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Globalization and Gangs: The Evolution of Central American Street Gangs

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A Project Submitted for Consideration by the Honors Research Committee

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Introduction

The forces of globalization shape not only international relations and global commodity chains, but also influence local culture and social issues that historically have been seen as exclusively local problems, such as street gangs. The emergence of highly violent and prolific cliques of Central American street gangs (a.k.a. “maras”) throughout the United States, Mexico and Central America, thus serves as a paradigmatic example of how the forces of globalization shape seemingly local concerns.

Through the global cultural flows of media and the transnational movement of people, these Central American maras² evolved to their current levels through a series of initial adaptations, first to the Los Angeles gang scene in the 1980s and 90s, and later to post-conflict Central America. The development of these gangs was expedited by short-sighted deportation policies of the United States Congress in 1996 and heavy-handed anti-gang initiatives in Central America starting in 2002.

Furthermore, the rise of Central American gangs such as Maras Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18), demonstrates the limitations of the nation-state in a globalized world. Given their transnational, dispersed and flexible nature, the maras are able to move across national borders and adapt to any suppression-centered anti-gang initiatives domestic governments may implement. This case study exemplifies the need for regional and international cooperation when addressing problems such as transnational crime, structural poverty, and even terrorism.

This study is not intended to produce experimental or even quasi-experimental findings regarding the growth of Central American gangs. Nor is it intended to serve as an examination of every type of gang or make broad generalizations about all youth gangs. The focus of this paper is beyond a critique of U.S. immigration law and the

regions' judicial systems, although their roles as they relate to gang activities in these areas will be assessed. Nor is this paper a comprehensive ethnographic account of gang life and gang structure in general. Instead the purpose of this study is to synthesize the theoretical literature of globalization and apply it to what we know about specific gangs such as MS-13 and M-18 in North and Central America.

More than anything else, the rise and evolution of the maras serves as an example of how cultural flows, and the exchange of global ideas, behavior and concepts, as expressed and transmitted through popular media, youth trends and migration, can shape the nature of seemingly hyper-local and domestic problems. As such, this case study adds to our understanding of the forces of globalization.

Literature Review

There is very little scholarly work regarding the recent intersection between the general concepts of globalization and the evolution of Central American gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). This paper will build upon a large body of conceptual work on globalization as well as articles chronicling the growing problem of Central American gangs in particular, policy papers regarding how governments have responded to gang activity, and recent descriptions of gang structure, methods and behaviors.

Over the past twenty years, many publications have been written to explain aspects of globalization. The topic is so broad that there is much debate over the very meaning and nature of globalization. One of the most important aspects to the framework used for this paper is the understanding of cultural flows and identity. Arjun Appadurai's "Modernity at Large" details his notion of the "imagination" and the existence of the "-scapes."³ The suffix "scapes" implies the ephemeral and irregular

shapes of these dimensions of cultural flow and that their depiction is based upon personal perception.⁴ Mike Featherstone's book *Undoing Culture*, discusses globalization with reference to the uncoupling of cultural goods from specific geographical locations, how local cultures are globalized, and what transformations take place in different contexts. In *Transnational Conflicts*, William I. Robinson focuses on globalization's effects on Central America, in particular the impact of post-industrialism on the region with its increase in social and class tensions, and the transnationalization of what were once internal problems. For an examination of the importance of the global media, "The New Spaces of Global Media" by Kevin Robins is useful. This piece manages to explain the emergence of a truly global media and what that means for culture and politics around the world. To a similar degree David Harvey in "Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition," provides a framework for understanding recent changes as a result of technology and other advances. Harvey describes a world compressed, where goods, people and information flow rapidly across borders and discusses the potentially unbalancing effects this has caused. The concepts within these writings along with several other concepts will form the foundation of a theoretical framework to better understand the rise and evolution of gangs such as MS-13 and M-18.

Gangs such as MS-13 and M-18 have only begun to be formally researched and up to now most of the information on them comes from journalists and law enforcement officials. One of the larger groups that has focused on the gangs is the human rights NGO, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). Most recently WOLA held a conference in San Salvador, El Salvador in October of 2007. WOLA released a special report "Youth Gangs in Central America", where issues of human rights, effective

policing and gang prevention are discussed. The report, while primarily a policy paper, also examined different perspectives about youth gangs, different government approaches towards them and the consequences of these policies. Ana Arana's 2005 article in *Foreign Affairs*, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America" is a sweeping overview of the current gang situation (Maras) in Central America, as the author notes how anti-gang measures and deportations by the U.S. government fueled the rise of the Central American gangs. Also in 2005, Clare Ribando wrote a brief titled "Gangs in Central America," for the U.S. Congressional Research Service, which provides a concise overview of the origins, contributing factors and national/regional responses to the gang crisis. An interesting article by Andrew Papachristos at the University of Chicago, "Gang World," serves as a reminder to the intrinsically hyper-local nature of street gangs. While globalization is a large factor in the development of certain non-traditional gangs such as MS-13, the fact remains that for the average gang member, globalization is just an insignificant word, as one's everyday life rarely extends beyond a three city block area. There have also been a series of congressional hearings held with experts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Department of Justice and State Department testifying during these hearings. As mentioned earlier, many of the best insights into the gang crisis have come from journalists. Some news articles, such as Fen Montaigne's piece in "Mother Jones," "Deporting America's Gang Culture," provide in-depth insights into aspects of Central American gangs and their rise.

There is also a great deal of sociological work about gangs. Two texts important to this paper are *The Modern Gang Reader 3rd Ed* and *Gangs in the Global City* edited by

John Hagedorn. *Gangs in the Global City*, while focused more on European and American gangs, provides an interesting framework for understanding the pliability of gang culture in a wide range of national and social contexts worldwide. Culture in this sense can be defined as the “totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.”⁵

Globalization Framework

Although difficult, controversial, complex and perhaps contradictory, globalization can be defined as the broad development of global connections in a way that gives local events a potential global impact and vice versa. This works as a broad definition but when examining globalization processes and their effects, more detail must be developed. One way around the problem of the often contradictory nature of globalization is to accept that globalization itself should be understood and defined in the plural, as a group of inter-connected yet separate processes. This way, a definition that accounts for economic, political, social, and cultural processes can be developed. In economics, globalization is generally seen as economic internationalization with the spread of market capitalism, global financing, production and consumption. Political globalization is generally understood as the widening of interstate relations and global politics. Socially, it can be seen as the increased movement of people and groups around the world and their integration into a global society. These different layers of understanding globalization cannot be separated and understood piece-meal but rather they give social scientists a framework upon which to better understand and examine the increasingly ephemeral state of the world.

