortion. I don’t like it. Not at all. I feel angry and embarrassed, but most of all, I feel stupid. It must show because as he speeds through the night Tommy slaps me on the back, saying, “Ah *Gringo*, don’t worry. You did nothing wrong. You were only riding along. And all this...”— he waves his hand vaguely, gesturing back towards the restaurant, the police station, the deserted street— “All this is normal. I am lucky enough to be the one who charges, and not one of those who pays. As they say, ‘would you rather hear the sound of weeping in your neighbor’s home, or in your own?’”

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The dictionary definition of “extort” is “to obtain from another by coercion or intimidation.” It can mean to overcharge, to blackmail, and to engage in “protection rackets”. Protection rackets are “...organized crime at its smoothest...”³ The term “protection” has a doubled meaning, depending on one’s relationship to a given danger and the offered means of shelter from that danger. “...’Protection’ calls upon images of the shelter against danger provided by a powerful friend, a large insurance policy, a sturdy roof...<or>...it evokes the racket in which a local strong man forces merchants to pay tribute in order to avoid damage—damage the strong man himself threatens to deliver.”⁴ The modern state can be understood as the racketeer that has over time managed to monopolize the power to “protect” within its territory by coopting completely the legitimate use of violence against its taxpaying populace.

But the Guatemalan state, like so many struggling sovereigns, has never had such a monopoly over violence.⁵ The rise of organized crime, private security, vigilante groups, and narco-trafficking organizations patrolling and controlling bits and pieces of Guatemala present open challenges to the state’s claim to govern its territory. In certain Guatemala City neighborhoods—*el Limon*, *la Limonada*, *Barrio Gallito*, to name a few—the criminal organizations are a kind of underground authority. Residents and businesses must abide by their “law” while still paying lipservice to the state. And so, in Guatemala, and, indeed, across the Northern Triangle of Central America, extortion is today the most common of crimes. Among the groups extracting profit through the promise to “protect”, *maras* have emerged in the last decade as the most visible, violent and widely despised. In everyday conversation, Barrio18 and La Mara Salvatrucha have become synonymous with extortion. The same holds true in expert discourse; their post-Cold War evolution is commonly described as a transformation from “youth street gangs into transnational protection rackets.”⁶

Widely blamed for post-war Guatemala City’s high homicide rates, extortion is today the most despised of crimes, and *maras* its #1 perpetrator. The suffering they cause in their efforts to extract *la renta* (the rent or extortion tithes) from residents and businesses in their respective territories is a big reason gangs are so deeply hated by so many. Through these rackets, the *maras* attempt to carve their own brand of “order” into the spaces they control.

But *maras* are not, ultimately, the problem. While they remain the spectral face of extortion, they have in fact become a commonly mimed model and a smokescreen obscuring vast networks of state agents, financial institutions, private businesses, and countless civilians feeding off the extortion economy. Today in Guatemala, extortion is a business model employing some idea of sovereign control and a brutal form of governance that has bled into the social relations of everyday life.

³ Tilly: 69. I follow JM Cruz’s assertion that “organized crime would be understood as any group with the capability to develop an illegal system in which the members of the group demand money from someone to provide protection against any threat or to avoid any harm perpetrated by the same members of the group.” (JM Cruz 2010)

⁴ *ibid* 172

⁵ Since the end of the civil war, criminality has steadily escalated. Under the direction of Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz (2010-2014) the prosecution rate of reported violent crimes has more than doubled from 5% to 10%. (McDonald 2012) In 2014 however, she was dismissed from the Guatemalan government because of her support for the prosecution of former president Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide.

⁶ JM Cruz 2010

However, to even talk of contemporary extortion rackets as protean forms of governance and control, or a particularly violent extractive industry, misses the point. In places like Guatemala City, the constant threat of extortion now organizes everyday life. Extortion has become an alternative livelihood and a zero-sum game in which, willingly or not, the majority of Central Americans must participate. Knowingly or unknowingly, many even benefit. Take my bowl of soup as but one example. When it comes to extortion, it is difficult to find anyone whose hands are clean.

Ultimately, the expansion and diffusion of extortion beyond “traditional” criminal networks links the terror in poor neighborhoods with considerable profits for individual and collective agents who will never need to carry out or threaten physical violence. Gangs may have perfected the contemporary extortion model, but it is financial institutions, agents of the state, private businesses, and countless civilians nurturing and feeding off protection rackets who make extortion what it is today: a post-war zeitgeist and socio-economic regime reorganizing city life beyond gang territory and at the most intimate of scales. *Mareros*, the extortionist subjects par-excellence, are the leading edge of a cannibalistic approach to survival that threatens to tear already frayed social fabric apart.

The Rise of Mara Extortion Rackets

Mareros will still refer to *la renta* as “*Impuesto de Guerra*”, meaning “war tax”. Whether this references a connection to the revolutionary past is not clear. A justice department internal publication traces the practice of collecting “war taxes” back to civil war *guerrilla* operations in the Guatemalan highlands. Ex-military commanders and indigenous peasant troops would threaten to burn down rich landowners’ plantations unless they paid in food or treasure. However, the document fails to explain the lines of historical inheritance that brought this practice to urban gangs. In any case, *maras* live out their own private low intensity wars from day to day—against rival gangs, the police, and increasingly over the last decade, against themselves.

In some neighborhoods, residents trace the use of the term “war taxes” to an epoch when the local *mara* clique collected tithes to fund ongoing feuds with enemy gangs in other *barrios*. It was distinct from robbery, which was practiced, among the more conscientious cliques anyway, strictly outside the *barrio*. Collections efforts started with businesses and families residing in the neighborhood, and then targeted vendors’ trucks delivering in *mara* territory. Today, however, gang war, as reason or excuse, is rarely mentioned. Extortion rackets, as I will show, have become unhinged from other exigencies and have a *raison d’être* all their own.

Like protection rackets run by the Italian mafia and their successors in the United States, demands for *la renta* implicitly entail the possibility of violence. But when gang extortion first became a widespread urban phenomenon in the early 1990s, the *maras* emphasized the softer side of protection.

Many experienced observers hew to a nostalgic version of history, drawing a decisive break between *la renta* of yesteryear and contemporary extortion rackets. Gerardo Ingles is the director of one of the oldest gang-rehabilitation organizations still operating in Guatemala. Sitting in his ramshackle office in a neighborhood where extortion threats have closed down all but a few family-run businesses, he told me that when gangs first started exacting tribute from local businesses—mostly corner stores, the ubiquitous

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“*tiendita*” found on every block in every poor Guatemala City neighborhood—“*la renta* was a kind of primitive taxation scheme where the “clients” paid the gangs for round the clock protection as they would pay a private security firm to guard against intruders.”

This comparison between gangs and the security industry, which has been post-war Guatemala’s fastest growing legal industry, is a common refrain among former gang members, civilians, and gang experts. In the ever-receding golden past, if you were rich enough to afford the 700 *quetzales* (\$90) a week for a shot-gun toting, uniformed guard to stand outside your place of business for 12 hour stretches, you went with private security. Otherwise, you contracted the local gang for a homie, or more likely a *chequeo*, an uninitiated gang-member wannabe trying to earn his stripes, to provide a similar service, replacing the shotgun with a handgun tucked into his jeans.

Of course, it was never that simple. During the 5 years he worked the streets (in the late 1990s), Juande and his homies collected *la renta* from *tienda* owners in Mixco, a suburb of Guatemala City. He claims *la renta* was once a peaceful operation, even if he had to engage in underhanded violence from time to time. “In that time, we only sold protection—and the people came to us to tell us that someone was bothering them,” He said as we watched fellow prisoners play soccer on a concrete court. “Perhaps we gave the right to protect to another homie, and he took care of it...When a *tienda* wouldn’t pay, we sent a dude from another corner to do a *coralina*, that is, to rob without assaulting... but we only did it to convince them that they needed protection.” He trailed off, as if lost in thought, and then shook his head. “We should have finished with it then, but we didn’t know we would go to cannibalizing other poor people like us.”

And this is the crux of it: the *maras* role in protecting their neighborhoods from hostile intruders has been sublimated into the pursuit of extraction, plain and simple. Whatever communal solidarity *maras* once claimed they have lost—or discarded. Today, some gang members will still mouth the refrain of protecting the *barrio* for a fee, but most everyone, including *mareros* themselves, know this to be pure fiction.

The conditions of possibility that would give rise to the *maras*’ dystopian metamorphosis are legion. Severe insecurity, state neglect, and non-existent job opportunities for a growing population of poor youth play significant roles. Recalling Tilly’s argument, protection rackets tend to take root in spaces where state presence is weak, locally perceived as predatory, or nonexistent. The Guatemalan state has never attended to the economic or security needs of its poor. Even in those neighborhoods where gang protection rackets began as a kind of communal response to severe insecurity, in less than a decade the dominant ethos became one of extraction and profit through unmitigated violence. Underpinning this shift was a growing sense of alienation between the gang and the neighborhood communities where they operated. This communal fracturing had a lot to do with the state’s clumsy efforts to deal with the “gang threat.”

Through heavy-handed policing, the Guatemalan state has been an unwitting midwife to the metamorphosis of *maras* extortion. Beginning in the late 1990s, and growing into the early 2000s, Guatemala was caught up in regional hysteria over the unprecedented growth of post-Cold War crime. Pantomiming Honduras and El Salvador, Guatemala organized a massive assault on the “gang threat”, regionally perceived as the key source of rising insecurity. However, Guatemala’s *Plan Escoba* (Plan Broom), put into action in 2003, did not have the far-reaching judicial and enforcement initiatives of its neighbors’ full-blown *mano dura* (strong fist) policies. Laws and policies often officially express intentions more efficiently executed through hidden channels.

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Plan Escoba was the publicized strategy for gang reduction. Under President Oscar Berger (2004-2008) government security forces combined mass arrests with extensive clandestine operations targeting suspected gang members for disappearance, extrajudicial execution, and even torture.⁷

Prisons nurtured the transformation. Violent prisoner hierarchies hostile to tattooed gangsters drove them to band together in alliances hitherto unknown and unlikely. *Mareros* found themselves trapped in behind bars fighting a game of survival with rival prisoner factions. Extortion was the quickest and, perhaps, the easiest, means of establishing a steady cash flow to soften life in prison, feed their families, and keep themselves armed against their enemies on the street. From the isolation of prison *maras* leaders leveraged their ability to raise funds from the street. At the same time, consolidation of command structures inside prison meant that the business of extortion could be corporatized.⁸ Massive imprisonment gave birth to gang extortion as a viable business model.

Prior to their targeting by police in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the *maras* were little more than poorly organized groups of youth imitating an imported identity and battling each other for claims to neighborhood turf. As shown in chapter two, what alliances existed between various *Barrio18* and *Mara Salvatrucha* “franchises” were based mainly in symbolic allegiances to Southern California Latino gang codes and styles as well as local histories of amity and enmity. In very little time, however, the prisons packed with *mareros* became crucibles forging new relationships between gang members from various urban zones and cities. As discussed in detail in chapter three, to escape heightened state pressure, both *Barrio18* and *La Mara Salvatrucha* began circulating homies to conduct gang business outside the neighborhoods in which they grew up. To organize a hit against a rival gang in a neighboring *colonia*, for example, an incarcerated gang leader might exchange soldiers with another gang leader because they wouldn’t be recognized as neighbors. Such strategies were highly successful, even as they sharpened the fear and paranoia of daily life. “You could just walk into a group from the enemy gang and start firing,” recalled a former MS member. “And no one would know what you were until you were gone.”

Meanwhile, *ramfleros* employed the same strategy in collecting extortion payments and threatening or killing recalcitrant clients. The “rights” to a given neighborhood were often negotiated between hardened convicts inside prison, and homies on the street could be called to conduct “hits” in barrios they had never seen before. Driven by the economic imperative and conditions of possibility created by massive incarceration, *maras*’ repertoire of violence shifted from a logic of combat—pursuing and attacking an enemy threat—to a logic of extortion—coercing tithes from innocent victims by any means possible. “Killing innocent people became part of *la renta*,” said Mo, a former MS member serving a life sentence for multiple homicides. He lived through the transition into the more violent era, participating in more murders than he was willing to say until falling out with his colleagues. “Before you could intimidate just with words, but then people didn’t listen so much, so you had to really scare them... People today don’t even

⁷ Police records show that more than 10,000 suspected gang members were arrested during the first two years of Berger’s administration (JM Cruz)

⁸ For a regional study of the effects of massive incarceration on gang networks, see JM Cruz (2010) and Lessing (2013)

pay attention if you kill someone with a shooting. It's just a lost bullet. Today you have to dismember and terrorize the people ... if you want to have power."⁹ Whereas *la renta* was once an exchange between business owners and local youth who pledged to stop outsiders from robbing in the neighborhood, it transformed into alien and/or alienated agents threatening to hurt anyone who refused to make regular installments.

For *maras* today, extortion has become far more than simply a means of making money—it has become a signature aspect of their claim to power, which, like most forms of governance, is hooked to territorial control. In the face of heightened police scrutiny, the old methods of advertising gang dominance over urban space (graffiti) and over members' bodies (tattoos) have noticeably diminished. Today, they measure their power in the number of households they tax, the earnings the gang treasurer logs. During the Andy's interrogation, a prosecutor asked, "During the course of your declaration you indicated that La Mara Salvatrucha is dominating the world. Can you indicate to what you refer with this expression?"

"Of dominating the world? More than anything, how can I say it, from pure extortions they are controlling territory. They are a big gang... they have a ton of soldiers. What I'm telling you is that they are expanding like rats, throughout the world. The vatos have a great power."

Killing "clients" who refuse to pay their dues is only the beginning. To instill the proper fear, *maras* employ more sophisticated forms of intimidation. This is not only about brutal corporeal violence. It is about psychological terror. A working man struggling to support his family, when threatened by a 15 year old with a gun, might be willing to risk it; refuse to pay up in the hopes that the gang won't bother following through with the threat. But menace that man's family—threaten to rape his daughter and torture his son, and make sure he knows you have done it before and will do it again—and he will be on his knees begging for mercy. A man's love for his family makes him vulnerable, and *maras* have made a business out of identifying and exploiting an enemy's or victim's weakness. Indeed, over the last decade, the most ruthless and successful *mara* cliques have considerably developed their capacity for terror. Often there is no need to even make explicitly violent threats to convince extortion victims to pay up.¹⁰

Fieldnotes, June 12, 2012. Tower of Judgment, Guatemala City.

Andy sits on a raised platform before a panel of judges and an army of prosecutors. One of the lawyers is, for the record's sake, asking him to define certain key terms he used to describe his gang's activities.

Prosecutor: What does "*la renta*" mean?

Andy: *La renta*. *La renta* is when the *ramflero* gives an order to go and set up an extortion, ask for *barras* (bills), ask for money from a *tienda*. For example: it's a big *tienda*, you understand, they come with a letter with a number that the dude has to call. When the dude calls, you give the vibe that you're gonna care for them and you'll give them protection and at the

⁹ In the following chapter, I explore the rise of spectacular violence as a means of political discourse.

¹⁰ For deeper historical overview of Guatemalan *maras* evolution see Levenson 2012

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same time the dude will report with the gang (*plebe*).¹¹ So, they ask for approximately 5000 *barras* (\$650) for entry for which they give a maximum term of 10 days for the dude to pay, and then they put it at 400 *barras* weekly you understand. With the dude you speak *de pinta* (nicely) ... and if the dude doesn't want to collaborate with the *plebe*, the *ramflero* will be told and the *ramflero* gives the order to go and kill him. This is what extortion and charging *la renta* means.

At their smoothest *mara* extortion schemes resemble formalized business models. The *mara* expects "clients" to pay an established rate, though as with all transactions in the informal market, payment is subject to barter. The promise to protect is a formal article of the contract, and the gang presents this protection in conciliatory terms. There is a preferred tone and friendly approach. If the client cannot produce the entire sum up front, he can go with the payment plan. Often, the mortal threat attached to the request need not be openly expressed. But if the client does not pay, he or she will die. This implicit ultimatum is the red thread running through every transaction between *maras* and the families and businesses they extort.

Contemporary gang extortion rackets only function with such smoothness in spaces where they have established unrivalled control over the use of violence. These neighborhoods are legion, scattered throughout the poorer zones of the city and concentrated in peripheral areas that have always fallen outside both the formal capitalist economy and the state's promise of protection. And everyone in *mara* territory knows the deal. Children and youth, too, are well aware that no one—not the government "authorities" or their own parents—can protect them if their parents fail to pay, and so must carve out their own security.¹² Often, this means getting close to someone inside the gang in the hopes that amicable association will provide a buffer against the gang's demands. But how to remain in the periphery when the gang's gravitational pull is so strong? And so, in these neighborhoods, extortion rackets often employ significant subsets of the population. Most of those involved in its day-to-day business are not even *bona fide* *mareros*.

While local gang members and incarcerated leaders dictate how much tax to levy and from whom, it is often their neighbors, relatives, girlfriends, and wives who deliver the written demands or hand over the cell-phone with an incarcerated *marero* waiting on the line to threaten a victim. In a zone 18 neighborhood built into a ravine and dominated by a *Barrio18* clique, children as young as 8 work as *banderas* (watchmen), taking note of what goes on in the neighborhood, while grandmothers collect *la renta* on the gang's behalf. As in other *mara*-dominated neighborhoods, the only individuals able to run *tiendas* or other small businesses are gang-members' kin, girlfriends, or other *paros* (gang-associates) on friendly terms with the gang; everyone else gets taxed or threatened into bankruptcy.¹³ Today, as many as one third of residences in Limón have been

¹¹ *Plebe*- Literally, the plebians, the common people, a term for fellow gang members of the same rank.

¹² Saunders-Hasting 2014

¹³ *ibid*

abandoned due to extortion demands that residents would not or could not pay. Other poor urban neighborhoods suffer similar patterns.¹⁴



Six alleged members of an extortionist ring directed by incarcerated mareros.

May 10th, 2012

On the 15th floor of the Tower of Judgment, waving my press pass at the guards in their blue uniforms, I enter the courtroom with the vaulted ceiling, the prisoner's cage, the lawyer's tables set before the judge's platform. Opposite the entrance a bullet-proof glass window affords a panoramic view of the city below.

There are 32 defendants on trial for involvement in an extortion ring. Four of them are Barrio18 gang leaders already jailed for other crimes. Two in white, two in orange jumpsuits, they sit chained by the ankles in the glass and metal cage.

¹⁴ In 2007, the national police (PNC) received nearly 600 reports of homes abandoned to the threat of extortion across Guatemala City. Given the uncountable threats that victims never report for fear of retaliation from the perpetrator(s), it is likely that the actual number is far higher.

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Shaved heads, tattooed faces. In the gallery sit two-dozen women handcuffed to each other in pairs. All but three are young, wearing heavy make up, boots, tight jeans. They sit in silence, except for a girl with thick, smiling lips and heavy silver mascara. She giggles and makes jokes, communicating in gestured signs with one of the caged leaders. The oldest woman- in her 50s I would guess- sits heavily in her chair staring blankly with her daughter next to her slumped against her chest. I wonder how it would be to be handcuffed to my mother, facing the state's accusations and all its portents.

Defense lawyers crowd a table set before the judge's raised platform. They bump elbows as they shift about reaching for the shared microphone. A single lawyer for the prosecution sits facing them across the room, inspecting his nails.

Along the gallery's perimeter stand dozens of heavily armed police. Men in gray uniforms and gray caps hold old machine guns with wood panel grips. Men in black uniforms and black berets hold Israeli Tavor assault rifles, heavy clips jutting out like teeth. They all have 9 mm pistols in hip holsters or shoved into the front of their bullet-proof vests. They are here for our protection, I suppose, standing around so tense and bored. But what the hell do you do with that much firepower in one room? Any one of them starts firing and we're all dead, I think. I take my seat behind three male defendants without tattoos sitting across the aisle from the women.

The day wears on. Much shuffling of papers. With so many defendants, the piles of evidence get confused, and each defense lawyer is in charge of several defendants, so the documents must be divvied up among them. Inside the cage, the gang members shift about in their chains. The women talk in hushed voices, and take turns holding a toddler. She crawls beneath their chairs across the linoleum floor.

Judge Villatoro is reviewing the pile of evidence set before him by the lawyers. According to his summary, the caged men selected the companies to target and made the extortion threats via cell-phone. The women picked up the payments in small increments—no more than \$500 worth of quetzals at a time. The three men sitting in front of me were allegedly the operation's enforcers— shooting bus drivers when their bosses failed to make timely payments. The whole operation depended entirely on the transportation company being too cowed to report to the police. All of this laid out in recorded phone conversations, bank records, victim testimony, rap sheets from the prosecution. From the defense, a motley collection of affidavits for this or that woman's character, pay stubs, birth records. Good, hard-working mothers, they bleat. No one is denying involvement in the racket. No one is fighting, only asking for mercy.

A white-haired defense lawyer interrupts the judge's study. Could the caged prisoners, whose mothers and wives and sisters sit accused and handcuffed to each other some 20 feet away, get the chance to talk to their loved ones while the judge reviews the archives?

Judge Villatoro is nothing if not humanitarian. "Seeing how today is Mother's Day, and while these prisoners have lost their right to liberty of movement they remain subject to all the other constitutional rights provided to Guatemalan citizens, it seems to me they should be able to talk and interact with their relations

as long as security is not compromised. So please, those who wish to visit with their loved ones may do so in groups of two.”



“Those who wish to visit with their loved ones may do so in groups of two.”

In many poor urban neighborhoods, *mara*-directed extortion rackets constitute a brutal form of taxation and spatial control with little pretense of “governance” beyond the terror necessary to ensure smooth and timely extraction of *la renta*. The gangs do not seek to mold their clients beyond instilling fear in ways that will not soon be forgotten. However, the kin networks, neighbors, and other gang-associates through which the *maras* collect *la renta* make extortion far more than merely a brutal criminal business, or even a “parallel mode of production and profiteering” that appropriates or mimics some aspect of state sovereignty.¹⁵ Rather, extortion constitutes a pivotal social relation in the communities where it has become entrenched. Residents survive by either taking part in or capitulating to the *maras*’ rules—by either preying upon their community or being preyed upon.

The Profits of Extortion

The networks through which extortion rackets spread terror and extract profit go far beyond *mara* territory. Most of the money leveraged from such suffering does not remain in the pockets of accomplices, rank-and-file *mareros*, or even gang leadership. Instead, it flows into the hands of state agents and financial institutions, while communal efforts to defend against extortion threats almost inevitably profit private security corporations.

¹⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 8

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And so, extortion rackets feeding upon poor, insecure space generate significant wealth for many who never need threaten or kill in order to reap dividends.

Let us return to the prison. The most well-developed extortion schemes can generate profits far greater than what is needed for daily existence behind bars. Especially in maximum security facilities, there are few diversions on which to spend money besides the bribes and kickbacks necessary to keep the system running.¹⁶ The extorted profits join the flow of money, information, and other (il)licit commodities across the prison system's porous boundaries (see chapter 3). In exchange for allowing gangsters and other inmates to communicate and exchange with their street networks, prison staff get a cut of the profits. Police are also often involved—receiving a cut of extorted profits in return for looking the other way, or even taking an active role in identifying potential victims. Beat cops and rank and file prison guards earn little more than the national minimum wage of 2000q/month (~\$250) and the bribes they receive can easily double or triple their monthly income.

As discussed in chapter 3, the daily operation of the prison system itself depends upon an informal taxation scheme that is extortion in all but name. Prison strong-men and officials collect a “tax” from every newly arrived inmate, and refusal to pay this tax results in hard labor, physical punishment, or worse. The collusion between prisoners and officials in these schemes can rise to the highest levels of authority. Byron Lima, despot of Pavoncito prison and the most powerful prison strongman in recent history, provides a spectacular example. Working through his network of prison officials and police, he arranges for wealthy prisoners—narcos, politicians, among others—transferred into Pavoncito where he charges exorbitant “fees” in return for providing them with protection and privileges. His network allegedly includes six of the seven prison sub-directors in the Interior Ministry (*Ministerio de Gobernacion*) and an extensive cadre of police and prison guards, not to mention a fleet of vehicles and hundreds of cellphones.¹⁷

The degree to which prison officials take active roles in extortion schemes is difficult to know, since those who do not willingly cooperate are often cowed into silence. Recall Director Guzman of Pavon Prison, who muttered under his breath at the end of an interview, “I don't take money. I don't take payoffs, but I know perfectly well what is going on, and this makes me complicit because I say nothing. But if I said something, what would happen? I'd probably get killed.” Like residents of *mara*-dominated neighborhoods, prison staff often must take part in, remain passive before, or become victims of extortion networks operating all around them.¹⁸

However, state agents are not merely tools of criminal-run extortion networks. Incarcerated extortionists, street operatives, and government agents form symbiotic networks to extract profit through terror, and it is often unclear who, ultimately, is calling

¹⁶ The incarcerated chief of a major Barrio18 clique receives more than 50,000q (\$7500) a week from extortion tithes. (Saunders-Hastings 2012)

¹⁷ <http://www.contrapoder.com.gt/es/168/actualidad/1581/Nadie-puede-contraryon-Lima.htm>

¹⁸ Of course, in trespassing the blurred boundary between the underworld and the government institutions charged with containing it, extortion networks are not so different from other illicit businesses. As a general rule in Guatemala and indeed, much of the world, the inter-linkages between representatives of state authority and the criminal underworld are myriad and ill defined. Some researchers and pundits claim that 65% of the Guatemalan national police are in the pay of narco-traffickers, and there is a general and widespread belief that many police are as corrupt as the criminals they are duty-bound to hunt.

