Inkin’, Taggin’, Flashin’, and Flowin’:
Defining Group Identity Through Mara Salvatrucha Expressive Culture

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation asserts that the expressive culture of the trans-national street gang, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), helps to account for the unprecedented expansion of the organization. I examine how their tattoos, graffiti, and rap consolidate allegiance and strategically engage with the outside world. MS-13 expressive culture, much like nationalistic culture, manipulates insiders’ and outsiders’ understandings of the group. Such activities help designate MS-13 members as “citizens” of a Mara Nation, and encourage members to consider their affiliation with the gang preeminent, trumping religion, family, ethnic group, or politically defined country. I examine MS-13 expressive culture as what Patrick Colm Hogan calls “techniques of nationalization,” which work to promote the importance of the nation or equivalent social group above other associations, often with the aim of making that group important enough to kill and die for. Special emphasis is placed on how their expressive culture challenges the often-sensationalized media depictions of the gang. This approach to Mara Salvatrucha culture and group identity enables us to understand better how this hermetic gang has grown to become one of the most feared and powerful organizations in the world.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Beatriz, Xavi, Heidi, Evey, Bailey and most importantly, to my father, Alejandro, who had confidence, even when I did not, that I would last all fifteen rounds.
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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Mara Salvatrucha and Their Expressive Culture

1.1 Introduction

Mid-afternoon, walking south on Glendale Boulevard, and I fear for my life. I had been in Los Angeles for four days, and my camera’s memory card was already full of compelling graffiti pictures that reflected the various styles and communications apparent in Mara Salvatrucha (also known as MS-13) urban muralism. I had spent the first part of this fourth day traversing Echo Park searching for tags (a street-lingo synonym for graffiti), and was on my way back to the hotel for food and a bit of rest. Along the trip back, I noticed a clothing donation box replete with various gang markings on all of its sides, most of which I did not recognize (see Figure 1). This box served as the ideal example of how gang turf wars not only involved guns and bullets, but also a conquest of empty space, where different groups used spray paint in order to assert their territorial dominance in a neighborhood. While pressing the button on the camera, I heard someone yell “Hey! What are you doing?” In an attempt to avoid suspicion, I did not jerk my head to see where the voice was coming from. Instead, relying on the periphery of my field of view, I saw him. A Hispanic man stood about fifty yards away, just under six feet tall, wearing a black tee shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of dark sunglasses. Even from this
distance, I noticed that his arms were completely sleeved in tattoos, and these arms were huge, bulging with muscles. And he was reaching into his pocket.

The tone of his yell was what most alarmed me. He clearly intended to intimidate me. I slowly put my camera away, pretended as though I had not heard him, and began to walk south once more. I knew that he was following me. Without looking back, I could hear him behind me, still yelling. “Say man, let me look at them pictures! I know you can hear me! What were you taking pictures of, white boy,” his tone as threatening as in his initial scream. Luckily, I had a good head start, and although he pursued me for several blocks, he never ran to catch up with me. However, he closed the gap slowly, and I heard him talking on a cell phone, leaving me to wonder whether that was what he had reached for in his pocket. I crossed underneath a freeway, and finally reached a busier intersection, with various gas stations and convenience stores on all corners competing for a small piece of urban space in a way akin to the various gangs in the neighborhood. I felt comforted by all of the traffic, thinking to myself that if he were to assault me, a number of witnesses could tell the police, and by extension my family members, what had happened. I arrived at one of the gas stations, and as I was waiting for the crosswalk to signal my opportunity to cross the next street, I saw that he had stopped following me. He stood on the other end of the street, cell phone to his ear, pointing at me, with his finger scanning me from head to toe, as if he were describing me to whomever he spoke with. He ended his phone conversation, slid the phone back into his Dickies pants, and flashed a number of gang hand-signs in my direction. I did not recognize the gang-signs that he gestured. Then again, his hands moved so quickly formulating his message, and I
was so shaken up, that I may have missed the specific gang affiliation. Once he had finished stacking his hand-signs, he turned around and walked in the direction that he came from. I was safe, for the moment. Still, I remained terrified that he may have described me to his fellow gang members, and that they would soon find me during the thirty minutes remaining on my walk to the hotel. I broke from my budget, and called a taxi, thinking it a worthy sacrifice to further ensure my safety.

This episode served to contextualize my own research in several ways. Of course, it provided me with heart-pounding reminder of the danger of studying Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture. Additionally, after a few weeks of separation from the incident and enough time to re-think the event, this situation provided me with a new focus in regards to how I could apply much of the research that I had studied in the years leading up to my fieldwork. In short, I was a first-hand participant of cultural theory as praxis. The application of Patrick Colm Hogan’s theories of social identity and nationalism, for example, resounded more realistically after my encounter with the gang member.

Separated from the words in Hogan’s books, on the streets of Southern California, the use of his terms “in-group” and “out-group” became increasingly practical, as well as self-explanatory, after what happened that September afternoon in Los Angeles. The gang member saw me taking pictures of graffiti in his neighborhood, and he felt as though my actions threatened his own community. Was I a police officer on a reconnaissance mission, looking for signs of gang growth in the Echo Park neighborhood? Could I have been a journalist taking pictures for a newspaper or magazine article that would further sensationalize the gang situation in Echo Park? Is there the possibility that I was a
wannabe gangster studying up on a particular graffiti style, so that I could later “bite,” or copy them in my own neighborhood? Regardless of the answers to these specific questions, one thing became clear: I was not a member of his social group. I was a part of the out-group, and to this gang member my intrusion represented a negative incursion into a world to which I did not belong. The tags on this clothing donation box meant something to him; they were much more than generic communications or examples of vandalism. This is obvious because he felt strongly enough about my trespass to follow me for several blocks, and it would have been anyone’s guess as to what he would have done had he actually caught me, the outsider.

This man’s personal connection to the graffiti on the donation box relates directly to Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, because it was obvious to me that his reaction signified that these markings were not merely paint. As I stated earlier, I was unable to discern a specific gang allegiance, and yet his response to me and my picture taking affirms that, at some level, the painted tags stood for something of value to him, something representative of his community that transcended the simplistic explanation of graffiti as the destruction of public property. There were a number of people walking the streets that day, many just as “white” as me, although my own skin tone is olive. Some wore baseball caps and baggy shorts, falling into the traditional “gangsta” stereotype garb seen in movies and music videos. Others were just as big as I am, and they may have had tattoos like I do. And yet, he specifically went after me, and nobody else. There was not anything particularly distinctive about my appearance or demeanor. I wore a pair of khaki shorts, a dark t-shirt and a pair of weathered sneakers. I kept to myself, trying not to draw
attention from anyone. And so, the only thing that set me apart from everyone else was the fact that I was taking pictures of his graffiti. For the man that pursued me down Glendale Boulevard, the pictures in my camera stood as an affront to his gang culture, an intrusion from an outside agent who had no business trying to observe or decipher the messages that were painted. The associated meaning of these kinds of tags, beyond the communicative function of the expression, drives this research project, as it reflects a specific way in which a community represents and characterizes themselves via their own cultural production. In the case of Mara Salvatrucha, graffiti and other forms of expressive culture define and affirm a sense of belonging to a very specific social group, their gang. This affirmation clashes against an urban landscape where outsiders have systematically sought to shun and marginalize a young, poor, and oftentimes racially different sector of the population, long before they resort to the gang life.

This investigation explores the hermetic Mara Salvatrucha community by studying and interpreting their expressive culture, specifically their tattoos, graffiti, and rap. Mara Salvatrucha began as a small group of Salvadoran immigrants who banded together in order to protect themselves from the violence of encroaching gangs in South Central Los Angeles. From that point in the early 1980s, this once very localized and small group has developed into one of the most commanding and feared criminal forces in the Americas, now controlling entire neighborhoods in many parts of the United States and Latin America. Much has been published on gangs, in general, engaging topics such as organizational structures, initiation rituals, the process of proliferation in urban settings, what draws youngsters to gangs, preventative methods that keep children from
joining gangs, and other similar subjects (e.g. Knox, Leet, Thrasher, and Trump). Other studies have taken sociological approaches to the gang phenomenon, analyzing the definition of a gang, what makes a gang function as a community, and how gang members attain a sense of identity by carrying out illicit activities meant to represent the gang (e.g. Long, McDonald, Shelden, and Thrasher). Gangs such as the Bloods, the Crips, the Latin Kings, and various prison gangs have drawn more academic attention than others, and dominate scholarship on the subject (e.g. Botello, Jah, and Shakur). However, there is comparatively less research on Mara Salvatrucha, specifically. José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, Roxana Martel Trigueros, and Carlos Monsiváis have contributed Mara Salvatrucha-specific texts focusing on violence, the mara’s use of fear as a mechanism of control, as well as the gang’s group dynamics (It is important to note that the word “mara,” not capitalized, is a slang term which translates to “gang member,” in a general sense. When capitalized, the term refers specifically to a member of MS-13). My project builds on this kind of scholarly work focusing on MS-13. All three of these cultural theorists participated in a conference in Iztapalapa, Mexico, entitled Las maras: Identidades juveniles al límite. Their concentration on the relationship between social identity and gang affiliation ties into my own research regarding Mara Salvatrucha. Rossana Reguillo, whose work is particularly relevant for my dissertation, is one of the few who has studied the communal aspect of Mara Salvatrucha. Her examinations serve as an extension of her more general interest in the roles of fear, violence, and teenagers in Latin American cities, as she attempts to understand MS-13 as an urban youth culture that comes together in order to survive starvation, poverty, and the constant threat of
death (“La construcción social del miedo” 195). But scholarly attention to Mara Salvatrucha is limited to this kind of work and little more, with a large portion of the information that is available on the gang originating from outside of academia and cultural theory.

Movies tend to dominate recent reflections on MS-13. For example, Hijos de la guerra (2007) is Alexandre Fuchs and Samantha Belmont’s documentary investigation of gang activity in El Salvador. This documentary contains a history of the development of Mara Salvatrucha, an analysis of the gang’s extension into Central America from Los Angeles, and various interviews that give the maras’ perspective on the violence and squalor they face on the streets of San Salvador, as well as the loyalty that they feel for the only community who, according to the maras, accepted them as family members.

Another popular depiction of the gang resides in Cary Fukunaga’s feature film, Sin Nombre (2009). Differing from Hijos de la guerra in that it portrays a fictional, dramatic view of MS-13, the gang is seen as the primary antagonist who interferes with the attempts to immigrate into the United States from Central America. The movie presents a sensationalized characterization of the gang, on that characterizes Mara Salvatrucha as nothing more than villains hell bent on murder, rape, and causing societal unrest.

Most of the information available on Mara Salvatrucha, outside of the few academic resources and the movies mentioned above, comes from popular media outlets, or from reports released by news agencies and law enforcement officials. Television shows such as Gangland and The World’s Most Dangerous Gang focus on Mara Salvatrucha murders and hierarchical organization, dedicating little time to characterizing
the origins of the gang. Articles in magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* (e.g. Romano, McGirk) report the many murders and criminal activities, while numerous online web pages glamorize and sensationalize the violent lifestyle of Mara Salvatrucha (e.g. Knowgangs.com and Altereddimension.com).

This dissertation will add to these varied, existing explorations of Mara Salvatrucha, but from a different and previously unexplored angle. Specifically, it will illuminate how MS-13 expressive culture affirms origin, identity, and kinship directly through the images and words that these expressions relay. Above all of these, however, Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture consolidates and cements the gang members’ affiliation towards what they themselves call the Mara Nation. This term—which suggests an analogy between the social group of the Mara Salvatrucha and social groups that consists of the citizens of a nation—presents a critical challenge, as the gang, of course, is not a nation, per se, and its members are not in a national community. Modern nation-states are specific and special sorts of social groups. Yet, throughout my preliminary research I encountered the expression. Documentaries such as *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* and various episodes of *Gangland* make reference to a Mara Nation, as well as articles published, both in print and online, from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. This terminology initially drove me to consider Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture as a means by which the gang represents its affiliation and affectivity for MS-13. Within the context of these aforementioned sources, the concept of nation seems to have principally a generic significance, one distinct from more restricted academic definitions. However, I began to consider the degree to which usage of the term nation by Mara
Salvatrucha members and the media alike derive from perceives concrete similarities between the two kinds of social groups. I surmised that to the extent that MS-13 and nations coincided in special ways—ways in which the gang and other sorts of social groups, such as religion, ethnicity, and gender, did not coincide—then research on national communities, especially the means through which belonging and allegiance are promoted, could provide some insight into this gang. For the popular media sources, the term nation, in the more specific designation “Mara Nation,” corresponds to a group of people who perhaps share in the same culture, interests, and goals, who band together in order to somehow represent these on this commonalities. In this regard, the Mara Nation could relate to the Red Sox Nation (fans of the Major League Baseball team, the Boston Red Sox) or the Buckeye Nation (fans of the Ohio State Buckeyes). For Mara Salvatrucha, however, the Mara Nation is much more complex and grounded in a sense of community, and corresponds in several ways more to the nature of a national group.

After my interviews with the ex-Mara Salvatrucha that I will call Juan in order to maintain his anonymity, I came to understand that the idea of a Mara Nation surpassed the simplistic interpretations reflected in the documentaries, magazine articles and television programming. He was the first person that I spoke to who had direct links to the gang, and his was my first interview for this project. Even then, in the opening stages of my research, he referenced the Mara Nation. In the interview, he was very concerned that the Mara Nation would come after him because of his decision to leave the gang. I return to Juan’s story later, but his fear is relevant in the current discussion regarding Mara Salvatrucha’s self-conception of nationhood. He was clearly worrieded that the
Mara Nation would seek out vengeance for his leaving the gang, a perceived act of treason. This fear emerged because, unlike the Red Sox or Buckeye Nation, Mara Salvatrucha attacks its enemies in droves. It takes over territories. It trains its members in the various ways to physically defend the honor of their community. The Red Sox Nation does not support, even urge, its members to tattoo their faces as a show of loyalty, nor have they ever sought to take over neighborhoods in New York, the location of their greatest rivals, the Yankees. Likewise, there has never been a wide-scale shoot-out in the streets of Columbus between members of the Buckeye Nation and its largest rival, the fans from the University of Michigan, nor has there ever been a sizeable incursion of members of the Buckeye Nation into Ann Arbor.

The idea of a Mara Nation, now confirmed to me by one of the gang’s ex-members, became a topic that many of my interviewees returned to, and it served as a salient point of departure from which to examine how Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture reinforces the idea of community. In my experience, Mara Salvatrucha members themselves feel as though they do, in fact, belong to a kind of gang nation. Research by Vigil, Hayden, Hagedorn, and others points to characteristics of Mara Salvatrucha that bolster the analogy between the social group and national categories: it has an army, long-standing traditions, an avenue towards membership that parallels the processes involved in becoming the citizen of a country, an organizational structure, a means towards community advancement, a kind of court system that metes out punishment, and a pseudo-democratic organization that takes into account the opinions of its members before certain actions or activities are undertaken. Some other kinds of social groups
manifest some of these characteristics—certain religious communities or fraternities come to mind. However the presence of so many qualities in common perhaps points to the reasoning behind why some Mara Salvatrucha members understand their community as such.

More importantly, it is irrelevant to the gang members whether we think Mara Salvatrucha represents any kind of nation, pseudo or otherwise. They believe that they are citizens of the Mara Nation. And because this project looks to understand how Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture works to consolidate feelings of community and social identity, it is critical that I analyze the gang as its members see and understand its significance. This is especially true when considering how many of my interviewees believe that the more traditional notions of nationhood appear empty and lacking in terms of their own purported citizenship, findings that are confirmed by researchers such as Hayden and Vigil in their own work. They do not have the protection of their nation, access to comfortable education, nor the means by which they can advance economically. Because of this they do not feel as though they belong to any kind of nation, nor do they feel as though the nation wants them as citizens. Devoid of any kind of emotional or political association with a country Mara Salvatrucha members vault their membership in the gang above the various other social groups that they may belong to, including the nation-states in which they live. From the very first days of the gang, constant exile, deportation, and incarceration severed gang members’ connections to citizenship in traditional national units. Today, in part due to strong-arm and heavy-handed anti-gang policies, this rift remains. And so, the Mara Salvatrucha community provides them with a
pseudo-national entity that accepts them and provides them with all of the various services that the more conventional political structures failed to give them.

They transmit their loyalty and affectivity towards their Mara Nation through their expressive culture internally, to themselves, as well as outwardly, to rival gangs and towards a society that has consistently looked to separate them. Among these transmissions, tattoos, graffiti, and Mara Salvatrucha rap serve as their primary means of expression. These expressions empower MS-13 members in situations where media outlets enact their essentialization and sensationalism, resisting a characterization that labels them as nothing more than faceless antagonists within the violent drama of urban violence. The gang’s portrayal in news programming and cable documentaries tend to ignore the origins, social conditions, and rationale that would force a teenager to seek membership in Mara Salvatrucha. It is my contention that Mara Salvatrucha tattoos, graffiti, and rap resist mediatic portrayals by providing a means through which they can take representation into their own hands, before the media does it for them.

I examine Mara Salvatrucha tattoos, graffiti, and rap as they synergize and relate to each other in terms of in-group representation and what I see as a kind of nationalism. Together they assert their own expressive power through a manifestation of culture that originates from inside of the gang, which is also later emitted to society as a whole. For example, in the case of tattoos and graffiti, we have open expressions, available for any passer-by or observer to absorb. Yet in some of the symbols and combination of images seen, only fellow Mara Salvatrucha members and, to a certain extent, rival gangs can wholly understand the messages contained within. Whereas the two are visual and
extroverted, both also contain a language of images and phrases that few outside of the
gang community could understand. The same relates to MS-13 rap. Many of the videos
are easily accessible on internet sites such as YouTube, making them available to
millions of members of the out-group. However, the lyrics are a mix of Spanish and
English, and, in some cases, words whose origins are lost within the syncretism that
emerges from a community that began as a group of immigrants trying to assimilate a
Spanish life into an English world. Those outside of the gang cannot understand many of
the words and phrases in the song lyrics, as their message is meant specifically for Mara
Salvatrucha members spread across the Americas. Other examples have words that are
rapped in the slang of rival gangs, threatening them, attempting to assert domination over
them in verse. There is a dual communicative process occurring, then, where MS-13
expressive culture looks to diffuse messages to its own members, yes, but also to those
who are not members. The expressions connect and relate to each other, all of them
sharing in a commonality of imagery and symbology, yet differing in whether the
messages presented are inward and intimate within the gang, or outward and broadcasted
to outsiders.

The Mara Salvatrucha gang, then, employs a number of forms of expression that
run parallel to accounts presented in contemporary, popular media outlets, by way of a
language of images and sounds that provide first-hand, outwardly visible histories and
statements of personal and group identity. Also, when analyzed together, they
communicate messages that are meant, not only for other MS-13 members, but also for
rival gang members, and for those who are outside of the gang life altogether. Among
these articulations, tattoos, graffiti, and MS-13 rap constitute the most visible, most
colorful and loudest outward show of Mara Salvatrucha nationalism towards those who
are not in Mara Salvatrucha, and so they permit the strongest forms of resistance against
sensationalized representations. This project is the first in-depth study of these Mara
Salvatrucha enunciations as an entire, inter-related system. It will address what many
MS-13 symbols mean on their own, what they mean when grouped with other similar
images and songs, what this network of pictures and phrases mean to the mara personally,
and how this meaning cements their affiliation to a Mara Salvatrucha national
community.

1.2 Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The most critical component of my research involved fieldwork that provided
essential insight on Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture. Having spent years studying
MS-13 tattoos and graffiti through secondary sources such as internet pictures,
documentaries, and print reports, I felt that any new approach towards understanding the
gang community necessitated first-hand contact with Mara Salvatrucha culture. Although
these many secondary sources gave me a strong foundation, the information that I
gathered seemed hollow, shallow, and in many cases depended on the very agents that I
later criticize as sensationalistic and essentializing. With the assistance of a dissertation
grant from Ohio State’s Mershon Center for International Security Studies, I was able to
study MS-13 expressive culture directly during my trips to Los Angeles and El Salvador.
The time spent in both places gave me the opportunity to make better critical assumptions
on the meaning of expressive culture based on contact with a number of MS-13 members,
as well as the chance to see the gang’s graffiti in context, as it appeared on the streets and the buildings. Furthermore, in San Salvador, my visits to *El museo de la palabra y la imagen* gave me important background history on the country’s civil war, a leading cause for the birth of Mara Salvatrucha. The museum drew from El Salvador’s strong history of alternative narratives in order to reconstruct a memory that in many cases had been eradicated in the years following the conflict. Their archives of pictures, videos, art, and literature represented a vision of the war and its victims that has been largely ignored over the course of the last two decades. These narratives came directly from the rebel side, the ones who most suffered through death and exile, and they forge a strong link to the kinds of histories that are relayed by Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture. The documentary *Morazán*, for example, was taken from the footage filmed by oppositional forces that trained in the jungles of El Salvador. In one scene, the interviewer asks a young, twelve-year-old boy about his role in the war. In a very straightforward and unemotional manner, the child responds that he is an expert in the use of mortars, hand grenades, AK-47 and FAL machine guns, as well as close combat machete tactics. I was stunned by his cold demeanor, his chillingly efficient tone, and by his youth. But most striking in terms of my own research, this twelve year old could have easily been one of the first Mara Salvatrucha members, deported to the United States after the civil war, trained and combat-ready in warfare at an age where other kids play soccer and board games.

My analysis of Mara Salvatrucha tattoos involved interviewing roughly twenty current and former MS-13 members, and taking pictures of their tattoos when they
permitted me to do so in order to construct a fairly representative corpus of images from which to draw my interpretations. I compared and related the images and took notes on those tattoos that I was not allowed to photograph looking for trends, repeated themes, and differences that demonstrated strong feelings of Mara Salvatrucha nationalism, as well as a concrete, extra-literary visual history of their culture. I selected the subjects from a number of community outreach programs whose main objective is to re-introduce gang members into society, when they make the very difficult and dangerous decision to leave MS-13. In many cases, talking about their gang life was seen as therapeutic, as a way to vent, and so a number of these ex-Mara Salvatrucha members were very willing to discuss their tattoos. I contacted organizations such as Homeboy Industries, based in Los Angeles, and also developed relationships with gang taskforce members in the Los Angeles, Houston, and Columbus police departments who also work with the re-integration of ex-gang members into the community. In a majority of situations, however, the subjects and organizations wished to remain anonymous. They believed that a project that published both photographs and interviews of Mara Salvatrucha members looking to leave the gang ran the risk of compromising the integration process, as well as threatened the lives of all involved. They welcomed the research and methodology, but only agreed to my interviews if I did not use names, specific quotes, or photographs that could identify the subjects. And so, in most cases, I paraphrase and make anonymous the information and stories that they told me. Afterwards, I analyzed how the Mara Salvatrucha members’ opinions on their tattoos related to my own developing arguments on MS-13 expressive culture.
It is important to note, however, that a small number of those interviewed did feel comfortable with having their ink published in this dissertation. For example, I met the mara that I mention above, Juan, in a physical rehabilitation and pain therapy clinic in Houston, Texas. He was originally from northern Los Angeles, and was arrested for a violent crime. While serving his sentence, he chose to separate himself from the gang, placing him in a dangerous situation because of other incarcerated MS-13 members who did not approve of his voluntarily leaving the gang. After deciding to get out of the gang, and while waiting to shower in the prison, he was stabbed numerous times in the back with a homemade knife constructed out of tiny pieces of scrap metal, hair, and fingernail clippings. A close look at Figure 5 reveals the puncture wound scar left from one of the stabbings. He survived, and was receiving treatment in this clinic in Houston, a place where he thought his ex-gang members could not find him. While speaking to him, he was very forthcoming with his explanations of how his tattoos revealed his emotional connection to his gang. And he wanted me to include his tattoos and comments in this project.