When it comes to global cultural flows, there are two general schools of thought. The first and traditionally most popular concept is that cultural globalization means the homogenization or “Americanization” of cultures around the world.⁶ In this theory, the “West,” and the United States in particular is the core and export center of a “global culture.” A continuance of colonial theory, global cultural homogenization is seen as fostering cultural imperialism by the west over indigenous cultures in periphery states, particularly developing or non-Anglophone societies. Although the process historically started with 18th Century colonialism, since the 1960s American and European multinational corporations have been the primary drivers of cultural homogenization. Some believe that this framework for understanding cultural flows emanates from the very “logic of globalization” and capitalism on a global scale, imposing standardization and homogenization across global cultures.⁷ A fundamental flaw in the concept of global culture homogenization is that as cultural ideas and practices, and even many products and services enter new foreign societies they are “indigenized” to adapt to local contexts and become more applicable or marketable to the indigenous population.⁸

The classic example used by theorists is the global expansion and influence of McDonalds restaurants, conceptualized by sociologists as “McDonaldization.”⁹ McDonaldization is a variation of cultural imperialism as the idea that McDonald’s efficient management, standard menu and global marketability allow it to permeate cultures worldwide. The reality however is different. McDonalds as a business necessity invariably adapts its business, product and marketing plans to the local market. This means that McDonald restaurants in Des Plaines, Illinois, St. Petersburg, Russia, and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala will all have distinctive differences between their relative

prices, menu options, targeted market and operating practices. Some things will remain the same of course, such as the existence of the “Golden Arches,” the availability of ketchup, and the use of the food assembly line, but these “American” innovations will be mixed with local preferences and product tastes.¹⁰ In fact, even the very identity of this brand-focused restaurant varies internationally. What is an inexpensive fast-food option in the U.S. is marketed as a higher-end dining experience in locales such as Russia and Guatemala. This reality makes simple business sense not just for service industries like McDonalds but for any international business that spans nation-states or cultures. To be accepted under different contexts, products, brands and services *must* be localized. This is called “glocalization,” a phrase coined by late Sony chairman Akio Marito.

Glocalization is fundamentally understood as global localization, adapting global products, services or ideas for a local market.¹¹ This concept of glocalization can also be applied to cultural ideas or practices that are transmitted between cultures.

The second school of thought, and the one that will be used in this paper, is generally understood as the mixing or “hybridization” of global cultural flows.¹² The core of this theory is that as cultural ideas flow between territories, they are constantly evolving and becoming indigenized by local contexts and mindsets to better fit the existing society.¹³ This implies that cultural flows are not a post-modern expansion of neo-imperialism by Western societies imposing cultural norms, but rather that cultural flows go in all directions and this exchange of cultural ideas and practices affects all societies, resulting in the creation of a diverse and dynamic global culture. This process is not a recent development by any means; historically it has existed for all of human history. As long as different groups have come in contact, they have adopted, adapted

and exported culture between each other. This process first accelerated during colonialism; it is why India is an Anglophone country with an established bureaucratic democracy, why the Spanish language has incorporated Moorish/Arabic phrases, why most Mexicans practice Catholicism, and why it is possible to eat authentic Indian and Nigerian food in London. The examples of meshing cultures are endless. What has changed is the means and speed by which people and cultures interact and exchange cultural ideas and practices.

This hyper-acceleration is possible through the literal and metaphorical compression of time and space in the modern world. In brief, spatial barriers and time constraints have been dismantled as information and transportation technologies have developed, allowing for an exponentially faster movement of people, goods, ideas and capital than ever before.¹⁴ Greater access to all regions of the world has actually emphasized the importance of local differences and variation. Rather than being wiped out by western homogenization, these small local differences have actually assumed greater importance as the hyper-mobile forces of capital, products and worker flows are drawn to the areas where they have the greatest competitive edge. Fashion, business and production practices, capital flows, ideologies, cultural ideas and even products are now progressively more volatile and ephemeral by nature.¹⁵ The only constant appears to be change, not always large or revolutionary change, but small adaptations and flows. This compression of both space and time, both real and perceived, has allowed the historical process of cultural hybridization and evolution to take on a new scale and develop faster than ever before. Obvious technologies like the internet, cell phones, mass market

television and motion pictures allow for almost instant transfer of cultural ideas into a wide range of contexts under which they may/will be interpreted and adapted differently.

One way to examine the flows of global culture is to break the process into different “scapes” or dimensions of global cultural flow. These scapes are the building blocks for understanding the imagined worlds by which people identify themselves as their culture and upon which they build communities with others.¹⁶ The use of the term “imagined worlds” is not meant to cheapen the cultural ideas and practices or social constructs, but rather to emphasize that they are adaptable mechanisms of the mind and not entirely dependent upon outside factors or day to day situations.

Arjun Appadurai breaks the dimensions of global cultural flow into five scapes: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas and ideoscapas. These first three dimensions are the rather complex infrastructure and foundation upon which the other two scapes, mediascapas and ideoscapas, are built.¹⁷ The two most important “scapes” for examining the evolution of Central American gangs are Ethnoscapas and Mediascapas. Ethnoscapas consist of moving groups of people throughout the world. This includes tourists, refugees, emigrants, immigrants, guest workers, exiles and commercial workers moving between nations. The movement of these populations is spurred largely by their “fantasies” of potential change in different locations and also by how they deal with the realities they encounter.¹⁹ Mediascapas are the most relevant dimensions for the theoretical framework of this paper. They include both the global distribution of information through public and private media channels (newspapers, television, movies, radio, the internet, etc.) as well as the very images these mediums transmit throughout the world. It is these images that people around the world encounter and interpret under

many different contexts. The key aspect to this process is the effect these “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of scripts of reality” have on people’s lives and how they interpret them.²⁰ How a person interprets the cultural image depends upon many factors: the historical context of the society or country the person is in, one’s own education and personal history, the medium upon which the image was delivered, the societal opinion of the message being portrayed and one’s understanding of the original context in which the image was created. It is out of these interpretations of the elements (characters, plots and themes) of the transmitted cultural image that people can incorporate the developed cultural idea into their own imagined life and those of others.²¹ It has become nearly impossible for a person’s mental maps to keep up with the increasingly volatile and ephemeral realities of a globalized world which forces one to create imaginary worlds to try to interpret and deal with their ever-changing reality.²² These imagined worlds can become directly influential in how people live and act in their everyday lives.²³ This is not to imply that there is a mechanical shaping of behavior by media but rather that the images enhance the presence of cultural ideas and open up avenues of communication among different people and cultures.

The commodification and transmission of cultural images of early-1990s Los Angeles gang culture to Central America is a perfect case study of global cultural flows and evolution. From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, all forms of the media were interested in capturing and portraying images of Los Angeles gang culture at its peak. In particular, as the popularity of ‘gangsta’ rap and hip hop music emerged, parts of the cultural meanings and ideas surrounding these emerging styles grew in popularity as well. The music was practically irresistible to adolescents who were attracted to its

forbidden, aggressive and counter-authority origins. Music videos broadcast on MTV, movies, and television shows portrayed a “gangsta paradise” with Los Angeles gang life being associated with big money, expensive cars, pretty girls and an edginess that appealed to many youths. Soon it was not just the Bloods or Crips or Homeboys from Los Angeles wearing baggy jeans, oversized t-shirts and plaid button ups, but teens throughout the country, including many in affluent suburban communities who also did so. Soon various commodified images and ideas of the gangsta' rap/hip hop culture incorporated themselves into many aspects of pop-culture, youth marketing, fashion and even everyday youth vernacular. The driving force behind these flows of cultural images and ideas around the country and the world was consumption, the selling of a lifestyle (or at least the commodified aspects of a lifestyle) that was intrinsically attractive to youths for its rebellious, unbridled and seemingly dangerous nature.