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the shots. As an evangelical pastor working in a gang-dominated Guatemala City suburb said,

These poor gangsters are only the lowest on the ladder. I have no motivation to tell the police the things that happen, because they are often running the charade themselves. I remember one night at 2am a police came to one of the boys' houses and started beating him, yelling, "I asked for a good cellphone, not this piece of shit!"

Government agents are not the only "outsiders" to profit from the extortion economy. Once collected, extortion monies filter through gangs' networks as quotas for bone fide *homies*—it might only be 1000 *quetzales* (~\$125) a month, but it's regular. It also flows to lawyers to represent *homies* in legal trouble; doctors and nurses paid a retainer to be on call; and, in the last few years, gang "treasurers" have been reinvesting in working class businesses—carwashes, bus lines, microbuses, etc. And so, extorted profits work their way back into the licit economy, suturing it to the fear and suffering this cold-blooded business requires and reproduces.

But this is only the beginning. When I asked Arturo Aguilar, Guatemala's deputy attorney general (2008-2013), about the obstacles his office faces in prosecuting extortion cases, I expected him to talk about police corruption, bureaucratic intransigence, and the widespread fear victims have of reporting crimes. But to my surprise he replied, "Look, most of the money goes through the banks, and it is impossible to trace... because we have virtually no way of forcing financial institutions to reveal their records." As extortionists move more and more money electronically, the extortion commodity chain increasingly involves Guatemala's largest financial institutions. As in the case witnessed above, in which more than two dozen women collected money extorted from a bus company, banks make considerable profits off of the regular deposits victims make into anonymous bank accounts.

After the court hearing, when the defendants had all been bussed back to their respective prisons, I joined Judge Villatoro in his office. We discussed the plight of those two dozen girlfriends, wives, and mothers handcuffed in his court room. A tall, bulky man with a luxurious mustache and an avuncular kindness, Villatoro cuts an impressive figure in his black robes. "Ah, I can send the mareros away just like this," he exclaimed in stentorian baritone, snapping his fingers. "But the banks! No one goes after the banks. And, believe me, they *know* what is going on."

In recent years, various Guatemalan banks—most notably *Banco Azteca*, which does not require clients to register personal information when depositing or collecting funds—have made untold millions off the 10% surcharge on each extortion payment transferred through their systems. To date, no bank has been prosecuted or even investigated for their involvement in extortion schemes. According to government officials who choose to remain anonymous, this is because Guatemala's richest families maintain ultimate control over national banks. Congressional efforts to pass stricter financial oversight laws have repeatedly failed because the political and economic consortiums

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representing elite interests will not let them go forward.¹⁹ As Aguilar said a few months before he was forced out of office: “Every case we decide to pursue involves a calculation—and this calculation must always take into account what big powers we are going up against. When we go up against the banks, we can do nothing.” Extortion, so often defined as “the poor eating their fellow poor”, cannot be disentangled from systemic impunity and considerable profits reaching up to the highest levels of society.



The insignia of a several private security corporations operating in Guatemala City

While extortion has been the fastest growing illicit business since the end of the civil war, private security, its legal doppelganger, is the region’s #1 growth industry. The *maras*’ extortion profits are nothing compared to those reaped by private security. In 2013 Guatemala boasted more than 127 security companies with over 120,000 agents, more than 6 times the number of Guatemalan police. Each of the last several years, Guatemalan businesses (not counting households) have spent more than 2.8 billion *quetzales* (over \$350 million) on private security.²⁰ The widespread fear of extortion continuously creates new opportunities for private security corporations. Ironically,

¹⁹ The most powerful of these organizations is CACIF- *Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras* (Coordinating Committee for Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations).

²⁰ UNDP 2014 Human Development Report
<http://www.undp.org/content/dam/rblac/docs/Research%20and%20Publications/IDH/IDH-AL-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

perhaps, both extortion schemes and private security depend upon leveraging criminal threat and state paralysis into exorbitant private profits.

Villa Nueva and Guatemala City. January 2012

Colonia Castañas is a small neighborhood located just before the bridge between Villa Nueva and Guatemala City. Elizabet, a prison social worker and longtime Colonia Castañas resident, tells me that nearly every single household in her neighborhood received an extortion letter slipped under their door at the end of November 2011. They were distributed by “*ladroncitos*” (little thieves) from the nearby community of Mezquital. She thinks they were Barrio18, but she is not sure. Up until these threats, Castañas was unclaimed by Barrio18 or La Mara Salvatrucha—thus, fair game—and this group was trying to make its move. In response, young and middle-aged men donned ski masks and mounted patrols armed with bats, knives, and the occasional firearm to defend the community. But the vigilantes were a short-term affair, because meanwhile the neighborhood committee lobbied the city government to provide protection. In February 2012 the government granted them permission to close off all but one of the entrances to the neighborhood to through-traffic, motorized or otherwise (the *ladroncitos* came in by car and motorbike), and establish a private security checkpoint at the remaining entrance. Now, everyone must carry an ID card to get in. Elizabet showed me hers; it was a simple pink plastic card that could be a gym membership. Each resident now makes a monthly payment for the new system.

The gang did not take long to attempt revenge. The Villa Nueva police chief had done little more than act as middleman between the community and the private security firm. Nevertheless, the frustrated gang sent two 17-year-old *chequeos* on a mission against the local police station. Eager to earn some recognition, they lobbed grenades over the station wall into the courtyard, where a dozen or so civilians waited in line. The boys panicked, however, or had a crisis of conscience, and never pulled the pins.

The Colonia Castañas community banded together to protect itself, and eventually found a long-term solution by isolating entry and exit to one avenue guarded 24-7 by private security. Thus, an ad hoc “enclave community” was created and the costs of this newfound security paid out-of-pocket by the enclave’s residents.²¹ In the final analysis, Barrio18’s attempt to extract extortion ended up providing new profits to a private security firm. This is typical of “successful” efforts to stave off the threat of extortion.

In order to profit from public fear, both private security companies and *maras* depend upon the government’s failure to secure the city. Both extract payments from urban communities with the promise to protect. Gangs depend on their reputation for hyper-violence to scare off would-be rivals and thieves while coercing timely extortion payments from clients. Private security firms arm their guards with 12 gauge shotguns, the highest caliber weapons that non-government personnel can legally carry. Finally, both employ poor, young, uneducated males, give them guns, and put them in harm’s way. Today, nearly the entire young male populations of some rural villages seek

²¹ Caldeira 2000

employment in security firms, leaving their communities to work in Guatemala City and other urban centers for the pitiful wages they companies offer.²²

The differences between private security and extortion rackets are, of course, obvious, especially with today's brutal version of *la renta*; gangs siphon money from their fellow poor (albeit slightly less poor than most) and create a large part of the terror from which they promise to protect their clientele. Security firms merely leverage general fear into moneymaking opportunities while their investors, drawn from the rich elite, lobby successfully against raising Guatemala's 12% tax rate, ensuring that the national police force will remain under-funded, under-trained, and out-gunned. If gangs are parasites, then perhaps private security firms are merely symbiotes. But I cannot help seeing this distinction as somewhat superfluous. Both self-consciously feed off the same overwhelming collective fear, a fear that has spread far beyond the "red zones" and *mara* dominated spaces to engulf the city itself.

Mara Masquerade: From Criminal Enterprise to Post-War Zeitgeist

In August 2012, I accompanied a police raid on a house in a suburban enclave just outside the city. Armed with AK-47s, the swat team stormed both entrances and captured two men and three kilos of cocaine in plastic baggies. The lead investigators were immensely satisfied, slapping each other on the back and talking of promotions. "It's *el famoso* (the famous) Scrappy," they whispered as police dragged a shirtless man in boxers into the courtyard. "*El famoso* Scrappy!" Later, the presumed gang connection would prove false. These were simply low-level drug runners betrayed by a colleague or competitor. The press arrived soon after, shooting pictures and video of the two arrested men handcuffed, huddled in a sliver of shade in the concrete courtyard. A child's stroller and baby toys were strewn about, and a small dog lay loyally at the men's feet. Aware of the rumor that they were gang members, one of them begged. "Just don't call us extortionists in your report. We're just men trying to make a living."

²² Thomas 2011



TV newsmen train their cameras on men arrested in the raid

As the most feared and despised criminal enterprise in a time when rampant insecurity defines urban life, extortion has become the zeitgeist of the post-civil war era. Many urbanites consider extortion to be worse than immediate bodily violence. As Isabel Aguilar of Interpeace Guatemala, an anti-violence organization, said, “Extortion leaves one without hope. Why are you going to work if they’re going to take away the little you earn?”²³ And today, *maras* are the phantasmagoric face of extortion. The image of the tattooed gang leader residing comfortably at home, or even behind bars, as his network of extortionists terrorize and suck the lifeblood out of good, law-abiding citizens has been etched into the public consciousness. Thus, the poor fools above preferred to be seen as hardworking drug dealers than as *marero* extortionists.

Mass media has played a key role in forming and feeding this image. Virtually any day of the week, one can pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV to a flood of images and stories of gruesome murders, massacres, and mutilations. This murky “death porn”²⁴ has become standard fare for the Guatemalan public, and an important vector for enhancing extortion’s profitability. Indeed, exceptional violence (dismemberment, rape, etc.) has proven an incredibly efficient business practice. The more spectacular the brutality imputed to the *maras*, the wider it circulates in the community and in the press, the further the *maras*’ message of intimidation travels, and the more willing their “clients” will be to make timely extortion payments.

However, the quickness with which the media and the public root each new murder in gangs and unpaid extortion debts belies the uncertainty swirling about urban

²³ Aguilar 2011

²⁴ Alaniz 2005

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crime and insecurity.²⁵ When I asked Villa Nueva’s chief prosecutor what part of the daily crime in her district could be verifiably connected to gangs, she replied, “It has become impossible to know because it is always changing,” she said. “Neither can we differentiate between *maras*, narco-traffickers, and other organized criminal groups.” Certain gang cliques regularly carry out murders and other business at the orders of narcos and organized crime, and besides, less than 10% of violent crimes are ever successfully prosecuted, leaving the vast majority of daily violence subject to a “regime of rumor.”²⁶ This state of affairs is rife with opportunity for those willing and able to perform the role carved out by *mareros* in public perception.

Countless anonymous actors have stepped in to play the *mara* masquerade. The chief of PANDA, Guatemala’s anti-gang unit, cited a dozen examples of extortion rackets run by individuals pretending to be gangsters. *La Nica*, an inmate in F-2 maximum-security facility became particularly adept at the *mara* masquerade. He would peruse the newspapers each day looking for murders involving taxi drivers or other employees of commonly extorted companies. “I only call up the big ones,” he said. “Hotels, taxi companies, that kind of thing.” After finding the company phone number, he would call in the threat.

The investigator who finally caught La Nica made little effort to hide his amusement as he recollected the prisoner’s tactics. “That shithead could speak pure *marero* slang,” he laughed. “He would tell them, ‘This is *El Smiley* of Barrio18’—or some other famous *marero*—‘Did you read the newspaper? Well you know we killed your driver. If you don’t want anyone else to be killed, deposit 15,000q in such and such account.’” According to police records, La Nica managed to bring in as much as 20,000q (~\$2500) a week. “He never killed a single person,” the investigator said. “The guy didn’t even have any *sicarios* (hitmen) on the street.”

This sort of masquerade is not limited to the incarcerated. Anyone clever, desperate, or ruthless enough to emulate the gang approach can reap the profits. Former members of the military have been caught pretending to be *mareros* making extortion threats. Disgruntled employees have made extortion threats against their employer, and estranged family members have targeted their own relatives.

In rackets targeting public transportation, rival bus and trucking companies are thought to be responsible for up to 40% of the associated murders.²⁷ Bus inspectors, quasi-government functionaries who coordinate bus schedules between various private contractors, often act as middlemen between extortionists and bus companies. They facilitate the exchange of money and demands and take a cut of the profits. Bus driver’s assistants, often young men drawn from gang-affected neighborhoods, have also been blamed for passing information on daily profits and bus schedules to extortion networks. Such violent competition has made driving a Guatemala City bus arguably the “most

²⁵ As a security analyst for the Guatemalan prison system stated in an interview, “the police and the media are too quick to connect every new murder, decapitation, and quartering to extortion when there is often no evidence whatsoever.” (Pineda 2013)

²⁶ “...under the regime of rumor everything becomes patchwork; an infrastructure of hidden bricolage floats to social consciousness like a submerged, stitched together body.” (Feldman 1995: 231)

²⁷ Insight Crime 2011

dangerous job in the world” over the last several years—with more than 500 bus drivers gunned down between 2007 and 2011.²⁸

The ever-present possibility of extortion, like political terror, makes everyone feel they need to watch their back, watch their words, watch their neighbor. But unlike political terror, one’s suspected ideological affiliations mean little; it’s not what one thinks that matters.²⁹ If extortionists consider their target at all, it’s how much they imagine one makes, and how vulnerable one appears, that makes one a potential victim. While urban poor remain the most abject before the threat of extortion, the field of potential victims has expanded far beyond their neighborhoods.

Walter, a former military officer, works for the Ministry of the Interior investigating extortion threats emerging from inside the prisons. By Guatemalan standards, he makes a decent income—enough to own a modest home in a middle class neighborhood— and he recently bought a new car. His office walls are plastered with maps of criminal networks, *marero* mug shots, and blue-prints of various Guatemalan prisons. But when, sitting at home one afternoon, he picked up his phone to a stranger’s voice threatening to kill his family unless he deposited 10,000q (~\$1200) in a bank account within three days, he was caught off guard.

“This asshole spoke with utter politeness,” Walter said, grimacing. He mimed holding a phone to his ear. “Look, we don’t want to have to kill any of your kids, but we know your schedule, we know where they go to school...’ I told him to shut his damn mouth and never call me again, and then I hung up. Then the phone rang again, and when I picked it up he started yelling and threatening, and I replied, ‘Look, I know where you’re calling from. I can have the guards pick you up in two hours. You don’t know who you’re dealing with. Never call my house again.’ And you know what? He never did.”

When I asked Walter how he was able to face down his would-be extortionist with such aplomb, he replied, “I could only answer this way because he threatened to kill my “kids”, and I only have one child. That is how I knew, and could answer with such confidence. If he had not given himself away... oof, I would have been in trouble.”

Cold-call threats from strangers riffling randomly through telephone directories are increasingly common for residents of Guatemala City and other parts of urban Central America. But most victims do not have the background knowledge and experience in law enforcement that helped Walter resist.

Cold-call extortion schemes are mostly sporadic, once-off affairs— a threat is made, the money collected—or not—and that’s that. They do not require the *maras*’ territorial control and street operatives, or even the clever opportunism of La Nica. Rarely do they pose any “real” threat, but that is, in a sense, beside the point. How is one to decide which threats are real? Cold-call extortion merely requires victims made docile

²⁸ Insight Crime 2011. Rumors and more rumors. Many leftist Guatemalans suspect actors connected to the military and loyal to now President Perez Molina orchestrated bus attacks to undermine his predecessor’s administration.

²⁹ Even so, extortion has also become a useful political tactic for union-busting, threatening human rights activists, and stymieing political organization from below. *Maras* are inevitably implicated— but whether they act at the behest of say, *maquila* owners intent on taking out union leadership, are part of some other masquerade, or wholly uninvolved, is never certain. In these situations, the blurred lines between personal survival, political violence and criminal acts often disappear. For example, *maquila* bosses sometimes gather employees suspected of having ties to *maras* and threaten to fire them if any unions are formed. Then, as one activist told America’s Quarterly, “it’s up to (the *mareros*) to see what they have to do (to keep their jobs).”

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by fear. And the readily available supply of such victims has made extortion profitable for a wide array of actors able to convincingly personify the violence flooding public consciousness day in and day out.

There is no sanctuary. Extortion demands can arrive at any hour, anywhere, against practically any kind of victim. Schools, humanitarian organizations, even church parishes have received demands for *la renta*. The ever-present threat of extortion corrodes the pretense that personal security is possible. In the never-ending calculations of risk all city-dwellers—rich and poor alike— must make as they navigate urban life, such unaccountable randomness destroys the capacity to judge whether, when, and where one can feel safe. While this fear was once concentrated in poor urban neighborhoods where illicit actors dominate, today it has spread across the city, the nation, and the region.

Indeed, by taking advantage of the lack of oversight on financial institutions and the ease with which money can be electronically moved across borders, extortionists in Central America and Southern Mexico can today work transnationally. The Transnational Anti-Gang Unit (CAT)—an FBI trained and funded initiative— has traced extortion demands made from southern Mexico and El Salvador to Guatemala City, and inmates in Guatemalan prisons have extorted businesses and families in El Salvador and Honduras. Demands for “*la renta*” can arrive from any quarter—business rivals, police, one’s own family or employees, or random strangers based hundreds of miles away. Consequently, the climate of uncertainty, fear, and impotent rage has become inescapable.³⁰

With public fear and paranoia running so high, accusations of extortion fly. The government, vigilante groups, and the public at large flail in their efforts to identify and punish the alleged perpetrators and halt their operations. In May 2012, the Guatemalan military conducted a widely publicized invasion of the *mara*-dominated neighborhood El Limon. A week earlier a 15 year old shot and killed a well-respected community police officer. For seven years, the man had maintained a kind of *détente* with *Solo Raperos* of Barrio18—managing after school soccer tournaments and other programs. Suspecting local police of collaboration with the gang, the army never consulted them. With media cameras in tow, they rounded up several dozen low-level gang associates—no one with any real power—and “occupied” the neighborhood with round-the-clock patrols. While the gang made efforts to keep their operations less conspicuous, six months later their extortion rackets continued unhindered. Residents continued to pay *la renta*—and refused

³⁰ A 2007 Guatemalan police report illustrates the estimated financial costs of extortion rackets on Guatemalan society. Like all quantitative data produced on Guatemala, it is suspect and should not be taken at face value. Still, it gives an idea of how widespread the problem has become.

National Civil Police registry of extortions (2007)

| Material Losses | Cases | Monetary Value (in quetzales) |
|---|---------|-------------------------------|
| Extortions against bus drivers | 200,092 | 14,600,000 |
| Extortions against homes and small businesses | 25,012 | 52,000,000 |
| Extortions from prisons | 14,600 | 29,000,000 |
| Extortions against maquila employees | 44,250 | 10,620,000 |
| Homes abandoned because of gang extortion | 597 | 65,032,397 |

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to report the extortionists—because they knew that the army must eventually withdraw. The media cycle would spin on. But no matter what, the *mara* would still be there, eager to punish even the slightest betrayal.³¹

In a sense, though, the situation gets more confusing *outside* of neighborhoods dominated by a single gang. As Walter the investigator commented ruefully, “The police and the media are too quick to connect every new murder, decapitation, and quartering to extortion when there is often no evidence whatsoever.” Such trigger-happiness has its own risks. In *la Terminal*, a transport and wholesale market hub in the heart of Guatemala City, the vigilante group *Los Angeles de Justicia* (Angels of Justice), a group paid by merchants to maintain security, executed a deaf and dumb woman accused of extortion.³² A local merchant told me that while extortion was a big problem, he wasn’t sure if justice had been done. The deaf and dumb often communicate using hand written messages, the same means by which extortionists often deliver demands to their victims. “Perhaps *Los Angeles* got confused,” he said, laughing. I had to laugh too. The morbid absurdity of it all.

The terrifying uncertainty that is so often both a product and condition of rampant violence serves the extortion economy well. Extortionists feed and feed upon fear and suffering beyond our capacity to calculate or measure. *Maras*, with their gothic tattoos and brash embrace of brutality, provide a recognizable face to the phantasms haunting the collective imagination and an object upon which to affix impotent rage. But the networks through which extortion rackets reap so much profit trespass far beyond the gangs and their barrios. It is these connections which trouble the desperate pretense that certainty is possible, And the consequent fear, the suspicion, the anger engulf society itself, coursing through mass politics, communal relations, and individual lives. Cold numbers cannot capture how extortion devastates urban life. Each victim experiences this fear and this destruction singularly. So, to communicate how extortion rackets, the strategies employed to avoid them, and the consequences of their violence create the potential for unbounded suffering, I offer one last example.

September 2011. Guatemala City and Villa Nueva.

Jorge is a taxi driver. We spoke as he ferried me across the bridge between Guatemala City and Villa Nueva. Three years before, he had a job driving a bus, making a “decent” living, enough to own a small home in a gated community and to send his kids to school. Then the violence against bus drivers started ramping up, violence that seems to be connected to extortion rackets, and he had to leave. “Too many *compañeros* killed,” he said. So he went to work as a guard for a private security company. While working, he was attacked, and broke his collarbone. He spent all his savings on medical bills. Then he started working as a taxi driver. This does not pay well, and he eventually had to give up the home in which he had already invested his life savings. Now he and his wife are struggling to keep their children in school. “I don’t think I will be able to pay for the next semester,” he said morosely. “My wife is going to start a little *atol* stand to make some money, but...”

A year ago, alleged extortionists executed his mother. Why? It’s not clear, but most likely she refused to pay *la renta* for her little fruit-stand outside a Villa Nueva

³¹ Saunders-Hastings 2014

³²El Periódico 2012: 6

school. “It might have been gangs,” Jorge said over garbled radio voices and the rush of traffic. “But I think the police were also involved. I saw my mother on the pavement under the plastic tarp they put over her and I wanted to take revenge... but I know this is not my work... *Mano dura, mano floja* (iron fist, weak fist), we end up with the same thing. It is up to God and God alone.” He leaned over and pulled out a newspaper clipping of his mother’s murder from the glove compartment. “Here, take it for your book.” I snapped a photograph of it and gave it back.



“They Kill an Old Lady: she sold fruit at a school” *Nuestro Diario*, May 21, 2010

Today in Guatemala City, the capacity to convincingly threaten violence and offer protection has devolved and democratized in the worst possible way. The brutal rationalities expressed so cruelly in *maras'* approach to protection rackets have diffused throughout society itself, greatly expanding the field of potential perpetrators and victims of extortion schemes. The marero remains the ghoulish face of extortion and has become a mask behind which a cast of actors—police, prison guards, state and bank officials, and countless anonymous citizens—hide in order to prey on people so frightened by the status quo they will pay *la renta* without even nominal resistance. The business of extortion—which depend upon the perpetrator’s willingness and capacity to prey on innocent people and upon a general state of fear that makes victims’ resistance and appeal to authorities unlikely—has become an alternative livelihood for a few and a regime of fear under which tens of millions live out their lives.