Although he thought that he was safe in Houston, his former gang mates found him. One of this therapists relayed the following story to me during a follow-up phone call that I made to the clinic. Shortly after establishing himself in a new city and a few weeks after our conversations—since my last interview with Juan, I have not spoken to him directly—while he and his wife slept, MS-13 members from his northern Los Angeles gang clique broke into his apartment. They attacked both Juan and his wife in bed. They went after him first: while holding his wife down, they stabbed him viciously,
and left him nearly paralyzed. Then they went to work on his wife. They murdered her where she laid, beating and slicing her to death. These assailants wanted Juan awake so that he could watch them murder his wife. In other words, they kept him alive as punishment for leaving the gang. For them, the trauma of watching a spouse murdered served as ample castigation for the affront of deciding to leave Mara Salvatrucha.

The therapist told me that Juan was recovering in a hospital, and that he would be able to recover almost completely, with just a few neurological signs of the attack. Juan’s plan was to recuperate as completely as possible, after which he would return to northern Los Angeles in order to avenge the murder of his wife. Such retaliation is perceived as necessary in his world. To Juan, a failure to react would reflect weakness, and in the Mara Salvatrucha community weakness is unacceptable.

I include this story not for the shock value, nor to amplify the representation of Mara Salvatrucha as violent. Instead, the anecdote serves as a strong confirmation as to the reasoning behind why many of the maras that I interviewed refused to have their names, direct quotes, and especially photographs of tattoos included in this work. They feared for their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, and in more than one occasion, they intimated that I, too, should be careful about what I publish. Therefore, in all but a few situations, I have decided to summarize and paraphrase the information that I gathered, including those exact citations and photographs in the few cases where the subjects felt it was appropriate and safe.

Anticipating such violent anecdotes, my research methodology had to take into account the very sensitive subject matter that my interviews would conceivably reveal. I
gave each subject a release form that clearly stated that the interview process was completely voluntary, and that the subject could choose to end the interview at any point. I made it clear that terminating the interview would not result in any negative repercussions in regards to the reintegration program that they were taking part of. Furthermore, if, after the interview, the subjects decided that they would rather not have their tattoos or commentary included in my research, they were given the information to contact me, at which point I immediately eliminated their contribution. In the cases where the subject did not have advanced reading skills, I read the release form out-loud. Also, I provided both Spanish and English release forms. Once they understood and accepted, they signed or made their mark. Each interview took approximately twenty minutes, and I also included this time limit on the release form. However, if the subject wished to extend our discussion I gave them that option when we arrived at the twenty-minute mark. This allowed the subject to “open up” if he or she felt comfortable with the interview and wanted to proceed.

The interview itself consisted of four very general questions. The open-ended questions sought to minimize my own biases when I engaged the subject. It also allowed for a rich diversity in the subject’s interpretations of the tattoos. I asked the following four questions:

1. What does this tattoo represent?
2. What significance does this tattoo have to you, personally?
3. What significance does this tattoo have to you, within the context of your gang?
4. What does the tattoo mean to you now that you are out of the gang?
I posed the final question only to those who were no longer Mara Salvatrucha affiliated. These questions permitted a variety of answers regarding the tattoo’s importance to the subject, as well as the importance of the tattoo within the MS-13 culture. Furthermore, the open nature of the questions led to extended conversations that may have been curbed had the interview followed a more rigid structure.

Specifically, I looked for and analyzed tattoos that I believed served a communicative purpose. In other words, I looked for images of friends and family, ink involving a retelling of a significant life event, series of tattoos that told a personal or community history, those that honored or eulogized dead loved ones, and any other kind of body modification that attempted to tell the story of themselves and their gang culture from their direct point of view. Simultaneously, I was interested in tattoos that reflected a loyalty for Mara Salvatrucha that overrode other associations. This could have manifested in the ink-work, itself, for example a gang name, a symbol representing the gang, or an inked group of faces that reflected membership with the subject’s particular gang cell, all of which affirm the importance of the Mara Nation in comparison to their identification with all other social groups. What is more, the placement of the tattoos was just as important as the actual image. For example, it is a common practice for MS-13 members to tattoo their faces. This ink generally focuses on MS-13 imagery, therefore broadcasting their gang allegiance on their interface with society, in a place on the body that everyone can see. Such tattoos involve a great deal of pain, as well. The pain endured for the gang reveals a great level of loyalty, considering that the pain is taken on in order to represent their allegiance to Mara Salvatrucha. I then compared and related all of the information
and photographs collected during my field work to MS-13 tattoos found on various websites and public domain databases, in order to construct an ample body of Mara Salvatrucha ink from which to engage the gang’s expressive culture within the context of nationalism and autochthonous representation.

In some ways, it was much easier to collect graffiti images. Because I had no direct contact with those maras painting the walls, the issues concerning gang violence towards, and incrimination of, my interviewees did not arise. My research centered on already-tagged murals that appeared in various urban settings, and included no interaction with the taggers. This means that I could include any image that I felt applied, without any restrictions or consideration for the possible safety of the subject. The more open and less constrained nature of gathering evidence out in the field, however, came with the an added element of danger that I had not felt in my one-on-one interviews. As evidenced by the episode detailed at the beginning of this introduction, taking these pictures on the streets of El Salvador and Los Angeles left me vulnerable to attacks from active gang members like the one I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. With the tattoo interviews, I conducted the conversations under very controlled circumstances, often with a secondary, non-gang affiliated person in the room to supervise. On the streets, I was on my own. Also, it is important to remember that many of the interview subjects wanted to leave the gang. They had sought these re-integration programs voluntarily, and not as part of some parole or probation sentence. The ex-gang members understood that any attack on me, or anyone else, effectively destroyed their chance of successfully separating themselves from Mara Salvatrucha. And with their ex-gang knowing, in many cases, that
they wanted out, attacking me would have left them with no options, as they could never return to MS-13. Because of this, I never once felt threatened, nor did I ever fear for my safety while interviewing maras about their tattoos. This sense of safety disappeared as I searched for Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, as I was the intruder in the gang world.

Finding Mara Salvatrucha out in the field is a much less controlled and much more dangerous endeavor. I was out in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the Americas, without the protection of re-integration specialists or physical therapists. At any given time, I was surrounded by the kind of gang member that followed me down Glendale Boulevard, still very much involved in the gang life, and possibly still looking to make a name for himself within the mara community by defending his gang’s turf.

Remember that the gang member who chased me down the street was not a member of Mara Salvatrucha. I have studied MS-13 for almost a decade, especially in Los Angeles, and am acquainted with a number of the different gang signs used by Mara Salvatrucha. None of the hand gestures hinted at an MS-13 association. This presents another hazard associated with collecting gang graffiti in the field. I had to worry about more than just MS-13. Mara Salvatrucha is one of the most important and influential gangs in the Americas. And uneasy lays the head that wears the crown. Dozens of other gangs in Los Angeles vie for power, territory, and an increased inflow of money, and these other gangs understand that in order to receive a piece of that action, they have to take down the king. This perhaps explains the reason why the gang member pursued me that hot, summer afternoon. He may have been a member of one of these rival gangs, asserting his perceived territorial dominance by aggressively protecting his turf, going after anyone
who seemed like an outsider. Of course, this is all conjecture on my part. I was not going to stick around to ask him.

Despite the risk, my strategy involved hitting the street, walking through neighborhoods that had a strong Mara Salvatrucha influence in order to collect a sufficient body of tags that I could later study along with the tattoos. I wanted diversity in my images, but I also looked for connections between gang cliques that had never met each other. Was the graffiti the same in different neighborhoods? In different countries? If the tags did have similarities, did these convergences reflect a sense of Mara Salvatrucha nationality? In order to answer these questions, I felt it necessary to analyze tags not only from separate barrios, but also from varied countries.

My fieldwork began in Los Angeles. Since MS-13 began there and the city currently has one of the largest concentrations of Mara Salvatrucha cliques, I knew that the Southern California metropolis would provide me with numerous examples of the gang’s murals. Upon arrival, I did not have to look for very long. The side wall of my downtown hotel had an MS-13 tag the night that I arrived. Centrally located, I was able to branch out to various sectors of the inner city where the gang had a presence. I walked the streets of Echo Park, Westlake, McArthur Park, Compton, and took a train out to East Los Angeles, where Mara Salvatrucha has battled other Latino gangs on a daily basis for the last twenty-five years. This clash was evident by the tags scattered all over the neighborhood, as MS-13 fought other cholos, or Hispanic gang members, not with fist, knives, or guns, but with spray paint on every single blank space available. The same kind of combat was evident in Korea Town, where I met a local bar owner who had his
employees come in three hours early every night in order to paint over the tags drawn on his building’s wall by both Mara Salvatrucha and their rival Asian gangs. However, no neighborhood had more MS-13 graffiti than Pico/Union. This is understandable considering this section of the city, also known as the Ramparts by police officials, became the home for the thousands of ex-patriot Salvadorans who migrated to Los Angeles before and after the civil war in their country. Here, Mara Salvatrucha graffiti appeared everywhere. On the side of pupuserías and ostionerías, on street signs and sidewalks, in the parks and in the windows of the McDonald’s restaurant, the gang made it clear that this was their neighborhood. Finally, in order to see if MS-13 branched out to more upscale areas of the city, I travelled to Beverley Hills, noticed tags on buildings on Rodeo Drive and Melrose Avenue, as well as in the more tourist-packed Sunset Boulevard. I left Los Angeles with two memory cards full of graffiti pictures, over 200 in all. After analyzing them upon my return to Columbus, over 75% of these were specific Mara Salvatrucha tags.

After my trip to Los Angeles, I next departed to El Salvador in order to capture images of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti outside of the United States. My departmental colleague Stephanie Aubry greatly facilitated my research in the country in various ways. Her own studies centering on transnational Salvadoran gang culture informed me of a number of neighborhoods and city sectors where Mara Salvatrucha claimed territorial control. Furthermore, she put me in contact with Jakelyn Azucena López, the assistant-curator and historical archivist for the Museo de la palabra y la imagen in San Salvador. Her collection of pictures and historical documents served as a great source for
background information on the country’s civil war. Stephanie also introduced me to Don Carlos, the taxista who drove me around San Salvador as I looked for MS-13 graffiti. This contact was an invaluable part of my fieldwork in El Salvador. Many years and endless hours of experience as a taxi driver gave Don Carlos intimate knowledge of the Central American capital, and its violent history. Thanks to his help and insight, I was never left to my own devices in a situation that was considerably more dangerous than my Los Angeles experiences. He knew the best places to go in order to find the relevant tags. He also knew the best ways to get to these places, without having to worry about car-jackings or robberies, as well as the best times to enter these parts of the city (typically very early in the morning, but never after dark). With Don Carlos’ urban expertise, I took pictures of graffiti all over San Salvador, concentrating on underprivileged sections of the city where the MS-13 graffiti got thicker as you travelled further into barrio. He safely guided me through the Mara Salvatrucha dominated neighborhoods of Soyapango and Apopa, areas that I would have never entered on my own. In these rougher sections of the city, Don Carlos drove me to buildings and parks where he remembered seeing MS-13 tags, and afterwards through the streets as I looked out for symbols and script that indicated a Mara Salvatrucha presence. At every research opportunity, Don Carlos stepped out of the car with me, with the engine running, and stood watch behind me, as I snapped photographs of the murals and paint on the walls. He also took me to La zona rosa, the Beverly Hills of San Salvador, where tourists and wealthier citizens went to eat, shop, and have drinks. Don Carlos’ intention was to prove to me that every portion of the capital, regardless of economic prosperity or trendiness,
had to submit to some form of Mara Salvatrucha expansion. And just as on Rodeo Drive, in Los Angeles, the sides of the upscale restaurants and bars reflected this gang presence with the large amount of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti.

I left San Salvador with roughly 150 pictures. Upon my return to Ohio, I analyzed all 350 pictures, collected both in the United States and El Salvador, looking for connections, similarities, and differences. But above all I searched for those examples of MS-13 graffiti that represented the Mara Nation in all of these varied neighborhoods, despite the many miles that separated them. My aim was to examine how the tags related to each other, how they narrated an expressive version of history and community, and also how they engaged the various critical definitions of nationality that I draw upon for this project. Despite the difficulty involved with whittling down the large number of pictures, I was able to reach the sample body of about twenty-five photographs that appear in the subsequent chapters.

The texts used in Chapter Four and Five required less legwork, and more traditional research. I found examples of Mara Salvatrucha rap through hours of online research, visiting various message boards and internet music websites. It was difficult to find any songs where the rappers outwardly associated themselves with the gang, and so I did extended work looking at various rap artists and their record label information, social media pages, and their fan’s comments on forums. After finding two songs that I felt best represented an in-group example of MS-13 rap, I transcribed the lyrics to the best of my ability. In some cases, the words were muffled and unintelligible, due in large part to the poor quality of the recording. Furthermore, the combination of a fast rap style coupled
with slang words that I was unfamiliar with affected the transcription task. Ultimately, however, I was able to discern enough of the lyrics of one song, and the entirety of another to examine Mara Salvatrucha rap as a predominant manifestation of the community’s expressive culture.

Chapter Five involved the same kind of research I that I undertook in Chapter Four, where fieldwork was not necessary. I look at three filmic representations of Mara Salvatrucha. I was already acquainted with two of the films used. In some ways, the National Geographic documentary *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* served as the main inspiration for this project. It was difficult to accept, after years of studying the gang, that this was the best, most reliable source on the gang available to casual at-home viewers who did not know anything about Mara Salvatrucha. After various screenings, both before the inception of this dissertation and during the research phase, it became more and more clear that the characterization of the gang was at best sensationalized, and at worst completely incorrect. And so, it serves as a perfect example of an out-group, second-hand portrayal that misrepresents the gang, the kind of portrayal that Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture clashes against. I examine the second film, *Sin nombre* (2009), because director Cary Fukunaga emphasized his desire to present a realistic characterization of the gang (*Complex*, Franco, et al.). And so, I wanted to compare this kind of out-group production with the National Geographic documentary. Although *Sin nombre* is markedly an out-group film, Fukunaga spent time with the gang in order to study its culture and community. His intention was to provide a more authentic depiction of the gang based on his first-hand experience. I wondered how this attempt at
authenticity compared in purpose and tone, and ultimately how it related to in-group videos originating directly from the gang. The in-group Mara Salvatrucha representation that I analyze is a video for the rap song, “La mara anda suelta,” studied in the fourth chapter. After spending hours transcribing the lyrics of the song, I could not ignore the strong visual imagery corresponding to the words. It became a natural point of comparison with the two films originating from outside of the gang. Furthermore, the imagery connects to Mara Salvatrucha tattoos, graffiti, and rap in that it extends and develops the histories and nationalistic trends by way of a common language seen in all forms of the gang’s expressive culture.

1.3 Chapter Organization

Chapter Two specifically analyzes Mara Salvatrucha tattoos as a means by which the gang’s members solidify citizenship in a Mara Nation. At the same time, the inked images and their placement on the body affirm the importance of the Mara Salvatrucha category over all other social groups that they may belong to, for example religious, family, or racial, thereby making the gang community the preeminent social category for the MS-13 member. Before examining tattoos as statement of nationality, the chapter provides a history of the gang. Relying on gang researchers such as James Diego Vigil, Tom Hayden, Sarah Garland, and others, I trace the origin of the gang from its birth in California to its current transnational situation. Beginning as exiled or deported teenagers who migrated to inner city Los Angeles after the Salvadoran civil war, Mara Salvatrucha has become one of the strongest and most globalized gangs in the world. This expansion has been one of the primary reasons for the gang’s popularity in the media, printed news,
and internet. The sensationalized nature of these sources, however, often skims the

gang’s roots, or ignores them altogether. In doing so, the rationale behind the desire to
join Mara Salvatrucha disappears since the media sources neglect the fact that many of
the young gang members feel disenfranchised and separated from any kind of association
to conventional citizenship. In other words, exiled from El Salvador, deported from the
United States, and later incarcerated upon their return to Central America, the original
MS-13 members could not lay claim to membership in any kind of traditional political
system. Logically, this sentiment extends to present times, where poverty,
unemployment, racism, and an utter lack of opportunity forces would-be gang members
to question their place in countries that consistently ignore their hardships. For this
reason, and others, these teenagers eschew their identification with El Salvador,
Honduras, Guatemala, and others, and replace it with their allegiance to the Mara Nation.

Although there are a number of different critical approaches that define and
engage nationalism, for the sake of this project Patrick Colm Hogan’s method proves the
most useful to help understand why Mara Salvatrucha tattoos reflect the consolidation of
a Mara Nation. For Hogan, the concept of nation assumes different meanings at different
times for a citizen, but a nationalistic allegiance becomes strongest during periods of
conflict and opposition with those who are outside of the national group. Considering that
MS-13 members are in a state of constant conflict, from the authorities, from rival gangs,
from news programming, Hogan’s theories serve as particularly helpful in examining
how Mara Salvatrucha members cement their own nationality, away from the more
conventional socio-political entities that have long served to marginalize them. Hogan
argues that there are five “techniques of nationalization” which elevate the national
category above all other group identities, be they religious, ethnic, political, or economic,
therefore emphasizing the membership to a country as the most important. The first of his
techniques, “salience,” refers to how nationalism is projected outwardly in highly visible
and attention-getting ways. “Durability” deals with the idea that the nation has long
existed, and will continue to exist, as affirmed through tradition and history.
“Opposability” draws out difference between the national in-group and the foreign out-
group in such a way that the polarization between the two confirms the importance of the
nation in the face of conflict. A citizen’s capacity to access goods and services within the
national category reveals the level of “functionality” that is available, underscoring the
importance of voting, the ability to find a job, the right to use governmental programs,
and any other activity associated with legally staking claim to citizenship. Finally,
“affectivity” involves the emotional attachment that a citizen has to his or her nation, and
how this affection is reflected and demonstrated in his or her daily activities. An analysis
of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture demonstrates that these techniques work to
cement the importance of the gang social group well beyond any other social, political or
geographic entities.

For example, Mara Salvatrucha facial tattoos synergize all five techniques at
once. They are on the most obvious and easily seen part of the mara’s body, and so
salient to any onlooker (see Figure 2). They communicate durability because the tattoos
are permanent, and will stay with the Mara Salvatrucha member until their death. Of
course, tattoo removal is a theoretical option, yet the cost of the process makes it

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inaccessible to most maras. Furthermore, tattoo removal leaves scars in cases where the ink is bold or when the tattoo is large or especially intricate. And so, in more extreme cases, removing the tattoo would leave the Mara Salvatrucha member facially scarred for life, with regions of the face or scalp looking as though they have been burned by acid. These facial tattoos also reflect opposability because the act of tattooing your face stands in opposition to what is expected in normative society. Although tattoos have gradually become more accepted in today’s world, ink on the cheeks, eyelids, and forehead set the mara apart from even the most liberal of cultures. Facial tattoos are taboo, and yet, as we shall see, they are one of the most common examples of MS-13 expressive culture. They create an immediate opposability between the gang member and a society who deems facial tattoos unacceptable. They also increase the mara’s functionality within MS-13, because this most salient example of gang loyalty demonstrates the gang member’s commitment to the gang. The tattoos serve as a constant affirmation that the mara is entirely pledged to Mara Salvatrucha, an affiliation that permits the MS-13 member access to the various jobs and advancement opportunities that are available, without doubt or suspicion. Of course, a facial tattoo demonstrates affectivity because a Mara Salvatrucha member with facial ink has chosen to represent his or her love for the gang through a voluntary act of facial mutilation. In fact, when I engage these facial tattoos more specifically in the Chapter Two, it will become evident through the integrated photographs that most of these kinds of tattoos mention the gang directly, by way of either unmistakable references to the gang’s name or more cryptic symbols, such as a series of numbers or inked hand-signs that allude to Mara Salvatrucha via the gang’s
subversive language of images. And so, it becomes evident that all five of Hogan’s techniques of nationalization come together in Mara Salvatrucha facial tattoos explaining how they work in unison to cement the idea of Mara Salvatrucha nationality. The Chapter Two extends this analysis to various other examples of MS-13 tattoos, examining how a different group of pictures and drawings etched all over Mara Salvatrucha bodies function to hierarchize the Mara Nation as the most important social group to its members.

Chapter Three continues the analysis of the visual forms of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture focusing the nationalistic elements through the lens of the gang’s graffiti. Both tattoos and graffiti are interconnected in their capacity to draw attention from the eyes of onlookers. Where tattoos show up on the face, scalp, and chest, Mara Salvatrucha tags appear on some of the most public and highly visible buildings and walls of a given city or community. MS-13 gang members go as far as to graffiti public transportation vehicles, cop cars, and moving vans, thereby providing moving billboards of sorts, where the Mara Salvatrucha language of images goes mobile, reaching more people. Before a close reading of MS-13 tags, however, the chapter overviews and engages relevant graffiti scholarship as it pertains to gangs, emphasizing the communicative function of tagging and its role as an alternative literacy in the case of the gang subculture. Also, this overview provides definitions for a number of graffiti terms, with associated MS-13 tag images as examples, which serve very useful in the more in-depth analysis of graffiti as a technique used to stratify the Mara Nation as the preeminent social group.
From this foundation, the chapter moves into a detailed study of specific tags taken from my fieldwork. With Patrick Colm Hogan’s techniques of nationalization and Mara Salvatrucha tattoos as a constantly related point of departure, I argue that MS-13 establishes an expressive canon of repeated images that transcend any individual type of expressive culture, and appear everywhere in the gang’s community. All examples of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, regardless of country or neighborhood, rely on a concrete set of symbols and pictures shared despite the distance that lies between the various cliques. These cliques rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. There is no MS-13 convention or internet message board where they can consolidate which images are used to represent the gang. And yet the symbols on the bodies of maras resurface on the walls of the buildings in the cities where they claim territorial ownership. Furthermore, these messages branch out, and are heard in the Mara Salvatrucha rap studied in Chapter Four. Together they create a body of communications that are not printed on a page nor emitted via a television report. They extend in manners and through means that are available only to the in-group, and so should be studied in unison, along with other forms of MS-13 expressive culture.

In order to engage other such cultural articulations, Chapter Four begins with a critique of the argument asserting that hip-hop is dead by addressing the genre’s importance within the Mara Salvatrucha community. Proposed mainly by New York City rap artist Nas, the belief is that all of the technological advances and production techniques implemented in the modern-day construction of a hip-hop album have taken the street out of rap. Nas’ contention is that rap and hip-hop’s roots in the inner city, and
by extension their role as narrators of violence, economic hardship, and racial inequality, have been severed. This rift emerges as advances in studio recording promote a group of contemporary rappers who sing about subject matter no longer relevant to the difficulties of growing up in the neighborhood. I argue that hip-hop is indeed alive and well, existing within Mara Salvatrucha communities all over the Americas. The rap songs that come from MS-13 cliques parallel the grassroots level expression made popular by young Black teens in the mid-eighties. The technology is rudimentary, the lyrics are rough, and the songs attempt to represent the gang life much in the same way that the genre’s forefathers intended. As such, this specific style of rap presents an excellent example of Mara Salvatrucha cultural expression that relates to both tattoos and graffiti in subject matter, imagery, and in the desire to consolidate identification with the Mara Nation.