One aspect of “Americanization” that is useful to mention in this case is the global reach of American culture and media, particularly pop culture. This includes the worldwide distribution of Hollywood films such as: *Colors* (1998), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), that while displaying the tragedy of gang life also glorified it and presented compelling narratives of life on the streets, through depicting tormented yet strong protagonists. The rap and hip hop music popular in the U.S. spread globally along with the image-rich MTV music videos further glamorizing and serving as a hook for LA gang culture. It is no wonder why such glamorized, colorful and dramatic portrayals of *la vida loca*²⁴ would be so attractive to the disenfranchised youth of Central America. While a youth from Central America would have no way of understanding the true context of these marketing-driven,

glamorized images, they would instinctively integrate them into their own “imagined realities.” The mean streets of Los Angeles would certainly not seem an extreme leap in imagination to kids growing up in the barrios of San Salvador, Tegucigalpa and Guatemala City with few economic opportunities available to them as they continued to live under the shadow of the civil wars. In their eyes, they could imagine themselves as “homeboys” living *la vida loca*, living largely by the way of the gun, the male dominated gang culture fitting nicely into concepts of “machismo” of Latin America. The images and ideas, in a sense, became internalized and incorporated into their “imagined worlds” where they could influence the very way the youth interpreted their world and acted. The spread of Los Angeles gang pop culture through bootleg gangsta rap CDs, sold on the street or in international blockbusters, served as a background and primer of sorts for the eventual arrival of the real thing, Central Americans from Los Angeles, who were deported for gang crimes in groups like Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang. These deportees brought with them unprocessed and unrefined aspects of Los Angeles gang culture, untouched by the media conglomerates. Los Angeles gang culture includes a set of principles focused upon respect, solidarity and unwavering loyalty one’s gang clique, insubordination to the law and to all institutions of authority, hyper-territoriality, visual expression through the use of fashion and tattoos, deference toward the gang clique hierarchy and above all the concept of street justice and its implicit violence. The first wave of deportees who arrived in a Central America, met counterparts in the despondent youths who were living in a society that could neither care, nor provide for them. The deportees were looked upon as demi-gods by their peers, straight from the youths’ imagined perceptions of the glorified, hard streets of Los Angeles.

The Central American Context

In the 1980s and 1990s, the people of Central America experienced several brutal civil wars. Guatemala was embroiled in a conflict (1960–1996) between many leftist guerilla groups and U.S. supported military dictatorships. El Salvador's civil war (1980–1992) was fought between the Salvadoran government and a loose coalition of leftist and communist forces under the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). In both conflicts the civilian populations bore the brunt of the violence and oppression. In Guatemala approximately 200,000 people were killed during the civil war, the majority of whom belonged to the large indigenous population.²⁵ Approximately 75,000 Salvadorans were killed in their civil war with another 8,000 missing, one million internally displaced, and another million refugees who were forced to leave, at the time El Salvador had a population of approximately 5 million people.²⁶ The wars also left the region in economic turmoil. The gross domestic product per capita in Guatemala was at \$3,300 by the time the peace accord was signed in 1996,²⁷ and when the fighting stopped in El Salvador in 1992, the economy was wrecked. Meanwhile in Honduras, unemployment was mounting as the mechanization of commercial farms left many unskilled laborers without work. The ensuing wars and political instability discouraged any substantial foreign investment that would have created jobs for youth and even those who completed an education, had a hard time finding any work. Central America has continued to have among the highest levels of inequality in the world,²⁸ and income inequality has been shown to be the strongest predictor of high violent crime rates.²⁹

One of the immediate results of these political and economic crises was a sharp increase in the number of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and

Nicaragua to the United States. In the 1970s there were a total of 134,640 immigrants who came to the United States from Central America, including 34,436 Salvadorans. In the 1980s this number jumped to 468,088 immigrants, from all of Central America, 213,539 coming from El Salvador.³⁰ Some of these immigrants were former rebel fighters or right-wing paramilitaries from the Salvadoran slums or the Guatemalan highlands. They brought a working knowledge of weapons, explosives and combat experience to their new homes in the United States. Some of these refugees became the founding members and parents of the generation that would start gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha in Los Angeles.

While the military and police played a predominant role in perpetuating conflict during the civil wars, afterwards they were largely demobilized and restructured to prevent the abuses that had previously taken place from occurring in the future. This created relatively weak security institutions within Central America, but even so, the “restructured” police forces were still largely mistrusted by the population, as they continued to inflict abuses and widespread corruption.³¹ During the war in Guatemala extreme right-wing vigilante civilian “security forces” emerged to fight an unconventional war against the rebels. Their tactics included the use of torture, forced disappearance and the murder of suspected leftists and their families. In addition, many students, professionals and peasants were targeted. The groups were never completely disarmed or disbanded and with the dismantlement of formal repressive state security institutions, they would later apply their methods of violence and vigilante justice to new social problems.³²

The region was also awash in small arms and other military-grade weapons left over from the civil wars. There are approximately 4 million weapons in Central America, at least 2 million of which are military-grade small arms. This means that in Central America there is one assault rifle for every ten people.³³ This statistic alone does not predict trouble; the United States actually has more firearms than it does people. However, given the availability of cheap military-grade weapons, the existence of political instability, a history of government abuses and vigilante death squads and high levels of economic inequality and poverty, the statistic takes on greater significance.

The situation for children in these countries has been particularly perilous. The circumstances within Guatemala as the civil war ended in 1996 are particularly demonstrative of trends throughout the entire region. In 1996, over 49.1% of the Guatemalan population was under the age of fourteen.³⁴ Over 80% of the population lived under the poverty threshold, and of those 7 million people over 5.1 million lived in extreme poverty.³⁵ The rate of child poverty was particularly high as the majority of large poor households were in rural areas. Honduras and El Salvador saw similar trends with nearly 50% of their population under the age of 18, struggling to overcome the drastic changes during the 1990s. In addition to their immediate circumstances, young people in Central America had very little to look forward to. In 1994, the literacy rate in Guatemala was only 60% and in rural areas as much as 70% of the population was illiterate.³⁶ Only 43.3% of children over the age of fourteen were registered within the school system while statistics for corresponding attendance rates are unavailable.³⁷ Throughout the region, young people were deprived of educational opportunity, excluded

from receiving the benefits of formal economic initiatives, and generally were ignored by government institutions.

The children of the last three decades in Central America have lacked any kind of economic or social opportunities to integrate into society.³⁸ Youth unemployment levels, particularly among those from low income homes, have been remarkably high.³⁹ Domestic violence was and is a common and tragic reality for many children. A university study in El Salvador showed that physical domestic violence was present in at least 80% of households.⁴⁰ As a result of the strains placed upon the family unit from wartime or economic troubles, the tragic prevalence of violence within the home with corresponding police indifference to its expression, and inter-familial consequences of “machismo,” many children and youths were and continue to be subject to physical abuse or neglect.⁴¹ Under such circumstances it is understandable that many children become desensitized to violence and develop skewed understandings of its role in society.⁴²

As children of the civil wars, many youth were influenced to believe, through the death squads, rebel attacks and government oppression, that violence and vengeance are more viable options towards solving conflicts than faith in the rule of law or peaceful resolution.⁴³ This is not a surprising development when the police and the government, the institutions responsible for providing fair justice and adherence to rule of law, act with impunity.

These conditions created a cohort of Central American youth, unemployed, marginalized from society, accustomed to a world of violence and tragedy, lacking in paternal role models and with no apparent future. It was members among this cohort of the disenfranchised who would adopt U.S. gang culture. They found new idols and

surrogate family members as they began to associate with the strangely dressed, tattooed and violent men, who arrived in shackles from the U.S. but once in Central America, were free to recruit new protégés. To understand the impact these deportees would have upon Central America youth, it is essential to explain the circumstances under which they adapted to and developed gang life in Los Angeles.