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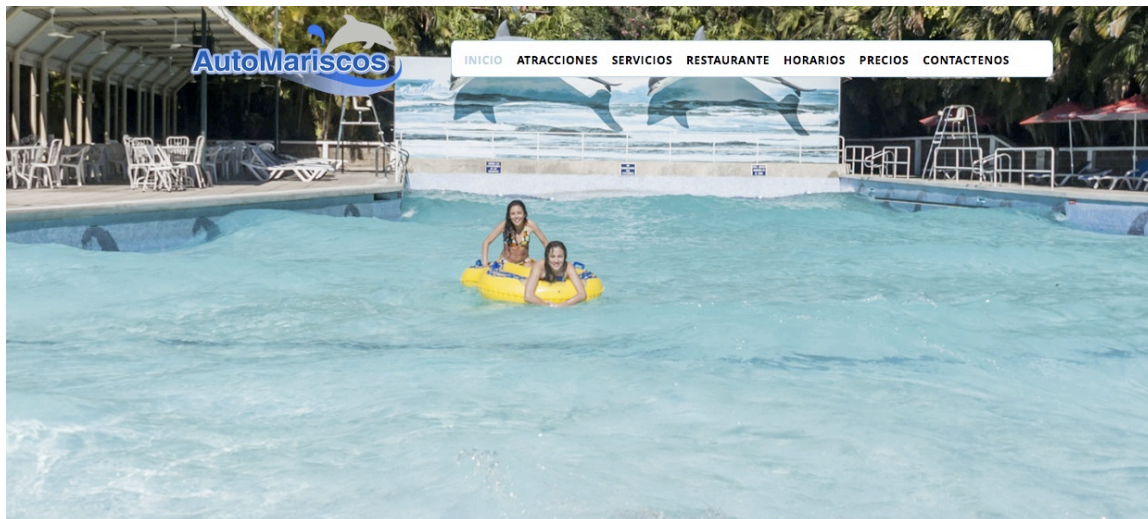
In this chapter, I wanted to show how deeply the ethos of extortion has penetrated post-war society, how *maras* have made it spectacle, have given it a face, but that this face dissimulates and distracts more than it reveals. But now I realize, I have not gone far enough. The *maras* and their dedication to preying on innocents without any justification beyond power and money are a new page in an old, old story. As dystopian as their evolution and the role extortion has come to play in post-war society appear, they are in fact hyper-visible manifestations of ongoing socio-economic destruction and reorganization occurring the world over. We live in an era in which free market values reign triumphant and “security” has become a precious commodity. Extortion is a brutal manifestation of unbridled capitalism in urban space largely abandoned by the state and polarized by extreme inequality. The rise and expansion of protection rackets makes terrifyingly visible overlapping patterns of social fragmentation and brutal economic opportunism on the rise the world over.³³

As governments everywhere withdraw support for social safety nets and their capacity to maintain a monopoly over the use of violence shrinks, other actors inevitably step in to fill the void. Gangs and vigilante groups for the poor, private security corporations for the rich and anyone else who can scrape together sufficient funds. And even those of us still living in places which afford us a relative sense of safety and comfort, are we not also hooked into networks and nations in which the strong extort the weak, one way or another, and coercion through the promise or reality of violence is often accepted as an unfortunate necessity, or simply ignored? And so we all share the *maras*’ inheritance, and Tommy’s question gains a new relevance for each and every one of us—“Would you rather hear the sound of weeping in your neighbor’s home, or in your own?”

³³ Lefebvre’s original definition of the “right to the city” is summarized as the “demand...[for] a transformed and renewed access to urban life” (Lefebvre 1968: 158) Others have employed the concept of the right to the city to highlight its importance for collective human well-being and ongoing human rights struggles. (cf Harvey 2008, Holston 2010)

Part III
Unjust Suffering and Deserved Death

Chapter 5 Dismembering Discourse



The Crime of the Four Heads

Automariscos is a popular water-park off the highway between Guatemala City and the Pacific Ocean. Two giant plastic dolphins are suspended like sentries over the gated entrance. On weekends and during *Semana Santa* children splash about in the wave pool, squeal down the water slides, and cavort around giant metal mushrooms spraying water into the air. Vendors push carts loaded with balloons, beach balls, water pistols, and pinwheels spinning in the hot breeze. An old man sells ice-cream, ringing a small cowbell among the trucks and Winnebagos parked on matted crab grass.

In the early morning of June 9th, 2010, before the grounds filled up with vacationers, members of La Mara Salvatrucha (MS) gathered around some unused barbecue pits on the far side of the parking lot.¹ Representatives were there from every major MS clique in the country. The day prior, Jorge Jair de Leon, aka El Diabólico, sent messages via cell-phone from El Boqueron prison to operatives on the street for a “Barrio level ‘Meeting.’”²

Among the homies gathered in the parking lot that morning was a 16-year-old boy named Andy, also a bone fide member of Los Coronados Locos Salvatrucha (CLS), a powerful MS clique. Two years later, he would become a secret witness for the Guatemalan government against La Mara Salvatrucha. In his testimony, he stated before a judge and a dozen prosecutors,

¹ Velazquez Cuellar 2012

² El Diabólico entered prison in 2001 as a little known *sicario*² for the *Coronados Locos Salvatrucha (CLS)*. Today, he is widely regarded as an important leader of La Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala. El Boqueron is a prison facility housing only active MS members.

I was already *brincado* (initiated), so it fell to me, el Pensador, el Scrappy and Maniaco to go to the meeting. When we arrived we were some of the first of the homies. Afterwards, homies arrived from Gangster, Parking, Bichos, Bandidos, Puiguis, from Normandy, Souza, Little Psychos, from Chapines, from Little Malditos, Leeward, from Vatos Locos. A shit ton of homies from various cliques came...It was a big meeting. From Little Psychos came el Sleepy, el Serio was there, el Little Loco, and el Demente. From Little Malditos a *chequeo* who's called El Cruz.³ From Chapines there was el Verdugo and a guy called el Willy. From Crazy Latin there came el Viejo Strong, the only one of his clique outside. From Gangster there was el Mentiroso and El Droopy, who was calling inside to Boqueron. ...There was el Travieso, el Nero de Parking, el Shadow de Leeward...Once the meeting was started el Pensador put the cell on speakerphone so that all the homies at the meeting would hear...⁴

El Diabólico explained the situation. Months before, prison authorities had revoked prized privileges—chief among them “*la Visita*” (visits from family members, wives, lovers and other intimates on the outside). As explored in chapter three, *la Visita* is essential for, among other things, the *maras*’ illicit businesses they need to survive and prosper. To protest loss of *la Visita*, incarcerated MS members staged a series of riots. The prison authorities seemed to capitulate, promising to reinstate access to conjugal visits and other privileges—and then reneged. To punish this apparent duplicity, incarcerated MS members instructed the homies to find and kill 5 people, decapitate them, and place their heads around the capital with messages attacking the government. The victims would have no relationship whatsoever to La Mara Salvatrucha or its rival, Barrio18. The leadership wanted the message pure, untainted by gang rivalries. After all, it’s relatively easy for the general population to dismiss gangster cadavers. But random victims strike fear, because *they* could be *you*.

Andy, El Pensador (the CLS leader), and the others returned to Guatemala City that afternoon and immediately put the plan into action. “Open a hole in *chante huario* #3,’ Andy recalled el Pensador saying, ‘because there’s going to be a party.’”⁵

... It was time to go bring the person from whom they had to take the head. They left in two cars... from La Paz and went towards Alyoto. They wanted to pick up a dude (*mage*), but they couldn’t because a patrol came and since the *vatos* only carried 9mms they didn’t want a shoot out with the *juras* (police)... so they went to la Riqueta. In Riqueta they ran over a dude, and acted like they were gonna take him to a hospital, but the vato didn’t want to get in the car and another patrol arrived. From there they went to la Primavera, and there they found nothing. And

³ *Chequeo* refers to a gang wannabe working to become a bone fide homie.

⁴ All quoted passages were translated by the author. The Central American gang vernacular is laced with English and spanglish terms imported with the Los Angeles gang symbols and structure via deported US gang members, gang films, and other conduits of cultural transfusion. When possible, I have tried to retain some of my informants’ original language, which includes both terms like “watchear”—to watch or look and Spanish slang like “paro”, “carnal”, “la onda” etc, which have no direct English translation.

⁵ A “chante huario” means house of war in gang vernacular. Literally, a house or pad (chante) and a bastardization of the word “war”—huario. A safehouse, so to speak.

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the vatos were pissed. And from there they went to la Frutal where I heard el Pensador say, “Look at that dude. Look alive,” to Maniaco. <They got out and said to the dude> “We’re from the National Civil Police. You know who charges extortion around here so get in the car!” They put a cloth and a bag over his head so he wouldn’t have a clue where he went. Since we could still hear everything he said over the line, they said “now get ready because we’re going to arrive.” I was in La Paz, and the *vatos* in Frutal brought this person to the pad. When they arrived in La Paz, TNT calls and el Pensador, he says ‘...Look alive and open the gate because we’re here with the present.’ I opened the door, and they entered the garage of *chante huario* #4.

After cruising slipshod and reckless around urban neighborhoods, Andy and his compatriots captured their victim by masquerading as police hysterically trying to enforce the law against *maras*’ extortion rackets. They continued the charade to the very end, long after the victim could effectively resist.

El Maniaco, el Pensador, el TNT and la Madrastra entered. They come in and throw him on the floor.

“What’s up with this dude?”

“He’s the guy.” They tell me.

“And here La Mara Salvatrucha.” I say.

“*Nel* (No way),” says one of them. “This is the National Police.”

“Ummm, okay,” I say.⁶

They executed their victim by garrotting him, using the same technique the military death squads implemented to kill subversives disappeared during the civil war.⁷

“Look alive then,” says El Pensador to el Madrastra, a *chequeo* of Little Psychos. “Tie a lasso,” and <El Madrastra> tied a lasso. Then he grabbed a piece of broken broom handle. I was just checking the vibe, you understand, since I was already jumped in and the dude was a *chequeo* trying to do the work because he wanted to get out of his *chequeo*. The dude put the lasso around his neck. And with the piece of wood he starts to turn it, making a tourniquet until he kills him.

From there el Pensador comes and says, “*Vivo los quiero* (I want you to look alive), take him to safehouse (*chante huario*) #3.”⁸ They get into the car again, the

⁶ Andy claims he did not accompany the men searching for a victim, but that he overheard everything on speakerphone. This seems highly suspicious—why would they stay in telephone contact the entire time? Andy, I believe, was distancing himself from the affair as much as he could without ruining his worth as a witness. Thankful for the information he provided, the prosecution did not question him more deeply regarding this disparity.

⁷ Beheading, on the other hand, was never a popular military method according to forensic anthropologists who have spent decades culling through the remains of civil war victims. Where the *maras* got the idea to chop their victims heads off remains unclear, and, probably, always will (Jose Suasnavar, forensic anthropologist, FAFG 03/01/2012). US security analysts have traced the practice of decapitation in Latin America to “viral videos” produced by Muslim extremists, eliding the long history of colonial brutality in the Americas (the Spanish Conquistadors used decapitation and other forms of dismemberment against captured Indians for centuries).

⁸ Chante huario- House, or pad (*chante*) of War (*huario*—literally, latinized “war”), safehouse

green Mirage, polarized 4-door. We take it to the *Chante La Paz*, the *chante huario* #3. ...A hole had already been opened. They threw him on the floor by the hole. El Maniaco went to bring a machete, a big machete, ok, and then he tells TNT and La Cuca, a *chequeo* from little Psychos, to take the clothes off the body. They do it, and they put him with his mouth facing down and a block under the head so that it would stay hanging. From there they start to cut the dude (Andy makes a sawing sound). He passes the machete to Cuca, and says, "Take it and cut him," and the vato starts to cut him.

El Maniaco asked again for the machete. He just cut a little bone that one has here, and the head fell off. A ton of blood came out and they put a <wash bucket> underneath so that it wouldn't spray all over the room. Then el TNT starts to cut pieces out of the face, the head, with a knife, and he throws gasoline on it and lights it on fire to disfigure it...

El Pensador and el Maniaco went to *chante* #1 with a piece of paper on which they were going to write a note since they were the *ramflero* and the second in command, and the accountant too was going to see what they put on the note. ... Around 430 or 530 in the morning, El Pensador comes and says to el Mike that he put the head in a backpack, inside the plastic bags, and they put in the paper. And he says "*Vivo pues*, go leave the package, you already know where."

"*Vivo pues*," he replies, and he puts the backpack on his back and gets on a motorcycle. It was a Surna Escobar 125. El vato gets on and goes, and at like six in the morning he gets back. He says to the homies, "*Simon, carnal*, I turned in the package." And from there we watched the news that came out when the four heads appeared here in the capital. And the homies started feeling good, they were happy and relieved.

Working through the night, three other cliques captured and decapitated their victims, all of them men.⁹ The four heads were placed at various locations around the city before dawn: one in front of a popular shopping mall, one at the entrance to the Congressional building, one at a fire station where journalists were known to congregate, and the last in a *barrio popular* (working class neighborhood). With each head they left a note addressing the government. One read simply "*No More Impunity*," misspelled in clumsy scrawl. Another: "*This is happening because of all the impunity and injustice that exist in the prisons of this country. If you do not pay more attention to these mistreatments, we will hold the Ministry of Government and the penitentiary system responsible for what happens going forward because of their abuses of authority.*"¹⁰ MS sutured claims of defending human rights against state tyranny to dismembered bodies. It was a bizarre parody of popular protest spliced with echoes of historical violence.

The government labeled the quadruple murder an act of terror, and the national press flocked to publicize the grisly affair throughout the region. Despite intense media and police scrutiny, two years would go by before investigators made any arrests connected with the case. The break came in early 2012 when Andy—who had severed ties with CLS leadership shortly after the crime of the four heads—agreed to testify against his old gang as a protected witness. He gave the government enough evidence to

⁹ A fifth clique failed in their mission, and was subsequently punished by the others.

¹⁰ See photos in appendix at end of this chapter

arrest and convict many of his gang's top leaders before his former compatriots found and killed him.

La Mara Salvatrucha inscribed their rage into the public sphere through the mutilation and exhibition of bodies chosen “at random” for execution. As excessive as this act may appear, it draws from what has by now become a well-worn script: murdered, mutilated bodies left on public display to communicate some message to some audience. Today in Guatemala, terror is often spoken through corpses chopped up and left in garbage bags in the street; female bodies raped and tortured and quartered; charred gangster corpses placed in certain police-designated locations signalling no need for an official investigation. In the midst of skyrocketing homicide rates, such strategically brutal demonstrations—circulated in the media, infiltrating everyday conversation—take on starring roles in the bloody drama of Guatemala's post-war order. Time and again in friends and informants, gang members and government ministers, taxi drivers and waitresses, they would turn to a computer, or take out a cell phone, to show me yet another body undone or rearranged for public viewing. It was as if, as words failed them, the images might convey what they could not say.

The crime of the four heads is part of a *conversation*, but it is a cacophonous, often incomprehensible exchange and struggle waged for power and survival. I call this conversation a *discourse of suffering bodies*: the public display of murdered and mutilated corpses—in the flesh and in staged images—transformed into surfaces bearing some message for some audience. It is true that *maras* often engage in this discourse to spectacular effect. But their will to excessive violence cannot be disentangled from how Guatemalan society has made the *maras*—as both the source and target of murder—symbolic anchor-points mooring the floating sense of fear and uncertainty haunting post-war life.

Acts like the crime of the four heads are in a sense terribly simple. The perpetrators employ a brutal, efficient logic to give their violence maximum circulation before the public eye. More often than not, the message they wish to convey is nothing more than blunt, unvarnished intimidation and terror. But mere motives are not nearly the whole story. Like all public performances, meaning and significance are determined as much by the audience as by the actors staging the spectacle. I will explore the *maras'* role as both victims and perpetrators of murder as well as the scripts through which *maras* strive to make murder matter to a public strung out on criminal brutality, pulled into hysterical excitement and numbing shock with every new act of gruesome violence.¹¹ From indifference to horror, fascination to fatigue, made-for-media-murder, like TS Eliot's magic lantern, “throws the nerves in patterns on a screen,” exposing, in gory detail, collective conceptions of unjust suffering and deserved death circulating throughout Guatemalan society and beyond.¹²

¹¹ Cf Taussig 2004

¹² Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: 7

What Maras Mean, What Maras Do

Gangs fit too perfectly into all sorts of pre-existing fears and prejudices. The history of extreme racism towards the dark Indian, the class fears still clung to by the rich and the ambitious middle classes... Everyone finds their answers in gangs: business interests and their fear for continuing profits, the middle class fear of the raging poor, politicians searching for a topic that will mobilize their populace.¹³

In inter-war Europe, Walter Benjamin identified two figures whose subjugated bodies became emissaries for the sovereign order. The first was the sandwichboard man walking the streets of Paris. Typically drawn from the city's homeless laborers, he would, for a few pennies, make himself a walking advertisement for commodities he could not himself afford. The second figure was a naked Jewish man in Berlin, flanked on each side by SS, a sign hung from his neck proclaiming support for Hitler. In each of these cases, the excluded or marginalized body has been "subjectivated", made to proclaim a politics opposite to or askew of the person's will.¹⁴ The purity of the message in both of these cases is striking; the indigent advertizing capitalism's commodities and the soon-to-be extinguished racial other abjectly celebrating his executioner's power each evoke the near-total domination of the economic or political order.

In post-war Guatemala, obeisance to global capitalism is everywhere apparent, but there is no such domination by a single sovereign. As explored in previous chapters, the Guatemalan state is only one among many actors fighting to control urban territory and monopolize the use of "legitimate" violence. Criminals and law-enforcement are deeply enmeshed, and agents of the state and denizens of the underworld regularly exchange places with one another—both in their actual activities and in public opinion. The institutional and existential chaos of the post-war disorder requires a standard-bearer capable of containing the collective confusion, rage, and despair with this state of affairs. *Maras* fit the bill. They have emerged as the erstwhile emissaries of all the failures of post-war progress to heal the wounds of war and find a path towards collective prosperity.

As symbolic figures through which politicians, scholars, and others link the revolutionary past with the insecure present, violence performed by or imputed to the *maras* becomes coded as a legacy and inheritance of civil war. La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 replace the Marxist guerrilla of another age as "footsoldiers" of the "new urban insurgency"¹⁵ fighting in the "slumwars of the 20th century."¹⁶ This rendering imputes a coherent politics to gang violence that it simply does not have, while opening the door to rightwing politicians' calls to re-militarize society in defense against the insurgent threat. More nuanced readings emphasize how acts of gang violence take on echoes, after-images, and buried memories of the civil war past. Zilberg has called this elusive interplay between *maras*' persona and civil war specters "disorganized mimesis"—

¹³ Jimenez Irungaray 2011

¹⁴ Feldman 1991: 9

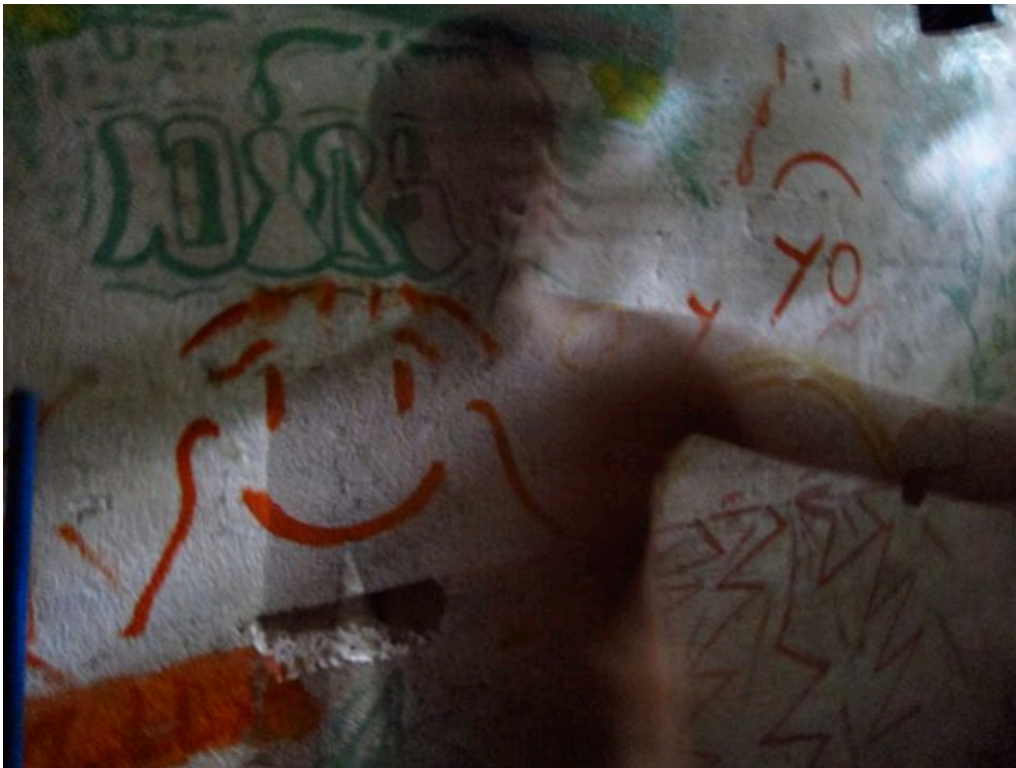
¹⁵ Manwaring

¹⁶ Rodgers 2009

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While gang violence is presented as a new post-civil war (and therefore post-political) phenomenon, the stories surrounding it are haunted by cultural formations of meaning and modes of feeling attached to that war. Media coverage of, investigations into, and rumors surrounding the violence are all ‘animated by a substrate of fantasy scenes that betray complicated kinds of intimacies’ (Aretxaga, 2003: 402) between the new (gangs) and the usual suspects (guerillas, political parties, death squads, soldiers and police).¹⁷

In the crime of the four heads, La Mara Salvatrucha took the concept of disorganized mimesis one step further by actually performing the roles of past and present “usual suspects” making collective fantasy blend into concrete acts. Thus, their public persona(s) and their *modus operandi* become hopelessly entwined. In what follows, I will explore this entanglement through various interpretations of what *maras* are and why they do what they do from the perspectives of law enforcement, expert analysts, politicians, ordinary civilians, and *mareros* themselves.



Incarcerated marero. Canada Prison, Escuintla, Guatemala

Popular opinion of what *maras* are and why they do what they do runs the gamut of psychological, spiritual, social, and structural analyses. Everyone—experts and laymen, politicians and pundits—seems to have an explanation of the why and wherefore of the *maras*. Gangs are a deep-throated articulation of profound “*odia y envidia*”—hatred and envy—coursing through Guatemalan society. Gang members are “like sex addicts, but addicted to killing”, as a Salvadoran crime reporter declared at a meeting of police and

¹⁷ Zilberg 2007: 42

NGOs to discuss peaceful crime prevention. A taxi-driver repeated the common refrain that *mareros* “worship the devil and the Santa Muerte—they have given their souls to the Beast (*la bestia*).” An Evangelical gang pastor ministering a violent suburb of Guatemala City put it slightly more subtly; as he excused himself from our interview to return to his neighborhood, he said, almost laughing, “The nights are worse. This is like Alcoholics Anonymous, they need a 12 step program to stop from killing. Constant supervision, constant intervention, because killing is all they know.”

In a society in which violent death has become a defining feature of everyday life, *maras* are the inhuman killers who have lost the oh-so-human fear of death. An anti-violence advisor for the USAID in Guatemala told me that “...the gangs’ biggest advantage, the reason they create such horror in the population and they are so difficult to combat is that their soldiers have reached a point where they no longer fear death. Death has no power over them.”¹⁸

Some perceive gangs as mere mercenaries following the orders of higher powers—doing the dirty work of corrupt police, who in turn take orders from politicians, organized crime and the rich elite intent on maintaining the status quo. Finally, I asked a well-respected criminal circuit judge why *maras* had become so violent. “Aha,” he thundered, pounding his desk. “I will tell you! We have become rotten from the beginning. It starts with Cesarean sections, the separation of child from mother, feeding newborns animal milk, and leaving them alone in their cribs. The gangs are the vomit of a sick society.”

Psychopaths or Thanatophobes?

Human beings have five senses. The *marero* will have a sixth. The sixth will be that he has no heart, that he doesn’t give a damn about anything. You will dismember for your gang, you will kill for your gang, you will die for your gang. This is how you describe a *marero*.

Andy repeated this refrain as if reciting from an instruction manual or a prayer book. Willing to kill anyone for any reason, willing to die for their gang... such bravado before death seems to place rank and file *mareros* among the likes of religious fanatics willing to die for their faith. But in practice, the fearlessness seems to fade. “I have been with them when they are about to die,” the Villa Nueva police chief said ominously. “And believe me, they were afraid.”

Personal humiliations and rage suffered by the boys who do the dirty work, the institutionalized barbarism of prison-life, and the militarization of masculinity from decades of civil war are but a few of the 10,000 tributaries feeding the *maras* capacity for violence. When faced with such overdetermined brutality, retreating to explanations based on intention and interiority can be dangerously misleading.

As deviant as they may appear to the viewing public, *mareros* bravado regarding death and killing cannot be reduced to some pathological root. Rodolfo Kepfer, a psychoanalyst and researcher who worked for several years in juvenile detention centers with young killers of all stripes—*marero* and otherwise—found that the *mareros* under his care managed themselves with far more discipline and less erratic behavior than other minors incarcerated for homicide.