Drawing from scholars such as Hashim A. Shomari, Bakari Kitwana, Timothy Francis Strode, Alexander Riley, and others, I trace an academic lineage of rap theory as it relates to Mara Salvatrucha. After reviewing this literature, the chapter examines MS-13 rap in a descriptive manner, analyzing beat structure, musical tendencies, and lyrical content with the intention of linking it to West Coast and Gangsta Rap recorded in California during the eighties and nineties. This connection reinforces the theory that many Mara Salvatrucha rappers look to these seminal performers not only because of their geographic location and proximity to Los Angeles, but also because of their identification with the message diffused by N.W.A, Tupac, and others. Tupac was murdered and N.W.A. broke up; nonetheless, they and other West Coast rappers continue to influence contemporary MS-13 rap through lyrics that concentrate on racism, poverty,
violence, and police abuse and beats that specifically channel Gangsta rap music recorded twenty years ago.

After this general analysis of Mara Salvatrucha rap, I undertake a close reading of two MS-13 rap songs. The first, “La mara anda suelta,” describes the violent lives and defensive aspect of gang life. The word “defensive” is critical in this study because much of the song is dedicated to affirming that Mara Salvatrucha is ready to protect themselves from any encroachment into their territory and aggression against their community. According to the song, they fight for survival and against anyone looking to take away what they believe belongs to them. The second song, “We Got Guns,” furthers this protective stance. The rapper boasts about the weapons and soldiers that his clique has at its disposal, ready for use at any moment that they feel threatened. In both cases, the rap songs relate to Patrick Colm Hogan’s theory of opposability as a technique of nationalization. Both songs imply that Mara Salvatrucha is at war against those who are trying to oppress and marginalize the gang members, or worse yet, wipe them out entirely. Hogan argues that war is an important example of how nations emphasize the difference between the in-group and out-group, and this emphasis becomes evident in the lyrics that are studied. Furthermore, the songs relate to MS-13 tattoos and graffiti because they extend the visual narratives apparent in these, only in an aural manner. Mara Salvatrucha rap continues the community histories, the homages to dead comrades, and the desire to self-represent their gang culture through the lyrics and beats in their music.

The final chapter extends the initial introduction of the imaginary of violence, a concept first engaged in Chapter Two in the discussion of Mara Salvatrucha tattoos as
examples of opposability at work. Introduced by Rossana Reguillo, and fleshed out by Susana Rotker and Jesús Martín Barbero among others, the imaginary of violence refers to the role that the media plays in sensationalizing and perpetuating urban fear with the intention of blaming certain marginalized sectors of the population for the terror and crime that exists on the streets. According to Reguillo, the antagonists in this imaginary are typically racial minorities, the poor, the young, and what she calls the creatures of the night, an amoebic, generalized group of people, invented by media sources (“Guerreros o ciudadanos” 56). One of the most important criticisms of this negative representation of violence is that it ignores origin. The at-home viewer who watches movies, documentaries, and news reports seldom gets the entire story, one that would explain why certain sectors of the population feel a necessity to enter a world of crime or illicit behavior for the sake of survival. When considering poverty, government and economic failure, racism, extreme unemployment, and other such social problems, many of the agents of violence within the imaginary become more humanized, and the audience may tend towards sympathy. Stripping these important socio-economic factors from the antagonists morphs them into less than human subjects, turning them into monsters whose only purpose is to create violence for the sole sake of destroying the social order. Such a characterization broadens the rift between the marginalized and the at-home viewer, as the audience becomes reassured in their own role as the “normal” people in the world. Within the imaginary of violence, the underprivileged and peripheral become the “other,” the brutish evildoers, and certainly the people to most fear.
The chapters leading up to the final chapter present various forms of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture as they originate from the in-group, that is to say directly from the gang. Chapter Five draws from the previously examined expressive culture and compares it to out-group representations of the gang that come from the imaginary of violence. The purpose is to understand how in-group and out-group characterizations of the gang differ in terms of message and intention. I look at three filmic portrayals of the gang. The first is the documentary *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, which originally aired on The National Geographic Channel in 2006. Although the documentary promises an “inside look” at Mara Salvatrucha, relying on interviews and footage taken while embedded in the gang community, the end result is a sensationalized account that abandons verisimilitude in order to further propagate fear for all of those viewers that are unfamiliar with MS-13. The gang’s origin is mentioned in a cursory manner, and even this brief history is largely inaccurate. Furthermore, the documentary manipulates the audience’s terror in multiple ways, thereby constructing a vision of the gang as nothing more than vicious savages whose only goal is to steal from and murder anybody that is not in the gang. Such a representation is categorically incorrect, despite the high level of violence associated with Mara Salvatrucha life. Without mentioning all of the complex mechanisms that lead youngsters to join the gang, the MS-13 member is essentialized, and the purported didactic function of the documentary falls to the wayside.

The second film that I discuss presents an even more problematic depiction of Mara Salvatrucha. Cary Fukunaga’s 2009 film, *Sin nombre*, attempts a more “realistic” portrayal of the gang. Fukunaga’s goal was to create a gritty, honest movie that avoided
the sensationalization of the gang that has become so prominent in the media (Complex, Franco). And so, with the intention of “keeping it real,” so to speak, Fukunaga does give the audience a glimpse of previously unseen and widely unknown parts of the MS-13 community. In this way, his feature film does go beyond the National Geographic documentary in terms of educating the viewer about otherwise unfamiliar facets of the gang’s inner workings. Yet, as the movie unfolds, it becomes apparent that the only function of the gang is to act as the villain in the movie, much in the same way that the marginalized serve as the villains within the imaginary of violence. The film, then, perpetuates the characterization of these gang members as “bad guys,” and nothing more. This is especially important when considering that the main character, Casper, only really becomes the film’s hero after he transforms himself from a Mara Salvatrucha member to a “regular” human. This transformation culminates in Casper shedding his gang name, replacing it with his “regular” name Willy, and ultimately in his peeling his MS-13 tattoos from underneath his eye. Now, no longer as a mara but as a person, Willy can protect his love interest, assuming the role of the hero in the movie. This separation from the gang further confirms Mara Salvatrucha as the enemy, and further perpetuates not only the gang’s depiction in The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, but also in the imaginary of violence as a whole.

These two out-group films form an interesting distinction with the final video examined in Chapter Five. I argue that the video for the song “La mara anda suelta” represents an in-group vision of the gang that more specifically and authentically depicts the gang and its culture. Although the video is no less violent than the two films analyzed
before, it characterizes the gang as something more than a mere agent of violence. And despite the fact that the video shows beatings and guns, it also presents Mara Salvatrucha walking through their streets casually, interacting with children, and simply hanging out with each other. Additionally, and unlike the films examined before, it gives a kind of reasoning behind their illicit, violent behavior. The video and associated song place the focus on survival and defense in a world that consistently attempts to take what they believe belongs to them. Even though the video corresponds, in many ways, to the representation of the gang seen in *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* and *Sin nombre*, it gives a much different perspective in terms of origin and purpose; it emphasizes the marginal status given to the gang members even before they join Mara Salvatrucha. This creates a counter-narrative that clashes against the accounts presented in the imaginary of violence. Like MS-13 tattoos, graffiti, and rap, “La mara anda suelta” reveals an in-group, alternative form of communication that looks to narrate history and community through a discursive form that does not depend on secondary representative techniques that speak for the gang.
1.4 Images for Chapter One

Figure 1. Clothing donation box covered in the graffiti of rival gangs. Located on Glendale Boulevard in Los Angeles, California.

Figure 2. An example of Mara Salvatrucha facial tattooing (www.examiner.com).
Chapter 2
“Only God and MS-13 Can Judge Me”: Mara Salvatrucha Tattoos and the Consolidation of the Mara Nation

2.1 Introduction

The first time that I spoke with the ex-Mara Salvatrucha member that I have dubbed Juan, I could not stop myself from asking about the religious imagery on his body. I did not understand how he reconciled the cross on his neck and the nun (or perhaps a virgin) on his bicep with the topless succubus, the flaming skull pushing through his back, and the bullets on his arm (see Figures 3 through 5). To compound this ostensible incongruence between religious iconography and malevolent imagery, he openly admitted that he had just been released from prison after serving a seven-year sentence for assault. I asked him how he understood what seemed to me to be contradicting sets of skin work: religious devotion on the one hand and demonic, violent symbolism on the other. My question was meant to decipher how these tattoos might reveal something about his engagement with society. How could he feel a connection with a religious community, I wondered, while seemingly ignoring the Catholic tenants of non-violence and the prohibition of murder in his daily criminal activities? His response was that only God and Mara Salvatrucha could judge him. Juan’s cryptic answer, at first glance, seemed to contribute to the contradictory nature of the ink-work, faith and religion on one arm, clashing with demons
and bullets on another. Upon further conversation, I came to the conclusion that for him, his answer resolved the apparent disconnect among the tattoos. His answer to me made reference to two of the social groups that he most felt a sense of belonging towards, both of which were alluded to in his skin work. His faith in God and, as we can infer from the subjects of his tattoos, some link to a Catholic religious community, and his association with Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, constituted the two aspects of his social identity that most influenced his behavior. In other words, his actions mostly took into account God’s final judgment, sometime in an ephemeral, nebulous future, as well as the present opinion of his gang, on which he depended for money and kinship. Nothing else was more important to him than his religious salvation, after death, and the work that he did for his gang, in life.

As he continued to explain his tattoos to me, however, it became evident that he did find relevant his associations with other social groups, and his tattoos reflected his engagement with other categories of his social identity. He felt a strong sense of pride when discussing his family. His Salvadoran heritage was a subject that he often returned to. Yet, when asked, he quickly affirmed that none of these mattered to him more than his gang, and he assured me that the rest of his “brothers”—that is to say his fellow gang members—felt the same way. Juan’s ink reflected the importance of the gang as his preeminent community: the most obvious and visible tattoos referred not so much to his family or ethnicity, but to what he called the Mara Nation. And his citizenship in that perceived nation clearly trumped membership in all other groups.
The tattoos on Juan’s body demonstrate a kind of hierarchy, where the symbols representing certain groups are more conspicuous presumably depending on his loyalty and sense of belonging. This chapter addresses the phenomenon of Mara Salvatrucha unity demonstrated on Juan’s body, and the bodies of other maras, by analyzing how MS-13 tattoo work unites the community and cements a definition of a Mara Salvatrucha nationality to its members. I draw from Patrick Colm Hogan’s work on what he calls “categorial identities,” which attempts to explain how people understand each of the social categories that they pertain to, such as ethnicity or nationality, and the relative importance of each one for an individual. MS-13 tattoos have more than just a decorative function. They provide a means by which the gang promotes among its members the feeling that their mara “nationality” is more important than all other categories of their social identities, which reinforces a sense of cohesion that in turn strengthens its members’ resolve to do whatever the gang asks of them. This contention extends to show how these tattoos, and this sense of being part of a Mara Nation, counter the representations of the gang that are seen in popular media outlets, such as news programming, cable documentaries, and the internet. This assertion of group identity, reflected in the ink-work of Mara Salvatrucha members, also produces a type of community history that originates directly from the gang. The result is a depiction of the gang formulated by the maras themselves that parallels, and sometimes clashes with, the representations relayed by the media.
2.2 Categorial Identities Written in Ink and Blood

Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, has been called the most violent contemporary gang in the Americas by police agencies and media sources such as news programs and cable documentaries (Vigil 140). James Diego Vigil believes that this trend towards violence is an innate by-product of the gang’s roots (140). Most of the first members of Mara Salvatrucha came to the United States as refugees from a Salvadoran nation caught in the middle of a civil war, specifically in the mid- to early-eighties. A large percentage of these immigrants settled in Los Angeles, the eventual home to more than 800,000 exiled Salvadorans, in an over-populated neighborhood named Pico/Union (131, 133). Many arrived at a young age without their parents, who had been kidnapped or killed during the civil war. Schools in the barrio were forced to adhere to a two-month-in-session/two-month-out-of-session schedule in order to accommodate for the immense amount of overcrowding (140). During the two-month sessions when they were in school, the younger Salvadorans sat in classes with forty or fifty other students, and consistently experienced ethnic and racial discrimination from Mexican, Black, and Asian schoolmates and neighborhood dwellers (140). At an early age, then, the Salvadoran immigrants felt disavowed by almost all of the social groups ostensibly available to them (Vigil, Hayden, et al). As Vigil, Tom Hayden, Sarah Garland, and others have argued, they began to rely on each other, not as Salvadorans, since that nation had kicked them out, nor as Americans, due to their rejection within an already marginal community, but as a different, new group. Faced with a lack of schooling, poverty, never-ending violence from other racial gangs in the neighborhood, and without the comfort of calling any
country theirs, the Salvadoran group opted to band together for protection, and the Mara Salvatrucha “nation” was born (141).

This life of “violent opposition, dispossession, and migration” contributed to the desire to organize into a street gang (Hayden 203). As Tom Hayden writes, these children were the “frutos de la guerra” (the fruits of war) who walked to school every day stepping over the dead bodies on the streets of their homeland (201). Upon arriving to the United States, they traded one violent situation for another, as they faced not only separation from their family—and the comfort that a family can provide, especially when that categorial identity is held dear by someone—but also the harassment of street gangs organized by race (203). The poverty in their Los Angeles barrio turned Mara Salvatrucha into a haven for homeless, unemployed and orphaned Salvadoran immigrants (206). When asked why they joined Mara Salvatrucha, one of the youngsters interviewed by Hayden responded “so nobody can come into my neighborhood and take the bread out of our mouths” (3).

Sarah Garland’s examination of the origin of Mara Salvatrucha also identifies the densely over-populated, low-income neighborhoods as the main catalyst behind the desire to join MS-13 (60). By the mid-90s many of these maras were arrested and incarcerated. In prison, they became hardened, angrier, and tougher, only to return to the neighborhood ready to engage in more violence once they had served their jail sentences, since crime was one of the few options for economic advancement (61). A number of the gang members were deported to El Salvador and there planted the seed of Mara Salvatrucha in a national community that had never really dealt with gang violence (61).
This trans-national element, in fact, turned the cohesive, new social group called Mara Salvatrucha into what it is today: one of the most feared and menacing gangs in the world (24).

The research conducted by Vigil, Hayden, Garland, and others agrees on one critical aspect of the origin and expansion of MS-13. Because of the forced ebb and flow between different countries, a large portion of the gang base cannot, or is disinclined to, stake claim to any kind of national political affiliation. Exile, deportation, and displacement disassociated many would-be maras from their connection to a country. What is more, after their expulsion from the United States, and consequent incarceration upon arrival to El Salvador, the originators of MS-13 found themselves imprisoned with people from all over Central America who had experienced the same kind of displacement. At this point, the maras began to open their ranks to people of other national origins (Garland 61). In prison, the gang became a heterogeneous group, ethnically, religiously, yet they were joined together by their alienated role in society, as criminals, deportees, or victims of poverty, violence, and police persecution. Still, this only very generally explains their desire to group together, as they felt unwanted or pushed away by almost every sector of society. In MS-13, they found an accepting social identity bounded together by the commonalities that they shared. In fact, the mechanisms that led to their affiliation with MS-13 are more complex than the mere need to belong, and are directly related to the expressive culture that was starting to develop within the group. Indeed, because this young social group had become heterogeneous—much like a young nation composed of disparate constituencies—there was a more pressing need than
ever to forge a bond among the members. Whereas before the shared origin and experience of the initial members produced a natural cohesion, now to be as strong as possible, the gang needed to weave its community together by emphasizing what the diverse membership shared, thereby creating new commonalities.

The coalescence of Mara Salvatrucha as a community brings into focus the question of subjectivity and identity construction as it relates to affiliation with a specific social group. In other words, how does the perceived identity of an MS-13 member hinge on his or her membership in Mara Salvatrucha? The answer to this query also reinforces the reasoning behind why so many youngsters across the Americas opt for membership in MS-13. After all, although it is true that future Mara Salvatrucha members lack in legal recourses to economic and social advancement, there are a number of illegal activities that they could conceivably turn to that would bring in money or a fleeting sense of social and economic security. They could rob, sell drugs, or resort to prostitution and pimpling. Herein lays the communal importance of Mara Salvatrucha membership. Although these future maras could find alternative means by which to support themselves and their lives, becoming an MS-13 addresses another blatant lack—these would-be gang members desire some kind of community that accepts them. Alone, they are poor, attacked, ignored, pushed aside, and vilified. In Mara Salvatrucha they find a sense of togetherness, they are secure and protected, and most importantly, they are accepted almost unconditionally. As long as the mara lives by the rules set forth by Mara Salvatrucha, he or she can belong to the gang for the rest of their lives. What is more, these youngsters who would have otherwise eked out obscure existences filled with hardship and abuse,
now become a part of something much larger, by way of a community that is oddly prestigious compared to the alternative lonely and marginalized life. MS-13 is famous, appearing in the many media reports analyzed in this dissertation, as well as others. People pay attention to MS-13 as a group. For the gang member, Mara Salvatrucha is respected because it is feared, and with this twisted sense of respect comes a feeling of community that is further aggrandized by the popular perception of the gang in society at large. Before joining Mara Salvatrucha, the young man or woman lived in oblivion. In Mara Salvatrucha, they affiliate themselves to a community that has drawn the attention of magazines, movies, and even academics. And so, Mara Salvatrucha members correspond to the notion of the subject as a collectivity, whereby a mara constructs a new identity, away from normalized society, utilizing the cultural scaffolding provided by the larger social group, MS-13. This framework consists of traditions, rules, acceptance, and a distinct expressive culture that represents the individual mara in terms of his gang.

This need for an accepting community is not the only reason why children join MS-13, nor is it the most important. Working simultaneously with the urge to feel included in a social group, the Mara Salvatrucha member also looks to how the gang can help them meet their more tangible needs—money, employment, food, housing. In other words, the identification with Mara Salvatrucha as the preeminent social group takes on a mutually beneficial dynamic, where both the individual and the collective gain through this communal identification. The individual mara gains a community, yes, but he or she also gains a job, of sorts, doing tasks for the gang. He or she acquires a sense of protection that they never had. They also obtain a means of social advancement, where
they gain in importance as they extend their tenure as an MS-13 member. In turn, Mara Salvatrucha expands their ranks, adding to their community foot soldiers and agents who will promote the goals of the gang. Simultaneously, they extend their scope of influence via the swelling of their membership. As the gang becomes larger, it can take over more territories and more efficiently conduct the differing activities that provide the cliques with money.

As the gang increases in size and as more and more youngsters resort to Mara Salvatrucha for a sense of community and social identity, additional maras refer to their gang as the Mara Nation, a designation often mentioned by my interviewees. Patrick Colm Hogan and his analysis of nationalism can help us to understand the complex means through which the Mara Salvatrucha consolidates a sense of nationality among its members. MS-13 tattoos and graffiti repeatedly reflect this affiliation with a nation of Mara Salvatrucha members, either by direct, obvious references to the gang (the gang name on a mara’s forehead, for example), or through more encoded, obscure symbols (a pair of playing cards whose numbers add up to thirteen). Still, Mara Salvatrucha spreads over dozens of countries, separated by thousands of miles, and completely lacks a centralized location that it can call its home. Therefore, the traditional theories of nationalism, those that take into account physical geography, political structure, and citizenship, are ill-suited to explain their particular brand of nationalism. And yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, this does not stop maras from referring to Mara Salvatrucha as a kind of nation, one that better accepts them than their own conventional geopolitical designations. MS-13 reflects Benedict Anderson’s idea of a an imagined
community, one that, despite never having any real kind of face to face interaction with other MS-13 cliques (the name given to the individual Mara Salvatrucha cells) from other parts of the world, still identifies with Mara Salvatrucha as their nation. Expanding on Anderson’s theories, Hogan argues that nationalism depends on a sense of “identification rather than a political structure,” and in the case of Mara Salvatrucha the identification lies in their affiliation with the gang as a “structure of social authority that supersedes other forms of authority when conflicts arise” (4). According to Hogan, this structure manifests in the form categorial identities, which refer to any group membership that a person takes to be definitive of who they are. It is “the acceptance of a category label as a representation of what one is, as a name for some crucially important quality of one’s nature” (29). Categorial identities mold and sculpt a person’s concepts of individual identity through the sharing of ideals and the culture of their corresponding group.

To better flesh out the idea, if I speak of my own categorial identities, I would list that I am an Ohio State Buckeye, a Catholic, a Texan, Latino, a Miami Dolphins fan, and so forth. These are the groups that I most identify with; the groups that I believe most define my reality. I could express my connection to these different groups via T-shirts, a sports cap, or with a crucifix around my neck. Mara Salvatrucha members represent the most important categories of their social identities through their ink-work. Their tattoos reveal the various group memberships that they feel define who they are. The tattoos in Images 1-5 show that for Juan the category of religion is salient, and they suggest that he is conscious of membership in the Catholic group, as evidenced by the cross on his neck and the nun or virgin on his inner bicep (see Figures 3 and 4). He is a member of the
family Ulloa, which indicates pride in being part of that smaller membership (see Figure 6). Beyond that, however, this prominent Hispanic name tattoo, often visible to viewers, may be understood as alluding to his membership in a large Latino group, even if the degree to which he cares about that group is not clear here. At the same time, a tattoo on the back of his neck demonstrates affiliation to the “Norteños,” a group of Northern Los Angeles Salvadorans (see Figure 7). From a critical perspective, these associations are interesting because they represent a multi-faceted layering of identifications, which all combine on Juan’s flesh as a pledge of allegiance to, or at least a declaration of pride in each individual group. And according to Juan’s responses to my questions, to him they represent the strongest kind of loyalty because they are permanently etched into his skin. This is not only because the tattoo removal process is painful and costly, but because Juan would have never considered having them removed while he was in the gang. I can always take my Dolphins T-shirt off after a game, or remove my crucifix when I go to sleep, but Juan will have these marks on his body until the day that he dies. The whole purpose of his getting these tattoos is to demonstrate his love for and connection to these respective categorial identities. Yet despite the strong feelings of devotion that would drive Juan to permanently display his group alliances, there was one social category that he respected above all others, one that, as Hogan says, superseded all other forms of authority. Nothing was more important to him than his membership in Mara Salvatrucha.

This sentiment is fundamental to the discussion of tattoos in this chapter. Mara Salvatrucha not only takes over neighborhoods and territories, it appropriates the bodies of its members. Maras sacrifice their lives for the gang and what MS-13 represents to
them. More so, mara tattoos correspond to the assertion that “the body becomes a point of capture… where cultural codes gain their apparent coherence and where the boundaries between the same and the other are installed and naturalised” (Pile 41). The body of the tattooed Mara Salvatrucha member provides an area where the gang’s beliefs, history, and ideals are broadcast to the world that sees it. The cultural codes take the shapes of skulls, tombstones, virgins, and demons. In these symbols and images, a distinct separation materializes between the gang members and outsiders. These inked mara bodies confirm that the “strength of the individual is identified with the strength of the whole, and ventures impossible or abominable for individuals become not only thinkable but achievable” (Noyes 30). While Dorothy Noyes’ mention of impossible or abominable ventures at once brings to mind violence and murder, these actions could also take into account facial tattoos. This kind of ink specifically points to an otherwise unacceptable act of facial mutilation that is voluntarily undertaken in the name of the one social category that the mara feels accepts them, without question.