The Homeboys

While many Central Americans lived through the struggles and tragedies of the civil wars, others sought to find refuge outside of the country. In fact, over 20% of the population of El Salvador fled during the twelve-year civil war, over 5 million people in total.⁴⁴ In 1990 alone, 80,173 Salvadorans immigrated legally to the United States, many as special status war refugees.⁴⁵ The majority of these immigrants settled in the Rampart area of Los Angeles in predominately Hispanic, Mexican/Chicano neighborhoods. Most of the families that escaped the violence brought children who, while born in Central America, would spend most of their childhood growing up on the streets of Los Angeles. At this point in time, Los Angeles became the nation's "capital" for street gangs as turf wars between the Bloods and Crips brought homicide and crime statistics to record highs and the media rushed in to capture the essence of this new gangster lifestyle. Upon arrival the new refugees were terrorized in their own neighborhoods by several established local Hispanic gangs.⁴⁶

In response to these threats several Salvadoran refugees started a protection group they called Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). The name comes from Salvadoran slang for a soldier ant, *Mara*, and a nickname for Salvadorans, *Salvatruchas*; members of the new gang referred to themselves as "Homeboys." In fact, an enigmatic street gang named La

Mara already existed in El Salvador during the civil war, although information on its history and nature are unclear as crime statistics from the time were skewed by the ongoing civil war and corrupt government. The gangs that existed during the end of the civil war in El Salvador were scattered groups, typically armed only with knives and machetes, with no real connection to illegal drugs and very little appeal or power.⁴⁷ In contrast, the new gang culture that grew up in Los Angeles was more violent, better organized and exuded a certain style and way of life that appealed to youth. Many believe that the first members of MS-13 were actually former members of *La Mara* or guerrilla/ right-wing paramilitary refugees, as this explains the level of organization and violence for which the gang would become notorious.⁴⁸ By the early-90s the images and some original values of the Los Angeles gang life had already been processed and mainstreamed by the national media as a cultural phenomenon, with movies and rap music sending images of drive-by shootings and turf wars, with kids around the country wearing baggy clothes and getting new stylistic tattoos.⁴⁹

While membership was originally limited to Salvadorans, Mara Salvatrucha was, along with the 18th Street gang, one of the first gangs to break the racial and nationalist barrier by accepting members from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras other Hispanics and even some African-Americans.⁵⁰ This trans-national identity today is more prevalent within gang cliques in the United States. However, even in Central America there is an overriding sense that gang identity runs deeper than any nationalistic pretensions. While a gang like Mara Salvatrucha may employ nationalistic symbols such as the national flag and colors of El Salvador, these symbols have typically been adopted by the gang culture without retaining much of their original nationalistic meaning. For example, MS-13 gang

cliques in Guatemala will use Salvadoran national symbols in their body art or graffiti, even though when asked they would still identify themselves Guatemalans and may even be slightly prejudiced against Salvadorans. It is this kind of flexible nature, not only in recruiting but also in criminal activities and modus operandi, which allowed Mara Salvatrucha to expand and evolve to a truly transnational scale.

Although originally formed for protection against other Los Angeles gangs, it was not long before MS-13 was fully integrated into the Los Angeles gang environment. Aside from the music, fashion and other more marketable characteristics, the emergence of the Los Angeles gang life brought with it new types of crimes to Central America. This was the gang scene that popularized the “gangland drive-by shooting” and perfected the art of using graffiti to mark territory. However, for the most part, Los Angeles gangs would participate in what is considered cafeteria-style crime, basically a wide-range of criminal endeavors, most of them not very serious and not specializing in any one particular crime. For example, the average gang clique over the course of a month may engage in some simple muggings, petty theft, extortion, small scale drug dealing and possibly a drive-by shooting against rival gang members. Street gang involvement in drug distribution and dealing was a relatively new trend in the 1980s. As the U.S. economy was restructured with fewer job opportunities in poor urban areas, the informal economy in these areas (such as Los Angeles) expanded. Many street gangs transformed their character, taking on a more economically-driven model; drug dealing was the most profitable informal venture available.⁵¹ Not all gangs became income-generating, however. In fact in 1995 a survey of police officers across the country estimated only

26% of gangs were income-generating, 28% were what they defined as violent gangs, and they considered 46% of gang cliques as simply delinquent groups.⁵²

Gangs reached an unprecedented level of sophistication and size in Los Angeles between the 1970s and 90s. While gangs such as MS-13 and M-18 were fully part of the general Los Angeles gang scene, they also worked to distinguish themselves. Members of MS-13 and M-18 developed an extensive and complex system of symbols and rituals. Many of these adopted symbols are expressed visually in the form of tattoos or gang signs using their hands. Gang signals are often used as warnings or for intimidation, stating that they “own” this particular area. Some gang cliques use a more elaborate system called “stacking,” a type of sign language used to coordinate actions or advertise the clique to which they belong.⁵³ Often employing religious, Salvadoran nationalistic symbols, representations of the devil or evil (such as devil horns on the forehead or full depictions) and other forms of symbolism, many members would tattoo nearly their entire bodies. (See Appendix A.) The tattoos typically carry special meanings for the members who wear them, such as Los Angeles area codes or tributes to fallen gang members or one’s family. Often times, these tattoos serve as visual biographies; others are particular to their local clique. Many of the particular gang styles and symbols utilized have been useful to law enforcement officials and gang researchers as they understand how the gang has migrated and changed. What were particularly unique to these Hispanic gangs were facial tattoos. The idea behind such unconventional body art was to send a message as to how serious, dedicated or crazy the individual was, in living the gang life, *la vida loca*. Placing tattoos on one’s hands or face is a way to permanently symbolize their rejection of general society and to assert their membership in the gang.

The widespread use of tattoos to denote lifelong membership with a gang was a more recent development with the growth of gangs in Los Angeles. The irony behind this use of unconcealed body art was that the very characteristics that set them apart, at least visually, from other gangs would eventually make gang members visible targets by the robust police initiatives and the vigilante violence of Central America in later years.

The other gang that would eventually grow along with MS-13 was the 18th Street Gang. Originally formed in the 1960s, exclusively for U.S. residents of “pure” Hispanic background, M-18 saw tremendous growth as it expanded its membership criteria and accepted members from many neighborhoods and backgrounds. M-18 grew largely through its strategy of “jumping in” (initiation into the gang through timed beatings) of “tagger crews,” groups of youth that spray graffiti, and through its recruitment of new immigrants to Los Angeles.⁵⁴ M-18 has even been credited as the first Hispanic street gang to “strategically” establish new cliques either through active recruitment or through the relocation of existing members.⁵⁵ Although evidence for these activities as part of a planned or centralized strategy is weak, there is evidence to support the belief that some cliques have actively recruited and migrated to new areas as the communities they depend upon expand or move.⁵⁶

In response to skyrocketing crime rates and the very existence of public gang wars, Los Angeles and Californian authorities responded with much stricter anti-gang laws in the mid 1990s. The laws used a variety of methods to target gangs and restrict, punish or prevent their activities. The new measures included charging young gang members as adults, applying stricter felony sentences to crimes associated with street gangs, and giving harsher penalties to multiple offenders under the “three strikes you’re

out” law of 1994.⁵⁷ The laws put thousands of LA gang members in prison, including hundreds of Hispanic members from groups such as MS-13 and M-18.