¹⁸ Calderon 2012

Most of the young men who had a higher degree of psychopathology were not *mareros*. “The *marero*”, so to speak, was quite socialized. It was difficult to give a *marero* the diagnosis of, for example, a social disorder. Difficult because he did not fulfil the criteria, nor was his conduct so antisocial. Interestingly, there were groups of *paisas* <non-gang affiliated prisoners> who were *really* violent and dangerous...”¹⁹

Gang violence is not the work of pathological deviants. You could even call them “structured psychopaths” if the term psychopath weren’t so heavily laden with images of serial killers muzzled and straitjacketed and mad. Kepfer offered an alternative psychological analysis that took into account the violent system in which gang members find themselves immersed everyday of their short lives. Surviving day in and day out under the constant threat of death, *mareros* quickly become “thanatophobes”— young men who “fear death so deeply that they seek it. They try to beat death to the punch.”²⁰

Gang violence also follows a set of rules, relationships, and hierarchies that dictate who can be killed and why. Along with several police and gang informants, Kepfer claimed that La Mara Salvatrucha’s structure imposes an ironclad discipline on its rank and file members, and to step outside these rules is to invite brutal punishment.

Something that one noted a lot in <*mareros*>, especially in the MS members, was how dominated they were by the rules. The rules for them are everything. The *marero* rules. “I can’t because of the rules”. You sit with them for an hour and they would talk to you about all kinds of things, but then you ask about something specific and it’s, “No, no I can’t say because of the rule.” In this sense they have rules that are stricter than the military. Like kaibiles.”²¹

A willingness to perform extreme violence within an organization that exacts extreme discipline... It is a military model. Kepfer’s reference to *kaibiles*—the US trained and funded special-forces responsible for many of the Guatemalan civil war’s worst atrocities— is apt. In the 1980s, their training program included raising a puppy during boot camp. At the end of training, their final test was to drown the dog and eat its heart.²² Today, many of the top leaders in the country—including the president and security minister—are former kaibiles. So was the principle architect of the 2011 Zeta200 (Z200) massacre, in which purported agents of the narco-cartel killed 22 plantation workers employed by a rival, writing messages in their blood.²³ And, *marero* informants claim that many of those who become gang leaders have received military training. *Mareros*, who in the popular imagination represent the most uncontrollable members of society, in fact

¹⁹ Kepfer 2011a

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

²² Puppy-killing an urban legend? Versions of this have previously been claimed for SS, Mossad, Saddam Hussein’s private guard force, etc.

²³ Stone and Wells 2013

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emulate the rigid, authoritarian models that have become the paradigms of order amidst the chaos of post-civil war society.²⁴

Clearly defined goals and ruthless strategy drive some of the most gruesome and spectacular acts of *mara* violence. In late 2011, for instance, the Guatemala City government opened a new TransUrbano bus station in El Limon, Zone 18 of Guatemala City. The neighborhood had long been bypassed by public transportation because of gang extortion rackets and lack of security. The new commuter line displeased the local gang—*Los Solo Raperos*—one of Guatemala’s most infamous Barrio18 cliques. The Transurbano route would displace the *tuk-tuk* drivers who provided local transport for commuters, as well as extortion tithes and valuable information for the gang. To express their anger, Barrio18 members kidnapped, tortured, raped, murdered, and dismembered a 17-year-old girl chosen at random. They put her undone body in a garbage bag, and placed the garbage bag in the newly minted TransUrbano bus station on the day the route opened.²⁵

With some *maras* and *mareros* hewing so eagerly to the role that has been written for them, *maras* as social symbols become ever more tightly sutured to the death and violence they have come to represent. Their image embodies the nightmare of post-war life, and are useful targets for helpless rage. One night, as I rode shotgun in a taxi to visit a friend just out of prison, I struck up a conversation with the driver, as I often do, about crime, insecurity, gangs, etc. He was an affable, quick-witted man. As we pulled into my friend’s neighborhood, the driver said,

I have trouble sleeping sometimes. I suffer from insomnia. Often it happens that I watch too much television, and afterwards I can’t sleep. So to relax, instead of counting sheep, I shoot *mareros*. Just line them up, take aim, and shoot them. And you know what? It works, I suppose, because there are always more.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Always more. I must have killed thousands and thousands of them, but only in my thoughts. But really, it would be okay (to really kill them) because the bible says, well, he that does not listen to me shall be pulled out by the roots and thrown into the fire.

I asked him how the *mareros* appeared in his fantasy of execution. He shrugged and laughed and said they always had tattooed faces, they threw up gang signs with their hands, and they wore baggy clothes. But then he sighed. “Anyway it’s just a fantasy. In real life, it’s impossible to tell if someone’s a *marero* or not. Today... even someone dressed like you, a *guero* (white guy) in a nice coat can be a *marero*. You just don’t know, so you are always risking yourself.”

The most visible signs that police, the press, and civilians once used to parse innocent bodies from guilty ones are disappearing. Even as the press, the police, and civilians look for the tattoos, clothing style, and other tell tale signs to identify *marero* bodies, the *maras* have largely exchanged these symbols for more subtle codes of belonging. Once easily identified by their dress, their tattoos, their graffiti, and their

²⁴ The very extreme extent to which this rigid form of governmentality (not on behalf of the state in this case, but on behalf of the authority structure of the gang), is played out in the individuals. To the point where the individuals become that structure of governance, they perform it, make it their own, try to out-do each other in proving that they have wholly become the beast.

²⁵ Prensa Libre 2012. See also Saunders-Hastings (2014)

bombastic approach to claiming territory in turf wars, today bone fide members maintain a much lower profile. They stick to more formal clothes, and many cliques—especially MS cliques—have discontinued altogether the use of body tattoos for their members.

So, even as the stereotypical image of the *marero* moors the floating sense of fear and despair that peacetime violence provokes, actual *mareros* blend more and more easily with the “civilian” population. This blending makes the already incalculable fear and insecurity more pervasive. Since the *marero* is both the paradigmatic killer and the most easily excused target of extreme violence, the category of the “innocent” victim has shrunken as the collective fear expands. A corpse must be presumed innocent in order to be publicly mourned, to invoke outrage, and to garner the publicity necessary to make the killer’s message register before a wider audience. But who, in this age of assured blame and collective fear, can be innocent?

The Discourse of Suffering Bodies

The present is never free of past violence. Contemporary acts of brutality, as well as public perceptions of what is legitimate violence and what is not, always draw upon what has come before. But continuums between past and present, war and peace, constantly undergo processes of fracturing metamorphosis, victim to the unstable nature of collective memory and unexpected contingencies.

In Guatemala, the state-perpetrated, US-funded massacres and disappearance campaigns of the civil war have become the subject of countless books, war crimes cases, and NGO fundraising pamphlets. This history of violence remains deeply inscribed in Guatemalan society today, manifesting in the continued impunity of the rich the widespread acceptance of violence as a means of resolving conflict, war crimes prosecutions and public protest to break the silence and continued suffering of the survivors. Eager to revivify the collective memory of civil war atrocities, many scholars and activists frame contemporary crime as a product of war-time excesses.²⁶

I for one have little doubt that the wounds of 36 years of war still fester. But to draw such a direct line between war- and peace-time elides essential differences in how suffering spreads through the social body. Post-war atrocities carry a markedly different social and political valence—the meaning and experience of violence has shifted—even as they bear vestiges of their civil war inheritance. The most obvious distinction is this: public reaction to each new murdered body is today altogether distinct to what it was in war-time. During the war’s most brutal period, mass murder remained cloaked in collective silence. Today, a cacophony of voices greets peace-time brutality, screaming accusation, seeking to blame, determined to name the source of so much murder and suffering.

In the early 1980s, the Guatemalan military and its elite backers were convinced that the insurgency was at “Guatemala City’s doorstep.” In the rural highlands, indigenous support for armed rebels was growing. In Guatemala City, the political arm of the insurgency operated hundreds of safe-houses, relying on the support of trade unions, leftist professors, student movements, and other groups struggling to overturn the status quo. Before taking out the rural insurgency with a scorched earth campaign that would

²⁶ e.g. Sanford 2008

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leave hundreds of thousands dead, the military moved to contain the urban threat. Urban activists' access to the media, and capacity to communicate with the international community, had to be destroyed before the military could liquidate the communities thought to be giving material support to the guerrilla army. And so, between 1980 and 1982, death squads killed over 200 people a month, their bodies appearing at the bottom of steep ravines carving through Guatemala City.²⁷ Many more targets of military repression never appeared at all, however. Kidnapped by military intelligence services, these “disappeared” ended their days in total anonymity, imprisoned, tortured, and executed incognito on military bases at the outskirts of the capital.

Public reaction to the government's campaign of urban terror remained quiet, muted by an “existential uncertainty.”²⁸ There were few public venues within Guatemala where accusations or even inquiries could safely register. And so—rumors whispered fearfully between friends and loved ones, but there was very little public outcry. In 1984, human rights organizations and victims' families finally confronted Defense Minister Mejia Victores, demanding the whereabouts of the disappeared. Mejia Victores is said to have responded, “Disappeared? There are no disappeared- those people probably migrated to the United States to find work, or died in the 1976 earthquake.”²⁹

Today, the paradigm of silent, invisible death has morphed into an altogether different way of seeing and understanding ongoing murder. It is the intense, in-your-face visuality of mutilated, dismembered, or decapitated corpses left on display that defines the peacetime violence. Over the last ten years, Guatemala City homicide rates have shot past 60/100,000.³⁰ But in place of the silent pall cast across Guatemalan society in the face of civil war atrocities, today a continuous public outcry, albeit deeply incoherent, accompanies the parade of corpses. Unlike the disappeared, many of these murders boldly appear in front page news—often with full-page photos, graphics, and accurate but limited commentary—as well as in radio and television broadcasts.

Running in parodic parallel to post-war political progress, murder has been “democratized”—unhinged from a centralized state authority, arising from multiple and badly defined sources—and entered into the chaos of post-war political maneuvering for power and influence. Guatemalan politicians from across the spectrum blame their adversaries' policies for creating the conditions giving rise to so much murder. Researchers, activists, analysts, and journalists seek to describe, often in minute detail, how and why this violence is happening. The litany of voices rising up in response to contemporary violence creates a distinct, but no less paralyzing, kind of confusion as the past's profuse silence did.

As mentioned previously, just who is committing all this murder remains unclear. Narco-traffickers, organized crime, hired hit-men, domestic abusers, and, of course, *maras*, are among the usual suspects in every new murder and dismemberment. However, less than 10% of violent crimes ever make it to trial, making Guatemala one of the “best places to commit murder in the world.” *Maras* are widely thought to be the primary perpetrators—but estimates for the percentage of daily dead due to gang violence range

²⁷ Grandin, G., Levenson, D, Oglesby E. (eds). “Roads to Revolution.” Pg. X *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.

²⁸ Manz, 2004; Sanford, 2004, quoted in Benson Fischer Thomas

²⁹ The reference is to the 1976 earthquake. 46,000 were killed in the earthquake, while the total number of disappeared has been estimated at 45,000.

³⁰ Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) 2012

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from 10-60%. Neither is it clear what percentage of the daily dead is made up of *mareros* themselves.

In Guatemala City, contemporary existential uncertainty has given rise to widespread nostalgia for what is remembered as the ordered violence of civil war. This nostalgia is certainly not universal. When I asked Mario Polanco, long-time human rights activist and Executive Director of Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) to compare the terror of the past with that of the present, he replied. “Things are certainly better now. Back then, you could be disappeared simply for owning a copy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *100 Years of Solitude*. I had a copy that I would have to cover with newspaper so it wouldn’t be seen on the bus. Now you have the freedom to think and say what you want.”

For most residents of Guatemala City, however, the freedom of thought and expression is not as important as the sense of security they know they are missing. Today, among urban residents the dominant sentiment regarding the wartime past is that “in those days at least you knew if you stayed out of politics you could avoid trouble.” The ideological, class, and racial lines defining who might be a likely target of state violence were not difficult to define. Today, however, daily violence seems to have been freed from such narrow constraints, and every new murder becomes a hotbed for rumor and supposition, another reason to feel vulnerable. *What does it mean*, for example, when a baby’s severed head is discovered on the outskirts of the city? Is the precipitous rise in bus driver murders linked to gang extortion rackets, or is it a matter of rightwing political maneuvering to convince people to vote for hard-line, *mano dura* candidates? Why was the dismembered corpse of a 17-year-old girl left on a brand new commuter bus platform?

Such questions inspire a profusion of contradictory answers. More often than not, we are left to contemplate these signs written in blood and viscera like fraudulent seers muttering over tea-leaves. Those who must live with such “wanton” violence day in and day out often fall back on blanket assumptions to make the bloodshed more palatable. The perpetrators are “beasts”. The victims “must have been involved in *something*.” Ultimately, the parade of ruined corpses on public display each day feeds a general sense of vague and overwhelming despair, fear, and horror. In conversation, my Guatemalan friends often use such brutal events as referents indicating how deeply insecure and violent the present has become, and how apocalyptic the future appears.

From Silence to Spectacle

Images—digital and in print—have become the primary vector through which violent death circulates in the public sphere. “Narratives can make us understand,” writes Sontag. “Photographs do something else. They haunt us.”³¹ Certain images have a way of etching into consciousness with more precision and power than perhaps we would like to give them. In the era of global media technologies, we have become both saturated with and dependent upon images to inform our worldview. And, in spaces and societies in which violent death has become part of everyday life, images of undone bodies play a crucial role in public discourse. A raw, flamboyant species of “death porn,”³² increasingly prevalent across the Americas and in other parts of the world, has become standard fare served up to the Guatemalan public. Images of such suffering do more than haunt.

³¹ Sontag 2003: 43

³² Alaniz

Death porn, whether “real,” for “entertainment,” or both, so shocks and titillates that finding a measured, ethical response sometimes seems impossible.

Perusing the daily news in Guatemala City, inevitably I would come upon yet another dismemberment, tortured cadaver, or massacre. Such images circulate so widely that they seem to be everywhere, intruding upon one’s field of vision when least expected.

For instance, in November, 2011 I was on a trip to the Pacific coast of Guatemala with my fiancée. As the bus pulled up to the southernmost village along the coastal road, I could hear the waves lapping on the shore. I was looking forward to an ice-cold beer. As I reached up to pull down a bag from the overhead compartment, a crumpled newspaper fluttered down to rest among our things. Gwendolyn, my fiancée, picked it up. She smoothed it out and looked at it silently, shook her head, and handed it to me. The headline announced, “They find the decapitated head of a baby.” And there it is, a baby’s head cradled in two yellow gloves; the eyes swollen shut, the lips parted slightly, the skin mottled and brown. The head so tiny in the gloved hands, the size of an apple and horribly misshapen except for a perfectly articulated ear no larger than my fingernail. I shoved it into my backpack.



Through images like these, sensationalist journalism has fed upon the violence to become the most popular and powerful venue for informing the public of its daily dangers. A prime example is the enormous success of *Nuestro Diario*, the country’s leading newspaper. Today, with an average print run of 230,000 copies, the paper occupies 75% of the market of newspaper readership at the national level with 2 million Guatemalans reading it daily out of a total of 2,680,000 readers. In the capital these readers account for

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55% of the reading population (410,000 readers), while in the interior of the country 82% of people who see a newspaper every morning read *Nuestro Diario* (1,590,000).³³

Nuestro Diario often dedicates a full third of its pages—more than any other newspaper—to the “*nota roja*” (red note), a subsection focused entirely on crime and violent death. *Nuestro Diario*’s consistent attention to violent death and catastrophe have earned it the nickname “*nuestro muerto diario*”—“Our Daily Death”. It is a “blue collar” paper with extensive circulation chockfull of bright and often bloody images and short on text. Many who peruse its pages are barely literate. Along with several pages dedicated to Latin American and European professional soccer, and the requisite scantily clad models, the *nota roja* is *Nuestro Diario*’s bread and butter. There is an implicit politics in this kind of sensationalized violence that is difficult to assess. With echoes of Baudelaire,³⁴ pitched to resonate with the bloody present of Guatemala City, Colussi writes,

Nuestro Diario transmits violence wherever one looks, in general terms associating violence with criminality. There is no critical analysis of the delinquent acts presented daily; only report and the image (macabre in every case) of the situation in isolation and without contextualization. The first few pages are impactful; a victim killed in an assault, a marero dead in a coup de grace, a woman raped and dismembered, a lynched delinquent... all of which is nothing but the regurgitation of the facts—without doubt real, since there is an efficient journalism at work here—but that, repeated day after day, contributes to nourishing a collective imaginary in which the violence is identified with an abundant delinquency that is master and mistress of these lands, without presenting causes of these processes, and much less, alternatives.³⁵

The effects of such reporting, sharpened so poignantly with images of death and massacre, are deeply contradictory. The urge to look contending with the urge to look away, numbing shock shot through with confused fascination. Over time, public reaction to daily murder circulated in this way cycles through horror to titillation, from titillation to indifference, indifference to exhaustion, until some new atrocity breaches the defenses to start the process all over again. When insecurity and violence have become a defining feature of everyday life, images of murder and massacre become totemic symbols of the status quo.

Dead *marero* bodies—or bodies labeled as such—have become central nodes through which a frightened public metabolizes a creeping sense of helplessness, confusion, and despair. As Nietzsche observed, “What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering.”³⁶ *Mareros*’ suffering is easily justified and murdered *mareros* need not be mourned. Any sign of “gang association”—

³³ Colussi 2004

³⁴ In 1860s Europe, Charles Baudelaire observed, “It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month, or the year, without finding on every page the most frightful traces of human perversity, together with the most astonishing boasts of probity, charity, and benevolence, and the most brazen statements regarding the progress of civilization... And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man washes down his morning repast... I am unable to comprehend how a man of honor could take a newspaper in his hands without a shudder of disgust.” (Baudelaire: 91).

³⁵ Colussi: 4

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* : 68. Who decides which pain makes sense and which is senseless?

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determined by myriad factors relating to age, dress, geography, and so on—can make a victim unmournable.

Fieldnotes. September 30, 2011

Today, like every other day, *Nuestro Diario* has its entire first 3-4 pages dedicated to reporting murder and violence of every kind—dismembered bodies dredged up outside of Mixco, **THEY KILL A MARERO** (*ASESINAN A MARERO*) spelled out in huge capitals, and a close-up of the cadaver’s tattoos... The faces of a woman and a girl child and boy child on his bicep, “Gaby” drawn in gothic calligraphy, a gun on his belly. Somewhere else, the *Santa Muerte*. The headline claims he was the head of a gang that conducted extortion rackets, though the 100-word article contains nothing to back this up.

The next page shows two separate “massacres”—two women killed with multiple gunshot wounds in zone 21 of the capital with a quote from a local business owner. “Sadly, some girls get involved with the gangs, and this kills them.” (*Lamentablemente, algunas patojas se meten con las maras, esta las matan.*)³⁷

A tortured, tattooed corpse immediately becomes a gangster’s body, an extortionist’s body. The body is intact, but the use of imagery robs the corpse of its human wholeness by showing only his tattoos, focusing in on these symbols of social subversion that, for many Guatemalans, are *prima facie* evidence of his guilt. The other stories relate with no details at all the murders of two women, with only a glib quote linking the girls’ deaths to association with gangs. It is the association that kills, whoever the murderer might be.

A history of violence, exclusion, and erasure is written into—or rather, out of—this skin-deep rendition of death. Bodies stained with *mara* markings, so intensely visible as killers and signs of social subversion, make the violence they have come to represent more easily metabolized. As murder rates have risen beyond all previous levels, the collective struggle to create distance from so much death has pushed many victims into the same category as the killers. These people, as the saying goes, “must have been involved in something.” What Caldeira has called the “symbolic labor” to “differentiate the image of the criminal as far as possible from oneself” extends not only to perpetrators of violence but also their victims.³⁸

³⁷ Muñoz 2011

³⁸ Caldeira (2000): 38

2

MAESTROZAMORA
NOTICIAS 1177

VIERNES 19 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2011 - NUESTRO DIARIO

IMPACTO

JEFE: MARIO SECUNOS, correo: mariosecunos@nuestrodiario.com.gt




Como Carlos Alonso García, residente en Tierra Nueva, fue identificado el fallecido.

La Policía cree que la causa del crimen es una venganza.

ASESINAN A MARERO

Jefe de pandilla que extorsiona a comerciantes en Tierra Nueva y Minerva aparece estrangulado.

Marta Muñoz
* Nuestro Diario

En un terreno desolado, en el terreno baldío y penchos amarrados con un cable y lazo de nailon, fue localizado en la zona 11 de Mixco el cadáver de un hombre con señales de tortura.

Vecinos de un sector de Planes de Minerva que se dirigen a un servicio religioso encontraron el cuerpo y le avisaron a la Policía Nacional Civil, la cual lo identificó como Carlos Leonel Alonso García, de 36 años, residente de la colonia Tierra Nueva.

Algunos comerciantes del lugar comentaron que se trataba de uno de los jefes de las pandillas que se dedican a extorsionar negocios, así como a pilotos del transporte colectivo y rúteros, lo cual fue ratificado por investigadores de la Policía.

Según los peritos del Ministerio Público, el cuerpo de la víctima estaba boca arriba con dos bolsas negras en la cabeza y varios disparos.

POSIBLE VENGANZA
Agentes de la comisaría que funciona en ese sector indicaron que el crimen podría deberse a una venganza personal o bien a la lucha interna entre pandillas.

Fiscales del Ministerio Público constataron que los delincuentes cometieron el crimen en otro lugar, donde habría sido torturado y estrangulado.

La víctima tenía varios tatuajes, entre estos uno de la santa muerte, el rostro de una mujer y dos niños, y un fusil en el pecho.

En las bolsitas del pantalón se hallaron marihuana, las llaves de su casa y una billetera con sus documentos personales.

Pobladores pidieron a las autoridades más seguridad en ese sector, el cual, indicaron, siempre se ha catalogado como un lugar tranquilo, y nunca había sucedido algo similar.

"Tengo 25 años de vivir aquí, y jamás había pasado algo así de terrible", dijo Clementina Rojas, quien, con asombro, llegó a verificar quién era la persona que estaba muerta entre los matorrales.

ASÍ OPINAN

"Es lamentable que ocurra esto en un terreno baldío, debemos cambiar esta situación", **MARTÍN CHANAC** EGAR.

"Solo sabe siempre ha sido un terreno tranquilo y nunca había ocurrido algo como esto", **MARÍA GONZÁLEZ** EGAR.

"Podría ser seguridad para la colonia, y así evitar que pasen estas cosas", **MARÍA PÉREZ** EGAR.

A Carlos lo vinculaban con quienes extorsionan a choferes.

"They Kill a Marero." *Nuestro Diario*, September 19, 2011

Struggles Over Historical Memory

While one species of death porn dominates the daily news, activists and politicians use another in campaigns to reshape collective memory of unresolved and unpunished civil war atrocities. War crimes trials are perhaps the most public venue for these struggles. Court cases prosecuting the civil war's worst human rights abuses have become public stages upon which lawyers, human rights organizations, and political figures debate and

refigure civil war violence before a public largely ignorant of its own history.³⁹



The lines of opposition in this struggle fall messily along those of the civil war—the fragmented, progressive “left” arrayed against military watchdogs defending the interests of the rich oligarchs who still rule this country. Typical of human rights-based demands for justice, these cases follow a framework made from three interwoven discourses: the primacy of *innocent* victims over any other subject, making justice claims visible by exposing innocent suffering, and the importance of punitive justice against certain perpetrators chosen as much for their symbolic value as for their deeds.⁴⁰

March 1st, 2012

On a quiet, shady side street in Guatemala City’s historic quarter, I discovered a tiny war museum. Inside, a tall man with braces and an awkward smile

³⁹ The Guatemalan government has purposefully misconstrued the civil war’s lines of opposition in state issued history books as a tale of “two demons”; the Guatemalan military facing off against leftist guerrillas with the civilian population caught up in the cross-fire. The result has been that even the small percentage of the Guatemalan populace possessing a high school education have little knowledge of the military’s targeting innocent civilians for massacre and genocide. (See Oglesby, Elizabeth. “Educating Citizens in Postwar Guatemala: Historical Memory, Genocide, and the Culture of Peace.” *Radical History Review*, Issue 97. Winter 2007)

⁴⁰ Though beyond the scope of this chapter, human rights discourse has become the language of resistance and protest for the fragmented remains of the political left. War crimes cases against Guatemalan military officials, protests against rural land displacements, and everyday struggles over property rights, employee salaries, and taxation are fought out using human rights frameworks... (need too much info here...)

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introduced himself as Samuel Villatoro, which provoked something of a Twilight Zone moment. Samuel Villatoro was a union activist disappeared during the civil and recently identified by forensic anthropologists. This man standing before me, I realized a moment later, was his son.

Black and white photographs hung on a wall in a tiny room. They were the portraits of the 42 disappeared “subversives” identified in military diaries unearthed by human rights activists. Many looked scared and exhausted. Alongside their faces were their capture dates, and the date they “*se fue con Pancho*”, the military’s euphemism for execution. And there among the doomed was Samuel Villatoro the father. He was wearing dark glasses with his hair swept back like his son’s. The resemblance was striking.