2.3 “*Above your mother, God. But nothing above Mara Salvatrucha*”: Etching Out a Mara Nation

For Patrick Colm Hogan, “techniques of nationalization” work to elevate certain identity categories in such a way “as to make the national category preeminent” (9). To this end, these techniques operate to consolidate nationalism as the most important categorial identity to a nation’s citizen. Hogan tells us that, “for anyone to function as part of the in-group, it must be possible to isolate members of that group. One must have the general ability to differentiate in-group members from out-group members” (38). Tattoos serve
this purpose. Mara Salvatrucha tattoos accentuate the chasm between the in-group and
the out-group in a very prominent way, with large and intricate images that cover some of
the most conspicuous parts of the gang member’s bodies, particularly their faces. MS-13
members look to tattoo some of the more taboo body parts—the head, the eyelids, the
inner lips, and even their eyeballs, precisely so that they can stand out in a crowd as
obvious maras. Such displays separate the maras from the non-affiliated member of
society. They show up on parts of the bodies that cannot be covered up by shirts or pants,
residing on the gang member’s most prominent physical areas. These types of tattoos
demonstrate their separation from the out-group while simultaneously affirming their
membership in the in-group. Within the limits of regular citizenship, that is to say, the
daily routine that makes up an urbanite’s life, facial tattoos are a concrete taboo. In
shopping malls and at grocery stores, ink-work on the face and head tend to provoke
stares and whispers, or the fearful aversion of gazes. Yet facial tattoos are among the
most common types of ink work within Mara Salvatrucha (see Figures 8 and 9). Facial
tattoos, and their other cultural expressions, to differing degrees, disconnect Maras from
society, thereby guiding members to live lives largely limited to interactions with other
gang members for money, friendship, and a sense of community.

It is important to point out that the in-group/out-group designations are not
mutually exclusive, nor are they static. Rather, they are always shifting and changing
depending on particular social and cultural events. Perception also plays a large role in
the understanding of the in- and out-group. War, celebrations, elections, race, religion,
and the national subjects’ position within these events and categories influence the make-
up of both the in-group and out-group. The same holds true for Mara Salvatrucha and the
gang’s expressive culture. As the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, although MS-13
constructs a very specific sense of community through their tattoos, graffiti, and rap, they
also draw from and interact with various elements that reside outside of the gang. For
example, the skull tattoos and graffiti that I examine in this chapter and the next seem to
draw from a strong tradition of calaveras and esqueletos that is so prevalent in Central
America. Likewise, graffiti as an act of countercultural resistance arguably bases itself on
the muralist movement in countries like Mexico. MS-13 relies on an entire gang language
that can trace its beginnings and perpetuation to the history and culture of other Latino
gangs. The use of terms such as “homic,” “la vida loca,” and “cholo” did not begin with
Mara Salvatrucha. Even in the context of popular mediatic characterizations of the gang,
MS-13 clashes against but also confirms some the information contained in the reports
and documentaries that are available to the public. The rap and music video studied in
Chapters Three and Four are no less violent than the portrayals in The World’s Most
Dangerous Gang or Sin nombre. Yet it is critical to understand that, for the purposes of
this study, the point of departure is not whether the in- and out-group are entirely
different and separated. Instead, central to Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture is how
these two seemingly disparate groups run parallel to each other and sometimes collide
when situations of opposition arise. In other words, when social identity groups stand
against each other, which one takes precedence, and how is this hierarchy represented in
Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture?
Mara Salvatrucha has an aphorism that dictates “Above your mother, God. But nothing above Mara Salvatrucha.” This summarizes the importance of gang membership in the face of other groups in that their identity as maras eclipses everything else, even though respect towards your mother and faith in God is considered important. Juan told me this motto, and affirmed that, in his life, the Mara Nation overrode all other affinities and attachments, that is to say, all of the categories of identity that were mentioned above. MS-13 tattoos solidify this bond to the gang, emphasizing gang solidarity through a set of outwardly visible pledges that involve a communication meant for not only those inside of Mara Salvatrucha, but also for those who are not part of the gang. At the same time, the tattoos reflect the techniques of nationalization in very specific ways, in order to represent the importance of the gang above all other identifications. What follows is a detailed analysis of how Mara Salvatrucha tattoos manipulate salience, durability, opposability, affectivity, and functionality in order to elevate the preeminence of their citizenship in the Mara Nation which, in turn, consolidates an idea of belonging that is powerful enough to die—and kill—for.

2.4 The Importance of Being Seen: MS-13 Tattoos as Salient Indicators of the Mara Nation

Salience refers to the “attention-eliciting ways” in which nationalism becomes visible and outwardly apparent, not only for those who are members of the nation, but also for those who are visiting (Hogan 58). Although the odor of a country’s typical dish or the sound of an anthem work to illicit ideas of nationalism, visual salience is the most pronounced way in which symbols and objects take meanings that affirm group membership. Hogan
specifically mentions flags, national monuments, historical artifacts, and tourist sites as the most important examples of visual salience within the context of strengthening notions of nationalism. He recognizes the importance of people having to see the object because “their designs involve a series of representations that themselves have nationalist associations” (72). Additionally, stamps, pictures of national heroes, the inscriptions of nationalist slogans, televised sports, and many other tactics all play a part in encouraging the loyalty of citizens in a visible way.

How, then, does salience factor into the cohesion of a Mara Nation kinship that asks its members to override all other categorial identities? Mara Salvatrucha does not have any statues. They are without monuments or cathedrals, and those members who have died in street violence do not have an Arlington National Cemetery. Their community heroes are not honored on stamps or a national currency. What is more, the transnational nature of the gang restricts a centralized locale in which such salient memorials could exist. Yet they do build cohesion within their social group much as nations tend to. When highlighting these limitations, it is essential to re-iterate the importance of the visual aspect of salience when considering how the Mara Nation is constructed in the lives of Mara Salvatrucha members. Salience’s most marked possibility as a cohesive force lies in the ways in which it draws attention from the eyes.

The importance of visibility brings me back to the subject of MS-13 facial tattoos. In the conference papers I have delivered, and in the lectures that I have given in classes, those present always ask about the facial tattoos. They wonder what drives the maras to mutilate their faces. This is not surprising, since facial tattoos still remain an important
social taboo, even though U.S. society, for example, has become more accepting of
tattoos over the course of the last fifty years. If a man with a facial tattoo enters a bar or a
fast food restaurant, he will garner stares, whispers, and his mental image will later be
remembered and retold as an oddity, something different from the norm. Members of the
out-group see the modified face, and they remember it as an anomaly, as a break from the
constraints of regular citizenship. It is this rift between normative society and the tattooed
face that cements the notion of in-group and out-group in terms of salience, in that it
elicits visual attention in an obvious way via an impossible to ignore statement of Mara
Salvatrucha membership. Even those tattoos that do not specifically allude to Mara
Salvatrucha correspond to MS-13 culture because they are inked on the face. In other
words, in the Mara Salvatrucha community facial tattoos are considered commonplace,
and therefore consolidate the in-group ideas of membership through the acceptance of the
practice. This in-group approval lies diametrically opposed to what normal society, that is
to say the out-group, deems allowable, a notion that previews my later discussion of
opposability and how it synergizes with salience. This separation between the in-group
and the out-group, exemplified by tattoos on the face and head, confirms the difference
between the members of the Mara Nation and quotidian culture. As such, the sense of
nationality is strengthened by permitting and even encouraging acts of facial mutilation
that would otherwise be despicable in any other environment. Facial tattoos not only
serve the purpose of demonstrating a Mara’s loyalty to his nation, but they also serve as a
visually salient, attention-getting indicator of a community of “others” to the out-group
who sees them.
Even though the placement of the facial tattoo serves as a critical separator between the in- and out-group, the actual images that are etched on the skin further reveal the technique of salience at work. Some of the symbols have personal relevance, or, as in the case with Juan, they speak to their own different categorial identifications. One almost invariable element in MS-13 facial tattoos, however, is the gang’s name, or one of its various nicknames, emblazoned on the most prominent parts of the face or head. So in addition to the fact that facial tattoos make the group more salient because many of the members have such markings, these attention-getting tattoos also often explicitly highlight the group. The gang name appears directly on the forehead or across both cheeks. The mara in Figure 9 has “MS” inked across his forehead, with the letters broken by a tattoo of the devil-horned hand-sign that Mara Salvatrucha members use to identify their gang. If he were a painting, this tattoo would be the point of reference, the first spot on the canvas on which the eye would focus. It is a logo, a sign, a demonstration of group membership by way of a tattoo on this man’s interface with the world, the part of his body that serves as the main communicator with society. Likewise, Figure 10 shows a mara with the numbers one and three displayed on either cheek. This, of course, references the number thirteen, as in MS-13, one of the many nicknames of Mara Salvatrucha. Again, it is the focal point of his tattoo-work, with two hands flanking the numbers, positioned in the gang-sign that represents MS-13. In the cases of the mara in Figures 9 and 10, the imagery is more subtle in meaning, if not in appearance, where the thirteen and the hand gestures could be understood only by fellow gang members, and the out-group affiliates of rival gangs. Regardless, they represent the gang directly, in name
or in symbolism, to anybody who looks at him. These tattoos cannot be hidden, or covered up, and so they serve as very salient reflections of their membership to the group that they feel most strongly about. Furthermore, these tattoos are the most visible, most discernible of all of the pictures on their faces. As such, they mean the most to the MS-13 member because they reveal the individual’s own personal identification with and commitment to the gang as the community that supersedes all other categorial identities.

Kay Inckle believes that tattoos reflect the non-normative body, that is to say, a body that is not controlled and manipulated by outside agents (67). This is because tattoos are viewed as “at best extreme, at worst sick or deviant” (132). Body ink articulates non-linguistic, symbolic representation that is affixed onto the body with the explicit aim of communication (200). In this way, the body reveals certain information about the individual who has a tattoo (140). The art has evolved into, what Ted Polhemus calls, the most informative of all forms of body art (40). He argues that tattoos serve as a databank of knowledge, beliefs, values and history (40). It is a language of personal and individual identity, but also, in a community, tattoos are used to mark members of group, articulating the ways in which they engage and understand society as a part of a particular subculture, and how they communicate this understanding to those outside of the group (40). Tattoos promote a sense of identity that responds to the individual, the individual’s place within a certain group, and the individual’s perceived communication with those outside of the group (Inckle 61). The decision to get a tattoo is an intimate one, yet the message appears on the flesh available for anyone to see. Therefore, Mara Salvatrucha facial tattoos serve a dual communicative purpose when considering the relationship
between the in-group and the out-group. Although the act is, on one hand, personal and private, at the same time it communicates these ideas of history, values, and beliefs to all who see them in public. With Mara Salvatrucha gang members, the communication relays their own ideas of nationality by way of a salient set of images that reflects loyalty from the individual as well as a kinship with other tattooed maras from the same gang.

2.5 Blood In, Blood Out: Mara Tattoos as Symbols of Community Permanence

Durability “projects the nation into the past” (Hogan 89). It is the notion that, despite political turmoil, wars, division, separation, or social unrest, the nation has always been there. Even in cases of newer countries, Hogan points out that it may just be a “projection of ideals coming to realize themselves in the course of history” that signifies the lasting qualities of the nation” (89). In those cases, primarily citing the United States and India as recent political entities, Hogan mentions “the invention of tradition” as the most powerful means by which even relatively recent countries promote endurance. Notions such as life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, religious freedom, and picking yourself up by your bootstraps all enter the public imaginary as concepts that existed long before the political affirmation of the United States as a country. Most children learn early on in American schools that these ideals existed before 1776, and that they all came together to form the philosophies that birthed this present-day nation.

Hogan also calls attention to the importance of literature and culture in the enhancement of a sense of national durability. Written and televised histories, presidential biographies, historical novels, and films all provoke feelings that the country has endured the weathering effects of time. More so, there is an assertion of literary
history, where national canons and paradigms place the country in the artistic and cultural stream of perpetuity alongside other civilizations that have been able to evolve a distinct literary voice and presence. Hogan mentions Greek tragedies and Shakespeare, and I would add Faulkner, Twain and Hemingway with respect to the context of the United States. Of course, being able to read stands as an important pre-requisite to this kind of literary durability, and Hogan emphasizes the importance of a formal education in promoting the means by which “to communicate national and other in-group narratives, to enhance the salience of the identity category, and to expand the sense of durability” (91).

In contemplating the relevance of Hogan’s technique of durability to the Mara Nation, we immediately encounter two ostensible problems. The first lies in the juvenescence of the gang. Although studies tend to debate on an exact year, most agree that MS-13 began to consolidate as a gang in the very early 1980s, during and after the Salvadoran Civil War. This means that the Mara Nation has only existed for three decades. The second apparent complication results from the lack of formal education that many, if not most, maras have. From the earliest days of the Salvadoran Civil War, national armies would enter elementary schools pulling very young boys out from their desks to begin training for the war. In the years leading up to the official birth of Mara Salvatrucha, Salvadoran children were forced to flee with their families, or were left orphaned, homeless, and with more pressing needs than reading lessons. As was mentioned earlier, upon arrival to the United States the younger Salvadorans entered Los Angeles classrooms with forty or fifty students, where individual attention was
impossible. The racial tension that these children faced made school another warzone, and not a sanctuary for learning. Even today, in impoverished neighborhoods all over the Americas, the appeal and necessity of earning money at a very young age diminishes the desire to enter school, and for those that do manage to find a way into the schooling systems, inner city gang violence forces a number of soon-to-be maras to pick a group that will protect and look out for them. In all of these cases, education is not considered a priority. The research conducted by Vigil, Hayden, Garland suggest that the desire to make money, seek out protection, and find an accepting community all obliterate the supposed necessity of learning to read. This translates into a community with little or no access to literature, and therefore no way to create a national literary tradition, something that Hogan mentions as critical in the development of an identification with nationalistic durability.

Nonetheless, the Mara Nation finds alternative methods in which to assert that their community is durable. Hogan’s contention that “the mere existence of tradition shows the durability of the nation” applies directly to MS-13, as they have a number of rites, slogans, and established practices whose purposes are to establish not only loyalty, but also legitimacy as an enduring community (92). Mara Salvatrucha invents tradition. The most violent of these, the “blood in, blood out” ceremony of gang initiation and termination, requires that a person must spill blood in order to enter the gang or leave it. This baptism in blood involves two actions. First, the candidate must endure 13 seconds of a beating by already-initiated gang members, the so-called “jump in.” Next, as a show of fidelity, they must injure or kill a member from a rival gang. In order to leave the
gang, however, the only blood that is spilled is that of the gang member, himself, as MS-13 expects gang turnover only in death, either from an out-group agent (police, rival gang member) or through an in-group assault towards those that seek to exit the gang life. Traditions such as these connect the gang members by establishing a set of ongoing rituals that all Maras must go through, and that all prospective members will experience, as well. It is a show of durability through consistency and continuity. The gang member becomes part of a temporality that has been a staple of Mara Salvatrucha since before their individual initiation, and that will continue forward as more members join the gang.

Among all of the MS-13 traditions, however, none are as prevalent as tattooing. If we recall Ted Polhemus’ analysis, tattoos can serve as a language, and in the case of Mara Salvatrucha, this inked language of images and symbols supplants the need for literature within the context of national durability. Aside from the signs of devotion that MS-13 tattoos reveal, the actual tattoo itself represents durability. Tattoos are permanent. Of course, one could argue that tattoos can be removed, but the process is expensive. The amount of money needed to eliminate a single tattoo is beyond the means of many of the maras who live in situations of poverty that forced them to join the gang in the first place. Extrapolate that price for the case of maras who have hundreds of tattoos, all of them converging upon each other to the point where there is no separation between one and another, and the cost can enter the range of hundreds of thousands of dollars, without insurance. Furthermore, the tattoo removal process causes scarring. Even though certain, smaller tattoos can be taken away with few remnants left on the skin, the larger and darker the tattoo, the more likely that scarring and residual traces of the ink will remain.
On people like those pictured in Figures 8 through 10, there would be considerable scarring directly on the face, scarring that will never go away, leaving the skin looking as though it has been scorched or burned chemically. Regardless, as Juan suggested during our interviews, the removal of these tattoos stands in direct contradiction with the primary reason why the Mara Salvatrucha members get them in the first place. To the mara, tattoos represent a permanent, inerasable testament to their affinity to the gang. As such, they would never consider having them removed. MS-13 tattoos are symbols of a community connection that will be evident, obvious, and salient until the day that the gang member dies. This corporeal permanence reflects an idea of nationalistic durability, considering that thousands of Mara Salvatrucha members spread all over the world possess life-long, outward emblems of devotion that were taken onto their flesh because of the strong belief that they will remain in the community for their entire lives.

Returning to the concept of tattoos as language, in the Mara Salvatrucha community a consistent system of repeated images replaces literature as an indicator of national durability by presenting a set of recurring images that transcends boundaries and geography. That is to say, despite the deportations, arrests, violent deaths, and the thousands of miles that separate different cliques, MS-13 retains a visible lexicon of tattoos that spans all political borders, therefore creating a regular language that parallels national literary traditions. More to the point, the similarities between the tattooed pictures would suggest a specific style and aesthetic that could be likened to a national canon. For example, compare the cross on Juan’s neck (see Figure 3) to the cross in Figure 11. They are identical in form and size, with only the distinction being that one is
blackened in. Likewise, in Figure 12, the Mara has a pair of scaly, demon hands forming an upside down “M,” a staple in MS-13 hand-signs that signifies the name of the gang. An almost identical pair of hands sits on the chest of the MS-13 member in Figure 13.

Also, when reviewing most of the images presented thus far in this chapter, the repetition of the “M,” “S,” and “13” resemble each other in script and style. These tattoos, and many more that I observed but are not pictured, build a kind of Mara Salvatrucha national aesthetic, at least as it is perceived by the gang’s members. They are a collected work of pictures and fonts that reinforce durability and endurance in the same ways that national literatures do in more traditional nations.

Another typical type of tattoo pays homage to dead family members, comrades, and Mara leaders. Traditional nations use their fallen heroes on stamps, money, and in historic biographies in order to further promote the durability of their culture. George Washington on bills, hall of fame baseball players on stamps, and presidents on tee-shirts, all synergize in order to build the idea of a group of people who promoted the ideals of a country years ago, therefore turning the idea of nationality into a multi-generational endeavor firmly rooted in history. This temporal affinity toward enduring national icons solidifies feelings of permanence by grounding the present and the future in the foundations built in the past. The Mara Nation, as was discussed, does not have access to these kinds of heroic, literary stories. They are outside of literature, therefore their community heroes are not written about. They do not have their own system of currency, nor do they have a national postage system. So they must find other ways in which to memorialize their dead compatriots. Many MS-13 tattoos attempt real-life depictions of
people who have lived. Unlike the stylized demon hands, or the gothic/diamond lettering, these inked commemorations pull away from the caricature-like or the cartoony, and make the effort towards realism out of respect to the person who is being honored. Figure 14 shows a mara with a “Vato Loco” (“Crazy Dude”) tattooed on the front of his shoulder, a name that was used to describe some of the first Latino gang members in Southern California. Such an image celebrates a sense of history for the ones who began the gang life. Immediately in front of the Vato Loco, there is the realistic depiction of a woman, possibly a wife, an ex-girlfriend, or maybe his mother. Figure 15 has a similar woman tattooed on a shoulder, in a more realistic style than the succubus on Juan’s back, for example. Juan’s own show of respect is demonstrated in Figure 16. The younger-looking woman was the mother of his child, who, shortly after giving birth, died from an AK-47 bullet that penetrated the wall of her living room, into her ear, during a drive-by shooting. And although these tattoos, taken individually, represent personal memories, when examined together they stand as a communal homage, a testament to all of the people who have died for Mara Salvatrucha across the Americas. Since MS-13 cannot rely on the aforementioned forms of historic representation found in traditional nations, many of their members depend on these kinds of tattoos in order to push forth a sense of durability by way of a link to the past. As such, not only do they symbolize a demonstration of individual respect from the person who has the tattoo for the loved one who has died, but also, the tattoos present a communication to the out-group, a dynamic that I will discuss in greater detail in when considering Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, in the next chapter. Whether these tattooed people are recognized by the out-group or not is
irrelevant. What matters to the mara is that they are seen, and therefore remembered, beyond their already ended lives.

This canon of Mara Salvatrucha inked images and icons extends individual tributes into large-scale acts of remembrance via the cemetery motif. It is common to see gravestones and full-on funerary grounds on the bodies of MS-13 members (see Figure 17). These kinds of images serve the same purpose, as the realistically depicted pictures of loved ones that are seen in Figures 14 through 16. In their case, the Mara Salvatrucha member reflects the enormous amount of loss associated with the violent street lives that they experience by taking on the death of friends and loved ones onto their skin as an act of memory and endurance. The cemeteries act in response to the two or three second long flashes of dead Mara bodies that are projected on television news reports or the pictures of crime scenes in newspapers. In the latter, there is no permanence, no identification with the dead bodies. They are merely corpses, reminders of the belligerent lives and the criminal activities that these gang members lead. Tattooed cemeteries perpetuate the dead Maras in a way that the ten o’clock news, of course, does not. Giving the corpses names or biographies humanizes them, and works against the typical external depiction of MS-13 as a faceless, anonymous entity wreaking random havoc on the streets of our cities. The tattooed cemetery, then, counters this depiction, naming the dead, identifying the murdered, humanizing their Mara Nation compatriots.

This act of remembrance, like all other Mara Salvatrucha tattoos, exemplifies durability because they remain with the mara for their entire lives. They outlast the brief glimpses of carcasses shown by the media, and stay on the skin for years, outwardly
eulogizing community members who are otherwise forgotten by the out-group. Earlier, I
gave the example of Arlington National Cemetery as a model for the notion of salience. It
is a large national monument that can be toured, experienced, and stands as a memorial
for American soldiers who have died in service. More than just a salient representation of
nationalism, the cemetery also epitomizes the durability of the United States. It began
burying soldiers during the American Civil War, a testament to the ability of the nation to
endure in the face of even the most brutal in-group discord. Today, some of the nation’s
most memorable historical figures lay buried in Arlington National Cemetery. John F.
Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, William Howard Taft, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and hundreds
of others perpetuate the idea of national durability, not only for what they represented to
the construction of the idea of the United States, but also through their perpetual slumber
in the ground at Arlington National Cemetery. The graveyard tattoos of the MS-13 mirror
this enduring quality. Maras do not have a national cemetery in which to commemorate
those who have fallen for the cause of Mara Salvatrucha. Their community heroes are
criminals and murderers in the eyes of the out-group, and so, no outside demonstration of
exaltation exists. To the out-group, the death of MS-13 members can even be a relief, as
their demise means that one less gang member is out on the street. Without the traditional
means to honor and extol their dead compatriots, Mara Salvatrucha members must rely
on alternative means by which to dedicate space to the memory of the fallen. Therefore,
the cemetery tattoo could parallel a monument like Arlington National Cemetery in its
ability to communicate the remembrance of their Mara Nation citizens, community
members who would be quickly forgotten if not for the immortalization on the maras’
bodies. Figure 17 shows an MS-13 member with a full cemetery tattooed on the upper part of his chest. Each gravestone has the initials “R.I.P.” along with the name of the person who is “buried” there. Above the graveyard, the words “en memoria de mis homies” (“in memory of my homies”) signal the meaning behind the act of homage. This tattoo and others like it function to prolong the memory of the fellow Maras who have died. They are an act of remembrance, and, as such, a way to create and enduring legacy of community heroes who the out-group views as criminals.

Figure 18 returns us to what Hogan writes about a literary canon as a reflection of national durability. Such a cultural tradition connects various genres of literature through a common thread of similar ideals, philosophies, and aesthetics in order to make these part of a national continuity. This continuity echoes durability because the worldview represented in the literary works transcends genre and therefore encompasses an image of the nation that is founded in a continuum that has existed for generations across all kinds of media. Although I examine Mara Salvatrucha graffiti very specifically in a subsequent chapter, it is important to note the similarities between the mural in Figure 18 and the tattoo in Figure 17. Both repeat the saying “In memory of my homies.” Both have gravestones with names on them, remembering members of the Mara Nation who have died. And so, the cemetery trope extends past the skin, and moves onto the walls in neighborhoods where the Mara Salvatrucha presence most persists. For the members of Mara Salvatrucha, these images are the Mara Nation’s canon. They offer a series of symbols that are repeated in all kinds of MS-13 expressive culture. They represent durability by their continuous usage, and respond to permanence in the way that they live.
through a number of different cultural articulations in hundreds of MS-13 cliques across the world.