A few years later, the U.S. Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996. Within the act was a section expanding the list of crimes that made a non-citizen eligible for involuntary and immediate deportation back to one’s country of origin.⁵⁸ The law was criticized regarding its constitutionality and for its broad language regarding the range of offenses and persons eligible for deportation. However, despite legal and legislative challenges, the law survived and its implementation has expanded. The law resulted in an immediate jump in the number of annual deportations. In 1996, 69,680 aliens were deported from the United States. Within one year that number had risen to 114,432 and by the year 2000 it was up to 186,391 deportations per year.⁵⁹ Since then, about 20-30% of the deportations have been on the basis of criminal violations, approximately 30-40,000 per year.⁶⁰ The leading countries of origin for deportees have been Mexico (69%), Honduras (7%) and Guatemala (6%).⁶¹

After serving their prison sentences in the United States, convicts selected for deportation would be placed in special detention centers awaiting a flight back to their country of origin, countries most had not been to since they were young children. They were heavily tattooed, their Spanish (if they spoke any at all) was interspersed with English and extensive slang and they wore the baggy pants, white t-shirts and oversized plaid button ups, all of which were characteristics of the Los Angeles gang scene.

Until 2007, ⁶² Central American governments had no way of even knowing the criminal backgrounds of the new arrivals as the U.S. immigration laws did not allow for

that kind of information sharing.⁶³ After serving their sentences in U.S. prisons, what many experts consider the equivalent of getting a masters degree in crime, the deportees arrived as unemployable outcasts. Their poor language skills, extensive tattoos particularly those on their faces, and their lack of any real education or practical work experience made them particularly unemployable in societies where there were already few jobs available.⁶⁴ This lack of viable opportunities meant that even those who did want to start a new legitimate life had no chance to and were again driven to crime and the fringes of society.

However, the same characteristics that caused the deportees to be perceived as outcasts by general society in Central America made their lifestyle so attractive to many Central American youths. Many young people of the region were well primed through MTV, Hollywood and hip-hop music to embrace these new icons of the ultra rebellious counter culture of gang life by the mid-1990s.⁶⁵ In idolizing transplanted gang members, many young Central Americans saw an opportunity to embrace another way of life where unemployment and social exclusion wouldn't matter, a way of life that was already being glorified by the media worldwide. Therefore it is not difficult to see why the gangs grew so quickly first in El Salvador and later in Honduras and Guatemala. The criminal deportees were representatives of the "gang banger life," and their presence, after youth were exposed to decades of violence, shattered families and inequality, brought about an explosion of crime, violence and fear.

Central America in the 1990s was extremely vulnerable to the outbreak and radicalization of gang culture and violence. With media flows of glorified images of gang life and the physical flow of bona fide experienced gang members returning to their

countries of origin, introduced a new type of criminal to Central America representing the violent gang culture in Los Angeles. Unfortunately for the people of Central America, these trends could not have come at a worse or more inopportune time. Wars and economic crises had thrown the national economies into shambles and fragmented the family unit, government security institutions once oppressively strong were dismantled after the civil wars, guns were cheaper to buy than were many household goods, inequality rates were among the highest in the world and almost half of the regional population was under the age of fourteen. It was as a result of these exceptional circumstances that the consequences of the cultural and migration flows typical of globalization were so dramatically evident and destabilizing.

However, as explained in the first section on globalization, cultural constructs such as gang culture do not remain unchanged when subject to different contexts and changing environments. The same factors that made Central American youth so vulnerable to the new gang culture, structural poverty, history of violence, and social and familial poverty, also transformed the culture itself. The nature and size of gangs is heavily influenced by how capable state security and social institutions are at limiting crime and other dangerous social behaviors such as drug use. In Central America the inability of the security institutions of the state to fully implement any sound policies has allowed the youth gangs to reach new levels of violence and crime. The failure of the economy and of social institutions provided an endless pool of potential recruits for gang expansion.

The Rise of Las Maras

Within ten years of the arrival of MS-13 and M-18 members into the region, the membership of the two gangs has grown to, by conservative estimates, approximately 70,000-100,000 members, in Central America. In the United States the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) estimates that today there are approximately 38,000 members of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang.⁶⁷ Estimates of gang membership vary greatly, particularly in Central America, as reporting bodies have varying definitions and methods of identifying and tabulating gang members. What is for certain is the explosive growth these gangs have experienced.

Within the same time period, there has been an ominous spike in violent crime as gang membership levels have increased throughout the region. For instance, in 1999 the homicide rate in Honduras reached 154 murders per 100,000 people.⁶⁸ This made Honduras one of the most violent countries in the world. In comparison, the United States at the same time had a murder rate of 5.7 per 100,000 and Colombia, a South American country undergoing a violent civil war, had 70 per 100,000. Since then, the homicide rate has dropped to 46 homicides per 100,000 people in 2004. Other countries in the region had similar homicide rates. In 2004, Guatemala had 34.7 homicides per 100,000 people and in El Salvador 41.2 per 100,000.⁶⁹ In 1998, El Salvador had more than 6,000 homicides, matching the country's annual death toll during the height of the civil war in 1983.⁷⁰ *Casa Alianza*, a child rights group, tabulated all media reports of killings of people 23 years old and younger in Honduras and reported 1,976 violent deaths and/or executions of youths between 2002 and 2006.⁷¹

Official crime statistics in the region are notoriously inaccurate, particularly when designating the nature of the crime. For instance, when distinguishing between domestic

violence, organized crime and gang-related crimes. El Salvador estimated that 60% of the 2,576 murders in 2004 were gang-related. Guatemala and Honduras attribute similarly high percentages to gang-related offenses. The problem with estimating how many of these crimes are gang related stems from a lack of information regarding crime statistics during the pre-Mara, civil war years. Some experts believe that the civil wars in the region concealed high non-related crime statistics and that it is only recently that the government has become serious about collecting crime statistics in order to justify and attempt to tabulate the effect of new law enforcement heavy response to gangs.⁷²

Government sources and media reports often use gangs as scapegoats for all the security and criminal problems in the region.⁷³ For example, Guatemala has seen a surge in murders of young women and girls with more than 665 murdered in 2006, 53% of the murders were of girls between 10-11 years old.⁷⁴ In 2000, the number of murdered women was 213.⁷⁵ In 2006, authorities reported that over 90% of the victims suffered sexual abuse prior to their deaths.⁷⁶ While the vast majority of gang-related violence and murders are committed against men, the local governments and media have been attributing most of the violence against women to violent gang initiation rituals.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, just as crime statistics were manipulated and concealed during the decades of civil war, now the existence and activities of the maras have been used to explain the (perceived) rise in violence against women. Blaming the problem solely on gang violence suppresses any debate over the prevalence of domestic violence and murder, preventing any significant change or social action from taking place⁷⁸. Many human rights observers believe the same mechanism is at work disguising military and criminal organizations left over from the civil war that continue to profit through the drug trade, arms deals and

government corruption. For such groups, not only is the perception of widespread gang violence convenient so as to conceal their own crimes, but the social and economic instability and unrest caused by the gang-violence distracts the public from dealing with the structural social problems that exist and the more organized criminal elements left over from the wars.⁷⁹ The maras were changed not only by arriving in a different context that allowed them to grow and act with more freedom than before, but also by the responses the Central American governments and people had to their presence.

During the civil wars in Central America shadowy paramilitary, right-wing vigilante groups emerged applying brutally violent and extralegal methods labeled as “social cleansing” towards the struggle against those labeled as revolutionaries. Several of these groups, thought dissolved, have reappeared with the rise of the maras, and one such group is the infamous *Sombra Negra* in El Salvador. So-called “death squads” like the *Sombra Negra* were allegedly responsible for thousands of disappearances and murders of civilians they labeled as troublemakers or revolutionaries between the 1980s and 90s.⁸⁰ The groups are largely comprised of police and military personnel who use the organizations to act with impunity. Similar groups also existed in Guatemala and after the peace accords in both countries did very little to disarm or demobilize these shadow militias and security forces.