Samuel Jr. launched into a rehearsed speech. Samuel Sr. became the head of the *chiclero’s* union after the military disappeared 27 leading members from a union meeting. On January 30th, 1984 he left his home in Guatemala City to attend classes at the Universidad de San Carlos. A few blocks from his home, a specially-trained police unit kidnapped him and quickly turned him over to military intelligence. He spent 57 days in military custody undergoing torture, until his captors had him executed by garroting. Decades later, forensic anthropologists found his skeleton in the same Levis jeans he was wearing when he was captured, the jeans Samuel Jr.’s mother remembered him wearing when he left the house 31 years ago. Today, Samuel Sr. is one of thousands of victims featured in cases against military and police officials allegedly involved in their disappearance, torture, and massacre.

The speech completed, he led me into another cubbyhole-sized room. An enormous glass box, polished immaculate, dominated the space. Inside, his father’s skeleton lay in repose. With the bones slightly spread out the man looked to have been a giant. Samuel Jr. placed one hand lightly on the glass and said, “I know it’s strange for a body to be left out like this... but it’s just that we lost him so long ago and now we want to be near him always. And we want to send a message to Guatemala and the world about what happened here. We want to make sure that such violations of human rights never happen again.” He paused and looked down at the bones. “This is only the beginning. We are getting funds for a full fledged museum, full of information about the disappeared.” I wondered how full of bodies it would be.

Such efforts to expose injustices of the past are geared to redirect the moral compass of the present, and they depend upon making the suffering of innocents intensely visible on the national stage. International and Guatemalan NGOs have spent millions digging up, identifying, and presenting the bones of the massacred dead to the public eye. In the genocide trial of Ex-General Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemalan and international human rights advocates lauded the prosecution for giving the innocent victims of civil war atrocity a stage upon which to present their suffering to the world in graphic detail. More than 100 survivors of military massacre took the stand against Ríos Montt and described, sometimes in vivid detail, the litany of abuses they witnessed and suffered. Human rights advocates have hailed this as a victory in and of itself, despite the faded hopes that the testimonies will result in any kind of punishment for the genocidaire ex-general.

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Guatemalan society is today suffused with images of suffering bodies. Museumified corpses and photographs of the civil war's massacred and disappeared contend for a place in the public imagination with today's murdered and dismembered. The former's haunting portraits and unearthed bones have become key images through which human rights organizations and their supporters attempt to make the bloody past matter. *These* innocents are mourned, their suffering fetishized and mobilized, while the possibility of even being *considered* an innocent victim of contemporary violence seems to diminish a little more everyday.



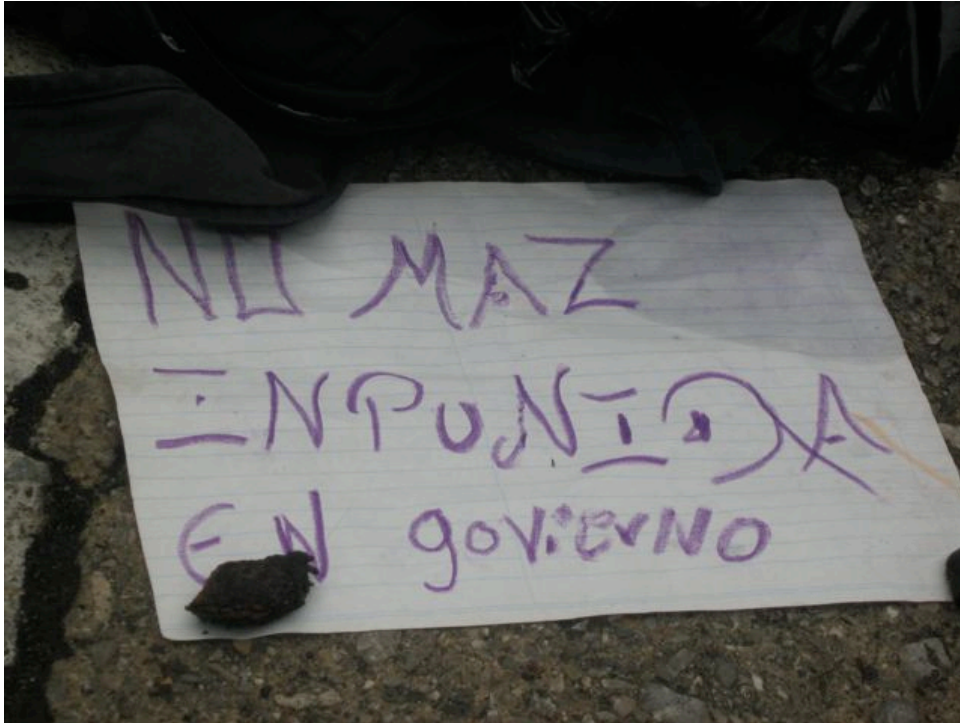
Photos of the civil war disappeared plastered around Zone 1 of Guatemala City

In the crime of the four heads, La Mara Salvatrucha fused these contending voices by remediating human rights discourse in perverse fashion, reflecting a rising trend in post-war Guatemalan society.⁴¹ Searching for quick and dirty explanations for the dystopian rise in insecurity, rightwing politicians and frustrated civilians have come to blame the progressive current in Guatemalan politics dominated by human rights discourses. A bereaved father of a murder victim in zone 18 said, “All this talk of human rights has made it impossible for parents and police to keep the young people in line.” A taxi driver lamented, “Human rights only help criminals escape justice.” Even those who work to make peace in neighborhoods struggling with gang violence blame the discourse of human rights for hamstringing local responses against wrongdoers. A former *marero* who became an Evangelical pastor said, “Everything started with the human rights. We

⁴¹ Bolter and Grusin 2000

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confuse liberty with libertinism! The <human rights ombudsman> looks out for the rights of people who kill and dismember others, and so the parents and the police have lost their authority.” Instead of seeing human rights as a framework for protecting ordinary people from abuse and exploitation at the hands of the powerful, many blame human rights for protecting criminals from punishment they so richly deserve. Since human rights discourse has also become the language of resistance for struggles against land displacement, government corruption, and other contemporary issues, its demonization has repercussions beyond the civil war and street crime arena.



“No More Impunity in Government.”
One of the notes left with the severed heads.
(National Police photo)



“No to Impunity”

An indigenous woman protesting military support for corporate land invasions in Guatemala’s highlands. (AP 2010)

Making Murder Matter: Class, Geography, and Gender

We want to know the reasons a person died violently, because, we think, knowing that reason will allow us to place that murder in its appropriate category; just or unjust, deserved or tragic. This reason, we always secretly hope, will suture the murder to the victim’s personal history and so create a buffer between their suffering and our own existence. All the well-worn categories of human difference—race, class, gender, faith, geography—come into play, harnessed to distance ourselves from the specter of violent death. When so many murders can be made to fit so easily with pre-conceived notions of deserved death, how do *maras* and others seeking to speak and be heard ensure their message won’t simply be ignored, shunted away, invisible?

There is a hidden history to the “making invisible” of certain victims of violence, a history of which I have only been able to collect disjointed fragments. I met Francisco Jimenez Irungaray, advisor to the minister of government under President Berger (2000-2004), in a trendy café bar in Guatemala’s *zona popular*. Over crepes and coffee he said,

I spent years reviewing the daily police reports made on a 24-hour basis. There were two categories that came out as falling under direct suspicion with little or no additional provocation. These were “young” and “tattooed”. If the victim of robbery, homicide, shooting, or what have you, either was young or had tattoos or both the case would be immediately archived and forgotten. These were not cases

worth pursuing because clearly it was an issue of gangs, and therefore did not bear police intervention. Here we see prejudice rising to the level of repression...”

This “prejudice rising to the level of repression” effectively erased the murders of poor young men from the public record, and signalled to the killers that they could do what they wanted. A Barrio18 member incarcerated for murder told me, “I’ve killed for respect, for money, but also just to keep up the practice, to not lose my touch. Once I learned that I could kill without anything happening... well...”

While the police stand aside and let rival gangs kill each other, vigilantes have taken matters into their own hands. Since the early 2000s, social-cleansing operations manned by agents of the state—both police and military—intentionally targeted suspected *mareros* for torture and execution. This was the clandestine side of Guatemala’s version of *mano dura*—known as *Plan Escoba*—a program of laws criminalizing gang association and police practices aimed at incarcerating as many suspected gang members as possible. A deported *sureño* serving time in a Guatemalan prison recalled how his fellow *mareros* became victims of extrajudicial execution. Sometime around the year 2000,

Two guys I knew, deportees like me, used to hang with 18th Street guys named Travieso and Spider. They weren’t in the game, you understand, just friends. One day two cars from SIC picked up my buddies outside my house. Lucky for me, I had been arrested for receiving stolen property, or else they would have gotten me too. My buddies had come around the house looking for me but since I never came back, they left. The police got them just around the block. They were both tattooed dudes, one 18th Street, the other Kansas St. They put them against the wall, and then two or three days later they showed up real crispy a few blocks from my house.

By officially ignoring murder victims who appeared to be *mareros*, and taking part in murdering and terrorizing suspected gang members, the Guatemalan state has helped make *mareros* into easily excused, even celebrated victims of violence. When *mareros* die, no public mourning is necessary, and the tragedy of youth killing and dying in such breathtaking numbers transforms into unfortunate but necessary violence to heal the diseased social body. Little wonder then, that *maras* so often resort to spectacular violence when they want to ensure to inscribe some message into the public sphere.

In the crime of the four heads, for example, MS’s victims were poor young men living or working in urban slums. The neighborhoods through which the killers drove in search of their victim are poor urban settlements that have been left largely abandoned by both the state security services and the formal capitalist economy. These are spaces that are, for the most part, “invisible” to the public eye. Imminent violence—connected to gang warfare or extortion rackets—is a virtual constant. As poor young males—a cook, a day laborer, a corner-store clerk (tellingly, authorities never identified the fourth victim)—the victims’ sex, class, geography and appearance all made them more or less typical targets and perpetrators of violence, and thus nothing special.⁴² Since these murders were geared towards making the *mara* demands as intensely *visible* as possible, the bodies, so

⁴² The victim shown above had a patterned buzzcut, evidence that, for many Guatemalans, could be a sign of his potential guilt.

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easily culled from the ghetto, could not remain there. In the political economy of daily murder, poor male corpses appearing in the ghetto create no more than a minor blip on the public consciousness.



One of the four heads left around Guatemala City (PNC)

While young men are by far the most common victims of murder, female bodies have become the favored means of transmitting messages to a rival, a community, the state, the nation. *Maras* have taken the blame for the rising tide of “femicides”—murders targeting females that show evidence of sexual abuse, torture, dismemberment, and other signs of excessive brutality. The increasing frequency of this kind of crime has garnered national and international attention. Signs seem to indicate that *maras* and others target women precisely for this reason; in 85% of femicides, no effort has been made to hide the body.⁴³ A disproportionate number of murdered female bodies show signs of torture.⁴⁴ *Maras* target women in the game of competitive cruelty between rivals, or as part of their initiation rituals.⁴⁵ Tortured and undone, female corpses sometimes function as “internal memos” meant to circulate within the gang.⁴⁶ Sometimes, they are messages meant to reach a broader audience—a community, the government, or even the nation as a whole. Again, this is a recent page in an old story. During the civil war, when the military

⁴³ (GHRC 2009),

⁴⁴ (Sanford 2008, 107).

⁴⁵ (Musalo et al 2010: 188)

⁴⁶ Saunders Hastings (2014)

targetted men, they were more likely to be disappeared.⁴⁷ When females were massacred—most often in rural villages—their corpses were often left in public view. The female is symbolically linked to the home, a space of intimacy, and she is the bearer of cultural reproduction.⁴⁸ To violate a community, to make a message pierce the public sphere, female corpses have proven the most effective means of communication in war and in so-called peace.

And so, the value of the severed heads could only approach the spectacular when strategically placed in locations associated with political, economic, or mediatic importance. Thus three of the four heads ended up before the Congressional building, at the entrance to the Tikal Futura shopping mall, and near a congregation point for journalists. This was enough for the murders to become a nationally circulated event, though it barely registered outside of Guatemala. The major international news agencies seem to hold a much higher standard for transmitting news of decapitated, dismembered, or otherwise abused bodies found in Central America than the Mara Salvatrucha was able to execute in this instance. As a stringer for Reuters in Guatemala told me, his editors in the Mexico City office require at least 15 undone bodies for a Guatemalan massacre to become newsworthy—less than that, and it is not a story worth telling.

As both victims and perpetrators, *maras* play a pivotal role in the discourse of suffering bodies; the media, the government, and the public use the figure of the *marero* to anchor anxieties over violence that often appears to have come unmoored from all sense and reason. The *maras'* violent evolution and predilection for innocent victims is intimately entangled with this role, as they use ever more spectacularly brutal means to inscribe their demands upon the social body. In the crime of the four heads, they masqueraded as police and mimed a military execution. They attached to these bodies messages echoing the language of resistance expressed in a human rights vernacular. By masquerading as police cum death squad, mouthing the refrain of rights, and speaking their grievances through innocent corpses, La Mara Salvatrucha took on multiple roles of this post-war pageantry. All this to make their demands heard amidst the cacophony of everyday violence, if only for an ephemeral media moment.

Conclusion

I have tried to interpret the crime of the four heads—and hyper-visual violence more generally—through various lenses to understand how such events map onto and shape perceptions of unjust suffering and deserved death embedded in personal, communal, and national anxieties circulating through the post-war order. By peeling back the layered dialectics—between the past and the present, fantasy and reality, actor and audience—haphazardly revealed in acts of public brutality, I hoped to reveal how the *maras* are throwing back distorted reflections of the social and ethical order of our world.

And yet, assuming the privileged role of interpreter, the speaker for the dismembered dead drawing on all manner of epistemological tools, allows me to create an intellectual bulwark against such crimes, to duck the nightmarish force and visceral impact, the way it can become lodged in the nether regions of consciousness. I have masked the confusion and shame that arises with the urge to look upon such suffering, and then to look away because it is beyond my powers of comprehension and troubles my empathy. The

⁴⁷ Franco 2004

⁴⁸ *ibid*

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existential quandary inspired by extreme violence and cruelty that ought not to exist but does—and in massive proportions— should not be dismissed. It is integral to how violence circulates in the social body, and essential to the experience of bearing witness in the first place.

Fieldnotes August 8, 2012

I have just finished an interview with the police chief of Villa Nueva. Late for another interview, I'm trying to make my exit as politely as possible when he turns without warning to his computer—a huge flat screen mounted behind him—and pulls up an image of a half-charred naked body lying facedown in a wheelbarrow in the blazing sun, a broken length of pipe protruding from its anus. A half dozen police are gathered in the background, only their black uniform pants visible, and one man's latex-gloved hands. Then the police chief commences flipping images rapid fire across that giant screen. Images from his personal database. Smashed heads and headless bodies in San Jose Pinula minor's prison when MS broke the SUR, in Pavoncito prison when the paisas killed a bunch of mareros. A pile of half clothed male bodies, some of them beheaded, piled promiscuously on top of one another. A severed head in a pitch-black room caught in a shaft of light. Many, many others, too many to count or remember as more than a horrible blur. Pictures taken from Zeta200 cell-phones of a man posing with a human heart in his hand, a dead nine-year-old boy, ghoulish grins on decapitated heads lined up one next to the other. He flipped through them quickly, occasionally turning to me gravely as if I understood. The last was a teenage girl, the photo labeled "*La Descuartizada*" (the Dismembered Girl). Her legs severed at the hips, her arms at the elbows. The stumps layered with fat and muscle like meat in a butcher's shop, laid out on a blanket. The remains of her body glistening. For a moment I imagine she is covered in tears, but on closer inspection it turns out to be only rain or dew. I ask the police chief if he can give me the photos. He responds with an appraising glance and a grin. "Why not?"

I have all these photos still, sequestered away on a hard drive. From time to time I glance through them. The last image, *La Descuartizada*, haunts me the most, and it is the one I know least about. Who did this and why? Was it personal? Did she suffer long before she died? Her hair has been clumsily shorn away, suggesting defilement before death. There are no visible wounds besides her missing limbs. There is hardly any blood. Did the killer(s) do this to her as a means of making someone who loved her suffer? Or was she chosen at random to become the bearer of some message to some third party in a contest of wills that had nothing to do with her? Or was she involved in some bad business, crossed the wrong ally or enemy, and was in some sense an agent to her own disaster?

My questions and my curiosity are entangled with a surge of fascinated horror, a quickening of the pulse... *La Descuartizada*, this anonymous unfortunate, has made me an erstwhile witness to a crime the details of which I will never know, and now she is victim to my unkempt imagination. I am, like all witnesses distant and near, conscripted into the vortex of the crime. Her image draws me in, and I cannot help but become party to her violation.



La Descuartizada (anonymous)

Chapter 6 Liminal Redemption

Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption.
-Walter Benjamin¹

One night in September 2011, around 8pm, Mario Flores, *aka* Joker, a former clique leader of Barrio18, was shot 6 times—once in the back and 5 times in the head—in the crowded zone 12 market of Guatemala City. He was twenty five years old. Joker’s killers also gunned down his 17-year-old brother-in-law as he tried to flee. His inert body lay 10 meters away. Cecilia, Joker’s wife, arrived 15 minutes later to find her husband’s and brother’s bodies lying among spent 9mm casings and a milling crowd of policemen and civilians. She screamed and flung herself across Joker’s body while the crowd looked on and newspaper photographers snapped pictures.

Forty days later, sitting across from me at a formica table in a Wendy’s, Cecilia tries to smile. Her eyes are bloodshot. She clutches a rag soaked with paint thinner, brings it to her nose, inhales. “He always told me, ‘One of these days they’re going to kill me,’ and he said when they did, I must collect his things. He did not want anything to fall into the pigs’ hands.” Before the police could stop her, she lifted his wallet, cellphone, and jewelry from his body.

“Who is the ‘they’ he knew would come after him?” I ask.

She shrugs and looks down at the table. “Who knows?”

Joker’s body bore dozens of tattoos, the most prominent an “18” in black ink across his chest. This was enough for the police to pigeonhole him and his brother in law as extortionists from *Barrio18*, and to write off the double murder as a settling of accounts between him and his would-be victims. The newspapers followed suit. *Nuestro Diario*, the most widely read paper in the country, proclaimed “Gangster extortionists paid back with the same coin.”² In a city where the murder rate has climbed to 109 per 100,000—approaching Ciudad Juarez in homicidal violence—and only 2% of reported murders ever make it to court, cases like Joker’s are written off as brutal street justice and quickly buried beneath the rising tide of bodies that flood the daily headlines.

But scratch the surface of this story and the official narrative becomes immediately suspect. Cecilia insists along with officials who worked with Joker at CONJUVE—a government office involved in anti-violence interventions with Guatemalan youth—that Joker had left the gang two years before and dedicated himself to honest work. He was also helping vulnerable youth stay out of gangs. Cecilia claims Joker distanced himself from his clique to stop her brother Cesar from joining Barrio18 as well. “They fought and fought. Joker never wanted Cesar to be in the gang and he made him leave.” Joker extended this message to other youngsters as well. Every few weeks he would go before

¹ Benjamin 1976: 254

² *Nuestro Diario* Headline, September 9th, 2011

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schoolchildren and give his testimony, taking his shirt off to show the tattoos and scars, souvenirs of the violence he had survived.

But he had to maintain a double life. Cecilia wanted him out of the gang permanently. But, she says, he kept in regular contact with them as a means of protection. He also tried to intervene against what he saw as his gang's growing brutality against enemies and extortion victims. His advocacy put him in direct conflict with his gang's interests. "Joker is dead because he tried to keep his clique from threatening women and children," claimed another former gang leader. "Not just in the other gang, but the families of extortion victims too. He wanted to stop them from hurting innocent people. And now that he is dead I fear what will happen in his Barrio." Cecilia would not accuse her husband's homies of betraying him, but neither would she accept their offer to care for her. Huffing away her sorrow and carefully sidestepping his former colleagues, Cecilia wants to leave it all behind. "It is better to be ignorant," she says.

Were Joker and his brother-in-law killed by vigilantes in revenge for extorting shopkeepers in zone 12, as the newspapers and police claim? Or was he recognized by a rival gang, and killed in a gang war from which he had tried to extricate himself and his family? Or could it be that Joker was killed by his homies because he advocated for peace, or simply because he betrayed them with his absence? Those who know will never say. I will never know. Like so many boys and young men caught up in gang life, the possibility of escape was always thin and fading. And now, the "truth" of his fate is buried amidst the explanations that pretend to neatly tie up all loose ends.

Musing upon a Parisian café *garçon's* subtle deviations from how such a person ought to comport himself, Sartre wrote, "There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it. That he might break away and elude his condition."³ The gaze of another fixes a person in their skin, their position in society, in the dominant ideological and symbolic order.⁴ We are all bound, trapped by the expectations of others, by the ways we have learned that we must be. From the way we talk to the contours of the future we conceive for ourselves, the space of possibility in which we each live and die allows for infinite variation within strictly policed boundaries.⁵ Violating the expectations imposed by these lines of differentiation and hierarchy inevitably presents some kind of danger—a risk to the violator and to others invested in safe-guarding the status quo. But this risk is not apportioned equally. As I have shown in previous chapters, the *marero* forms a particularly

³ Sartre 1956: 92 (quoted in Hacking 1999)

⁴ Althusser defines the concept of being "fixed" by the attention of another in his famous formulation of "hailing." That is, the moment a police officer calls out, "Hey, you there," and a person turns in response, they have become, or enact their role as, a "subject" in an ideological and symbolic order. Also, see T.S. Eliot (1934):

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wiggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

⁵ Hacking 1999

dense, packed subjectivity embodying the very worst ills of post-war society. This, of course, has consequences for the young men seeking to leave the gangs. The suspicion, rage, and fear moored in the *marero* make their “condition” difficult to elude indeed.

Joker’s escape was transitory and quickly reversed. He died like so many others have and will—deaths foretold, written into their lives and their skins. His murder was sucked into the media-stream, his story forced into the stark narrative of brutal street justice and deserved death. The concatenation of contradictory loyalties, his efforts to change, or seem to change into something other than what was expected, erased. Throughout my fieldwork, I met many men struggling to carve out a place of safety against Joker’s all-too-common fate. Some were able to narrate their experiences with excruciating detail and apparent honesty. Others were so eager to distance themselves from what they once were that their stories appeared flimsy and false. A few became my friends. All of them struggled within the severely delimited space of possibility in which the radical transformation from a *marero* into something else might take place. Those that have survived continue to search for some kind of redemption—to make amends with God, with society, with themselves.

But the redemption these men seek is ever incomplete because the world they live in does not allow for its possibility. Even as they become evangelical converts, protected witnesses, drug addicts, and so on, the past they try to abandon is never far enough away. Whatever internal transformation a former gang member may have undergone, the signs of gang belonging remain in myriad signs that are not so easily erased. For some, their history is written in the tattoos and scars staining their bodies like the Mark of Cain. It remains in their physical and social habits, and most importantly, the violence they claim is behind them continues to invade and shape their communities, their homes, and daily life.

To redeem means to ransom, free, or rescue by paying a price. It also means to free from the consequences of sin, and finally to make good on a promise by performing it. Payment, purification, and performance. Essentially, it is a radical reformation of one’s relationship to one’s past, and a reinvention of one’s self in the present. While liminality most often describes a transient, shifting moment between two states, by *liminal redemption* I mean a permanent state of becoming, or failing to become, or seeming to become a new person freed from the debts of the past.

When a *marero* seeks to be something other than a *marero*, what scripts can possibly make this transformation legible—to himself, to his gang, and to his community—and what routes can lead away from a violent death that seems like fate? It is the struggle to find a way out where apparently none exists that I wish to chronicle. I want to rescue Joker’s and others’ efforts to forge themselves anew away from the crucible of the *mara*, to pull away from implacable gravity even if they so often fail. In a sense, I want to make them “grievable.”⁶ The dystopian future that gangs have come to represent for so many often seems intransigent, omnipresent, without recourse other than more violence. *Ex-mareros*’ stories destabilize this fatalistic perspective, even if the cracks and fissures they escape into are transient, fading, or false.

⁶ cf Butler 2004: 32

Certain Death

I met Cholo in Pavon prison a month after he had been transferred there from Sector 11 of the Preventivo, home to active Barrio18 members. He was bone thin, “18” tatted on each eyelid, and had a nervous tick in his jaw. For years, he had led a Barrio18 clique in a Pacific coast port city before getting arrested for homicide. Once in prison among his Guatemala City brethren, Cholo found himself isolated and picked upon. Other members beat him because he could not or would not participate in extortion rackets organized from inside the prison. To pressure him to cooperate, he says, they killed his pregnant girlfriend who had moved to Guatemala City to be near him, and chopped her into pieces. It is likely he simply could not maintain leadership and organization housed so far from his hometown. Prison authorities finally transferred him after he made his second desperate run for the guards’ office. Cholo claims his so-called homies would have killed him had the prison director refused to transfer him out. As we spoke, he kept glancing about nervously, as if he still feared some hidden assailant lurking around the corner. “They kill everyone,” he said.