2.6 Devils, Skulls and Facial Mutilation: Mara Salvatrucha Tattoos, Opposability, and the Imaginary of Violence

It is critical to understand that Patrick Colm Hogan’s techniques of nationalization are not exclusive or independent, nor do they work separately of each other. Simultaneously, these techniques work in unison in order to promote a cohesiveness between members of a nation. Arlington National Cemetery, for example, stands as a salient enforcer of patriotism in the United States. The monument also speaks to the durability of a national philosophy that commemorates the lives of those who have died in wars, defending their nation, over the last one hundred and fifty years. As such, it grounds itself in the past in order to promote a durability that progresses into the future. People of all religious faiths and races are buried there. Soldiers who defended both the North and the South lie there. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents all lay, together, in Arlington National Cemetery. Despite all of these opposed categorial identities, the people interred in the graveyard are, above everything, American. The diversity of the dead in this U.S. national shrine confirms Hogan’s theory that nationalistic techniques attempt to divert the attention from sub-national categories, thereby promoting a sense of homogeneity (81). The salience and durability of the monument reinforces patriotic pride, as does the sentiment that, regardless of political affiliation, race or religion, all of those buried in the Washington D.C. cemetery are, first and foremost, heroes of the United States.
Mara Salvatrucha ink-work also represents many of Hogan’s techniques all at once. For example, facial tattoos are very salient reminders of a mara’s gang affiliation, as they immediately draw attention to the markings on the face and scalp. At the same time, these tattoos pull from a canon of images that the entire Mara Salvatrucha nation shares. These shared symbols remain on the MS-13 member’s skin for as long as they live. Therefore, this canon, as well as the permanence of the tattoos, exemplifies durability, along with salience. Opposability and affectivity synergize in this same way. The cohesive function of the Mara Nation is solidified by its member’s sentiments of being separated from society. As such, feeling that Mara Salvatrucha is the only community that truly accepts them, the maras demonstrate their love for the gang, their emotional attachment to it, by way of their tattoos.

Opposability “involves the polarization or near-polarization of in-group and out-group members” (Hogan 80). In other words, opposability relies on difference from the out-group, a difference that often sets up the out-group as an enemy. In the case of Mara Salvatrucha, opposability is a way of life. Its original members were kicked out of or fled their home nation. At once this brings into question their identities as citizens of El Salvador. Their attempts to assimilate and thrive in the Pico/Union were thwarted by neighborhood gangs and impoverished surroundings. At this point, not only were they not Salvadoran, but they were not able to assume the categorial identifications that could have arisen from the relocation. They were not American, Californian, nor Los Angelino. Rather, they were poor immigrants constantly under attack, and that by itself did not tend to promote consciousness and appreciation of membership in a Salvadoran, Latino, or
even multi-ethnic immigrant community, as might have been expected. Naturally, in this incipient stage of the gang, these new immigrants joined together because they shared in the Salvadoran Civil War experience. In a neighborhood where the poor could resort to different kinds of illegal options, these members of the newly arrived Salvadoran community thought it best to group up, united by a common culture and recent history. Thus, a new category of social identity emerged for these individuals as a result of these circumstances, a pseudo-national one: the Mara Salvatrucha. Once they came together as Mara Salvatrucha, they were looked upon as agents of chaos, summarily deported and/or incarcerated for their actions. Today, Mara Salvatrucha willingly admits murderers, kidnappers, thieves, and violent criminals into their ranks, and even encourages such behavior if it advances the aims of the gang. This means that MS-13 members, in one way or the other, have always occupied a space of non-identity in terms of nationality, since they never considered themselves citizens of regular society. They were the oppositional force in an urban society that considered them antagonists. This is the most common reason why maras join the gang in the first place. Mara Salvatrucha represents a community, a nation, one that protects and employs them, and one that accepts unconditionally what the out-group would consider deviant behavior.

This unconditional acceptance becomes obvious when we consider, once again, the example of facial tattoos. Tattoos have become more accepted in “regular” society, and yet there is a distinct line marking what is considered appropriate. Facial tattoos cross this line, and are considered unacceptable in even the most liberal of social circles. Even so, as we can see in the images that I have referenced, and in thousands of examples in
the streets, the practice is very common, and even encouraged, by MS-13. In the Mara Nation, then, this kind of ink-work illustrates a strong opposability to the outside social order. Facial tattoos are bold statements of difference that galvanize a sense of Mara Salvatrucha identity by way of a cultural expression considered unacceptable by the out-group. This distinction is one of many cultural expressions that consolidates Mara Salvatrucha unity.

Facial tattoos are just one way in which opposability works to strengthen a mara’s identification with their gang, above all other identities. And although the placement of the ink-work creates a separation, the images themselves serve to increase the rift between the Mara Nation and the out-group. In many cases, the pictures that are chosen forge a sense of fear in those that see them. These include satanic, demonic, and violent images whose primary purpose is to shock and repel. In Figure 5, Juan has a female demon on his back, and Figure 19 shows various skulls all over his arms. The mara in Figure 10 has the numbers “666” etched into his forehead, a biblical reference to the sign of the beast or the devil. I have already mentioned the scaly, demonic hands in the forms of the gang-signs as seen in Figures 9, 12 and 13. Figure 20 pictures a mara with tattooed bones that follow his facial skeletal structure, turning his visage into a “calavera,” or skull. In Figure 21, an MS-13 member has a grim reaper tattooed between his eyes. Figure 22 displays a Mara Salvatrucha member with devil horns on his forehead. In all of these cases, and countless others, MS-13 members choose these horrifying images and place them in very prominent places, with the intention of having them seen by people outside of the gang. In other words, they want to appear menacing to others. Of course,
this has much to do with the violent lives that they live. Many maras must look scary in
their battles with the police and other gangs, as a means to intimidate their opponents.
Still, the frightening imagery serves another purpose in response to their perceived
reputation outside of the gang. Mara Salvatrucha members know of the image of them
circulated by the media and the police. They know that they instill terror in urban
denizens. They understand that they are seen as the enemy by most sectors of society.
And so, they appropriate the evil imagery in order to empower their own collective
identity as enemies. This provokes feelings of terror to those outside of the group who see
the ink-work, but at the same time it reinforces their own gang unity by accepting the
malevolence, uniting under it, and taking it onto their flesh. This acceptance accentuates
the polarization between the in- and out-group, and therefore confirms the gang’s
opposability to a society that considers MS-13 a menace. This, in turn, solidifies the
sense of a Mara Nation, connected by their role as villains. Moreover, this exchange
between Mara Salvatrucha and the outside world affirms the idea that the relationship
between the in-group and out-group is malleable depending on particular circumstances
and perception. They separate themselves from the out-group by harnessing the fear and
evil characterizations that come from the world outside of the gang. And so, by
appropriating certain narratives presented in the out-group, MS-13 widens the chasm that
exists between them and those who are not affiliated.

Hogan discusses, very specifically, the role of media in the reinforcement of
opposability, drawing from the events of September 11, 2001 in order to develop the
theory that the coverage of the event fostered overwhelming feelings of nationalism.
Simultaneously, the messages delivered in news reports, the printed press, and on the radio created a direct opposition between the United States and the Arab world. Hogan mentions that “it is possible to imagine different ways of treating the bombings. It would have been perfectly possible for the government and the news media to present it as a massive criminal act that required extensive planning that it would be unlikely to be repeated in the near future” (Hogan 107). Instead, the nation saw an “aggrandizement of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda” (Hogan 107). There were constant references to the elevation of the risk for terrorist attacks; citizens were urged to seal their windows to protect from biological attacks; neighbors were asked to report the suspicious activities of their neighbors. Hogan contends that this approach to the attacks strengthened a sense of national unity in a time of tragedy, but likewise exaggerated the fear and hatred felt towards those thought to be responsible for the attacks. Hence Hogan’s reference to phone calls to popular radio shows asking the government to “nuke the Arabs,” “let’s kill them all,” and “let’s just nuke everyone” (108). The entire Arab world, then, was elevated as the villain, generally, and not the very specific branch of fanatics that orchestrated the act. The mediatic coverage accentuated the opposability between the American nation and an artificially created, sensationalized enemy that existed in neither the scale nor scope that was being presented at the time. Ten years later, this opposability remained as the debate over building a mosque near Ground Zero incited anger and disgust among those who oppose the structure as a symbol of Muslim faith.

I mention Hogan’s analysis of the media coverage of the 9/11 tragedy because it emphasizes the role that news networks, print media, the radio, and other forms of wide-
scale communication play in the fomentation of opposability. This relates directly to the
discussion of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture by way of the concept of the
“imaginary of violence,” a theory that has gained wide acceptance among Latin
American Cultural Studies scholars and academics who study the depiction of urban
violence in the largest cities across the world. The imaginary of violence molds the
public’s perception of crime, gangs, and social unrest. This theoretical framework helps
to interpret Mara Salvatrucha engagement with the world outside of the gang through its
expressive culture. What Rossana Reguillo, Susana Rotker and Jesús Martín Barbero call
the imaginary of violence focuses on the second-hand, sensationalized rendering of city
violence formed by what urban residents see on television, watch on the movie screen or
read on the internet. It is a perception of the city that is created artificially, in the home.
These versions of violence are structured in such a way as to create an opposition
between “us” and “them,” where the “us” is the at-home viewer, and the “them” is any
agent of social unrest—criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, minorities, and the poor. The
imaginary of violence “speaks” on behalf of the maras, recounting their violent acts from
a perspective that lies almost entirely outside of the gang.

Mara Salvatrucha tattoos create an independent version of such narratives, one
that originates directly from the gang itself, even though it appropriates certain narratives
that manifest in out-group characterizations of the gang. This independent representation
runs parallel to, and often times clashes against, what urbanites watch and hear in the
media. Media sources and police agencies have created their own account of the gang,
designating MS-13 as an international terrorist group seeking to inflict chaos and terror in
urban dwellers. The media’s personification of Mara Salvatrucha rarely discusses the origins of the gang, their culture, the reasoning behind the violence, or the impoverished surroundings that force many youngsters to rely on the gang for food and shelter. For example, television programs such as *Gangland* and *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* have focused on Mara Salvatrucha. After brief introductions to the gang’s roots, the documentaries concentrate on the violent aspects of their life, specifically the large number of murders committed by the gang and the criminal structure of the Mara Salvatrucha community. They travel into various prisons to demonstrate Mara violence in penal systems across the Americas. One of the documentaries recounts the case of Brenda, an ex-Mara turned informant, found brutally murdered and raped in Virginia. In short, these two programs, produced by The Discovery Channel and The National Geographic Channel, serve as authoritative, official representations of the gang, and these depictions are sensationalized, focusing on the death and crime perpetrated by the gang members in order to reinforce opposability between the at-home viewer and the gang.

The last chapter in this dissertation more specifically examines such out-group filmic representations of the gang, but for now this overview of Mara Salvatrucha characterization in the media serves well to underscore the sensationalistic and often untrue nature of the relayed messages.

These sources, and others, come together to create an imaginary of violence, constructing general categories that deal with urban youth culture, street violence, and giving a face to the crime and terror. Rossana Reguillo believes that the imaginary presents immigrants, street children, and drug addicts as the villains who cause the fear
that resides in the streets (“Guerreros o ciudadanos” 56). MS-13 members fall into each of these smaller categorial identities. Of course, this fear is warranted in the case of the Mara Salvatrucha. This gang has been involved in some of the deadliest and bloodiest demonstrations of crime seen in the last ten years (Garland 18, 24). Yet the imaginary only focuses on a sensationalized negative, without considering that Mara cliques arise in neighborhoods that social welfare projects have forgotten (Garland 25; Hayden 210, A Rainbow of Gangs 142). In the case of Mara Salvatrucha, we can see exactly how the imaginary creates its depiction of the enemy within a very specific cultural context. This mediatic misrepresentation becomes apparent through police tattoo databases, news reports of neighborhood crackdowns, images of dead bodies on the internet, and many other media sources (Shelden 104, 105). Often, and depending on the particular sources, the information that the viewer gets is incorrect or at least distorted, particularly when it comes to crime. This distortion often arises through a negation of origin or cause. The imaginary does not take into account the dreadful economic situations of the people committing crimes. The conditions that a Mara Salvatrucha faces before joining the gang are a case in point, as they are superficially examined or altogether avoided in the documentaries and movies mentioned. Programs such as these, and other agents within the imaginary of violence, overlook the fact that many of their youngest recruits are homeless orphans (Garland 58; Hayden 201, 203, 206; A Rainbow of Gangs 142). The imaginary ignores that public service efforts have failed the children time and time again, and that MS-13 provides these street children with places to live and food to eat (Garland 25; Hayden 3). The viewers do not see the problems with indigenous poverty and
marginalization prevalent in Central America, situations that cause hunger, disease, and unemployment, nor do they understand the various ethnic, racial, and socio-economic conditions that separate the many neighborhoods and countries where Mara Salvatrucha thrives. These considerations are important because they indicate a source for the violence, a reason for the horrible acts of crime. The members of MS-13 resort to crime because they are poor and starving, in abandoned and impoverished neighborhoods all over the Americas. As well, they seek a community that will not push them to the margins, a social group that they can identify with that will not consistently persecute and discriminate against them. Without this background Mara Salvatrucha become sensationalized, turned into caricatures, one homogenous, vicious gang with no past or explanation.

The Mara Salvatrucha face, then, as it flashes across the screen, represents an evil presence to the home viewer. To the audience, this face characterizes one of the agents in charge of creating the crime and violence that engenders the fear that keeps citizens indoors. The tattooed face means one thing within this public, mainstream imaginary of violence, but if we look more closely it reveals another story, one that directly challenges the one that exploits and misrepresents them. The public forum for this resistance is the skin, the walls of the very streets where citizens travel, and the lyrics of their particular style of rap. MS-13 tattoos create a space on the body, through which members can tell their stories. Through these articulations, the maras have a means to represent their lives and background on their own terms, and to scholars and researchers they can help
understand the roots and origins of an ever-growing urban community that is re-shaping the social landscape of some of the largest cities in the world.

A close reading of Mara Salvatrucha tattoos demonstrates how MS-13 expressive culture attempts to create a narrative that does not entirely depend on secondary, out-group sources in order to promote the culture’s ideals, history, and belief systems. And as has been mentioned before, they serve to widen the rift between the in-group and the outside world, therefore highlighting the importance of the Mara Salvatrucha national identity over all others. Before I go on to a close reading of several tattoos, however, it is important to emphasize that these are the meanings that interviewed maras have provided for their ink work. These cultural expressions signify an autochthonous communication meant to represent the gang’s culture directly from the locus of the in-group. This narrative, while relating to the imaginary of violence, and in some cases confirming it, broadens the gap between MS-13 and the world outside of the group, thereby accentuating difference and opposability.

The most common tattoo designs sported by Mara Salvatrucha members identify the gang’s name. This identification is accomplished in many different ways, and sometimes the designs do not allude to the name of the gang directly. Many Mara Salvatrucha members emblazon their chests, stomachs or backs with the entire name of the gang in huge gothic letters, also known as diamond font—a specific script that I will examine more closely in the next chapter. Others take the gang’s nickname, MS-13, and create different ways of representing this pseudonym. The tattoos, then, serve as a code, where one thing means another, and these marked bodies act as a kind of Rosetta stone
for interpreting the hidden meaning. For example, many will have a large “M” followed by two playing cards, the six and seven of diamonds, which add up to the number 13. Others will switch the suits on the cards, making them fit whatever personal or gang ideologies they believe, or even the position of power they hold within the gang. The six and seven of diamonds represent the earning of wealth, while the same cards, bearing clubs instead, signify violence and the readiness to fight for the gang at a moment’s notice (the club also represents the blunt weapon by the same name). When Mara Salvatrucha members combine the six of diamonds with the seven of clubs they are demonstrating their obsession with acquiring wealth and power through the use of violence. This reflects the earlier-cited sentiment of not allowing anyone to come into their neighborhood to steal food from their mouths.

Sometimes a group of dice, whose rolled faces equal 13, follows the “M.” Again, a game of chance signifies the 13 in the gang nickname, for example two dice rolled on sixes and a third with a one. The two sixes represent a “crap out,” or a losing roll that forces you out of a dice game. With both the cards and the dice, the Mara states that his own life is a crap shoot, a card game, an existence based on luck and chance, where walking down the wrong street or pulling up to a stop light could cost them their lives. There is little certainty in the life of a Mara Salvatrucha member. Even sitting in the living room and watching television with their family is a hazardous activity, as they are susceptible to police raids, rivals kicking in the door, or drive-by shootings. For them, crapping out typically means death, but could also signify a long prison sentence.
The “M” is manifested in different ways, as well. Many times, it is just a script “M,” in an old-English, gothic/diamond, or cursive font. In other cases, the tattoo mimics the gang signs that the Maras form with their hands in order to communicate between themselves and other gangs (see Figure 23). The hand symbol began in the early eighties, when its first members came together in order to defend themselves from rival gangs and neighborhood violence directed towards the Salvadoran community. It mimics a set of devil horns, and when turned upside down it forms an “M”. The hand gesture remains their primary form of non-ink identification. Sometimes, two hands are used to form both the devil horns and the “M,” throwing the sign up then turning it upside down. It is important to understand that the demonic aspect is just as crucial to the register as the letter “M”. MS-13 members believe themselves evil in the face of society; they are the enemy. They also relate to and directly channel the Biblical reference of Satan as Legion, from the gospel of Mark (“My name is Legion: for we are many.”). They associate with this amalgamate representation of Satan because they believe that no single member is more important than Mara Salvatrucha as a whole. Like the Marabunta jungle ants that they take their name from, MS-13 members swarm, working together in unison with one standardized set of rules for all of their members spread across the world. They bill themselves as a legion of evil trying to take over the world as one singular unit, in order to become the world’s most powerful criminal organization.

This demonic imagery recurs often, and is obvious in the images presented throughout this chapter. Returning to Figure 10, the MS-13 member has three large sixes tattooed on the top of his head. This triple six is the sign of the beast, as referenced in the
book of Revelations, when the Devil’s strongest emissary, the Anti-Christ, signals the start of the End of Days. The New Testament states that once he seizes control of the world, the Anti-Christ will force all of the world’s population to engrave this sign on their body as a show of subordination. Citizens will not be allowed to go to school, to work, to conduct commerce, or participate in any other facet of life, unless this symbol is somewhere on their skin, typically the arm or the forehead. According to many of those interviewed, these maras appropriate this symbol to perpetuate the already mentioned idea of evil and Legion. But also, they are also implying a world in which all criminal activity and perhaps all commercial transactions, in general, will be conducted by the gang alone, a notion that points towards the subsequent discussion of functionality later in this chapter.

Returning to the “M” in the M-13 name, specifically, Mara Salvatrucha members rarely have regular human hands forming the gang sign. Figures 9, 12 and 13 show how the hand sign translates into a tattoo, and in both cases the hands are otherworldly, horrific, belonging to monsters. Notice the long fingernails and the scales on the hand tattooed on the cheek of the subject in Figure 12. These hands belong to a demon. In image Figure 24, the mara has a single hand forming the “M”. Its flesh has been peeled away, and all that is left is a skeleton appendage that apes the long fingernails and the scaly remnants of skin seen in Figure 12. These tattoos extend the demonic imagery observed with the triple sixes. In both cases, and in many others, the symbol is etched upward and not upside down. In other words, the tattoo’s significance lies more in the demonic aspect than on the actual “M” as an identifier.
There could be many ways to read and explain this fascination with demonic and satanic ink-work. Any interpretation would have to take into consideration how these images interact with holy and religious iconography of a less evil kind. These devil horns and skeleton hands coexist on living and breathing canvases that also include haloes, crosses, and hands merged together in a sign of prayer. In Figure 17, the mara has tattooed the sentence “Perdona D. por mi vida loca.” He is asking God (D. for Dios) to forgive him for his crazy life. In the middle we see a pair of hands, clasped together, with a rosary hanging in an obvious show of prayer. Ironically, this tattoo lies just below and to the right of one of the devil horn-shaped hands mentioned earlier. The hand is cut off in that particular image, but it is clearly the bottom, fleshy part of the palm contorted in such a way that the thumb and two middle fingers are moved towards each other. Others have huge Virgins of Guadalupe, complete with Juan Diego and the roses from Seville, or very intricate portraits of Jesus Christ that sit next to the gang’s name (Figure 25).

The mix of these two very different sorts of religious pictures, those of angels with those of demons, represents a culture that believes that it is damned, and is seeking retribution. Demons conjure thoughts of possession and interference, and in a recent episode of *Gangland*, a popular show on contemporary gangs that airs on the History Channel, an MS-13 member convicted of killing a 17 year old girl reveals such a sentiment. Now in jail and repenting for his actions, he described Mara Salvatrucha as a demon. It entered his body and all that mattered was the success of the gang, at any cost. Every living thing died in his eyes, he says, except for his fellow gang members, on the day that he was jumped-in to Mara Salvatrucha. He forgot about his family, any old
friends, and wanting to do anything but impress his fellow members and advance the interests of the gang from that point on. He says that he was possessed by the gang, forced to kill that girl and others because of a kind of control that Mara Salvatrucha had over him. There was no way to control the demon, and even in prison, his attempts at separating from the gang have resulted in the need to isolate him from the general prison population, as jailed MS-13 members look to kill him for wanting out. My own interviews never revealed this idea of possession, and yet this isolated case, to some extent, presents at least one example of where these gang members believe that their hand is forced once they join Mara Salvatrucha.

This mara, and the tattoo work of many others, could suggest that they do not feel as if they are truly in control of their actions. In other words, they think that they murder, maim, rape and extort, all under the possession of some outside influence. Again, it is important to consider where most of these gang members come from. Whether in Los Angeles, El Salvador, or Peru, MS-13 thrives in some of most impoverished and run down areas of the world. Job opportunities are hard to come by in South Central Los Angeles, and the few jobs that could open up offer little relief due to their low wages. Feeding a family of four on a McDonald’s salary is impossible, for example. For many on these streets, gang membership is the only way to survive. A gang provides a constant source of money through any number of illegal activities, and a percentage of that money to whomever helps bring this illicit capital into the Mara Salvatrucha community. A 17 year old, orphaned teenager on the streets of Soyapango, El Salvador can’t aspire to get a good paying job. They have little hope of going through the primary levels of school,
much less college. Many are homeless. Mara Salvatrucha provides food, shelter, money and companionship. For these kids it is impossible to resist the gang. It possesses them.

The imaginary of violence can serve as a tool that can help us understand the idea of possession, of not being in control of your own actions. The imaginary of violence arises from the various media outlets available. The internet, music, movies, cable news reports, newspapers, and radio programs all contribute to the development of this imaginary. It flashes images of dead bodies, guns, blood, and violence. It shows the face of those that cause civil unrest so that the viewer can place the blame on somebody. At the same time, it engenders fear, fear of the city and those people living in its bowels. The imaginary teaches the viewer to fear people like the Mara Salvatrucha gang because they are poor, they are foreign, and they are violent. From the moment a young Salvadoran-American is born in the Pico/Union area he must battle against racism, racial profiling, ignorance, poverty, and the court of public opinion. This court is informed through television exposés that speak of the dangers of losing English as the main language in the United States, or through newspaper articles that discuss the threat that illegal immigrants pose to the job market. The average viewer cannot tell the difference between an illegal and a legal resident of this country. It isn’t registered in their eyes or their hair. Yet this doesn’t matter, as long as the imaginary provides some face to take the blame for any number of problems and transgressions.