In April of 1995 *Sombra Negra* took credit for the murders of seventeen people who were allegedly gang members. Most of the victims had been blindfolded and bound before receiving *Tiros de Gracia*, gunshots to the base of the skull at point blank range with an automatic or assault weapon. Following the killings, sixteen alleged members of *Sombra Negra* were arrested for the killings, including four high ranking national police

officers, *Policía Nacional Civil (PNC)*. All sixteen suspects were eventually released and no one was ever convicted for the crimes. *La Sombra Negra* justified the extrajudicial executions by declaring that “the laws of the country are not working” and that “the PNC does not have sufficient resources to combat crime.”⁸¹ While *Sombra Negra* has not made any more statements and the group has allegedly disbanded, the killings have not stopped. In fact, throughout the region, the number of unexplained murders has increased, many of which bear the signs of social cleansing, using violence, torture, and murder to address “social problems.”⁸²

Violence committed by these vigilante groups was often ignored as a “necessary evil” by both the public and the police to counter the maras terrorizing their communities. However, the extrajudicial killings have since expanded so as to include many victims targeted for being “young and poor” without possessing even a single tattoo.⁸³ Many are being killed in certain neighborhoods solely on the possibility that they are associated with a gang or will be in the future. Combined with the gang-violence, this vigilante “justice” has contributed to the overall regional instability and is both a symptom and a cause of ineffective government institutions.

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were in a state of fragile transition to democracy and rule of law in the 1990s when they were forced to deal with the rapid growth of the maras. A vital aspect to this transition is the demilitarization of the state and the reform of the police and security institutions. When faced with the threat of emerging street gangs, El Salvador and Honduras decided on heavy “militarized” enforcement as a solution.⁸⁴

Both countries instituted *Mano Dura*, or Strong Hand, policies. This strategy views street gangs as a law enforcement problem to be solved with more security, police and prisons. There are three different pillars of any successful anti-gang initiative: Suppression, Intervention and Prevention.⁸⁵ The *Mano Dura* policies focus on the suppression side of anti-gang initiatives and view gang members not as victims or products of social and economic problems but rather as intrinsically criminal elements that need to be removed from society. So far El Salvador and Honduras have yet to develop long-term approaches implementing the other two pillars. The *Mano Dura* laws made association with a gang a crime by itself. For simply associating with a gang, a person can get an automatic prison sentence of up to twelve years, regardless of whether or not one has committed any other “traditional crime.”⁸⁶ Honduras implemented the changes in 2002 and there was an almost immediate impact and soon afterwards El Salvador adopted its own program. On paper at least, the program initially appeared to be extremely effective. Prison systems swelled with the new arrivals, and within a year, Honduras’ prison system was 200% over capacity. El Salvador experienced similar problems as both countries’ legal systems, already strained, struggled to keep up with the overwhelming numbers of new criminal charges. As a result, appropriate jurisprudence and thorough investigation were severely lacking. Human rights groups criticized the hard-line approach as an attempt to “arrest itself” out of its gang problem without addressing its underlying social causes.⁸⁷ The *Mano Dura* laws also have led to a general disregard for the rules of jurisprudence and proper investigation standards, as arrests are made under vague rules. For example, in the first year of the *Mano Dura* laws in El Salvador, 19,275 people were detained under the new laws for association with a gang,

and nearly 91% of those arrested were later released without being charged, due to lack of evidence.⁸⁸ (See Appendix C.)

The prison systems have been completely overwhelmed. All three countries have gone as far as designating certain prisons for specific gang members only to attempt to cut down on inter-gang violence and control the prisoners. There has also been a high incidence of prison fires, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala as a result of overcrowding, and possibly as a form of extra-judicial killing of gang members. For example, there are accusations that in May 2004, Honduran prison guards allowed a fire to burn for sixty to ninety minutes before responding, killing 106 MS-13 members.⁸⁹ The enormous influx of gang members into the prison system has made prison time practically a rite of passage for young and aspiring gang members. The prisons are described as ‘colleges for criminals’ or gang finishing schools.⁹⁰ Gang members who get picked up on the street for wearing baggy pants or having arm tattoos serve time with hardened criminals and gang members from all over. They share information, network with each other and learn. More than anything else, the prisons have made the gangs more cohesive, giving them an environment to make connections and plans.⁹¹ This theory was reinforced in 2002 when crime statistics shot up again after the first wave of gang members who had been arrested in the early 90s was released.⁹²

The maras themselves would have the most volatile and calculated response to the new anti-gang strategy and their behaviors would eventually highlight its weaknesses. The maras retaliated with waves of random violence intending to send a message to the government. On December 23, 2004, a group of MS-13 members stopped a random bus on a Honduran highway, they then surrounded the bus and opened up firing assault

weapons, killing twenty-eight people including six children, and seriously wounding fourteen others. The gang members left a large note on the front of the bus addressed to the president of Honduras. The note identified MS-13 as the perpetrators of the attack and said it was in retaliation for the *Mano Dura*, zero-tolerance policies.⁹³

Adaptation and Evolution

The implementation of the heavy-handed *Mano Dura* laws and the re-emergence of brutal vigilante groups were the causes of the third major transformation of the Central American maras. The first change occurred during the creation and integration of Central American gangs into the Los Angeles gang scene in the 1980s. The second was when the maras and their distinctive Los Angeles gang culture arrived in Central America, where they grew to unprecedented levels and acted with impunity under the jurisdiction of weak state institutions. While the mara culture from Los Angeles had taken on Central American characteristics present within the immigrant communities of Los Angeles. The arriving had to find a way to reassert their identity and adapt to their new surroundings. The third transformation thus involved a series of behavioral adaptations in response to the gangs' changing environment, as they confronted vigilante death squads and the *mano dura* government policies.

The targeting of gang members through their use of elaborate tattoos provides an interesting example of how the maras have adapted to their changing environment. Previously, extensive body and facial tattoos had served as a means of visual expression, through which among members advertised their dedication to gang life and created an exotic/dangerous allure so as to attract new recruits. However, with the implementation of the *Mano Dura* laws, police and military forces were able to specifically target gang

members according to this particular cultural practice. The tattoos were (and in many places still are) an integral part of the general mara/gang culture. Therefore, just as they changed other cultural beliefs and practices to suit their environment, the *pandillas* (Central American gang members) adapted their extensive tattooing practices to new crackdowns in Central America. The fluidity and speed with which the maras made such adaptations is remarkable, and is further evidence of the flexible nature of mara/gang culture and its adherents. Thus, as soon as the *Mano Dura* crackdowns started, new gang members began to shun tattoos while older members took lower profiles or went to great lengths to hide or even remove their now hazardous marks.⁹⁴ Some have argued that with their newfound lower visibility, the maras have been able to move to smaller communities and possibly even infiltrate national police and military units.⁹⁵

However, these adaptations have not kept them from meeting and continuing gang activity.⁹⁶ The spread of wanton violence, not just by the gang members but also by the vigilante groups and rogue police officers, has fueled the insecurity and culture of impunity that the gangs have depended upon for recruitment and survival.