One has to be in their game, you have to be in their periphery, at the edge of the game they are playing. It is a hard game, a game of death. Everything is death death death; death of drivers, death of women, death of children, death of gangsters, death of family, all the way to death of government officials... They are willing to kill anyone. They are prepared... When I belonged to the gang we were men of death... suicidal men, like terrorists.

Ex-mareros’ struggle to carve out a precarious peace between their violent past and unforgiving present is a fight for life itself. Success is contingent upon myriad factors far beyond their control, and failure can mean death, or worse. Constructed as thoroughly killable killers in the social imaginary (see previous chapter), emissaries of the worst failures of post-war progress—from a ruined justice system to rampant extortion (see chapters three and four)—and marked for execution by their old homies, they have little room to maneuver.

Their former homies refer to them as “Gayboy Gangsters”, and “*pesetas*” (pennies), because they aren’t worth a damn. In conversation with me, former *mareros* usually referred to themselves simply as “ex”, a deceptively simple term conjuring up the non-space, the identity-as-nothing in which former gang members find themselves.⁷ Many are left with only the stains of the violence—on their bodies and in their psyches—which was once their claim to power. As one incarcerated ex-MS member said, “If I spent time thinking about all those I have hurt, I would die crying.”

Guatemalan society is, in general, no more forgiving of ex-gang members than their former homies.⁸ *Mareros* have “given their soul to the devil,” they are “nothing but parasites living off of others blood, sweat, and tears,” they are “like sex addicts, but addicted to killing.” A public relations officer for a Transnational Anti-Gang unit told a

⁷ The adjective “ex” means “former, outdated”; the preposition “ex” is used to mean “out of” in reference to goods; and the noun *ex* refers to “one who formerly occupied the position or office denoted by the context”, such as a former husband or wife. “Ex” also means “to cross out, to delete with an x” and stands for the unknown. Being an “ex” is to inhabit an identity without a home, an emptiness that must be transformed by will or by happenstance into something else.

⁸ See chapter 5 for more in-depth analysis of the *marero*’s role in public discourse

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group of scholars and reporters, “You cannot change once you are in. You cannot find another road. Really, I have not met a single person who has successfully abandoned his gang.”⁹ With so little public sympathy for *mareros* and so little faith in their capacity to leave *la vida loca* behind, former gangsters struggle to find shelter and support. Going straight may in fact make their already tenuous chances at survival thinner. Still caught in the cross hairs of rival gangs and law enforcement, fleeing *mareros* must also face the wrath of their former comrades-in-arms; today, both La Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio18 prohibit most members from ever leaving, and kill those who seek to escape without permission.

The avenues to escape were not always so narrow. A decade ago, it was possible to honorably exit the gang through negotiation with the gang leader and a promise to go straight. Tired of gang life, a homie could decide to leave, settle down, go to church, get married, have kids, and get a job. The gang would honor this decision as long as “the *vato* didn’t start screwing around again, using the lessons <like robbing, intimidating, extorting> the gang taught him to enrich himself.” If an ex-gang member could stick to the straight and narrow, his former gang would look upon him kindly, as if

...maybe the *vato* has changed. As long as he didn’t get into any shit. If he goes and fucks up one time, the beast will take him. If you screw up *one time, the beast will take you*. Do not screw up. *Te tenemos vigilado* (We have you surveilled). And since the *Barrio* has so many people watching, you will always be watched.

Under the rules commonly cited by former *mareros*, once a homie left gang life behind, his gang became something like an archangel of order, enforcing its monopoly over illicit activities in the spaces, and the bodies, it claims to control. But over time, what passed as *maras*’ permissive generosity and good will towards former colleagues gone straight has worn away. Today, it is nigh impossible. “The sucker who runs gets a greenlight,”—meaning a death warrant—was a refrain I heard over and over again from active and retired gang members alike.¹⁰

The reasons given to me for loss of all viable escape routes are contradictory and ambiguous. Taken together, though, they speak of a general hardening of internal rules in order to survive under intensifying state surveillance and competition with other illicit actors. Some former and active *mareros* connect the change to heightening police pressure and the *maras*’ need to become more professional and more hermetic. A former MS soldier recalled,

In the early 2000s, the police started to take a much deeper interest in how the *maras* worked, and the *vatos* began to understand that all these guys that left by becoming Christians, a lot of them talked to the police...The logic now is “they must be killed, they know too much.” It was El Diabólico <while he was imprisoned> in Pavoncito ... who gave the order to other members of CLS to

⁹ cf Brennehan 2011. “When I asked a Guatemalan psychiatrist who treats incarcerated gang youth what can be done to help a gang member leave his gang and reintegrate into society, he shook his head in silence for several moments and finally offered a suggestion: “Take them to another planet.”

¹⁰ “green light”—“*luz verde*”—taken from US gang slang. To be “green lighted” means to carry a death warrant. Every member of your gang has the duty to kill you on sight.

start killing anyone who left. The clique grew, and the others followed their example.

Some say the order to close down exit routes came from El Salvador, where in the late 1990s and early 2000s draconian *mano dura* policing drove many members to jump ship and hide in neighboring Guatemala. To enforce loyalty and survival under heightened state pressure, Salvadoran gang leaders imposed harsher policies for those who would escape. As Andy recalled, around 2006-7,

An order was sent out to every clique: “You will enter, but you will never leave...” It came from El Salvador. Many from there came fleeing here, and so we found them. “What’s this dude doing here?”

“I left, but I’m a Christian.”

So they would call. “That’s right brother (*Simon carnal*),” <they would answer> “The guy went running and here we’re getting fucked.”

It was lost, you understand. With all of <the pressure>, we had to just kill those who fled.¹¹

Finally, there is widespread consensus—both among gangsters and security experts—that too many homies claiming to go straight instead went into business for themselves, becoming free-lance *sicarios* (hitmen), joining local drug cartels, or starting up their own extortion networks. The *maras*, caught up in a constant feud against each other and reeling from heightened police pressure, could not abide these interlopers.

Whatever the combination of causes closing down previously available exits from the *mara*, today the bottom-line is clear: *Ex-mareros*, already hunted by police, vigilantes, and rival gangs, must survive the wrath of their former homies as well. The vast majority—upwards of 90% according to some gang rehabilitation organizations—do not survive.

The Problem of Attribution

What drives a gang member to give up *la vida loca* and pursue a peaceful existence? What kinds of policies and programs, if any, can draw *mareros* out of the gang and help them survive? For government ministries, non-government organizations (NGOs), and funding institutions involved in anti-violence work, the problem of helping boys and young men leave gang life begins with a basic conundrum of cause and effect. This conundrum, in policy-speak, is known as “the problem of attribution.”

As the director of an anti-violence NGO lamented, “Any number of events, experiences, or influences can lead a gangster to say ‘no more.’ Maybe his brother gets killed, and he doesn’t want to die too and leave his mother alone. Maybe he has a child and decides he wants to be there for his kid. Maybe the gang betrays him and he’s disgusted and wants something different.”¹²

The motives and conditions pushing gang members out of violence are multifarious and contingent. This is a problem for many do-gooder groups because most

¹¹ Other informants root the trend to close down exit routes to the breaking of the SUR in Guatemala—the inter-gang agreement that prohibited violence inside the prisons—in August of 2005.

¹² Aguilar, I. 2011

fundes, especially large state donors like the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the biggest single source of money for Central American security and anti-violence programs, are not interested in such nuanced entanglements. Since most peaceful gang intervention projects depend on international funding, these agencies' standards are of primary importance. Projects which promise to rehabilitate *ex-mareros* must demonstrate that their strategy will have concrete benefits: a direct and verifiable reduction of violence, measured by a drop in homicides, stolen cell-phones, femicides, and so on. As Mark Lopes, a USAID official in charge of overseeing projects in Central America, said, "I want my staff to connect the programs we fund with a murder that hasn't happened yet."¹³

And then there is the problem of scale. Most gang rehabilitation projects that have even a modicum of success work on a local basis, dependent upon a single social worker, priest, or official who has enough cachet with his or her community to make a difference. But this approach flies in the face of what most international donors want to support. "Don't talk to me about one priest, or one nun, and how charismatic they are," Lopes exclaimed. "I want to deal with hundreds of thousands of lives. How can I make my money work for that many people? If a project rests on the good will of one nun or one priest, how can it be sustainable?"

Growing gang intervention projects beyond the local—a single community, or a single church parish—can be quite difficult, however. One widely celebrated success-story came from Ciudad Peronia, a peri-urban community of Guatemala City where for years war between *Los Metales* and *Los Caballos* had terrorized the community. In 2009, Pastor Mardoqueo, an evangelical minister who lives in Peronia directing a church, school, and community center, brokered an unprecedented peace between the two gangs. I spoke with him in a KFC in Guatemala City in 2011. He was open, articulate, and tired of being interviewed. He only agreed to talk to me after I convinced him I was not a journalist. In his experience, all journalists do, "...is ask questions, treat everyone like a circus animal, use our stories like vultures, and then leave."

"There are 65,000 people in Peronia," he said. "And in 2009 there were 220 gang members. The gangs were responsible for 75% of the violence—and I thought to myself, 'How is it possible that 200 people determine the fate of 65,000, make 65,000 live in fear?' There were five shootings a week, many of them in public spaces."

Leaders of both gangs sought him out to help them make peace. On July 1st, 2009, *Los Metales* and *Los Caballos* made a formal truce. They invited the media, who made it a spectacle. Mardoqueo had offered to go to other churches, leaders of the local business community, and municipal and national governments to gather funds and support, and to try to expand the project to other communities. But, he discovered, no one would help. Other church leaders were jealous of the fame Mardoqueo had garnered, and protective of their positions in their communities. The national finance minister offered to lend him \$50,000 of international donor money if he could guarantee the investment with matching funds. "I told him, 'If I had that kind of money I wouldn't be here asking for more. And if the *mareros* knew I had \$50,000 they would kill me!'" The business sector and local representatives of government proved more fractious and difficult to deal with than the *mareros* had been. "Some of them threatened to show up at meetings armed with pistols, and often refused to sit at the same table as their rivals."

¹³ Lopes 2014

Officials from USAID approached him with an offer of \$30,000. But they would give him the money only *if* he changed his project from one of “reinsertion”—helping former gang members find jobs and reintegrate into society—to “prevention”, stopping kids from joining gangs. As a general policy, the US government does not offer support to criminals, even reformed ones. “We have no funds for what you are doing.” USAID officials told him. Mardoqueo’s reply: “But we don’t need prevention.”

In the end, Mardoqueo gave up on trying to garner support from outsiders, or go beyond his community. He claims that out of the 200 odd *mareros* in Ciudad Peronia, thirty had established stable lives. The others still struggled with drug addiction, deep poverty, or crime. “The problem *mareros* face is something on the inside,” he said in parting. “But it goes deep, and the church cannot help them with all that they need. The church can only help with spiritual problems, but the rest? Who will assist with their poverty, the educational training they need, and the issues with justice and security that they face everyday?”

However, the vast majority of Guatemalans share the sentiments directing US funding policies: no succor of any kind for criminals, period. Amidst the overwhelming poverty and inequality defining Guatemalan society today, attending to *mareros*’ lives and livelihoods strikes many as wrongheaded, naïve, and deeply unfair.

Mareros deserve no help not only because they have caused such pain to others, but also because they will twist any material aid to evil ends. I heard many tales of *mareros* turning gifts of good will to their own devices. It is difficult to tell what is true and what is urban myth—like the story of the church group that provided incarcerated MS members with a clutch of rabbits so they could establish a prison rabbit farm. The prisoners’ rabbits multiplied quickly, and all seemed to be going to plan. Until guards discovered that the rabbits had been put to work burrowing an escape tunnel beneath the prison walls.

A public prosecutor related a slightly more plausible account of a 2008 NGO project to give *ex-mareros* honest work. Using international and local funding, the NGO employed them in a metalworking shop where they could learn how to make fences, balcony railings and the like. The Guatemalan government matched funds for materials and workspace. “Perfect,” the prosecutor said,

And they went through the process... They bought the welding equipment, and they gave them the iron, and the metal sheeting for doors, and some model frames to make pretty designs... It worked for a few days. Then, they made *armas hechizas* (homemade guns). They didn’t make any balcony railings, or doors, or window-frames. Nothing. They were like, “Why should we make doors, why should we make windows? Anyway, one has to work to make them, and they’re difficult to sell. Better to make guns.” They circulated dozens of homemade guns in Villa Nueva, and the NGO went down.

The moral of the story is clear; any tool, any favor offered the gangs will be turned against society for the *mareros*’ benefit, often in the most violent way possible.

Body and Soul

Once a *marero*, always a *marero*, as the saying goes. “That’s why,” Andy said, “When you enter now they tell you that there will be no turning over another leaf, your soul already

belongs to the *barrio*, to the *bestia* (devil).¹⁴ The devil will have his due. To deprive him of it, many men try to escape the gang by finding sanctuary with God, particularly an Evangelical God, who intervenes on their behalf.

Today, being born again as a good Evangelical Christian has become the most popular “peaceful” answer to and exit from *maras* in Guatemala, Central America, and, indeed, throughout the Americas.¹⁵ *Ex-marero* converts are part of the Evangelical Christian phenomenon sweeping through post-cold War Central America and other parts of Latin America. Today, nearly half of Guatemala’s population is either charismatic or Pentecostal Christian.¹⁶ Evangelical Christian “gang ministries” have grown in number and reach throughout the post-war period. With North American Evangelical groups flush with cash and eager to extend their good-will into the blighted corners of Central America, today they make Guatemala’s (and Central America’s) most popular and well-funded violence prevention initiatives.¹⁷ In effect, rampant gang violence has been made “...into a Christian problem with a Christian solution” attractive beyond the circles of the faithful themselves.¹⁸ Today, gang ministries appear as the best, if not the only viable peaceful solution for liberal and ostensibly secular security officials throughout the Americas.

Becoming a good Christian no longer guarantees an *ex-marero*’s survival. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the single most convincing transformation through which a former gangster can show the world, and himself, that he is redeemed. Ex-gangsters-cum-good-Christians’ narratives tend to follow a particular, and familiar, script; conversion to faith provoked by great trial and suffering—physical and/or psychological—and a transformation of soul and body through which they try to keep the past firmly in the past.

David

David is a former member of Los Cyclones Salvatrucha, a now defunct Mara Salvatrucha clique that once operated in Zone 18 of Guatemala City. David is 33, an evangelical Christian who gives regular testimonies in praise of God and conversion away from gang life. I met him in the *Gloria de Dios* (Glory of God) Ministry in the neighborhood where he grew up. When he was a 23-year old *marero*, members of a rival gang shot him three times through the head. “The first thing I thought of was of my family,” his voice was high-pitched and strained, as if speaking took great effort.

It is a kind of terror that I cannot explain in words. When I was in the street, they came with scissors and cut off my clothes. I put my arm to one side and there were pools of blood. In the middle of a situation like that... really it’s terrible, and there are no words. The loss of blood... you have an incredible thirst... “Water, I was saying, “water”. I wanted to go to sleep, the body was giving up. But I fought, because I knew if I went to sleep I wouldn’t wake up... I didn’t think about God,

¹⁴ Andy 2012a

¹⁵ The fist official “gang czar” of Los Angeles was Pastor Jeff Car, a minister with a liberal Evangelical church called Sojourners/Call for Renewal (Helfand 2007)
<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/20/local/me-gang20>

¹⁶ Pew Forum 2006

¹⁷ O’neill 2009a

¹⁸ *ibid*: 64

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but I wondered if there was a heaven or hell. If I die, I thought, I won't have done anything good... I'd seen many of my companions hit the ground and never get up again. Just the yellowtape. I awoke in another place, all hooked up, a bullet lodged in my jaw... a doctor told me that I was part of God's plan, because it was a miracle I was still alive.

The bullets did irreparable harm to his optical nerve, leaving him permanently blind, and damaged his motor skills. He spent the next couple years re-learning how to do the simplest tasks. For several months, he remained a member of La Mara Salvatrucha, but finally had to have a meeting with the gang and explain that as a *marero*, he could do nothing and give nothing. They agreed, and released him of any further obligation, and left him to his own devices.

Having lost his capacity to be a worthwhile soldier for MS, and abandoned by those for whom he had been willing to kill and be killed, David was lost. He wanted a new life away from the drugs and the violence, but he says, man's will is weak. By himself, he was unable to turn away from the constant temptation of temporary pleasures and swollen pride gang life gave him. But, he says, God was not done with him. God sent two men, catechists from a local church, to bring him into the flock. For months, David refused. He even drew a gun at one point, threatening to shoot them through his front door. But they kept coming, and David started going to church. Then, a dramatic transformation took place.

Look, my flesh, my ego, my pride as a *marero*, all of it began to break down. God began to break me, to put me to pieces.... The most beautiful thing is that he himself came to put the pieces back together again, he reformed me after breaking me down. He put me back together, but in a distinct form, in a different way, with a different heart. Because as a *marero*, one has no feelings. There is no love for fellow man, there is NOTHING, there exists no God, no love. Love does not exist ...except for love of the drugs...But love for God, love towards children, to show love to children, all of that does not exist. But God put all of this anew into my heart. So it was an impressive thing because what I could not do with my effort, my will, God was able to do. God did it... Many times I had tried to leave by myself, by my will, but man's will breaks too easily.

David has since transformed his broken body into a living message against violence. Unlike others who hide or burn away their gang tattoos, he will not give them up. He bears an M and an S tatted on each of his elbows, among many others, which he refuses to even cover with a long sleeved shirt. Today he makes the rounds at several Evangelical churches, some of them in rival gang territories, his scarred and tattooed body a packed message and warning for children who would join up with the gangs.

Still, he says, "If I had not been blinded, I would still be with the gang, and I would probably be dead." The only other surviving members of his gang—he counted off three— are incarcerated for life.

So, it's like when you eat cake, I chose the best slice, right, because I am outside and I can enjoy my liberty... and I'm not talking about enjoying life on the street. No. I'm talking about the liberty that God has given me to speak of him, of having

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gotten to know him...Many have died that don't have tattoos. And I, who is so stained, and I go about with just a t-shirt through all this, no one has come up and said, "Look, remember what you did to me that one time," or, "You are from MS," and shot me. Never. I have confidence that He who goes with me is more powerful than any weapon.

He has faced death threats. Once after a sermon in *Barrio18* territory, two boys attacked him outside the church. After forcing him to his knees, they demanded he explain the tattoos on his arms. "Whatsup? You're of the Letters.' And I said to them, 'I was of the Two Letters. Now I serve God.' I begged their forgiveness for the hurt my gang might have done them." They did not kill him, but they slashed his elbows with broken glass to cut away the tattoos, and left him bleeding on the sidewalk.

David says it was God that kept him alive. It was God that was helping him, protecting him, because he was engaged in God's work. This belief has given him the strength to face incalculable dangers as he walks sightless through the territories of his former enemies. His faith is his shield that protects him from his past sins, and the lens through which he interprets all the death he has witnessed while, against all odds, he has survived.

Secret

I met Secret in a Wendy's on the corner of Guatemala City's central park. The bells of the national cathedral chimed the hour, mixing with the reggaeton music pumping from the storefronts. Secret is a tall, light-skinned *ladino* with a big belly and scarred hands. He showed me where the knuckles were disjointed and the small bones in his left wrist broken. Today he goes by Juan Gabriel, but when he was 14 and joined a *Barrio18* clique in zone 5 of Guatemala City they gave him the *apodo* Secret because, he says, he never shut up. People who knew him when he was an active gang member speak of his violent temper. For an imagined slight, he once macheted a man across the collarbone in broad daylight on a crowded street. Secret is now 32, and has been out of the gang for a decade.

When we met—17 years after he joined and a decade after he left the gang for good, Secret was wearing a long sleeve rugby jersey to hide the gang tattoos on his arms. He had already removed the most visible ones on his neck and wrists. To lose these vestigial markings of gang membership Silence went once a month to Alianza Jovenes, an anti-violence NGO. A trained nurse, who doubled as the receptionist, donned UV glasses and went to work on him with a laser gun. The machine, bought with USAID dollars, emits rapid-fire pulses of heat and light. The tattoo ink is embedded in several epidermal layers. The laser heats the skin cells until the ink boils, bursts the cell walls and dissipates into the blood. Depending on the color of the ink and the location and age of the tattoo, the experience can range from mildly uncomfortable to extremely painful. Elbows and knees are particularly tender, and yellow ink is the most excruciating to remove.¹⁹

Sitting across from him at Wendy's, I asked to see his tattoos. Secret glanced nervously over his shoulder, and rolled up his sleeve. He had a blue compression wrap on his right forearm and up past the elbow, faded and frayed, covering some of his half removed tattoos. He scanned the other customers again. There were few, and none were

¹⁹ The organization asks no questions of their clients. They might be *ex-mareros* on the lam, or simply poor urbanites who want to get rid of tattoos that provoke so much suspicion.

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paying any attention to us. He gingerly peeled back the compression wrap. There was a blotched demon's hand throwing a gang sign, a roughly drawn skyscraper, and an 8-ball etched into his forearm and bicep. The lines of the hand and skyscraper had begun to blur, like the images of a dream upon waking, and the 8-ball faded to an ugly, uncertain smudge. Silence was waiting for these images to be erased completely, when he would have only the mottled scars of their exorcism, discolored patches of skin that would make his adolescent past with Barrio18 irretrievable to all but the keenest observer. But he can only visit the free clinic once a month, so his immaculate body is still years away.

An integral part of gangs' mystique and their visual circulation, *marra* tattoos are hieroglyphs communicating *mareros'* loyalty, history of violent deeds and incarceration, eulogies to slain comrades and loved ones, and so on. Depending on the audience, they inspire respect, fear, disgust, or wonder.²⁰ With obvious relish, an incarcerated *marero* recalled the fear that showing his tattoos to robbery victims inspired. "We could rob a gasoline station with just a water pistol because of our tattoos." Over the last two decades, however, gang tattoos became the easiest way for law enforcement and vigilante groups to identify gang members, literally trapping tattooed *mareros* in their skins. Today, as I explored in the previous chapter, tattoos are signs of subversion that arouse immediate suspicion, and gang tattoos a sure sign of deserved death. These days, most *mareros* still on the street don't even get gang tattoos, and many only start etching their allegiance on their bodies once they've received long prison sentences. It still works to advertise the *marra* brand. Images of *mareros'* leering tattooed faces, long-nailed fingers curled into gang signs, gesticulating into the camera from packed prison cells have become iconic worldwide.²¹

For his part, Secret wants his body immaculate to escape the image of what he was and now must convince the world he is not.

The Dream of Redemption

Before Secret could begin to transform his body, he says, he had to transform his soul. He claims his spiritual redemption arrived unbidden one night in prison on the eve of a riot. He had promised to throw himself into the front lines, and would have surely died had God not intervened and set him free. At the time, he was caught up in his violent destiny, convinced there was no other future. "The point is I had zero probability of being able to go straight successfully because I didn't have the will to do it. I had no hope of being able to do it."²² For me it was preferable to die, maybe in a prison riot... I was going to die like a hero."

Then, on a freezing night in the isolation block of Pavoncito prison, he had a dream of biblical proportions. In the many interviews I conducted with Secret, he often stumbled over his words, got stuck in minor tangents, or spoke so vaguely that we had to backtrack. He would apologize for his lack of eloquence, lamenting his adolescent addictions to crack, *pegamiento* and other substances that addled his brain. But each time

²⁰ Gang tattoos can be useful as "criminal capital." (McCarthy and Hagan 2001)

²¹ CF Discovery Channel's "The Most Dangerous Gang in America"

²² Go straight-*cuadrarme*

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he recounted this vision of God and of his redeemed self, he spoke articulately and without hesitation, as if he had practiced the telling many times.

And then I had a dream that changed my life. I dreamed I was walking in another country, and I was listening to a young man who was telling me he had lived the same as I had lived, the same that I had suffered, and that he had changed. In my dream I was under the impression that someone had told him my experience and that this dude was making stuff up so that I would believe in his change and then believe that I myself could do it. “But,” I said to myself, “He’s not going to convert me like that.”