This is the perceived reality of the Mara Salvatrucha, from the perspective of its members. The mara is to blame for the violence, the death, and the general state of unrest present in many of the larger cities in North, Central and South America. They may feel
as though they have no choice in deciding who they are because it has already been decided for them, in the media, and through the social and political problems they face and have faced. Their script has been written long before they ever audition for the role of citizen. They are young, and brown, and hopeless. Mara Salvatrucha members are expected to be savage. The imaginary of violence has already predetermined their role, and as such, the MS-13 members live out their roles. They consider themselves the enemy because they have been made the enemy. They believe that they never had control, always possessed by an outside source that demonized and alienated them, forcing them to carry out the violent acts expected of them.

This may explain, to some extent, the conflicting religious images present on the bodies of many Mara Salvatrucha members. On one hand, they understand that they are the enemy, and they act out violent and illegal situations because they must play the part well. Of all the “bad guys” and villains presented by the imaginary of violence, Mara Salvatrucha has decided to become the worst and most villainous. On the other hand, they never really feel like they control any of it. Yes, they pull the trigger and serve the time, but none of them believes that they ever had a better alternative. To them, their fate was decided before they ever had a chance to sculpt a different life. As such, they seek constant retribution for their acts. They seek repentance and forgiveness because they feel as though they are damned to hell once they die. Why would the mara in Figure 17 ask God to forgive him, if he didn’t feel as though he was actively committing sins? This mara could have chosen any of these symbols to place on his body. Yet he chooses, specifically, to ask God for forgiveness, and places this request very close on his body to
a demon hand revering Satan. Through his ink work and its placement on the body, this mara makes the statement that his neighborhood, his society, the law, the economy, the police force, and the government have all forced him into an existence that he could not avoid. His surroundings turned him into a monster, a human possessed by a demon. This possession, then, is represented by the devil horns and the triple sixes, as if an outside source has dictated his present and future. Yet, understanding this lack of agency, the Mara Salvatrucha member wants God to understand that he had no control, and asks for Him to save his soul.

It is important to re-iterate that these conclusions are based on interviews conducted with Mara Salvatrucha members, extrapolated to similar kinds of tattoos spread across the Mara Salvatrucha culture. I think it would be hard to convince society at-large that these maras are not acting of their own free will when they commit vicious acts of violence. Even I am skeptical of the idea that they are somehow passive social victims acting out some predetermined role created for them, especially considering how their own expressive culture emphasizes the importance of agency in a society that would otherwise leave them powerless. Still, this is what they believe that their tattoos represent, how their tattoos relate to a common series of images that are repeated in countries all over Latin America. These beliefs are what tie this lexicon of ink to all of the maras who get the tattoos on their bodies. In other words, they are reacting to a perceived act of societal alienation by taking the marginalization into their own hands, creating opposability between the out-group and their own Mara Salvatrucha in-group.
Patrick Colm Hogan argues that functionality is a critical aspect of feelings of nationalism, where “the more functional a category, the more likely it is to be high in the hierarchy of one’s self-concept (60). For him, “functionality is the degree to which a particular category affects one’s freedom of action or choice and one’s receipt of goods and services in a given society” (60). The ability to access opportunities, goods, and services is self-evident in regards to citizenship within a nation, where laws, legal claims to government participation, and other political demands affect voting, employment, the ability to procure health services, as well as many other aspects of daily life. Hogan’s primary example refers to passports and their restrictions on international movement. I look to the United States to better flesh out Hogan’s concept of functionality, where non-citizens cannot vote, they cannot access government entitlement programs, and they cannot seek employment. Of course, I’m referring to those living in the country illegally. The closer that the level of legal residence approaches citizenship and naturalization, the rights of the non-citizen increase, and, therefore, their access to services grows.

As I have already demonstrated, most Mara Salvatrucha members have no real claim to the functionality of their geographic or political nation. In the earliest days of the gang, their deportation or exile stripped them from any citizenship claims to specific countries. Even today, MS-13 members are consistently banished or imprisoned because of their crimes, perpetuating a notion of non-citizenship insofar as Mara Salvatrucha members have no concrete claim to the functions provided by political nationality. This is one of the strongest justifications for hierarchizing the Mara Nation above others. In
Mara Salvatrucha they can earn money by performing all kinds of tasks for the gang. This eliminates the need for any kind of legal permission to work. They can move up in the gang, based on their loyalty and service. They only have to live by the sets of rules that Mara Salvatrucha sets out for them, which means that they do not have to adhere to national, state, or local laws. They have access to the goods that the gang procures, both through legal and illegal means, including food, shelter, drugs, clothing, cars, guns, and many other wares necessary for daily life.

In order to better understand the idea of functionality in terms of Mara Salvatrucha, and specifically their tattoos, it helps to revisit the initiation rite named “blood in, blood out”. This tradition refers to the fact that blood needs to be spilled in order to enter the gang, and also when the mara wants to leave. “Blood in” can refer to two different acts of violence. The first involves a group of active members “jumping in” or beating the initiate. Both the number of active members and the amount of time of the beating vary, but they always revolve around the number thirteen. In other words, it could be that thirteen maras kick and punch for a pre-determined amount of time, or that a pre-determined number of maras beat the hopeful for thirteen seconds. After the process is complete, Mara Salvatrucha accepts the newcomer as a provisional member, able to perform certain menial tasks for the gang. These may include selling a small amount of drugs, “tagging” or marking a certain territory with graffiti, joining other members in an assault on another gang, domestic robberies or car-jackings. After each “job” the new mara receives a small amount of the earnings, or a “cut” of the money. These small tasks begin to grow in importance, and as they develop trust with MS-13, his or her status in
the gang increases. Most of my interviews mentioned that their MS-13 affiliation began with the “jump in.” And although none of my own interviewees had thirteens that specifically referred to the jump-in, some confirmed that in order to prove that he or she underwent the suffering of the initiation, their fellow gang members got the number tattooed somewhere on their bodies, often in very visible places so that others could see it. And so, reaching an understanding in regards to the number thirteen on the Mara Salvatrucha member’s body becomes problematic and complex. The first impulse is to assume that it stands for the number thirteen in the gang nickname MS-13. This can be a misleading interpretation, however, because the thirteen could also represent the pride that the mara feels for having endured the “jump in,” a tradition that few outside of the gang know about.

But to claim that the thirteen is simply homage to surviving the violent rite would be a simplistic conclusion. It would equate the act to fraternity brothers getting Greek letters tattooed on their ankles after officially becoming members of the social group. This becomes especially apparent when considering that the thirteen is placed in prominent parts of the body, for example on the cheek or forehead (see Figures 2, 8 through 10, 12, 21, and 22), and not on the ankle, the small of the back, or the upper arm, all of which can be easily covered by clothing. The new Mara Salvatrucha member wants the world to see this tattoo, specifically his fellow gang members. This thirteen verifies that he has undergone the “jump in,” and that he is tough and loyal to MS-13. More importantly, it proves legitimately that he is a part of the gang, which allows him access to the goods and services provided by the gang, therefore reflecting the functionality of
his new community in terms of acquiring all of the things that are needed to survive on
the street. The thirteen means that he can do menial tasks for the gang, that he can receive
payment for the tasks that he completes, that he can stay at any of the safe houses and
Mara Nation neighborhoods without fear of assault, and that he can seek protection from
the gang when rival gangs attack him. Furthermore, the thirteen represents the initial
steps towards gang advancement, whereby Mara Salvatrucha, over time, assigns larger,
and more sensitive and profitable jobs to the new mara. As the MS-13 member completes
these tasks, his prestige within the gang increases, and he moves higher and higher
among the ranks, making more money for both Mara Salvatrucha and himself. Once the
mara understands that he can live off of the money and the utility provided by Mara
Salvatrucha, then he can completely separate himself from the functionality of all other
categorial identities, since he can rely almost entirely on the gang for what he needs. At
this point, the Mara Salvatrucha identity is the most functional, thereby providing one of
the most marked explanations for facial and full body tattoos. The limited functionality of
a facial tattoo within the context of “regular” society is irrelevant, because the facial ink
does not limit the functionality within the mara’s most salient social identity. If anything,
these extreme examples of body modification facilitate the gang member’s functionality
within MS-13.

The second kind of violent act referenced by the process of “blood in, blood out”
corresponds with a different kind of bloodletting. In the above example, the new mara is
spilling his own blood, but in other, even more violent communities, the targets are
people outside of the gang. This could mean in a highly contentious neighborhood, where
rival gangs seek to take over the MS-13 territory, or where police forces are trying to eradicate the Mara Salvatruchala threat. This kind of initiation is also common in prisons, where inmates and convicts are forced to split into racial gangs in order to protect themselves from constant attacks. In these cases, Mara Salvatruchala requires that the candidate murder or seriously injure an enemy. This could mean that the new mara must enter the territory of a rival gang in order to attack one of its members. Likewise, the process could entail attacking a police officer patrolling the MS-13 neighborhood. The attack could just as easily focus on a member of an all-Black, all-White, or all-Asian gang. Successfully carrying out the “blood in” ritual provides the Mara Salvatruchala member with almost immediate loyalty, protection, and most importantly the opportunity to make money for the gang, and simultaneously, for themselves. They have taken the life of another in the name of the Mara Nation, in order to advance the gang’s interests, save themselves from encroaching belligerence, and also, in order to perpetuate the fear and intimidation diffused by the gang.

One of the most common ways in which Maras celebrate this particular type of “blood in” is through the tattooing of a tear drop directly underneath the outside corner of the eye, directly beneath their tear duct (Figure 26). Such a tattoo demonstrates that the gang member has successfully completed the initiation ceremony by murdering one of the gang’s enemies. Much like the prominently displayed thirteens mentioned earlier, these teardrops are outwardly visible to all who look at the mara. As such, they cannot be ignored, are easily spotted, and prove impossible to cover up. The mara gets the tattoo near the eye specifically because they are so apparent. Members of the in-group
see this tattoo as proof of the initiate’s loyalty and his dedication to the gang. At the same time, it directly implicates them in a criminal activity undertaken for MS-13. In other words, the new mara is just as involved in illicit activities as his gang, and therefore has no leverage if he considers ever denouncing Mara Salvatrucha to the police. Unlike the jump in, this blood spilling does not involve the passive action of receiving a beating. The teardrop implicates them in, at the very least, an assault, and at worst, a murder. Perhaps this is the reason that the teardrop tattoo provides much more immediate respect than the survivors of the jump in. It brings a previously little-known prospective member onto equal footing with a number of thieves, extortionists, and murders, and thusly elevates the level of respect that more grizzled maras have for the neophyte. Teardrop tattoos, like the thirteens, allow entry into a number of different jobs and tasks that the mara can profit from in order to live their lives, even to a more advanced level than those who survived an initiation beating. The maras with these tattoos have already demonstrated that they are comfortable with killing for the gang. There is little doubt that the new mara can handle himself in gang attacks and bouts of urban warfare. They have already proven their loyalty, physically, in the most violent way possible. And now the Mara Salvatrucha member wears the ink as an emblem of that proof. This permits even more profitable tasks, and a faster track towards advancement. In other words, these tattoos signify a violent act that will increase the mara’s functional ability to live within the Mara Nation, without want.

The functionality that gang membership provides for Mara Salvatrucha members is a predominant factor in their affectivity for the gang, that is to say the mara’s
“emotional engagement” with his gang culture (Hogan 63). Not only does the gang become one of the few ways in which maras can acquire the various tangible goods and services needed to conduct their daily lives, but, at the same time, the gang reconstructs a communal unit that addresses the emotional lacks felt among its members. The gang proves to be one of, if not the only, community where they can move up socially, by promotion, as they gain prestige and fame within their specific local clique. It also gives them a job, of sorts, supplying them with a cut, or monetary compensation. Yet, perhaps equally as important, Mara Salvatrucha furnishes the gang members with kinship, camaraderie, and even a surrogate family with whom they can associate. It is a community that accepts them. This is opposed to the society outside of the gang who sees them as monsters, criminals, and terrorists. In many cases they have been bounced around from country to country, from one prison to another. For some, school overcrowding and lack of social programs have eliminated the opportunity for the most basic friendships that are developed at a young age in a scholastic environment. Others lack a father or mother, are completely orphaned, or have been entirely separated from their families, through deportation and prison sentences. The world outside of the gang is the enemy, a community that fears them and seeks to make them disappear completely. This particular opposability synergizes with Hogan’s concept of affectivity, whereby “any functioning identity group must foster certain emotional attitudes in its members toward two distinct objects—first toward other members of the in-group; second, toward members of the out-group” (94). Keeping this in mind, “an enhanced distrust of the out-group will foster the categorization of out-group as malevolent” (Hogan 97). In turn, the in-group, in this case
Mara Salvatrucha, becomes the benevolent group for the mara, the only community that includes others that are similar to themselves, and the culture that best represents the feelings of identification that the individual member uses to construct his or her notion of social identity.

As with Hogan’s other techniques of nationalization, Mara Salvatrucha tattoos display affectivity towards the Mara community. Most of the images herein contained depict tattoos in places where the inking process is excruciating. The “game over” tattoo in Image 9 on the eyelids, for example, involves the tattoo gun inching within millimeters of the subject’s cornea. The process of nasal tattooing pierces millions of nerves located along one of the most sensitive parts of the body, while rattling a flimsy cartilage divider that lies underneath the dermis. With scalp tattoos, hundreds of needles jut in and out of a thin piece of skin that is directly connected to the skull. Tattoos in places such as these, along with tattoos on the inside of the lip, on the eyebrows, in the ear, and on the knuckles, are substantially more painful than tattoos on the arms, the thighs, the upper chest, and in other places where there is a good amount of flesh between the needle and the bone. Of course, the maras endure the discomfort of these ink sittings in order to prove their toughness to their fellow maras. They are a reflection of their tolerance for pain, their ability to take physical misery, in a violent world that requires a strong sense of corporeal fortitude. At the same time, they take the pain in order to show the lengths that they will go to in order to demonstrate their love, or affectivity, for Mara Salvatrucha. It is important to note that, in most cliques, tattoos are not mandatory. They are not required as a part of membership. What is more, under the constant threat of arrest
and deportation, many cliques recently have asked their members not to get tattoos, in order to not appear so conspicuous, so salient. This means that this process of physical mutilation is completely voluntary. The mara willfully agrees to go through the physical torture of a facial tattoo, for example, because he or she wants to. The gang member chooses to get a tattoo to demonstrate his affectivity for the only community that has accepted him.

Hogan mentions sporting events in his analysis of the construction of nationalism, and this example relates well to Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and their connection to affectivity. During the last soccer World Cup, people from 34 nations converged in South Africa to root for their nation’s football team. Packed to capacity in stadiums across the country, these fans wore soccer jerseys and tee-shirts with flags and team crests which reflected their affectivity towards their team. Mara Salvatrucha tattoos serve a similar purpose, only driven to an extreme and more hardcore finality. The fans take off their jerseys once the game is done, once they return to their hotel rooms, once they arrive in their home countries. Maras cannot remove their tattoos. They are durable, permanent reminders of their loyalty, appreciation, and affectivity for their gang. And these reminders are not only internal or made for the in-group. Their affectivity is broadcasted to the out-group by way of their placement. Above, I mentioned tattoos on the eyelids, the nose, and the scalp. These are the most visible parts of the body, the most prominent sections of the body that communicate, physically, with the outside world. As such, the messages that are communicated via facial tattoos are the kind that most outwardly reference their gang. In Figures 2, 9, 12, 21 and 22, the MS-13 name, in one iteration or
another, is emblazoned on the face, prominent, unavoidable, leaving little doubt as to the subject’s gang affiliation. These maras are telling the entire out-group, that is to say the world outside of their gang, how proud they are to be members of Mara Salvatrucha. Hogan tells us that “every assertion of national pride serves to enhance the social valorization of national identity. In other words, every time someone affirms national pride, that affirmation serves to tell others that their national identity has social value, that it is something to be proud of” (102). They feel proud to be part of a growing community, proud that Mara Salvatrucha is feared, proud that they live under a set of social values and rules that exist outside of the “regular” norms of society, norms that have excluded or marginalized them on almost all levels. Most of all, they feel proud that they are part of a community that accepts them, and they flaunt this pride, this affectivity, in bold displays of ink that shake the foundations of the same out-groups that sought to eliminate them.

In this chapter I hope to have demonstrated how Mara Salvatrucha tattoos serve the purpose of consolidating group cohesion within the gang for the purpose of elevating MS-13 above all other social-identity categories, such as religion and ethnicity. These tattoos develop and intensify Mara Salvatrucha national pride through salience, durability, opposability, functionality, and affectivity by way of their highly visible, permanent, and often taboo nature. Also, the imaginary of violence plays an important role in underscoring these techniques, in particular opposability, most reflected in the gang member’s need to represent a characterization of the gang that originates directly from the in-group. The social identity portrayed in the ink-work responds to popular
media accounts of the gang, how media sources narrate Mara Salvatrucha violence, and how the Maras, in turn, react to this depiction in their body modifications. Drawing from both Hogan’s techniques of nationalization as well as the theory of the imaginary of violence, it is evident that Mara Salvatrucha tattoos have a concrete narrative quality that attempts to vault the idea of a Mara Nation over all other categorial identities. The chapter that follows will continue this line of analysis, considering another form of Mara Salvatrucha visual expression—graffiti.
2.8 Images for Chapter Two

Figure 3. The cross on Juan's neck.

Figure 4. Nun on Juan's bicep.
Figure 5. Flaming skulls and topless succubi on Juan's back. The scar from his prison stabbing is in the middle of his lower back, just above the belt-line.
Figure 6. "Ulloa" family name on Juan's neck.

Figure 7. "Norteño" tattoo on the back of Juan's neck.
Figure 8. Two MS-13 members with full facial tattoos. (fuckyeahthroattattoos.tumblr.com).

Figure 9. Mara Salvatrucha member with a devil hand forming the gang's hand-sign. It is located between an "M" and an "S," representative of the gang's name (norcalblogs.com).
Figure 10. MS-13 member with a "1" and "3" on either cheek, the numbers associated with the gang. Also, he has a "666" tattooed on his forehead, representing the sign of the beast or devil (thumped.com).

Figure 11. Cross on a mara's back that closely resembles the tattoo on Juan's neck (tattoosmania.info.com).
Figure 12. MS-13 member with the gang hand-sign tattooed on his cheek, in the form of a pair of demonic, scaly hands (ibtimes.com).
Figure 13. Similar set of demonic hands on the chest of another MS-13 member (gossiprocks.com).

Figure 14. Detail of a *vato loco* on the shoulder of an MS-13 member (auntiehathaway.blogspot.com).
Figure 15. MS-13 with a photo-realistic woman on his upper arm (pibillwarner.wordpress.com).

Figure 16. The mother of Juan's first child, murdered in a drive-by shooting.
Figure 17. Graveyard tattooed on a Mara Salvatrucha member, in remembrance of at least four dead homies. On his left pectoral he has the words "Perdon D. por mi vida loca" (hellonearthblog.com).

Figure 18. Graffiti depicting a graveyard similar to the one seen in the tattoo in Figure 17. Also in common, both have the words "en memoria a/de mis homies" (latimesblogs.latimes.com).
Figure 19. Menacing skulls covering one of Juan's arms. In contrast to this horrifying imagery, the bottom half of his tattooed nun is visible.
Figure 20. MS-13 member with the outline of a skull, or calavera, tattooed on his face (businessinsider.com).

Figure 21. Grim reaper tattooed in between the eyes, and just below a gravestone similar to the ones seen in previous figures (ruzz84.multiply.com).
Figure 22. Mara Salvatrucha member with devil horns tattooed on his head (auntiehathaway.blogspot.com).

Figure 23. MS-13 members "flashing," or showing, their most commonly-used hand-sign. This is the hand-signs seen in previous figures, as well as the gesture that is often represented as demonic, scaly, or skeletal (gangwatchers.org).
Figure 24. Skeletal, demonic hand forming the MS-13 hand-sign (fbi.gov).

Figure 25. Image of Jesus Christ crying immediately adjacent to the number thirteen (gallerybesttattoo.wordpress.com).
Figure 26. Teardrop under the eye of an MS-13 member. Next to it are three dots that symbolize la vida loca (levoici.blogspot.com).
Chapter 3
Skin and Ink, Cement and Paint: MS-13 Graffiti and its Expressive Connection to Tattoos

3.1 Introduction

It is impossible to ignore the writing on the wall. On their way to work, school, or the grocery store, graffiti surrounds the urban commuter. They pass graffiti driving under overpasses, as they shoot through tunnels in their subway cars, as they pull up to their children’s middle school, and when they sit at bus stop benches. The response to these often unintelligible, spray-painted hieroglyphics differs substantially depending on who sees it. Many consider graffiti a nuisance, an act of vandalism meant to disfigure the city which, in turn, amplifies feelings of unrest towards those who would deface the “normal” urbanite’s community. Worse, to these same critics graffiti represents an encroaching evil, a tangible, highly visible indicator of an expanding network of criminals who mark new territories as they are taken over. Once thought of as a problem for the larger cities, for example Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, the proliferation of graffiti has penetrated even those spaces once considered far away from the urban violence seen in the aforementioned metropolises, especially during the 1980’s and 90’s. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, less than half a mile from the largest university campus in the United States, the walls of local businesses and small shops are emblazoned with signals, drawings, and messages, all of which battle for a few free square inches. These markings
in Middle-America reflect the spread of graffiti through the United States, and furthermore all through even the smallest towns in Central America. Also, they signal the expansion of gangs across these same territories. Of course, some graffiti is independent, unaffiliated, and even appears as a result of counter-culture street artists looking for a non-canonical way in which to disseminate their art. Let us not forget that the line between intricate graffiti and the murals of Orozco and Rivera is a blurry.

It would be naïve to overlook the influence of gang culture on the boom of graffiti in cities all over the Americas. An oversimplified interpretation of graffiti leads to an improper essentialization of the reasoning behind why urban youths overtake public spaces with their painted messages. Graffiti is as complex as the various people who engage in the activity. In many cases, “tagging,” or spray-painting a wall, is not merely an act of vandalism, but an act of communication. As such, the cryptic writing and the stylized images represent a scope of ideas and messages, meant for both public and internal viewing. An MS-13 tag is at once out in the open for all to see, but also replete with symbols only understood by those in the gang. Mara Salvatrucha utilizes graffiti and its codified symbology in a communicative way, draping walls and wide-open cement and metal spaces in urban centers—signboards relaying all kinds of information that only other MS-13 members can read and understand, while simultaneously assaulting the eyes of those outside of the gang. Furthermore, the function and meaning of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti does not solely depend on the spray-painted murals on their own. These urban murals work in conjunction with their other forms of expression in order to create a particular, Mara Salvatrucha-specific communication that bridges all of their other visual
articulations of culture. The previous chapter specifically focused on how tattoos cement ideas of community, and how ink-work elevates identification with Mara Salvatrucha nationalism above all other social categories and identities. This chapter looks to extend that examination by analyzing how Mara Salvatrucha tattoos work together with their graffiti in order to create a representation of the gang that originates directly from the gang, itself. This gang image, constructed using their own particular set of signs and language, is bold and out in the open, and so it is directed not only at fellow Mara Salvatruchas, but also to the world outside of MS-13. In other words, when considered together MS-13 ink-work and muralism synergize into a particular form of cultural expression where the messages that appear on one become extended, reinforced, and corroborated in the other. Both genres work all at once, constructing a distinct narration of history, culture, and community.