The Central American response, both official and unofficial, also intensified the transnational nature of the gangs. While deportations from the United States continue to this day, and are in fact more prevalent than ever, the deportees are received differently. They are no longer the rock stars or idols to youth they were in the 90s.⁹⁷ In fact they are actually in great danger upon arrival as police and vigilante groups target new arrivals for detention and murder. Many gang members say they would rather take their chances with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security by attempting to sneak back into the United States rather than face groups like *Sombra Negra*.⁹⁸ This has led to more gang

members crossing borders to get into Mexico and for many, to eventually return to the U.S. This mobility, both voluntary and involuntary, has allowed the maras to prosper by engaging in drug smuggling and human trafficking, work that has added another dimension to their nature.

When discerning the sophistication and transnational nature of these groups it is important to distinguish between international organized crime and youth or street gangs. Some believe that gangs like Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang have already crossed the line into transnational organized crime.⁹⁹ They note, for instance, some mara clique's involvement in drug smuggling and dealing and their role in human trafficking between Mexico and the U.S. However, this understanding is a bit over simplified and relies upon old models of understanding criminal networks and youth gangs. The essential point to understand is that while gangs like MS-13 operate in over six countries and thirty-three states, they are still intrinsically local entities. The vast majority of the members of any gang rarely if ever leave a few block radius from their gangs' territory.¹⁰⁰ Los Angeles-style gangs are fiercely territorial and the vast majority of their time is spent within these bounds. The majority of income-receiving gangs like MS-13 depend upon local extortion rackets or local drug dealing and distribution for the majority of their funds. Undoubtedly, as immigration and deportation statistics demonstrated earlier, some gang members travel between countries, not always voluntarily, and these particular individuals may have a special status or role in their cliques. However, to this date, there have been no corroborated reports or evidence of any kind of centralized or even moderately hierarchical gang leadership structure in any Central American country, giving us even less reason to believe in the existence of a regional organization.¹⁰¹ The

vast majority of gang members ostensibly belong only to their neighborhood cliques. While they may identify themselves or their gang as part of an international network, outside of a shared local culture, their connection with their international counterparts is basically non-existent.¹⁰²

The truly organized international networks that run the profitable illegal drug trade and that dominate human trafficking are still organized crime cartels which run more like a business than a street gang. Such organizations include the Mexican mafia, (*La Eme*), and several Colombian drug cartels that operate regionally. If such criminal organizations had business operation flow charts, the role of MS-13 and M-18 cliques would be at the very bottom of the value-added process. Groups like *La Eme* hire gang members to do certain low level jobs, and may even contract local distribution out to a specific local clique of MS-13 or M-18. The *pandillas* are most often used as ‘soldiers,’ drug dealers and mules, and while some enterprising gang leaders or cliques may carve a local niche for themselves, there is no evidence of MS-13 cliques taking over leadership or strategic positions in the process nor obtaining any of the “means of production” in the drug trade.¹⁰³

One particular trait that has been applied to MS-13 and M-18 is their inclination to “migrate” and actively spread their gang culture or start new cliques. A common belief is that the expansion of these gangs, MS-13 in particular, to urban and even suburban areas across the U.S. is the result of planned or entrepreneurial expansion.¹⁰⁴ A more realistic explanation for such proliferation is that gangs go where their community goes. MS-13 cliques do not exist where there is no Central American immigrant population. The suburban and sometimes rural locations where the maras have been

emerging are not simply “chosen” because the local law enforcement lacks experience in dealing with gangs. Rather, new gang cliques appear only in areas with new Central American communities.¹⁰⁵ New immigrants commonly congregate where their family or former neighbors have migrated beforehand; this corresponds with the level of importance Latinos traditionally place on family and community networks. This community connection is also significant in that the primary victims of these gangs are members of their own community. Despite public denouncements in the media of “criminal illegal alien gangs” from Central America terrorizing our suburban communities,¹⁰⁶ the majority of crimes committed by maras in the United States target their own community.

An important distinction to keep in mind is the difference between transnational business or criminal contacts and family contacts. Transnational family connections between Latino immigrants are common and remittances from the U.S. to family back home are so common the regional economy depends upon them. Criminal contacts on the other hand are a different story. While rumors of transnational profit sharing and strategic expansion persist, for the most part they lack any basis in fact on a systemic or organizational scale. Virtually all suspected cases or rumors of transnational collaboration without the aid of a third party (organized crime, e.g., *la Eme*) have been proven inaccurate or at the very least embellished.¹⁰⁷

The idea of street gangs evolving into organized crime-like enterprises is not exclusive to the Central American maras. The 1987 conviction of members of Chicago’s El Rukns gang on terrorism charges connected with Libya’s Moammar Gadhafi is such an example. However, most of the evidence regarding the evolution of street gangs to

more sophisticated hybrid-organized crime networks is anecdotal and promoted by media coverage or high-profile prosecutors.¹⁰⁸ In reality, as gangs grow and expand they do not necessarily follow organizational theory which asserts that bureaucratic and hierarchical structure are natural consequences of expansion. Gangs are an anomaly; they are a fundamentally different type of organization apart from organized crime. Rather than being organized in a pyramid structure like most organized crime or other large groups, gangs have a more organic organization that is more adaptive and dispersed.¹⁰⁹

One rumor in particular demonstrates the attitude and framework with which regional governments have interpreted the growth of the maras. A report from Honduras alleged that a suspected Al Qaeda operative, Adnan G. El Shukrijumah, was in Tegucigalpa, Honduras meeting with members of MS-13, allegedly to procure assistance in smuggling Al Qaeda terrorist operatives and armaments across the border.¹¹⁰ The rumor was eventually proven false, but the idea was already planted and prompted more fears about U.S. border security and MS-13, which some still consider a terrorist-associated organization.¹¹¹ The willingness to believe in connections between terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and street gangs like MS-13 stems from the general framework with which these gangs are interpreted. Rather than being seen as a social problem (like most other gangs), they are treated as enemy combatants that need to be eliminated not rehabilitated.¹¹² Because of the transnational similarities and connections (regardless of their nature) between the MS-13 and M-18 cliques they are conceptualized more as terrorist cells than as local franchises of a cultural phenomenon. It is within this context that the *Mano Dura* policies are implemented. The Central American governments do not see these gang members as their own children, which in a nationalistic sense they

generally are, but rather as separate almost inhuman, violent animals. This conceptual understanding of street gangs ignores the social aspects of their development and prompts governments to address gang threats much like an insurgency, or rather, with policies reminiscent of the civil wars. Vulnerable youth become trapped between structural poverty and social/familial breakdown on the one hand and brutally oppressive government policies that deny the rights and very humanity of their own citizens on the other, allowing for a seemingly endless cycle of violence.

Gangs 2.0

The propensity for change and adaptation that has allowed the maras to expand and evolve according to their circumstances and the challenges they confront is the very same process that is prevalent in all youth. The popularization and spread of Los Angeles gang culture as set of popularized images and ideas to be consumed by the masses started during the 1990s. In the past few years, new methods of creating cultural flows have opened up and become available to the general population. The shift has been called Web 2.0,¹¹³ and it is based upon the internet's shift to more user-created and user-friendly web publishing applications. Examples include MySpace, YouTube, BitTorrent, Blogs, and Google AdSense. These innovations make the creation of content viewable to millions of people worldwide possible for anyone with access to a computer and the internet. With Web 2.0, the internet is no longer the sole territory of elites with specific computer training or resources; instead, the internet is a platform upon which nearly anyone can publish content and transmit cultural and political messages. This change has taken the powers of cultural commodification and transmission out of the hands of the elites and has made them available to anyone.