...For all that I had lived, I came to the conclusion that God did not exist, the Devil did not exist, and Hell did not exist. I became a total atheist. The only thing I carried was that I could create life, and I could also take it away. This and nothing more. But when this young man tells me to look into his eyes, he said “What you are seeing in me is what God has in store for you.” When he says this to me it hit me. To believe that I could do something better than what I was doing. This was something... appealing. Truly, I wanted to be someone different. I never wanted to be a delinquent. A criminal. Psychological studies and the experts say a psychopath, a criminal, or a sociopath isn’t born, he’s formed (*no nace, se hace*). I am formed. So I can be reformed. You understand?

So I’m listening to my history, and this young man says. “Look at me, you know me.” But I had never seen him. And my answer was “No, I don’t know you.”

“Look closely. This is what God will do with you.” When I looked closely, and my vision cleared, he was myself. The only reason I didn’t recognize him was because I had changed. It was no longer the face of that *marero*, of that demon that I saw in the mirror every morning when I got out of bed. Or of that drug addict. I was totally changed. Different. After that dream and through to today, my life was never the same. My heart was changed. I could never again go back to being a criminal.

Dreams are never easy to recount in full, dancing away like a will-o-the-wisp upon waking. Secret must have worked hard to accentuate and draw more clearly in his mind’s eye the vision of God and of his changed self, dependent as he was upon this evidence of divine intervention to convince his gang and, perhaps, himself, that real change was possible, that he had jumped tracks and could no longer follow the gangs’ edicts.

Secret is clear that it was not desire to change that was lacking, but will and fortitude against temptation. The will and fortitude could not be found in his tattered self, but had to be a gift of divine deliverance that transformed him from the inside out. He held up his dream as evidence of his change. I can see him practicing its telling, getting it just right. When Secret returned to his homies on the street, he told them of his dream and that he was transformed. But they did not believe.

The last thing they made me do was that I had to keep a bible with me like a shadow to show them that I really had changed. Because they said, “You can’t change. You will not change. Know what, we’ll give you like a vacation. Go,

enjoy yourself, relax. But in three months you're going to come back and ask us for one more opportunity."

Defying his homies' expectations, Secret did not return to the fold. He ended up alone on the street. He couldn't go to his family because he did not want to put them in danger and anyway he had little connection with them. He went deep into drugs—huffing solvent, smoking crack, sleeping on scraps of cardboard in the street, and sometimes begging for food. But he stayed away from his gang and, for a time, they left him alone.²³

Then, in August of 2005, MS broke the SUR, killing 36 incarcerated Barrio18 members, many of them leaders. Barrio18 was left reeling. A few weeks later, Secret got word that he and all other former gang members had to report back to the gang. Their retirement was cut short. If they did not respond within a few weeks, the gang would hunt them down. Secret refused to return, and he learned later that his gang had indeed put out the order for his death. To this day, he lives in fear that he might be recognized—on the busses and in the transit centers where he works selling cookies as an ambulant vendor, or simply walking in the street. Several times, on my way through El Trebol market, I have seen him skulking around the bus depot. He says he must remain constantly vigilant for surviving members of his gang who might recognize him and carry through with the punishment reserved for all deserters.

A decade ago, Secret's performance of his conversion—the clarity of his dream, his determination to follow it—was sufficient to convince his gang to let him leave, and to lend him enough courage to radically change his life. But the *maras'* intensifying competition in and outside the prisons and growing police pressure caught up with him. He is still pursuing that vision of himself he saw in his dream, burning away the last physical vestiges of his gang-life so that his body will resemble what he says his soul has become.

The Evangelical Answer?

The spectacular failures of harsh, punitive law and order strategies to repress gangs and reduce out-of-control crime have pushed Central American governments and international donors to stress more "integrated" approaches to insecurity, combining heightened policing with "soft" reintegration and rehabilitation efforts.²⁴ Supporters of the Evangelical approach tout it as the best non-violent means of curtailing gang membership—combining spiritual discourse with modern-day self-help and confidence building rhetoric to transform *mareros* from the inside out.²⁵

Secret, David, and other *ex-mareros* who seek refuge in the church, find a place to belong. The simplified, starkly drawn dichotomies and choices the church offers resonate deeply, and provide an alternative community that in many ways mirror the *maras* themselves. As a Guatemalan anti-violence expert said, "*Mareros*... often find themselves already inside the discourse of sin and guilt, and the great pain of spiritual loss...Great

²³ He was lucky. Barrio18 is not as puritanical regarding serious drug use as MS is known to be. The latter has executed current and former members who become obviously and abjectly addicted to drugs, besmirching MS' reputation for hard-line discipline.

²⁴ See O'Neil (2009) for an in-depth look at how Evangelical Christian based anti-gang programs approach the problem of violence, redemption, and gang intervention in Guatemala.

²⁵ *ibid*

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pain is part of their lives. They usually join gangs because they're running from some pain. And to get in they must undergo a gauntlet of giving and receiving pain. So pain is normalized, and Evangelical organizations use fear of pain as encouragement to avoid sin."²⁶

However, *Mano Dura* and Evangelical interventions are, in a sense, flipsides of the same coin. *Mano Dura*'s populist rhetoric promises to eliminate urban violence by using any means necessary to kill or incarcerate *mareros* and other criminals. For proponents of such punitive measures, urban crime will be eradicated through the elimination of gang members—and the “criminal element” in general—often by any means necessary.

Likewise, the Evangelical answer roots urban violence within the *marero* himself. “Only by cleansing his stained soul,” it proclaims, “can peace be attained.” Like *Mano Dura*, the Evangelical approach shoves the structural origins of gang violence—severe poverty and inequality, the failing shell of democracy, a corrupted police force and porous prisons, and so on—into the background, shifting attention from economic and political conditions and the historical roots of post-war disorder to the interior domain of the individual.

By removing criminal bodies from the street, *Mano Dura* promises to excise the cancer of crime. The Evangelical approach shifts security concerns from the bodies in the street to state of the soul. Accordingly, *maras*, as social issue and security problem, begin “...within each person (with one's thoughts, attitudes, habits, and sense of self) and can be rectified only through a concerted Christian effort to adjust one's relations to one's own self.”²⁷ Still, such talk plays easily into the hands of those who would make gangs into a singular cause of criminal violence rather than an expression of deepening conditions of violation rooted in post-war society and beyond. Seen in this light, Evangelical Christianity's popularity as an anti-gang strategy demonstrates a widespread refusal to understand or accept the complexity of the problem.

Then again, given the abject failure of every policy initiative meant to reduce urban violence, and the rising death tolls in poor urban communities, a retreat to the immaterial and otherworldly could be understood as a collective act of desperation. Even if the bodies of children and young adults must die, their souls can survive. Violent death has become so common and hopes of saving lives dashed so continuously that targeting the soul becomes a matter of pragmatic choice. “When you are facing death you must ask for forgiveness from Christ...” said a woman who volunteered with the Gloria de Dios ministry where David preaches.

We must be ready for when death surprises us. One day I was in my house and I heard a shoot out. People were around a boy who had been shot. And I lifted him up and told him to start praying. And we prayed together until his lips got pale and voice quiet and then he died in my arms. I left and went back to my house because my job was done.

Despite its widespread failure to save *ex-marero* lives, Evangelical Christianity remains a favored script through which former gangsters can convince the society they live in that they have truly changed. It is still the best, and perhaps the only, way of

²⁶ Aguilar 2011

²⁷*ibid*: 70

making their transformation away from gang life intelligible to the society in which they live as well as to themselves. The stark dichotomies of Christian faith—Heaven and Hell, God and Devil, damnation and redemption—provide a clear road map to salvation for men ready to leave gang life behind. In this sense, written out of every other script, *mareros* must follow the same route to enlightenment western society has forced upon “barbarous savages” since the conquest of the Americas, when embracing the Christian faith and performing its rites was the only means by which conquered natives could hope to survive colonial conquest.

But what if the subject who seeking to change does not buy into the script, and will not draw himself into the simple archetypes it permits? As my friend Calavera, a former MS soldier, said. “*El Diablo es Diablo por ser viejo*”, which translates, roughly, into, “The Devil is the Devil because he is old.”²⁸ I take this to mean that the master of evil is not evil because he was born so, but because he has lived long enough to know that being evil is quite practical. Or, that is, experience is worth more than innate intelligence. Likewise, the *maras* were forged out of the crucible of post-war society, and have developed a *modus vivendi* to fit their environs. Whatever desire a person may have to change, the world does not change with them, and they must find ways to navigate it.

Liminal Redemption

The last example I offer is, for me, the most confusing to grapple with, because the subject himself refuses an easy out from his violent past. From 14 to 20 years of age, Calavera was a member of La Mara Salvatrucha in zone 3 of Guatemala City in a neighborhood abutting the city cemetery. He joined up with Locos Salvatrucha de Northside when neighborhood drug traffickers shot and killed his older brother, Giovanni, the *ramflero* (leader) of another MS clique, in a drive by. At 19 years of age he went to prison for drug trafficking, and served six years. Luckily for him he has no gang tattoos. Giovanni was “blue with ink” and before he died warned Calavera never to mark himself so obviously. Still, upon leaving prison he entered a world stained with his former life, and with few viable options for honest work. Two weeks out, he said to me,

So much has changed. So much that sometimes I’m like, “What’s happening to me? Who am I? One is accustomed to the easy way, and suddenly, boom, to stop oneself and try to follow a straight path. It costs me. It’s not just saying, “Yes I can do it...” well, he who has always walked straight, it doesn’t cost him so much maybe. But he who hasn’t been that way... Oh god, it costs a ton. ... It is a great fight with myself.

The path Calavera has walked since gaining his freedom captures the essence of liminal redemption. Returning to work with MS is not an option, but temptations to return to “the easy way”, and real or imagined threats connected to his past, appear again and again. Some are ghostly reminders provoking long buried memories to rise again. Others are terribly clear and present poltergeists haunting his neighborhood, his home, his family. Unwilling or unable to perform what he calls the “charade” of the born-again Christian converts, Calavera carves his own path—a narrow, treacherous route between

²⁸ The more common form of this saying is, “*Mas sabe el Diablo por viejo que por diablo*” (The Devil knows more from being old than from being cunning/clever).

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specters of violence both old and new. What follows is a chronicle of Calavera's past and present in which I will linger on the moments of choice and decision, chance and contingency, temptation and resolution he and his family have lived as they try to keep hopes of a better future alive.

November 2013

Finally, two years after I met him in prison, and 18 months after his release, Calavera invites me to his family's home. He has told me of this place many times, but never invited me there because it was not safe even for him. I am sick with fever. I nearly got lost on my way from a downtown mall, where I had spent an hour practically hallucinating in a fancy café as I waited for a government official who never showed up.

Calavera meets me on the steps before the door, mumbling. "Remember, this is a humble home." This is where narco-traffickers shot his brother with an AK47. Long ago somebody plastered and painted over the bullet holes scattered about the front entrance. At my request Calavera traces his fingers across the constellation etched into his memory. Inside, beneath the dim light of a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling I look upon Calavera's lineage. There are photographs of his great grandparents, who bought this house in the 1920s when General Ubico ruled the banana republic. His grandfather is pictured dressed in a *futbolista* (soccer player) uniform from the 1960s. He would play for a few *quetzales* or simply room and board. His father appears as a chubby adolescent, before he became a drug dealer and an addict. He spent most of Calavera's childhood in and out of prison. They were estranged for years before making amends while both serving their sentences in Pavon. There are many others; faded pictures of weddings and baptisms, the subjects tinged with that grim, alien quality old photographs always seem to invoke. Giovanni's portrait, before he had tattoos, hangs prominently among the family memorabilia. A serious 16 year old, with Calavera's same eyes and nose. His is the newest photograph—the color still vibrant—as if the family stopped recording their lives once he died.

I have brought the fixings for a *churrascero* (barbecue) to thank Calavera and his family for their friendship, celebrate Calavera's homecoming, and bid a proper farewell. I know I will not be returning to Guatemala for a long while. Calavera guides me through two dark rooms cluttered with old tables and book-shelves, and into an inner courtyard. The courtyard was once protected from the elements, but part of the roof has caved in, leaving the back third open to the sun and the rain. Beneath the crumbling brickwork are rotting beams and tangled wire. The intact walls are turquoise, and Calavera's grandfather has hung dozens of dolls, puppets, and plastic figurines. "He's a creative man," Calavera says, smiling ruefully. "And a bit crazy." C3PO huddles with several ewoks above the bathroom. A dusty teddy bear with angel wings hangs above the entrance to the grandfather's room, and here and there bald baby dolls smile vacuously into the dim.

Rain from a morning storm has gathered in shimmering pools at the far end of the courtyard, behind where Calavera's sister Sandra is preparing the barbecue. She greets me warmly, her four daughters lined up age wise beside her, each of them hugging me and kissing me on the cheek.

I sit down in a broken down chair against the wall and Calavera brings me a Coca Cola. I watch the children play—a tiny sprite of a girl pushes a baby in a crib about on the floor. Laughing and making faces. A little boy, the skin across one side of his face

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cracked and scaled, sits on the ground before me and asks me questions about my country. Tinkling laughter, sunshine through the broken ceiling...

Sandra orders me to the table, and portions out lunch to me, Calavera, and his grandfather. Calavera talks about his new job with an anti-violence NGO that works inside the prisons. He accompanies social workers a few times a week, and assists with carpentry and painting classes, helping out some of his old buddies still stuck inside. He also brings in a little money painting portraits in a little kiosk along 6th Avenue in zone 1. It's not much money, but it's a start. Getting regular employment has been nearly impossible because of his record and his lack of education. He seems calmer, happier than I've seen him since he got out of prison a year and a half ago. I think about how Calavera has maybe, just maybe, finally arrived to a place of safety and peace. It has been a long road.

April 2001

My brother got up to go to the door and there outside was a chick they called La Shadow. She was of my brother's clique but she was signaling to like seven guys, all with AK47s and M16s. They start firing in the front of the house. A comrade who was named Vaquero, who is still alive in Boqueron <prison>, was the first to start firing back... Others too. Casper had a gun, but he just hid under a table. They were trying to come in, but when they saw people were firing back they ran. They hit my brother with one bullet, one and no more, in the leg. But in the hospital they didn't want to attend to him, since like he was so tattooed... We were really angry and they nearly threw us out. But we were able to talk with my brother and he told us who it was and everything and we tried to find a way to calm him down. We thought he was going to survive because it wasn't a mortal wound or anything. In the hospital they gave him anesthesia and he never woke up.

After Giovanni died, Casper started in trying to recruit Calavera to join his Northside Salvatrucha clique. Sandra wanted to keep him from joining up with the Mara. But then another MS clique killed her ex-sureño husband for his desertion, and 14-year-old Calavera joined up with Casper to get some income to help his family and to avenge his brother's death.

They made him do things that they could not. He could move through spaces prohibited to known members of the gang, many with tattoos betraying their allegiances. He committed many murders on their behalf, and served a short stint as a contract killer with narcotraffickers. He moved up to running extortion rackets and eventually selling and transporting crack and cocaine.

January 2006

Calavera was arrested with several thousand *quetzales* worth of crack cocaine. It was on one of the bridges on road connecting Guatemala City to Villa Nueva. The guy riding point on another motorcycle panicked when he saw the police checkpoint, failed to warn Calavera, and sped away. Calavera tried to ditch the backpack with the drugs by a telephone pole, but an old woman picked it up and brought it to the cops. The police already had his picture. He was known as an MS gang member. So upon arrest, they

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brought him directly to Boqueron. But Calavera did not want to go in there. He knew that a lot of guys ended up dismembered or disappeared leaving Boqueron on transfers, because Boqueron is reserved for active Mara Salvatrucha members. “The police wait for you to leave and then nab you.” So he told the police he was an *ex*, that he didn’t have anything to do with the Mara anymore and that if they put him in Boqueron he would get killed and that human rights organizations would be breathing down their necks. Apparently, they believed him, because he ended up incarcerated with the general population.

He received a six-year sentence. The stipend La Mara Salvatrucha promises to every homey never arrived, and Calavera grew disgusted with Casper’s hypocrisy and his gang’s increasingly uncontrolled brutality towards women and children. After reading about a murder his gang pulled off against a Barrio18 member in which an infant was killed in the crossfire, he tried to order the perpetrator punished. “An ungrown child has not lived what an adult has, and is not conscious of anything!” But Casper and the others ignored him. After that, he cut off communication with the Mara completely.

On the street, Casper continued to make frequent visits to Calavera’s home where Sandra lived with her children. He wanted her to work for him. She refused. However, a few months before Calavera completed his sentence, their mother started working for Casper. She would not tell her children how exactly she was involved, but they suspected, they still suspect, that she moves weapons and even murdered bodies for the gang. Sandra begged her not to tell Casper that Calavera would soon be free.

February 2012

Calavera completed his six-year sentence and walked free. His sister and Eddy, his longtime friend and adopted brother from the orphanage where they both lived as children, came to pick him up. Both Calavera and Sandra were desperate to live under the same roof again, but with Casper still making regular visits, and their mother so deeply involved, it seemed impossible. Instead, he went to live with Eddy and his wife and children. His mother does not know Eddy’s address and he did not tell her.

Shortly after Calavera’s release, I met with his sister Sandra in a fancy zone 1 coffeeshop. When I asked about her relationship with Calavera’s old homies, she exclaimed. “El Casper is *bad*, really bad. He only thinks about dismembering people, he doesn’t even consider killing someone in a normal way. No! He thinks only of torturing and dismembering them. He’s gone bad, that one.

In a guttural voice, she says, “I’m gonna turn him into *ceviche*.’ That’s how he talks. I have seen so many *patojos* (young kids) get caught up with Casper and his people – kids who are 14 or 15. Some of them are dead, and others are in Gaviotas, for double or triple homicide. He would send anyone into the wolf’s mouth.²⁹ He makes a lot of money, but he pays practically nothing. He has the look of a “*burguesito*” (petit bourgeois) rolling around in his brand new Toyota Yaris. He always dresses in the best that there is, and talks about his work as if he were tired of it. But he doesn’t do anything. He just gives orders. Casper is 30, but he looks like a young kid of 20 because... he injects his face.” She giggles. “For vanity. Because, he says, he doesn’t want to grow old.”

²⁹ A juvenile prison reserved for Mara Salvatrucha members

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The day before our interview, Casper walked into Sandra's home without knocking, wearing a spotless Armani t-shirt and Prada shades. His face was slightly red and swollen across the forehead from another botox session. "He told me again that he would pay my rent, he would pay my children's school fees, plus 800 <quetzales> weekly, and everything." She said. "Almost 3000 *quetzales* a month, if I would work for them... It's a temptation because I have people to look after. My brother, my daughters... But I won't do it. Everything that I have lived and everything my family has suffered in all this time is because of *them*."

"What do they want from you?" I asked.

"They want a *punto de drogas* (place to sell drugs). They want me to serve them by selling drugs. They want me to move weapons... and all that." She shakes her head and sighs. "Casper asked after my daughters' well-being, like a well-mannered person. 'Ah, look how big they are. If they are wanting for something, you could give it to them.' And I laugh. 'I give them what I can,' I say. 'And you all? What do you give them? Death, prison, and the hospital. That's the reality.' It's true that they pull in the boys with money. They pass them cash. They buy them things. And the poverty here is so very hard."

"How does he react when you say this to his face?"

"He says that I am the one who loses and my children too because I don't want to work to get out of my situation."

Before Casper left, he asked Sandra about Calavera. "Is he out, where is he? Have you talked to him?" And she said, "Who knows? Who knows when he's getting out because he has 12 years on his head." And Casper: "Poor kid!" But, both Calavera and Sandra wonder, why are they looking for him? Do they suspect? They do not trust their mother—not that she would give him away on purpose, but that she might slip up.

A few days after Calavera left prison, his mother called him on the phone from an MS safe-house with a home-girl. "Here, this is my son," she said, and handed the phone to the girl. Calavera was quick enough to say he was Eddy, his adopted brother. The girl talked about how hard it is to leave and to change and he freaked out because why would she be talking about that?

"Now I understand things, why my mom never came to the prison," Calavera told me several weeks later. "Because she's working with *them*. She is doing the things that are impossible for men to do. They know that with a woman as old as she is, it is unlikely that the police will stop her. They take advantage. Even I have done it. Take advantage of children, grown women, tell them to take *this* to such and such a place. Now, when I see a kid on the street I pay more attention than I do with someone older. I know that kids... shit... They're toys or puppets for the people of the underworld."

Calavera was thankful to be free, but the dangers the street offers make it a treacherous terrain to navigate. And how is one to discern between real threats and figments of the overwrought imagination? No stranger can be trusted. Not even, as Calavera said over and over again, the most innocent seeming. On the few days he risked venturing into zone 3 for a quick visit at his old home, his paranoid fantasies would put demons in children's smiles, and a predator around every corner.

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March 2012

Calavera and I met at a hole-in-the-wall cantina in zone 1. I bought beers and he eventually got uncharacteristically drunk. He told me of a dream that has woken him several nights running now, feeding his creeping insomnia.

I'm out looking for work and I see Chucho, and we go together. He says, 'We'll use this!' and takes out a giant iguana that seems to be growing out of his arm. I ask him what we're going to use it for and he says you'll see.³⁰ So then we get to the courthouse, the tower of judgment, and all my old homeboys are there, climbing the walls and standing on top of pillars, waving guns at me and laughing and saying they're going to kill me. The street is flooded, it is a river, a moat around the courthouse, and inside that body of water are reptiles of every description, diamond headed lizards and snakes I've never seen before. Snakes that probably don't exist. And I have to wade through that water to get to the other side. The homies are all threatening me, waving guns at me. Then they fall, one by one, into the water and the snakes eat them...

Waking life too, offers invitations to violence. Living off the charity of others, even his loved ones, was hard on Calavera's pride. Opportunities to slide back into a life of crime arose again and again. Walking through zone 1 on his way to meet with me, he came face to face with an old extortion "client". The man offered Calavera money to kill members of a gang that was levying *la renta* from him.

"Look,' the guy says. 'I'm gonna give you my number. The truth is I have some businesses here. And I want to see if you'll do me a favor. We'll pay you, there are several of us, and the truth is these others are fucking up our business.'" Calavera took the request as if he were still an active gang member—even pretending that he had an SUV parked around the corner to hide the fact he was traveling on foot—something he never would have done as a bone fide homey. When I asked him why he didn't come clean, he replied,

I feel like it would be a mistake to tell them... They're going to say, "Well, what's up with this dude? He's fleeing or something. Maybe I can tell his gang what's up, maybe he owes something to them". He'll tell them in the hopes I'll make better business for him. So I say, "Okay then, I'll call you." But I don't call, and I don't give them my number.

To protect his flank, to cover up the fact of his desertion and consequent vulnerability, he acts the part.

"I haven't told anyone this, not even my brother," Calavera said, glancing quickly around the bar. "But there have been mornings when I wake up and I have to fight a battle with myself to not go out and do the things I know how to do to make easy money. It's like I have a little devil sitting on my shoulder, and he tells me things. He tells me I just go do it, you know how, you'll have enough money to get all the things you need. Just like that. In two days I could have enough for a computer. In one day I could get enough

³⁰ Chucho was another ex-marero released from Pavon shortly before Calavera. They spoke on the phone every once in a while and helped each other through the transition back into society.

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to pay my own rent.” The urge to return to a life of crime, he told me, was always only a voice in his head, an internal struggle never manifested. The temptation arose, he examined it, and pushed it down with the memory of prison, the lost, useless years rotting in damp cells, the numerous times he almost died in riots he knew almost nothing about. That is how he had explained his struggle to me. But several months after gaining his freedom, he confessed how he had come much, much closer to falling into the bad old ways than he had let on. “We’re men, we’re humans, right?” Calavera said to me. “I think that at any moment we’re capable of anything. So the thing about temptations is that they come to one right at the moment when one is thinking “I’ve changed”, right, and they’re like tests. That’s how life is.”

Two weeks after leaving prison, he returned to pick up some papers from the administration office. He had a shouted conversation with some of the boys in the isolation block (*el modulo*) a stone’s throw from the tripled electrified perimeter fence. El Chaparro, in for narcotrafficking and, ironically, stuck in the isolation block for defrauding fellow prisoners by packaging and selling oregano as Zacatecas weed, shouted through a square peephole in the black metal door.

“There’s a job in zone 3. You interested?”

“Give me the number anyway.” I said.

So, later, the dude calls me, well, not him, but Elias, who was with me in Pavoncito <prison> when they wanted to kill us. So he calls me.

“*Que onda carnal* (Whatsup brother)?”

“What’s up?”

“The deal is that there’s a job with La Navaja.” She’s a woman who runs *trafico* (*drug-trafficking*) in zone 3.

“That’s great,” I say.

“Yeah, *la neta* (the truth) is that they’re paying 30.” He says.

“Fuck! Why?”

“You have to kill a dude,” he says. “And pick up the money and valuables he’s holding.”