In order to fully appreciate how graffiti and tattoos work together in the Mara Salvatrucha gang, it is first essential to formulate an academic and historical continuum of research conducted on graffiti. This exercise will also provide vital definitions of some of the more critical words and concepts used by those who graffiti, all of which depend on a very specific lexicon of terms surrounding their trade. At the same time, such an examination will serve to decipher many of the most common symbols and images used by Mara Salvatrucha in their graffiti with the aim of asserting that these images represent a gang-specific language which is reflected not only in the murals, but also in their tattoos. From there, using these important definitions and decryptions, the analysis will engage in its primary task, which is to understand how both graffiti and tattoos cooperate
in composing a first-hand, in-group statement of culture and community. This autochthonous narrative provides agency in the process of representation, since most portrayals of the gang emanate from out-groups, in particular from the media. Mara Salvatrucha graffiti and tattoos place the power of representation back into the hands and skin of the maras, and, as such, collaborate in the formation of a Mara Salvatrucha social identity that is independent of second-hand sources and depictions.

3.2 Understanding Tagging: An Overview of Relevant Gang Graffiti Scholarship

An overview of recent scholarship published on the subject of gang graffiti aids in the development of understanding how this cultural expression can function as both an outward and inward form of communication. This research not only places graffiti within an academic arena, but it also provides definitions for some of the most used terms associated with the activity. Furthermore, a critical approach to graffiti relates directly to this current study of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture as a form of inward and outward communication that also resists and belies the sensationalized account of MS-13 activity in the popular media. Graffiti has existed for a long time in urban settings, both inside and outside of gang communities. Stephen Powers traces the origin of modern graffiti in the United States to transient, homeless vagabonds, at the turn of the twentieth century, who tagged personal histories onto the sides of moving train cars (10). Obviously, in this early form, graffiti was a kind of visual, historical narrative for a group of poor, transient subjects who felt compelled to express the events of their lives in such a way that these stories remained on train cars that travelled from city to city long after the artist’s own death.
Powers claims that graffiti evolved into its contemporary form about 40 years ago, on the highways of cities like Philadelphia, where various racial groups and minority gangs sought a public space where they could broadcast messages between themselves, as well as to their rivals (6, 10). In the urban, Latino community, graffiti became a salient form of expression in Los Angeles, in the 1940s, where Cholo groups wrote messages for each other on the walls of buildings in impoverished neighborhoods (Powers 10). These cholo groups, mostly made up of Mexican-American youths, are the forerunners of today’s Latino gangs, and the ancestors of Mara Salvatrucha, within the context of a young Hispanic community grouping together in Los Angeles (Vigil et. al.). In all of these examples, graffiti holds a communicative function, far beyond the aim of vandalism, where the highly visible sides of buildings or suspended freeway signs represent billboards where stories take on the form of painted images and words. Even beyond its communicative nature, Powers believes that graffiti serves as an outward kind of oral history preserved on city walls. In the examples that he provides, most of the muralists share in poverty, marginalization, and subalternization. The need for personal representation is essential, but their own histories are either represented in a second-hand fashion, or ignored completely. Graffiti, then, becomes an impossible-to-ignore, obvious way to force a personal story of community identity on a population that may otherwise never consider the existence of this group of “others” outside of newspaper articles and television reports. This display of personal identity includes homages to community heroes, tributes to birthplaces, encrypted statements of street philosophies and ideologies, and demonstrations of the graffiti artist’s sense of belonging, in terms of both regular
society and their own salient, in-group associations. Graffiti embodies a catalogue of symbolic images that map the history of a particular marginalized culture on public spaces in some of the largest cities in the world. Powers argues that pictures lie hidden in albums, and are only taken out at certain times. Graffiti images, however, remain in plain view, often taking the form of large, intricate, and colorful displays that urban commuters cannot overlook (10).

Jeff Ferrell refers to graffiti as an expression with a sub-cultural significance that represents a stylized marker of identity, social interactions, and public visibility (58). By sub-cultural, he means outside of the “regular” range of popularly accepted urban roles. In other words, sub-cultural in this context refers to the poor, to minorities, to counter-culture artists, and to gang members who fall into all three of these categories. Ferrell also defines many of the terms used by graffiti writers, both among themselves and also as they appear in their murals. “Piecing” involves combining many small murals into a large message on a massive wall (76). For example, the original “tag,” or individual segment of graffiti art in Figure 27, is the centered and elevated “M.S.” The stylized versions of the Greek tragedy and comedy masks, as well as the cross-like headstone, were pieced together along with and after the first tag to form a much more intricate painting. Taggers, that is to say graffiti artists, piece these individual tags together for many reasons. In some cases, they represent an ongoing conversation or communication, each new segment of art building on what had been tagged previously. Also, the significance of the mural becomes more emotionally charged as it grows. In Figure 28, what could have started as an individual headstone eventually became an entire cemetery,
as more members of this MS-13 community died on the streets. And so, the pieced together mural becomes a way to honor an entire group of loved ones who died representing the gang, and not just a single, solitary mara.

Another graffiti term, “biting,” refers to instances where certain graffiti artists copy already-used symbols and incorporate them into their own work (Ferrell 85). This term carries a pejorative connotation, as biting means that the images have been plagiarized and used without permission. It is the tagger’s version of copyright infringement. Biting is a frequent strategy used by gang members who attempt to misrepresent the messages of rival gangs, giving enemies false information by biting symbols that are specific to a rival gang. In other cases, “wannabes” bite graffiti symbols in order to emulate a gang that they wish they were a part of, but are not. My interviews with “Juan” confirmed Ferrell’s analysis. For example, Juan told me that some of the less intricate MS-13 tags are the ones that reflect biting, since the tag must be done quickly and therefore in a non-complex way. Considered an act of disrespect by Juan and other Mara Salvatrucha members, wannabes and rival taggers who bite MS-13 signs must finish the tag quickly, because the penalty for biting is violent, often resulting in a beating or even death, depending on the neighborhood.

Also interpreted as an act of insolence, Ferrell defines “going over” as the process in which one tagger paints over the work of another, in order to eliminate or ridicule the already-painted image. This is another popular strategy of conflict between gangs, as rival taggers continuously fight over the images, space, and symbology that appear on walls. Figure 29 shows such a battle on a wall in the Pico/Union area of Los Angeles. A
detail from this photograph, Figure 30 pictures a tag from the 18th Street Gang that has gone over Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, possibly communicating that the MS-13 territory is under attack, and that it will soon belong to La 18. It is important to note that in this example of going over, the rival mara has not completely covered the number thirteen. If the tagger completely blackens out the rival number, then an onlooker cannot tell what was gone over in the first place. And so, a simple X crosses the number out, while still leaving the number thirteen visible. There is no question as to what social group is being disrespected, as the thirteen is still clearly visible underneath the paint. Both biting and going over are a “diss,” short for “disrespect,” against rival taggers (90). The fight between rival gangs, then, isn’t just one undertaken with fists, blades and guns, but also with cans of Krylon paint, the tagger’s paint of choice (63). Krylon provides the longest lasting finish, and it allows for the brightest colors and the most subtle difference of color tones. The tags shown in Figures 29 and 30 exhibit this urban battle of images, with several different gangs vying for territorial, open space, and Krylon images clashing and overlapping in an unending assault of paint and encrypted symbols.

Duane A. Leet, George E. Rush, and Anthony Smith extend this analysis of graffiti within a gang framework, in their text *Gangs, Graffiti, and Violence*, by referring to the art of muralism as “the newspaper of the street” (21). Graffiti not only marks territories, but it also announces past and future activities. It broadcasts warnings of attacks on other gangs that will come soon, and it dedicates wall space to those fallen in past battles, all which can be seen in the above images. Jeffery Fagan analyzes murals within gang communities specifically, and his study concludes that gang members tag
buildings primarily as a show of territorial dominance (234). Taggers paint roller rinks, shopping malls, and school corridors to mark their turf. But also these tags serve as a means to communicate with other fellow and rival gang members (234). This leads to the dissing, biting, and going over that ultimately results in gang violence over territory and ownership of neighborhoods (236).

Fagan focuses much of his research on the graffiti of Hispanic gangs, in a general way and without specifically engaging Mara Salvatrucha. He considers Hispanic graffiti “the most sophisticated and stylized,” when compared to the murals of White, Asian and African-American gangs (30). In Hispanic gangs, tags are called “placasos” or “placas” (32). Often, they appear in both Spanish and English, usually mixed together in one message (32). For example, the tagged cemetery pictured in Figure 18 reveals the phrase “en memoria de mis homies” (“for the memory of my homies”) in Spanish, though the term “homie” is an English street term for “friend,” short for “home boy.” Also, the image identifies many maras that were killed, all of which have English nicknames (Joker, Shyboy, and the tagger’s signature, Happy). Figure 18 proves how English and Spanish combine with a set of non-alphabetical images to create a complex, multi-lingual communication with the explicit purpose of delivering a message to anyone who may see the tag.

Fagan’s analysis provides the definition to many other terms seen on walls that have been tagged by Latino gang members. The term “rifa,” for example, stands for “ruler” or “owner” (visible in the bottom left hand corner of the tag in Figure 31). The word “controlo” means that the tagger’s gang is in control of the neighborhood or area.
“P/V” signifies an abbreviation of the phrase “por vida” as maras are expected to stay in the gang for the rest of their lives (see Figure 32). Figure 33 depicts a combination of both the word “rifa” and the abbreviation “P/V” in a pieced together and gone over mural, possibly signifying that this gang clique will forever rule this specific neighborhood. Furthermore, Fagan discusses the ways in which Hispanic gangs “go over” the graffiti of their rivals, for example covering up messages and images with the word “putos,” a derogatory word for a homosexual in Mexican and Salvadoran street cultures, as depicted in Figure 34 (33). Finally, he discusses the various styles of Hispanic graffiti, identifying script designs such as” diamond,” “straight,” and “loop” (35-39), all of which I discuss in further detail later, with examples. Painted in one of these particular styles, the gang name assumes the foreground of the work, with the tagger moniker somewhere along the fringes of the mural. If the tagger uses his real name, it means that he has not been given a gang name, and in most of these cases, the tagger is an unaffiliated recruit trying to become an initiate of the gang (40). These tagger nicknames reveal an important element in the signing of the wall murals, aside from claiming ownership for the piece of visual expression. The aliases correspond to the gang member’s sense of community, to their notions of belonging to the Mara Nation, and to the re-forging of an identity that breaks from normative society in order to find its niche in Mara Salvatrucha.

Chris Coleman further explores the idea of identity reconstruction within a gang environment and its association to tagging. He argues that the painted images, and even the act of tagging, in and of itself, correspond to feelings of alienation and
marginalization. Coleman believes that the taggers are seeking recognition from their peers (107). Considering the already discussed scholarship from Vigil, Hayden, Garland and others, it is evident that many Mara Salvatrucha members consider themselves separated from society in general, through poverty, racial classification, and urban squalor. As such, they re-create themselves as members of the Mara Salvatrucha oppositional group, a group that clashes with the very same status quo societal structures that sought to alienate them in the first place. To this end, many MS-13 members accept aliases in a show of voluntary separation from society, therefore forging a new persona, reborn in the Mara Salvatrucha community. They cast off their birth name, and rename themselves according to how their personality and activities are seen within the gang. These nicknames correspond with the gang sub-culture, either ethnically or by way of the gang’s illicit activities. MS-13 members are nicknamed in accordance to physical features that reveal certain racial connotations. They also re-name members with monikers that coincide with the jobs and actions that the mara does for Mara Salvatrucha. In other instances, the names derive from personality traits and idiosyncrasies that are demonstrated by the mara who is renamed. For example, MS-13 tags are signed by “Li’l Killah” (Little Killer, a possible reference to murder), “Cholo” (a reference to the first Latino gang members), and “Chino” (literally, Chinese).

Tom Hayden mirrors Coleman’s analysis, asserting that the disillusionment with poverty leads the young maras away from any attempt to assimilate into status quo society (28). They have little opportunity for employment, social advancement, or well being as regular urban citizens, as middle school and high school students, or as members
of a quotidian, accepted national community. Therefore, they accept exclusion from the out-group and transform themselves into different identities, via their tagging monikers, joining a subcultural in-group that has its own names, slang, dress, and art forms (28). These identities reflect their personalities, as perceived by their fellow gang. Whatever the reason behind the nickname, the new identity reflects a kind of acceptance that the gang members would not receive outside of the gang. The world outside of the gang would not laud a murderer, but the name L’il Killah makes the murder a part of the mara’s identity. It would not praise tagging as a mode of communication or expression, but the taggers within the MS-13 community sign their murals in the same way that an artist signs his paintings. These new names, as seen in the graffiti signatures, represent the gang member’s new identities in this more accepting community. In fact, the last chapter in this dissertation analyzes how the lead character in the movie Sin nombre mutates from mara to regular human, shedding his gang name as a critical element in this transformation. For this character, we see this transformation in reverse, where he must separate himself from his gang name in order to become more like the at-home viewer. Hayden believes that, in this way, graffiti serves as a community-based intelligence that delivers a message of identity and heritage that counter feelings of nothingness (329). Coleman mentions that the taggers seek recognition from their peers, and for that reason, it is logical to argue that Mara Salvatrucha taggers desire a sense of belonging, a concrete identity that trumps feeling of marginalization. In their separation from regular society, they re-name themselves in a way that represents their loyalty to the gang. Mara
Salvatrucha is the only community that can fulfill these needs, and so this new name represents their gang and community identity (107).

For example, we can consider the following story, joined together through various anecdotes shared by the Mara Salvatrucha members that I spoke with. An MS-13 member named José may have tried to engage normal society, looking to go to school, trying to find a job, calling the police after the numerous times that he was attacked on the way to his home. Over-crowding in schools stunted his education, and constant attacks from other gangs made his school experience dangerous and risky. Outside of school, in his own neighborhood, poverty impeded his ability to advance economically and socially. A lack of jobs in the area prevented him from legally acquiring a source of income. And the violence that he felt in school overflowed into his streets, as gangs fought for the neighborhood in which he lived. Without police presence or attention towards this violence, José must fend for himself. And so, at every turn, in every situation, the identity “José” is ignored, attacked, and/or thrown aside. José then looks to Mara Salvatrucha as his center of protection, his means of economic advancement, and as his source of community. He begins to understand that the name “José” has been a detriment, an appellation that was always overlooked or altogether disregarded in the society that he was originally born into. His new name, his new identity, is then given to him by his new community, by the Mara Nation, when he decides to cut all ties with his previous social group. He becomes “Joker” because of his unflinching, almost jovial demeanor in the face of deadly attacks from other gangs. He becomes “El Guero” (“white-boy”) because his lighter skin tone contrasts against his more brown companions. He becomes L’il
Killah because of the number of people that he has killed in defense of his Mara Nation. Of course, nicknames exist outside of the gang, but they are never used to sign a job application, an apartment lease, and the nickname will never appear on a death certificate or a headstone. Opposing this official, written documentation, the tattooed and spray-painted Mara Salvatrucha images underscore these monikers, in place of their birthnames. These are the names that are used when signing murals.

“José’s” fictitious situation is reality to many Mara Salvatrucha members. Juan, whose tattoos appear throughout this dissertation, cites a very similar upbringing and reasoning behind joining the gang in his very early teens. As such, mara taggers use the murals as their way of showing appreciation and loyalty, and they sign the graffiti using this “other” name. It is therefore important to understand how nicknames overtake their previous identity, and create a persona that depends on the gang for almost everything, up to and including the conception of a new name that corresponds to the mara’s role within the gang.

Fagan concurs with Powers, Ferrell, Coleman, and Hayden theorizing that graffiti establishes identity as a member of a community that does not want to take part in normative society (21). As such, this cementing of social identity based on visual expression confirms how murals, in a similar way as MS-13 tattoos, serve to unite gang members in what they believe to be the Mara Nation. Like the ink work, graffiti bolsters the significance of community, it memorializes the death of fellow gang members, it honors Mara Salvatrucha members, and it issues challenges towards rival gangs who may set eyes on infringing on the gang’s turf (21). Considering the multi-faceted nature of the
communication, it becomes obvious that the information provided on the walls of the city are meant both for the in-group of maras and various out-groups, including opposing gangs and even non-affiliated residents of the city. The density and amount of graffiti indicates the level of ownership of the community where it appears. As you move closer and closer to the center of the gang’s dominance, you find fewer attempts to cover it up or “go over” it (22). This is because the deeper into MS-13 you penetrate, the more dangerous it is for outsiders who are visiting. This was made obvious as I ventured into the Soyapango area of San Salvador. Known for its Mara Salvatrucha presence, as you approach the area there are tags, yes, but they are much sparser than when you continue on towards the center of the barrio. Once inside the neighborhood, the graffiti becomes much more concentrated, ultimately filling up countless walls and sidewalks. The same is true as you move into Echo Park, McArthur Park, and Pico/Union. And so, an abundance of MS-13 tags within a specific concentrated area broadcasts to other gangs the boundaries of their area, and the spots where the graffiti is most prevalent are the sectors of the MS-13 neighborhood where most of their members are located. Attacking this area, then, would be tantamount to engaging an enemy in the heart of their country, where there would be the most support and reinforcements. Conversely, as you move from these centers of Mara Salvatrucha activity into areas where either other gangs dominate or where no other group has claimed ownership, the graffiti is less clustered, less tightly packed. This means that MS-13 is slowly entering this area, announcing their intent to enter, or marking the territory for future conquests. In this way, the graffiti extends past the insular signification of symbols that only MS-13 can read, broadcasting
to those outside of the gang their intentions, the boundaries of their territory, and the warnings against intrusion.

A tag’s significance, then, does not only reside in the symbol or picture that is spray-painted on the wall. As with the tattoos discussed previously, graffiti’s territorial functions reflect the fact that the location of the branding becomes just as important as the tagged design. With both, the placement is critical. Graffiti and tattoos are normally clearly visible, on public buildings, on faces, and in places where an onlooker cannot ignore them. Furthermore, in the case of graffiti, the actual act is illegal. Of course, incriminating tattoos can lead to arrests, as evidenced by the case of Anthony García. Police charged this MS-13 member with murder based on a chest tattoo that allegedly depicted the act, an example that I further explore in subsequent chapters. In fact, in my own research, a large number of Mara Salvatrucha members refused to have their ink photographed specifically because they were concerned with the legal ramifications involved in having potentially incriminating tattoos published. Yet the acts of tattooing and getting tattoos are not illegal, in and of themselves. Taggers, however, sacrifice their freedom, and run the risk of arrest by police officers precisely because they are vandalizing public property. What is more, outside of the judicial and legal ramifications, MS-13 taggers face much worse penalties if they are found marking walls by rival gang members. Whereas a tagger caught by the police faces possible jail time or a fine, a Mara Salvatrucha member busted by an opposing gang member while painting graffiti often receives violent reprisal, normally in the form of a beating, or even death. Yet, this risk does not matter. The sacrifice is part of the display of loyalty, and in turn, cements their
sense of belonging through a dangerous and illicit activity undertaken for the honor and pride that they feel for their gang culture. The gang recognizes the danger, and appreciates the tag. In this way, the tagger’s status within the community becomes solidified and elevated. This extends to other ways in which graffiti is physically dangerous.

The last chapter discussed how tattoos in the most painful parts of the bodies reflect the greatest affirmations of Mara Salvatrucha loyalty. As the pain increases, so too does the demonstration of affection for the gang. Also, as the tattoo is broadcast on the more visible and most painful parts of the body to tattoo (the face, the scalp), then the statement of nationalism is more salient. In other words the location and pain associated with getting the tattoos relates directly to the feelings of community felt by the mara. The same can be said for the placement of MS-13 graffiti, and the danger associated with completing the tag. Entering a rival gang’s territory in order to go over an opposing tag is seen by the Mara Salvatrucha community as a very brave act, since the tagger runs the risk of murder. Aside from the interaction with rivals, however, MS-13 taggers look to brand very public spaces, spaces that inevitably catch the eyes of all who see them. Tagging these places involves an immense amount of danger, depending on the location. For example, freeway signs and overpasses (see Figure 35) serve as common canvases for tagging MS-13 messages and symbols. The tagger must find a way to avoid the traffic, avoid detection from the police, and then he or she must climb up to the freeway sign in order to tag his placa. This means that the tagger must work suspended thirty or forty feet in the air, with the oncoming traffic below adding to the already present danger.
of the fall. Notwithstanding the danger, graffiti in such places is very common. The
danger related to finishing the tag corresponds to the pain of a facial tattoo, or the risk of
an opposing mara catching a tagger marking rival territories. The extra risk, the
possibility of injury or death exemplifies the great lengths that a mara will undergo in
order to express his loyalty to his Mara Nation. The tagger’s community understands this
risk, appreciating and respecting the courage and disregard for personal safety because
the tag symbolizes a tangible manifestation of the gang member’s affection for MS-13.

It is evident, in these studies, as well as others, that graffiti serves more than just
the purpose of recreational, illicit behavior and/or vandalism. The form has a style that is
very particular in general, and even more specific as one examines the tags of certain
gangs individually. Powers, Ferrell and Coleman agree that graffiti constructs a personal
message of identity and history that corresponds to the tagger’s feelings of community
within the gang. It functions as a way to propel the gang member’s affectivity for Mara
Salvatrucha by defacing and marking up public spaces that are seen regularly by those
belonging to the out-group. Believing themselves alienated from society, maras resort to
activities like graffiti to further separate them from society, in turn acceding a sense of
belonging to the gang. In this way, graffiti becomes a voluntary act of resistance, an
empowered means by which gang members reflect their feelings of marginalization and
act upon it. Furthermore, the messages contained on the walls are meant for those fellow
gang members, but they also relay important messages to rival gangs, as well as to those
urban inhabitants who can see the graffiti on the walls and buildings that they pass
regularly as they commute through their neighborhoods. However, these studies look at
graffiti by itself, and seldom combine this form with other kinds of visual culture. In order to effectively engage the narrative and representational functions of graffiti, as well as how graffiti messages demonstrate devotion to Mara Salvatrucha above all other categorical identities, it essential to examine it alongside other forms of MS-13 visual culture. Tattoos, for example, synergize with graffiti, and together create a language of images and symbols that materialize in both, carrying the same weight of meaning across these common forms of visual expression in the Mara Salvatrucha gang. This language not only reveals an attempt to cement cohesiveness and group identity within the gang, but also dictates the gang’s relationship with the second-hand representations of them disseminated by media outlets and other groups that lie outside of the gang. Concurrently, Mara Salvatrucha graffiti and tattoos create an autochthonous, auto-realized representation of the gang that clashes with and runs parallel to documentaries, newspapers, and other intermediaries within the imaginary of violence.

3.3 Writing with Krylon Paint: Establishing a Mara Salvatrucha Expressive Canon

The research and scholarship focusing on gang murals, and specifically Latino gang graffiti, allows insight into the various dimensions that the expressive form can take. In other words, condemning graffiti as mere urban rebellion manifested in the vandalism of public property reduces this otherwise complex and multi-layered communicative form. More precisely, when considering MS-13 graffiti together with other expressive forms within the gang, it becomes obvious that that their visual culture takes on a narrative function, whereby the gang represents various aspects of their citizenship within the Mara Nation as well as this community’s history. We have already focused on how tattoos
consolidate the national category within the gang in such a way that MS-13 ink work exhibits the vaulting of the mara’s gang above all other social groups. This analysis drew from Patrick Colm Hogan’s techniques of nationalism. These same techniques can help to understand the potential impact of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti. In order to engage critically Mara Salvatrucha visual expressions as more than an aesthetic, counter-cultural statement of opposition, it is crucial to examine both tattoos and graffiti as interconnected and related.