In the context of Central American gangs, the shift towards a Web 2.0 dominated internet implies that the culture is now more available than ever, anywhere in the world, uncensored and unprocessed. Searches on MySpace and YouTube alone show hundreds if not thousands of references to Mara Salvatrucha and M-18.¹¹⁴ This has created the notion of virtual gangs, or Gangs 2.0, whereby along the periphery of traditional street gangs, there is also an informal network of web-content creators. With varying levels of contact with real gang cliques these actors nonetheless spread the gang culture online. Now, there are countless chat rooms, videos, online music, written stories and pictures of boys and some men holding up the recognizable gang signs while staring menacingly or in threatening poses. That said, it is highly unlikely that the gang members who make the nightly news for their brutal crimes are the same ones who are changing their online profile status and uploading a new MySpace template. In terms of cultural flows, however, the “street credibility” or true gang status of the web author is irrelevant. What is significant is that the culture is being spread by regular people at all, and that hundreds of interpretations and depictions of it are available.

Conclusions

It is difficult to predict what these technological and social changes will mean for the future of Central American gangs or how their culture will evolve. Parts of the culture may be picked up and adapted by other disenfranchised youth somewhere else in the world, just as the Latino gangs were pulled into the African-American Los Angeles gang scene. This process should not be interpreted as a mechanical shaping of behavior by communication forces or by the media, but it should be noted that transmitted images enhance the presence of cultural ideas and open up avenues of communication among

different people and cultures. The only constants involving the transmission of gang culture so far have been change and violence. Within gang culture, there is a constant craving to be on the cutting edge. Whether it is by getting the most extreme facial tattoos, adapting new music styles or committing the most violent of crimes, change has been the one constant factor in street gang activity. As certain aspects of this particular gang culture get commoditized or transmitted whether by the mass-media or by a teenager using MySpace, more and more people will have access to these cultural images and ideas. Even if the new web authors do not actively participate in the lifestyle the cultures depict, more opportunities will arise for the gangs to adapt and evolve. This process will continue to accelerate as technology further compresses time and space and the movement of people and ideas flow faster and faster.

The suppression-centric strategies for dealing with transnational street gangs have proven limited at best. The gangs are much too fluid and adaptable to be controlled by traditional forces of the state. Central American street gang activity simply transcends national borders, and any strategy that depends on the idea that borders are entirely defensible or that gang activity can be solved through domestic approaches alone, is bound to fail. A lack of imagination prevented the U.S. Congress from seeing the potential impact of sending hardened criminal deportees back to Central America where they found thousands of willing recruits, products of their impoverished environment who were eager to buy into the culture of gang-life. This is not to say that the problem was avoidable, for in all likelihood, the maras would have spread to Central America regardless of U.S. policies, as immigrants in the U.S. returned home voluntarily, or as the

gang culture was transmitted by the media, and would have caught on by itself in the region. The forced deportations simply accelerated the process.

Implementing a realistic and viable solution for gang violence is not impossible. In fact many experts and organizations have already laid out the framework for such plans. They focus on addressing gang violence as a social problem, and while law enforcement suppression is undoubtedly a necessary part to ensure short-term security, the roots of the problem must be addressed. There are several models upon which to base local or national policies that would be viable for Central American countries with the correct foreign assistance.¹¹⁵ The main step however will be the acknowledgement that the spread of gang activity is a transnational problem that needs a regional solution with U.S. leadership and support.¹¹⁶ All countries involved must acknowledge that by acting solely out of their own self interests, even in regards to particular domestic policies, they directly impact their neighbors, in this case provoking the cycle of gang violence across the region.¹¹⁷

What makes the case of Central American gangs so interesting in the context of globalization and government policy is the paradoxical dual nature of Central American gangs. The Central American maras, like all gangs, are fundamentally local organizations. Their members are territory-focused and the income they generate normally comes from within the small geographical area they control. Unlike terrorists, they are products and members of the very community and society in which they live and operate. Any successful anti-gang initiative must, for these reasons, be hyper local, it must reach out to the local elementary and high schools, confront families, create economic opportunities in small communities and work with local community leaders

and organizations. On the other hand, as people and ideas flow faster than ever around the world, what appear to be the most local of policy changes can have a global effect. The anti-gang initiatives in Los Angeles that increased the penalties for many gang-related crimes, along with later changes in U.S. immigration law made gang members eligible for deportation in the first place. The *Mano Dura* policies of Honduras and El Salvador coupled with vigilante violence made the mid-1990s gangster-heaven that was Central America nearly inhospitable if you had tattoos or wore your pants down low. This changed local environment resulted in many more gang members working to smuggle themselves back into the United States through Mexico. In doing this many gang members became familiarized with the border regions making them valuable assets to organized crime for drug smuggling and human trafficking while reinforcing the current cyclical and transnational nature of Central American gangs.

Further research will be necessary to develop a more complete understanding of how these global cultural flows occur and operate upon an increasingly globalized world. However, even by giving an incomplete illustration of these global flows within the narrative of the rise and evolution of Central American street gangs, this paper demonstrates the impact changing forces in globalization have on everyday life. This has significant policy implications as nation-state governments attempt to tackle evolving transnational problems such as immigration, the illicit drug trade, crime and terrorism. The intrinsic limitations of the nation-state, even one as powerful as the United States, in the face of the forces and flows of globalization make global cooperation a necessity in the 21st century.

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- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 50
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- ¹² Ibid. p. 2. -Hybridization is the "leitmotiv" and central focus of Pieterse's book
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- ²³ Appadurai. p. 36
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¹¹³ The phrase “Web 2.0” was coined by Tim O’Reilly of O’Reilly Media, an American media company that publishes books and websites focused on computer technology.

¹¹⁴ Author’s findings

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Appendix A.



Two M-18 members in El Hoyo prison, Escuintla Guatemala.
Photo Credit- Victor J. Blue. <http://vistorjblue.com/>

Appendix B.



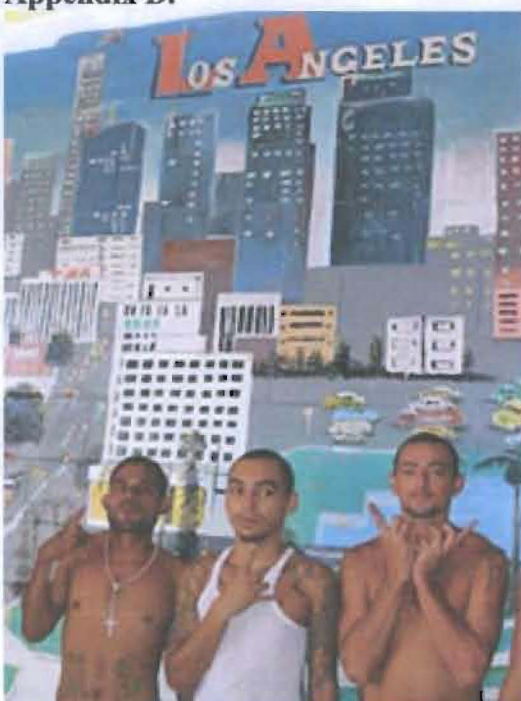
The family of a victim of gang violence in Central America
Photo Credit- <http://warfare2050.blogspot.com/2007/04/ms-13-la-mara-salvatrucha-y-sus.html>

Appendix C.



Anti-gang (*Mano Dura*) operation by Honduran National Police in Tegucigalpa Honduras.
Photo Credit - Victor J. Blue. <http://vistorjblue.com/>

Appendix D.



MS-13 members in a Central American prison in front of a mural of Los Angeles

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