I asked him, “Will they give me a pistol? A car?”

“*Simon* (Absolutely).”

“Okay then, pass me to the chick whose gonna do business.”

“Who are you?” < she asks.>

“I am so and so.”

“No way man,” she says to me. “You’re already out?”

“Yes,” I say. “So what’s up?”

“There’s a job... Are you gonna take it?”

“Yeah,” I say. “When can I come for everything?”

“Right on. Tomorrow, at 9 in the morning. Come by the Texaco in Barrio Gallito.”

“Good,” I say.

I went early the next morning and I brought my brother.

<I interrupt, laughing. “What?”>

Yeah, the dumbass didn’t have a clue. I was like, “The deal is I think I might have a painting job over there. If it comes through, I can help you out.”

“Right on,” he says to me.

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I dropped my brother off near the meeting place with La Navaja. “Wait here, okay... If the job comes through I’ll come to get you in a taxi and we’ll go from here together.”...

“That’s great.” He says, totally fooled.

So I went with the girl.

“You’re la Navaja?”

“Yes,” she says. “Who are you?”

“I’m the one that’s gonna do the job. Give me the stuff. If I came it’s cuz I came to do it.”

“Alright.” She gives me the keys to a car with polarized windows.

“Here,” she gives me a 9mm.

“Good.” To the belt.

I went for a ride in the car. Coming back, the girl (la mage) got in.

“I’m going to show you where the house is.”

“Ok.”

“Here,” she says. “Knock there, and there’s where the bullet is served. The guy will come out and there he stays.”

So I dropped her off. And it’s cool, right. I’m gonna do the job. Alright, I tell myself, come what may. Decided.

Popopop, the door. <Calavera mimes waiting> Ding dong the doorbell. <more waiting> And PA PA PA, hard kicks, and buddy, I am ready to break in, believe me. With the *malia* (obsession) of wanting the bills. And look, I was there for like 20 minutes. My brother, he calls me in that moment.

“Whatsup, what happened?”

“Look, I’m doing the job. Wait,” I tell him. “I’ll come to pick you up.” And I don’t know what all. I’m acting like a jackass, going from here to there, seeing how I can break into the house. And after a while a patrol comes by. And I see the patrol... I’m looking here, but seeing over there. And I tell myself that if I take off in a flash, those dudes are going to stop me, they’ll take the gun off me and it’s back to prison for possession. So, I just stand at the door, knocking like it’s nothing. Popopo. And nothing. I stay another few minutes and the police go on farther down. And I’m acting respectable, right.

“Good,” I say to myself. Then—nothing. I got the keys, I got in the car, and I left. I didn’t have a desire to do anything. My plane had landed. I’d left my brother there waiting a long time. The girl calls me, “Look, the job is good now.”

But I say, “You know what, with people like you it’s not worth doing things. Do what you’re gonna do. Don’t be giving me so much bullshit. I am gonna leave your stuff in such and such a place.” And I went to leave the car in the cemetery... I left the pistol under the gearshift, and I returned to get my brother.

“Let’s go, *carnal*. The *netá* is that nothing came of it.” I say. “Let’s go.” And he still doesn’t know, has no idea.

La Navaja and El Chaparro, her contact in the prison, pursued Calavera, calling him several dozen times over the next few days. Calavera cut off all communication.

“And if the man had been in the house when you knocked?” I asked Calavera.

“I’d already be enrolled, man. We wouldn’t be talking today. I would have seen the easy money, buddy. And I’d say, okay, here we go again. I’d arm my band. Pull in

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kids from the street, or purse-snatchers who go around stealing wallets and robbing old ladies, and I'd raise it.

“Under the Mara Salvatrucha flag?”

“Hell no. Outside the gangs. For ourselves. Anti-cholos, we'd be killing ourselves against the gangs. I think a lot about this, you understand. They are things that take away my... hell, my peace. Because I tell myself, the moment I do that... *Hijo a la gran* (son of the great whore). I start to analyze what it would have started.”

In the months following this incident, he spoke more and more of a dawning clarity, a sense that he could really make it in the world without having to take “the easy way.” The nightmares of his old homies and bloody battle came less frequently, replaced with quieter, sadder visions of his former life.

I have walked down some of my old streets and I remember many things, bad things, things I did thinking I was the best. *Hijo la gran*, I remember so much. So much. And so many *compadres* to remember. When I walk into the 3 (zone 3) I see my dead brother, my dead *compadres*... and I also try to see a way to take this in an optimistic way, a second chance, a chance to move on.

August 2012

Calavera calls me, distraught. Three men raped his girlfriend. They lived in her neighborhood, and she had to pass them on the street everyday on her way to work. There was no question of going to the police. He said he would wake shouting in the night with the rage and impotence—if he were still connected with the gang, resolving this problem would be quite simple. But since he is not, he obsessed over how to kill the men who did this thing. He asked me for advice. What could I say? What would you tell him?

May 2013

The police finally caught up with Casper. In the months preceding his capture, his behavior grew increasingly erratic. According to Sandra, who got regular reports from her mother, Casper was high all the time, and was becoming more and more paranoid. After 15 years of killing and evading death, feeding underlings and rivals to the wolves, threatening and extorting transportation companies, drug-traffickers, and prostitutes, he was finally done. His threats against enemies and allies alike became more and more histrionic, the cold pragmatism that had kept him alive and free for so long was gone.

Abusing his own people did him in. An old man who for years had moved weapons, drugs and corpses on Casper's behalf made the fateful call to the anonymous tip hotline “*Cuentaselo a Waldemar*” (Tell it to Waldemar) and gave the police the location of Casper's safehouse. Agents of the DEIC caught up with him before he could get into his car, and there was a shootout. Pinned against his Toyota Yaris, Casper took a bullet in the foot and took off limping down a side street. The police followed the trail of bloody sneaker-prints and found him sprawled on the steps of a tenement block.

Casper's sudden departure from the neighborhood made it possible for Calavera to move in once again with his sister in zone three. Good thing too, because the situation at Eddy's place had become impossible. Initially filled with good will, Eddy turned on Calavera and became deeply suspicious of his every move. Perhaps he knew more than

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Calavera gave him credit for about his flirtations with the old life in those first few months free.

November 2013 again

Calavera, his grandfather and I finish our lunch and it's nearly time for me to leave. I don't want to go out into the harsh city streets again, but I have several interviews to complete before I return to California two days hence. What I wouldn't give to just sit in a chair in the last of the daylight streaming into the courtyard and watch the kids play. I tell Calavera I have to go and he ushers me quickly into his bedroom. Bottles of paint and half-finished canvasses stacked in a corner. A single bed with a thin mattress.

He turns to me, and speaking quickly, tells me how I more than anyone have made him want to change. And not directly, not with advice or pushing or chiding him, simply by listening and encouraging him to paint, by being a safe place to speak his mind on events and thoughts that he can confess to no one else. He is smiling but, somehow, it hurts to look into his eyes.

Then he reaches up and takes a tennis racket bag down from the top of a dark wooden dresser. Unzipping it, he draws out an object wrapped in an old sweatshirt. As he unwraps it I catch a dull gleam of metal. He tosses the sweatshirt onto the bed and holds out an AR-15 fully automatic assault rifle. The barrel shortened, the grip and body smooth with use. "What the hell...?" I exclaim. He tells me a man named Santos, a veteran of his old clique, passed him the gun a few days after Casper was arrested. I ask him why.

"In case of trouble," he says, his eyes darting from mine.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Once word of Casper's capture goes out, other cliques might want to move in on his territory." Then he shrugs. "Anyway, Santos just wants me to hold it for him." I know there is something, something important, he isn't telling me. But I can't make myself probe further. The time isn't right. He holds the gun out to me and I take it. The metal is cool in my hands, the weight of the thing somehow comforting and also terrifying.

"Is it in working order?"

Calavera snorts derisively. "Ha! Of course it is."

I hold the AR-15 fully automatic assault rifle and hear in my head Calavera saying again and again, like a mantra. "I don't want trouble, but if it comes my way, I will be ready." I hand the gun back to him and watch him wrap it again carefully. The children are laughing in the courtyard. "I just wanted you to know what's really going on," Calavera says. We walk back into the sunlight to say goodbye.



Conclusion

The Feeling of Violence: Transgression, Metamorphoses, and Uncertainty

As I have shown again and again in this dissertation, individual, communal, and societal efforts to understand and explain criminal violence often revolve around the symbolic figure of the *marero*. *Maras* make an easy target for impotent, floating rage in search of an object. In image and sometimes in deed, the *maras* are distorted reflections of the societies that wrought them, the global processes which give them their marked transnational resonances, the ethical logics used to justify brutal, opportunistic strategies for survival and domination. *Maras* make a mask. Tear away this mask, and what is beneath? Other shadow powers, quotidian cruelties, and concerns universal to human life: drug cartels and organized crime syndicates using *maras* to do their dirty work, politicians and oligarchic elite leveraging fear and insecurity to their own ends, and innumerable civilians struggling to make ends meet. The *maras* are products of the deep contradictions of a global economic and political system, long and sordid histories of local and geopolitical conflicts, and a capacity for brutality that belongs to all humans. To make *maras* the source and cause of so much suffering is too much a burden to foist upon these men and boys killing and dying and “cannibalizing” their fellow poor.

Mara violence and *mareros'* lives make up many of the stories encountered in these pages. But they are meant to be an entry-point, a means to an end. For me, they have become a lens through which to glimpse a phenomenon of which they only form a hyper-visible façade. My ultimate aim has been to show how the violence *maras* sometimes perform but always represent refuses every effort to contain it and pin it down. Trying to fix its causes and effects in time and space is an exercise in futility, and worse, elides traits and processes essential to understanding the power of violence over everyday existence. The conditions of violation I have chronicled give rise to and are cloaked in a deep existential uncertainty that defy communal efforts to diminish violence and scholarly attempts to explain it. This is because the violence at work here creates a vortex transforming the terrain of experience and knowledge production so deeply that its repercussions cannot be measured in discrete, vertically fused chains of causation.

In post-war Guatemala City, the specter of violence has no fixed beginning and no potential end. It is “something that reconfigures reality in its very occurrence, making the concept of “over” meaningless.”¹ Criminal violence—as brutal act, as object of casual conversation and political discourse, as organizing social symbol—is embedded in the formation of social relations and the rupturing and remaking of urban landscapes.

I have illuminated the power violence exercises in post-war Guatemala City by casting a light into the myriad of spaces—red zones and elite businesses, public discourse and casual conversation, hopes, dreams and nightmares—infiltrated and transformed by its presence; by illustrating how, as a constant cultural signifier, violence saturates daily existence; and by showing how violence in its myriad expressions moves through the social body to transfigure individuals, communities, and society itself.

¹ Nordstrom 2004: 116

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Key to the circulation and dissemination of violence are the continual processes of morphing and translation it undergoes as it moves through the social body. Acts and conditions of violence criss-cross the material-immaterial divide, shifting between embodied action and disembodied discourse, mental maps and the built environment in quicksilver metamorphoses. An act of violence carried out clandestinely provokes rumors and supposition; rumors translate into communal fear, heightening reactive rage targeted across already existing lines of enmity; this rage leads to attempts at tit-for-tat revenge, or the organization of self-defense vigilante groups, and so on. Once brutal violence hits the public sphere—dismembered bodies captured on television and front-page news, for example—it disperses and regenerates along innumerable and entangled vectors. These “lines of flight” reproduce and ramify the sense of floating fear dominating post-war society and harden social prejudices collectively required to bring a sense of order back in. As violence made public ruptures urban landscapes and destabilizes communal relations, it also strengthens already existing physical and social boundaries. Communities living in fear throw up cinderblock walls and barbed wire fences and fall back on well-worn stereotypes of unjust suffering and deserved death to reconstitute a feeling of security into daily life.

Through an often chaotic mixture of ethnographic stories, media analysis, photography, and personal confession I have tried capture this process of “bleeding out” in particular moments, places, and encounters. It should come as no surprise that violence dominates the space of the prison, the courtroom, and poor urban neighborhoods where criminal organizations operate. It is emblazoned upon bodies of victims and perpetrators—undone corpses and tattooed skin marking its passage. Through rumor and reporting in the media these bodies become surfaces upon which the public seeks to read its own fate.

But the kinds of violence I explore also invade unexpected arenas and draw in unexpected actors. A children’s waterpark becomes the staging ground for a quadruple dismemberment. Extortion networks employ grandmothers and children. The newspaper image of a dismembered infant violates a beachside vacation. Campaigns against historical impunity utilize the same visual logics as criminal gangs’ staging of dismembered victims to demand prison privileges. Evangelical discourses of peace and forgiveness in fact mirror the most draconian and violent law and order approaches to eliminating crime and criminals.

Understanding how violence circulates also means delving into psycho-social space. Thus, I found it shaping the waking dreams of a taxi-driver—Juventino—who would put himself to sleep with fantasies of shooting tattooed *mareros*. Calavera’s post-prison dreams of his old homies threatening him with guns in a river of snakes provide a window into his struggle to stay free and alive. Andy’s story of travelling to the north to carry out an assassination splices fantasy and reality in an indecipherable entanglement, suturing the realm of Hollywood myth into the exercise of brutal power across the space of a continent. My own hallucinations of masked men lying in wait along my nightly walk home, of prisoner assassins leaping at me in an empty sector hallway, speak to the marriage of physical and imagined maps in the daily reproduction of a terrifying reality.

To even begin to grasp the power of violence in places like Guatemala City, it is not enough to simply identify the multiplicity of vectors along which violence moves, transforms, and reconfigures social relations and city space. For me it has been equally if

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not more important to transmit the “feeling of violence,” the psychological and visceral reactions violence can provoke in individuals and communities.

So what does violence feel like? It depends on where you’re standing. For those engaged in a life and death struggle for self-emancipation, it can be “like Achilles’ lance, healing the wounds it has inflicted” by combusting ingrown rage to explode conditions of oppression (Sartre 1963).² For those caught in the crossfire of civil war, Nordstrom (2004) claims violence feels like “existential crisis, like hopelessness, like loss of the future. It feels like impossible contradictions of resistance within oppression, like the struggle of humanity within terror.” (58)

As brashly as some gangsters, police, and politicians might celebrate the need for violence to attain their goals, I have found that in post-war Guatemala, violence does far more to trap people and communities than provide them with freedom. Even as violence disrupts and transgresses socio-spatial boundaries—prison walls, red zones and elite space, discourses of innocence and guilt—it imprisons people in an almost invincible cage, closing down the space of possibility in which they live and die, limiting the scope of their hopes and dreams to mere survival. Many of the central characters in these stories—Calavera and his family, Andy, Secret, Jorge the taxi driver, among others—struggled to find an escape route from conditions of extreme violation where, it seems, none exist. Perpetrators of violence and their victims, state authorities and preachers of peace, the media and the mewling crowd are all trapped together in this massive, misbegotten tragedy that plunges ever onward. So, too, am I, and so are you. Experts and laymen, witnesses both distant and near, searching for safety in indifference or struggling to *do* something, must all find themselves ensnared in the tangled skein out of which the *maras* emerge, but to which we are tied.

Through these stories, images, and observations a series of incomplete constellations emerges. These constellations provide glimpses of how violence transgresses socio-spatial boundaries and transforms urban life. That these accounts are shot through with lacunae and ellipses, that the repercussions of violence I seek to illuminate elude my powers of explanation, is not an accident. Ultimately, the power of violence in places like post-war Guatemala City lies in its almost inconceivable capacity to rip apart and resuture the fabric of existence and escape every effort to enframe it with rational thought and studied analysis.

The ways that violence—along with the fear, rage and trauma it induces and feeds upon—seeps into the underground reservoirs of communal consciousness and travels by mysterious channels throughout the social body are integral to its terrifying domination. It is the impossibility of getting to the “bottom of violence” that provokes so much nameless terror. Violence of the magnitude I have here chronicled fractures the psychological, physical, and social foundations of human existence, baring us to an abyss of existential proportions. I have sought to plumb the depths of the abyss with access both privileged and delimited by my capacity to escape it. I have emerged humbled by the strength and resilience of those with no such easy exit. I also know now that diminishing brutality and suffering in the belly of the beast requires careful and sustained attention to these hidden linkages and channels by which the will to violence travels, expands, and takes over. Any efforts to create conditions for peaceful coexistence must find passage along these same treacherous byways.

² Cf Fanon 1963, Arendt 1969

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Empathy for La Bestia

As a general rule, we know more today about the suffering of distant others than at any other time in human history. I believe, as many others do, that this unprecedented access to knowledge ought to make the world's privileged care, and inspire collective responses to do something about it. We are all in this mess together. Shared histories, local and global chains of production and consumption, as well as political and environmental issues connect the global to the local and make the local a global concern.

And yet—this is key—knowledge of the ties that bind provides few useful answers to the questions facing those who live in the so-called “belly of the beast”: how do I navigate the mortal risks of everyday life? How to protect myself? Who can help me? Why should they? Scaling up provides no more certainty in regards to long-term solutions: who will take responsibility for this violence and this suffering? Why are they allowed to continue and grow? What does it portend for the future? What is to be done about it? Explanations, at least for these larger issues, are always available, but in the end they seem to matter very little.

So, Guatemala City is only one place where the specter of extreme violence works through and alongside the forces of globalization to destabilize and reorder life. It is one of many locales through which the wounds of humanity bleed through in spectacular fashion. And maras are merely one standard-bearer for the catastrophic status quo. There are plenty of other phantasmagoric Others waving terror's flag in a variety of blighted Elsewheres. The daily news provides a staggering array of examples: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the internet craze of their carefully staged decapitations; Boko Haram massacring children in northern Nigeria; Taliban executing school children in the mountains of western Pakistan, and so on. Usually, they appear in frenzied media cycles, hyper-visible and then gone again.

When facing the extremity of violence and suffering taking place around the world, no response—personal or collective—seems adequate. The desire to intervene and do something about the violence and suffering runs up against the apparent impossibility to do so in any meaningful way. For most of us, the quotidian horrors taking place in the world's blighted Elsewheres are just too much to handle.³ The limits of political feasibility, not to mention personal concerns, make the talk of engaging in “solutions” seem absurd and futile. Consequently, our capacity for empathy for people living in the belly of the beast, to care about these others in such a way that breaks down the many differences between “us” and “them,” is continually battered by the sense that we are powerless to act.

So, how are we to respond? Looking on with distracted indifference, or turning away, reproduces the intentional ignorance that makes the act of witnessing complicit with actors and conditions of brutality. Giving in to the fascinated horror pumped up by sensationalist media cycles is even more ethically suspect; one risks becoming actively engaged in fetishizing others' suffering and empowering those who cause it. For denizens

³ cf Taussig 2004: 269. “Of course, that's elsewhere, always elsewhere, you'll want to say, not the rule but the exception, existing in An-Other Place like Northern Ireland, Beirut, Ethiopia, Kingston, Port au Prince, Peru, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Santiago, the Bronx, the West Bank, South Africa, San Salvador, Colombia, to name but some of the more publicized from the staggering number of spots troubling the course of the world's order.”

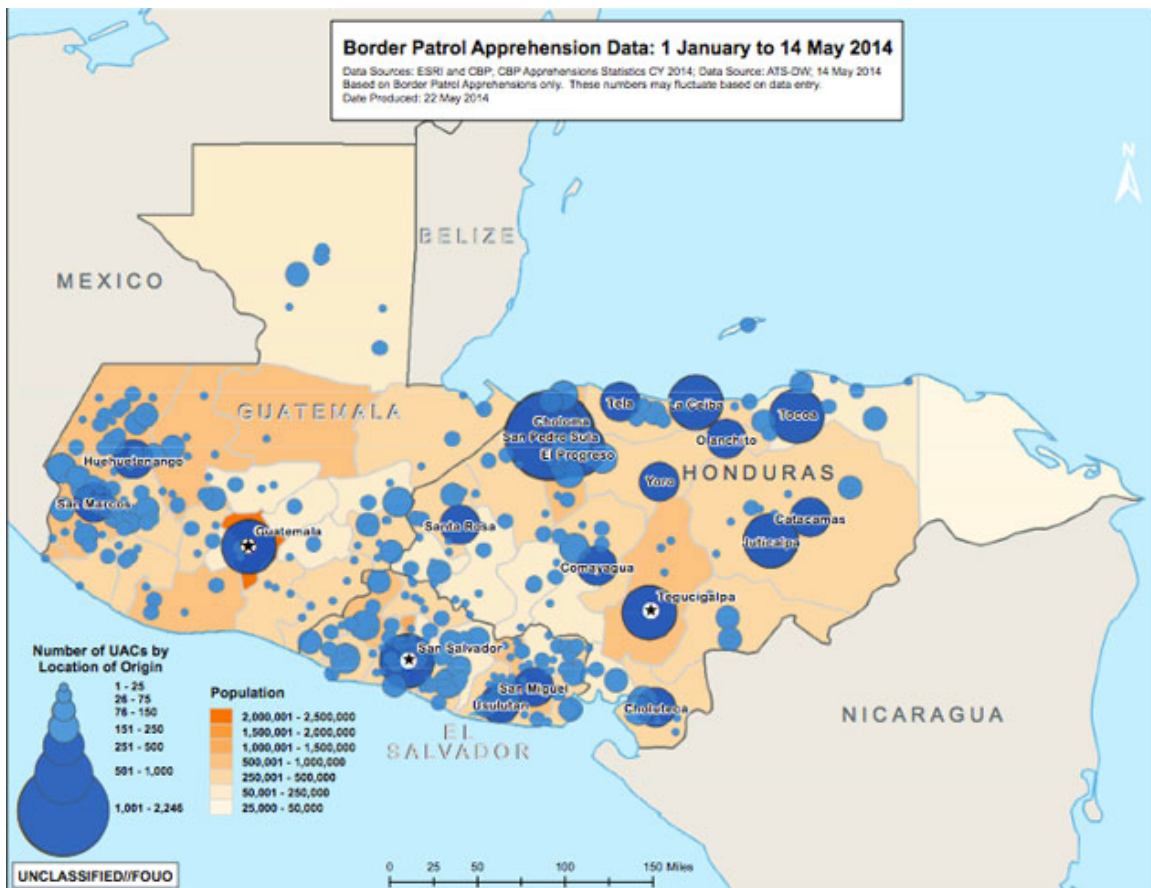
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of secure, prosperous space, we “global citizens” with access to so much catastrophic knowledge, these media cycles are often the only venues through which all this violence and all this suffering become visible.

I believe that the stories in these pages ought to be understood as belonging equally to safe, prosperous life-worlds—the venerable university, the shining towers of world commerce, the secure hearth and home— as they do to the cramped isolation cells and hazardous streets from whence I draw them. So now I am a messenger, carrying my communiqués from my own little heart of darkness to the shining fortress of civilization. But conveying the power of violence in the lives of distant others requires coming to terms with the destructive forces gathered in and dispersed from the heart of the “civilized” world.

Bringing it Home

Our lack of effective compassion for those we cannot touch or understand will prove our undoing. Growing our awareness of the ties that bind us to distant others, no matter how alien or alienating they may appear, is necessary if we, as a species, are to attend to the gravest issues threatening collective prosperity and survival.



Source map for Unaccompanied Child Migrants apprehended on the US-Mexico Border (Mother Jones)

Fontes Conclusion

Recent events have provided an opportunity to trace these entanglements back to Fortress America's doorstep. Between October and the end of August last year, more than 66,000 unaccompanied children—90% of them from the Northern Triangle of Central America—were detained attempting to cross the US-Mexican border. In seeking asylum 4000 miles from home, these children are making an argument about the power and reach of violence in the countries from which they flee. Since the histories and global dynamics giving rise to violence in Central America so intimately entangle the United States' influences in the region, these children are, in sense, bringing the circulation of global violence and suffering full circle. Public reaction in the United States has been a mix of sympathy, xenophobic rejection, and studied indifference.

The flood of media images of border patrol agents changing migrant babies' diapers trickled away. The US government has moved to contain the issue of child migrants by quietly pushing the Mexican authorities to clamp down on migration routes through Mexico. This is part of the effort to make the journey north so perilous that hopeful children will give up before they begin. Meanwhile, President Obama has announced a \$1 billion aid package to Central American governments to aid security and development.

In light of these events, I plan to continue exploring the clandestine paths along which violence and suffering travel by joining the children making the perilous journey north under shifting conditions of surveillance and state-criminal control. Like the *maras* these children are expressions of conditions of violation that only become apparent to those of us inhabiting safer, more prosperous environs in frenzied media moments. Like the *maras* they have become symbolic figures around which politicians and the media, experts and laymen organize their perspectives of unjust suffering and moral responsibility for a catastrophic present that refuses our best attempts to ignore it.

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