The earlier tattoo analysis considered how Mara Salvatrucha ink work corresponds to salience, durability, opposability, affectivity, and functionality. The same kind of connections can be made examining MS-13 graffiti. When studying all of the above images, the graffiti is placed in very obvious places, some of them with very bright colors, and very elaborate, attention-eliciting designs. They are impossible to ignore, and therefore salient expressions of the Mara Nation. The Krylon paint that they use, and the technique of piecing many images one on top of another, makes the tags very difficult to cover with white paint. In the case that they are covered up, the tagger works very quickly to re-tag the cleaned-up spot, leading to a perpetual battle between the maras and organizations that try to eliminate graffiti. In other words, the tags are durable, as are the messages contained in the tags. And although different groups struggle to leave their permanent mark on the walls, the spray-painted messages that are contained on the wall remain despite the efforts of opposing gangs and police organizations to erase them. In this way, the act of graffiti, in and of itself, not only illustrates durability, but also opposability between Mara Salvatrucha and the out-group. Normative society considers
graffiti an act of vandalism, and rival gangs use graffiti in order to fight each other and stake out controlled territory. In both cases, tagging a message on an urban wall connotes a separation between Mara Salvatrucha and all other communities, therefore concretizing sentiments of MS-13 unity based on those differences between them and the outside world. As was discussed earlier, taggers demonstrate their affectivity towards Mara Salvatrucha by submitting themselves to dangerous situations in order to diffuse their Mara Nation messages. Functionality is evidenced by the fact that not every member of Mara Salvatrucha can produce graffiti. True, any of them can casually spray-paint an “M” and the number thirteen on a wall, but the more intricate designs seen in Figures 27 and 28, for example, require a very specific artistic skill set that not every Mara Salvatrucha member has. This gives taggers within the community a specialized position whereby they are the ones asked to mass-distribute the painted images throughout a neighborhood or city. With this ability comes access to a respect and fame that otherwise may be difficult to come by. In turn, taggers are able to draw from added benefits for their trade: money, swift promotion, their tagging monikers on the works they produce, and more.

These are just a few very general examples of how graffiti, like tattoos, are manipulated in order to serve a nationalizing process within the Mara Salvatrucha culture. Through the use of a specific language of symbols and fonts which narrate a specific MS-13 culture, opposed and separated from the out-group, MS-13 members define their membership in the only community that they feel like they truly belong. Of all of Hogan’s techniques of nationalization, however, durability proves to be the most
instrumental when considering how graffiti aids in molding a Mara Salvatrucha national identity, especially when considering the link between permanence and literature. For Patrick Colm Hogan, “literature is crucial” to the process of constructing a national identity that originates directly from within that very nation (90). Hogan mentions that literature, along with film and television, stands as “the major source of our sense of national durability today” (90). Along with literature, “the related development of national literary paradigms—such as Shakespeare in England, Homer in Greece, Valmiki in India—has been particularly consequential” in formulating a national identity from within the nation itself (90). For example, Elizabethan literature, Hogan asserts, perpetuated British national identity by having authors and researchers writing about England, English history, and English national heroes in the English language. In Latin America, from the earliest days of Guaman Poma de Ayala on through the nation-building era, modernismo, magical realism, the Boom, and onward towards the contemporary Crack and McOndo generation, writers have sought to create an independent, autochthonous literary identity that did not depend on European influence or intervention. This literary identity, in other words a truly Latin American representation of what it means to be Mexican, Argentine, Colombian, or Cuban, aimed to broadcast and reinforce those cultural qualities that best defined their geographic region and cultural practices. In all of these examples, literary paradigms and canons have served as one of the principal mechanisms that have been attempted to deride foreign and outside attempts at representation.
In the case of Mara Salvatrucha, however, a lack of education and a concentration on survival over schooling makes the development of a literary canon impractical. And so, without any legitimate entry into literary expression, the Mara Nation must find alternative expressive forms in order to broadcast a cultural representation of their gang that derives directly from the MS-13 community. It would be a mistake to homogenize all of the Mara Salvatrucha cliques scattered around the world, as each particular clique responds to a different set of socio-economic conditions. Still, when considering the research of Hayden, Vigil, Garland and others, it becomes evident that one consistent factor influencing almost all MS-13 members is their inability to access a proper education. From the earliest days of the Salvadoran civil war, children were pulled from their classrooms at a very young age, in order to fight in the military. Afterwards, upon exile or immigration, Salvadoran children were crammed into classrooms that were overcrowded and unable to meet the needs of individual students. Hayden and Garland both discuss how school systems like the one in the Pico/Union area instated a six month in, six month out academic year in order to mitigate the problems with over-population attributed to the overwhelming influx of Central American immigration to the area during the eighties. The children were out of school for half a year, leaving them to fend for themselves on the streets of South-Central Los Angeles. As the years progressed, and Mara Salvatrucha evolved into a powerful, multi-national gang, their prime recruiting subjects were middle and high-schoolers. These students feel constant pressure and violence from other gangs in their neighborhoods, and even in their school hallways. With little police presence and no other form of protection in their communities, the
youngsters join MS-13 in order to stay relatively safe. Today, with unemployment and poverty strangling the neighborhoods where Mara Salvatrucha is most prevalent, young gang members have to choose between learning critical reading skills or finding a way to make the money to eat and live. Survival, then, becomes more important than education. These scenarios underscore the lack of education that many maras suffer from, whether because of their impoverished surroundings or because of the necessity to affiliate with a gang from a very early age, for protection and monetary subsistence. In this way, MS-13 members are unable to access literature as a form of expression. Mara Salvatrucha, then, has been traditionally represented by outside sources, from the very sectors of society that they are opposed to. Their history, customs, and rules have primarily come to light as a result of news programming, cable documentaries, and magazine articles. Understandably, their violent behavior and criminal acts mold this second-hand representation into a negative depiction, often sensationalized and exaggerated in order to push the gang farther to the margins of society.

In response to this representational manipulation, Mara Salvatrucha must consider an alternative form of expression, one that corresponds to Hogan’s idea of a literary canon, but that also takes into account their alienation from literary agency. In order to solidify their own national categorial identity, Mara Salvatrucha depends on extra-literary canons which are analogous to the literary works that Hogan refers to, but ones that do not rely on the written word, on publishing, or even on traditional literacy. Their canon consists of a series of images, symbols, and encrypted designs that relay community histories and extol their own pride for their territorial conquests over the course of the last
three decades of existence as a pseudo-nation. What is more, this canon is authentic to their own community and autochthonous in its representative function, insofar as it depends on a narrative created, perpetuated, and diffused directly from inside the Mara Salvatrucha community. Examples of this lexicon have already been seen in the many images that have been examined thus far, and it will continue in the various images that follow. One of the most important critical aspects of Mara Salvatrucha visual culture is that the images consistently repeat, not only in a particular genre, for example graffiti, but across all manifestations of expression, be they in tattoos, rap, or videos.

The symbols tagged on walls are the same that appear on mara’s faces. The coded messages spray-painted throughout the city, re-surface on the texts of flesh belonging to the gang members. Beyond the repetition from genre to genre, the same pictures and patterns cross borders from nation to nation, crossing thousands of miles, and manifesting themselves inside of communities that are, literally, worlds apart, without any direct contact with each other. In fact, Chapter Four analyzes a Federal Bureau of Investigation report suggesting that Mara Salvatrucha graffiti has spread to countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places where gang affiliated servicemen tag while on a tour of duty. And so, across genres, across countries, and in communities scattered all over the world, Mara Salvatrucha has been able to perpetuate a system of pictorial communication and narration that serves as its own canon, as its particular kind of extra-literary literature. Mara Salvatrucha visual expression exemplifies a language, and with this language the gang can relate its story, its history, it can honor cultural heroes, and threaten enemies of the Mara Nation. And in all of these cases, the language derives directly from inside the
Mara Salvatrucha community. As such, this language allows for auto-representation. It permits an independent construction of social identity, and therefore can serve to belie, de-mythify, and de-sensationalize the second hand representations that, up until now, have spoken for and about the gang.

3.4 Loops, Diamonds, and Straight Talk: “Handwriting” in MS-13 Graffiti and Tattoos

Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture is a language used to describe and personify the gang from an in-group perspective. Considering the expressions as a kind of canon forces questions regarding the construction of the language, and what the symbols signify to both the gang and the world outside of Mara Salvatrucha. How is this language assembled, perpetuated, and reinforced? Which symbols and signs depict narratives? What do these narratives recount? A superficial examination could conclude that the repetition of certain images results from mere coincidence, that they happen to appear on the bodies of maras and the walls of the cities that they live in as a kind of appropriation of signs that, in and of themselves, hold an empty significance. Worse, these cross-genre expressions could be considered simple reproductions of often seen marks within the gang sub-culture that work best as taxonomical tools, critical in the identification and categorization of Mara Salvatrucha members, but nothing more. This latter evaluation is the most common within the law enforcement and judiciary communities, where ink-work and muralism almost exclusively serves the purpose of recognizing gang members and the neighborhoods where they are most prevalent. These simplified conclusions do not take into account meaning, or the fact that the Mara Salvatrucha gang members rely
on these marks in order to promote a community history with a very individualized register that belongs entirely to MS-13.

Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture has a definitive handwriting, a set of fonts that indicate a communal personality. Returning to Jeffery Fagan, he discusses the kind of lettering used in gang graffiti. Of the three that he mentions—diamond, straight, and loop—MS-13 tags distinctly resorts to the diamond and straight script, an opinion based on my own fieldwork and the graffiti images appearing in this chapter. However, it is critical to understand that these two scripts are not only used in graffiti, but also in the tattoos that the gang members etch into their bodies. In order to consider Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture a kind of representative genre, it must appear across all of the visual expressions, and the characteristics of these expressions must remain constant across all MS-13 cliques, all over the world. The diamond font is very popular with the gang, possibly because the diamond is a precious stone, among the most valuable substances on the planet. My interviews revealed that one of the main goals of the gang is to acquire money in order to continue their illicit activities, and also to elevate their living conditions from the impoverishment experienced in their particular neighborhoods. Therefore, the diamond trope could represent the accumulation of this wealth. Furthermore, the diamond is indestructible, durable, and this toughness might symbolize the stalwart, impenetrable, and ever-expanding nature of Mara Salvatrucha. The diamond is such an important symbol that, aside from the script, the jewel appears all over walls in MS-13 dominated areas, as well as on the bodies of Mara Salvatrucha members. The graffiti font is called diamond because of its prismatic qualities. The tops and bottoms of
letters, as seen in Figure 36, spike to a tip, and the letters and numbers seem almost multi-faced, three dimensional, an artistic depiction of the many flat faces of a diamond. Figure 31 responds to the value of the diamond by demonstrating the shine of the diamond graffiti with the sparkle marks spray-painted above the “U” and the “R.” The word “sur,” meaning that the tag corresponds to a Mara Salvatrucha clique in the south side of the city, shines as a diamond would. The diamond font transcends the urban wall, though, and appears on the skin of Mara Salvatrucha members, proving that this handwriting is a multi-expression means of communication. In Figures 37 and 38, the writing is identical to that seen on the graffiti. The “M” on both of the pictured gang members has an additional swirl. All of the lettering is pointed, indicative of the diamond style, and the only slight variations lie in how the letters and numbers are shaded and filled in. And so, the diamond as invaluable and indestructible crosses over to these mara’s torsos, inked in flesh instead of painted on walls.

This diamond script has also been called gothic font, and predates Mara Salvatrucha, clearly in its use throughout history in illuminated texts and elsewhere. But more specific to this project, Latino gangs before Mara Salvatrucha have resorted to the gothic lettering style in order to tag walls and ink their bodies. My own research focuses on naming this type of writing “diamond” because graffiti specialists such as Fagan use this term to analyze the particular kind of graffiti. And yet, although there may be debate regarding nomenclature, what is most apparent is that either name confirms a specific kind of symbolism in the use of the script. Whereas diamond font may relate to wealth, invulnerability, and immutability, calling it gothic script could also infer prestige and
historical permanence. The regard for gothic lettering possibly stems from historical texts and medieval manuscripts over the course of the last five centuries, on the part of society as a whole. And taggers may look to the script because of this societal esteem, drawing from it in order to present a kind of fanciness or refinement in their own murals. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in Latin America, students in various countries learn to write in gothic script in order to tap into the weight of history, as it relates to the belles lettres. The prestige associated with this type of lettering may filter into the mural work of MS-13 taggers, where they want their urban message to carry with it a kind of seriousness reserved for more highly regarded literary works. In this way, referring to the script as either gothic or diamond reveals connections to a historical past that is used to affirm the present strength of the expressive culture. Diamonds are indestructible and invaluable. Gothic font is historical and perpetual. In either case, the name of the lettering speaks to the importance of the tag written in this kind of lettering.

The straight font, also mentioned by Fagan, is another often-used form of lettering in Mara Salvatrucha visual culture. This script is much clearer, especially when combined with other letters and numbers. It is easier to understand and less stylized than the diamond font. The boundaries that make up the tag are straight and true. Moving away from the cursive-like loops and turns of diamond font, straight graffiti provides a much clearer and readable message, particularly when longer words and messages in this script appear on walls. My conversations have led me to believe that Mara Salvatrucha gang members use this clearer, easier to understand writing in order to make their message absolutely unmistakable, especially to those who are not in the gang. In other words,
graffiti in this font could be used as warnings to other gangs that an eventual foray into their territory is imminent. Also, it is could be meant for urban residents that are completely unaffiliated with gangs. In both cases, I posit that the straight font delivers clear communications to people who would find the diamond font difficult to decipher, and so corresponds to their engagement with an out-group that is not well-read in the other, various encrypted forms of symbology that Mara Salvatrucha depends on. Figures 39 through 41 exemplify traditional straight font. Many times the letters are made larger, bloated, but in all the cases the lines that form the letters and numbers are very clear and straight, and although somewhat stylized, not nearly to the degree seen with the diamond font.

The gang name in these figures is distinct, almost like non-cursive, regular print. Of particular interest is that both Figures 40 and 41 show the act of going over, that is to say crossing-out or tagging above a rival *placa* in order to show disrespect and victory over the opposition. In Figure 40, the MS-13 graffiti is in the same color as the line going through the rival tags, suggesting that the tagger painted the Mara Salvatrucha symbol and also went over the rival tag around the same time with the same color spray paint. This may confirm the earlier assertion that the straight font appears in places where members of the out-group, perhaps unaware of specific Mara Salvatrucha codes, are able to read the messages without any confusion or doubt. It should be remembered that the word “straight” connotes honesty and clarity, as in the phrases “straight forward,” “give it to me straight,” and “straight talk.”
Again, we see this particular graffiti font transcending urban spaces and appearing on mara skin. In Figures 18 and 22, not only is the “MS” in straight script, but also it is displayed in very prominent parts of the body. In Figure 22, the mara has the gang’s “MS” centered in his forehead. The mara in Figure 18 presents the name of the gang on his chest. In both cases, and exactly like in the graffiti images written in straight text, it seems as though the message is meant for others to see and easily understand, so that anyone who looks at these two maras do not have to decipher a lexicon that they are unfamiliar with. The clearly delineated gang name is acutely apparent to any onlooker, and such a person looking at the gang member does not have to understand the many different encoded modes of expression that Mara Salvatrucha uses among themselves. Like the graffiti in rival territories pictured above, these tattoos provide very straight forward messages which communicate with the out-group in such a way that much of the artistic liberty and stylization gets stripped away, leaving a communication that is intelligible and unquestionable. The gang’s name does not appear in code, nor are there hand-signs representing the gang’s name. We do not see playing cards or dice. Here, there is a simple, obvious script written out in such a way that is easy to understand for anybody who sees the tattoo or tag. They are members of Mara Salvatrucha. That is their community, and these direct messages correspond to the idea that MS-13 is the social group that most represents their own individual sense of identity.

3.5 Representing La vida loca: The Relation of Graffiti Symbols to MS-13 Tattoos
If we consider the various kinds of graffiti fonts used by MS-13 a kind of “handwriting,” then it is logical to assume that Mara Salvatrucha visual culture has a definitive set of
fonts with which they construct their language and emit their messages. Still, the MS-13 language does not solely depend on written letters and words. Their communication also relies on a specific set of symbols and images that, like the scripts examined above, show up in all forms of expression. These pictures represent very precise information regarding gang life in Mara Salvatrucha, depicting narratives that piece together a cultural history in a way that is akin to the original boxcar graffiti mentioned by Stephen Powers. Poor and, in many cases, transient due to constant arrests and deportations, MS-13 members mirror the vagabonds who revealed their stories from their own perspectives, the same vagrants who tagged the trains that they traveled so that their stories would make their way from city to city. The walls in the urban communities where Mara Salvatrucha cliques emerge contain a regularly repeated gamut of expressions that symbolize various aspects of Mara Salvatrucha life, like the boxcars of the train travelers.

Perhaps the most interesting example of an image that is repeated over and over again, both in graffiti and tattoos, recalls the maras that lost their lives during the course of their violent, urban existence. The cemetery trope is very common across all forms of Mara Salvatrucha expression, to the point that it forces a critical understanding of why these drawn cemeteries are so important to the community. Figures 18, 28, and 42 show how these tattoos take up huge amounts of space on city walls. These are not just small depictions of a couple of headstones, but large, sprawling designs often incorporating many graves in complicated and intricate patterns that only the best taggers can create. In other words, these cemeteries convey a special significance because it takes a specialized set of skills in order to paint them. The life of the average MS-13 member is fleeting, and
often ends at a very young age. Urban warfare is constant, both against rival gangs and against the police forces seeking to end their criminal presence in the neighborhoods that Mara Salvatrucha takes over. The second-hand representative agencies—newspapers, television broadcasts, cable documentaries—relegate the lives lost in this urban conflict to flashes on the screen, to scenes showing the dead maras face-down in a pool of their own blood. As a response to this mediatic depiction of the death of valuable members of their community, Mara Salvatrucha uses graffiti and tattoos as a means of better, more personally, recalling the dead member of their community, honoring them in such a way that they are not forgotten in the five second blurb that shoots across the television viewer’s screen. The graveyard murals are akin to Arlington National Cemetery, insofar as these tags stand as their version of a national monument that reflects Patrick Colm Hogan’s theory of salience and durability. The graffiti is intricate and complex so that it is salient and impossible to ignore. The act of remembrance often takes up vast areas on walls that are out in the open, so that everyone that passes by can see it. Notice that both images mentioned above have the gang name clearly tagged, in straight font, so that the onlooker knows, without a doubt, that the names on the Krylon headstone were valued members of the Mara Salvatrucha community.

Regularly, the same kinds of cemeteries appear on the bodies of Mara Salvatrucha members, as if the wall murals are not enough to immortalize dead community members. After all, police and city beautification programs actively try to paint over graffiti (see Figures 43 and 44). The tattoos, then, extend the homage to a place that these organizations cannot reach, an expressive canvas where the memories cannot be forcibly
removed. Tattoos are more durable than graffiti, yet depending on the placement of the ink, not as visible. For example, a tattooed cemetery, needing an ample amount of space, typically surfaces on the upper torso and back. These areas of the body are often covered up by shirts. Still, the gravestones are permanent, more so than the graffiti. In this way, the two forms of expressive culture synergize, each responding to a different communicative need, whether considering the public exposure of the image or its permanence. The tattooed cemetery in Figure 17 is an almost exact reproduction of the funerary graffiti previously pictured. Perhaps the graffiti is public, and the tattoo, which can be covered, represents a more private, personal memorial. In all of the examples, there are many gravestones, representing the large number of deaths that the particular Mara Salvatrucha community has had to deal with.

Furthermore, the saying “en memoria de mis homies” also appears frequently, both on the tags and on the skins of Mara Salvatrucha members. The names of the maras that appear are remembered not only on walls and public urban spaces, but also on the bodies of those mourning their deaths, themselves. These names, as they appear on the tombs, are also a significant part of both graffiti and tattooed cemeteries. The importance of these nicknames have already been highlighted above, when discussing how gang members sign their murals. It is necessary to reiterate the role that these names assume when considering the tags and the ink, in unison, because it affirms that the nicknames are not a graffiti-specific tradition. In all of the images provided, those who died are characterized by their gang name, and not their legal name. These graves honor Joker, Crimen, Topo, and Shyboy. In other words, the maras are eternalized in paint according
to their chosen identity within the gang community, and not by the name given to them by the society. After all, why embrace the designation given by a group that has always stood in direct opposition to them? Their separation from normative society is complete down to the acquisition of a new moniker, and this moniker remains after the Mara Salvatrucha member dies, on walls and on the bodies of maras. Even in death, then, the gang member has cemented his Mara Salvatrucha identity, stripping his given birth name, and replacing it with a new, different identity that corresponds to his role in the Mara Salvatrucha community. Birth certificates, legal documents, and even inmate numbers are brushed aside during the mara’s life, and after their demise this name remains as their most salient identity construction. These painted and tattooed graves do not contain Miguel or José, but Joker and Shyboy. They lost their Miguel and José personas once they became affiliated with Mara Salvatrucha. Their memory, then, is perpetuated as the nickname tagged into the grave, and not as the named identities that came before they became part of the Mara Nation.

Many pictures included in this and the previous chapter show how Mara Salvatrucha members honor dozens of different maras who died in communities all over the Americas. Countless more are immortalized in other graffiti, and in other tattoos. Even more have died whose images are not preserved in these memories that are painted and inked. It is obvious that Mara Salvatrucha members live a very dangerous life, surrounded by threats to their lives and the lives of the members of their community. They can meet with death while sitting in a living room watching television, from a drive-by, as was the case with the mother of Juan’s child. Death can also take the form of
a neighborhood shoot-out with rival gangs or policemen. Those who go to prison must deal with racial discrimination from Black and neo-Nazi gangs, as well as from rival Hispanic maras who extend their wars beyond the streets, into the tiny cells and recreation areas provided by the prison systems. Death is often the result of these penal battles, or at least severe injury, as exemplified, again, by Juan. And so, MS-13 members willfully enter this life of violence, this dependence on illicit and dangerous behavior, knowing perfectly well what the eventual outcome could be. Understanding the danger only adds to the fervor with which many Mara Salvatrucha members defend their gang. As such, the Mara Nation becomes the social category towards which they show the most affectivity. This community that finally approves of them also provides them with a livelihood and a source of cultural pride. Therefore the risks are well worth the benefits, both financially and socially. The mara is fully aware of these risks, and takes it as a part of his relationship with the Mara Salvatrucha community.

Hispanic gang members, since the earliest days of the cholos mentioned by Stephen Powers, have always understood that theirs is a risky lifestyle, and they have represented their dependence on this marginal existence with the use of a particular phrase. “Mi vida loca,” that is to say “My crazy life,” has been a motto for Latino gangs ever since the nascent days of Mexican-American Cholos. The aphorism responds to the hazards of gang life, recognizing that it equates to a willing choice to sacrifice individual life and freedom for the communal betterment of the gang. The society outside of the gang considers such a lifestyle crazy, and the mara holds on to the saying as a rallying cry that indicates difference from the “normal” ways of establishing a successful existence.
Mara Salvatrucha has appropriated the motto just as their Latino gang forefathers, and many times the words appear both in graffiti and in tattoos. Their own way of presenting *la vida loca* is very particular to the gang, utilizing a specific iconography not seen in other Latino gangs. For MS-13, three dots in the form of pyramid symbolize their own crazy life, and the image shows up on tags in all of the neighborhoods where Mara Salvatrucha asserts its presence (see Figures 45 and 46). Figure 45 shows the three dots twice, once within the looped arrow next to the number thirteen, as if the crazy life is an integral part of the tag. Furthermore, Figure 31 depicts the three dots nestled in between the thirteen and the word “rifá,” which was earlier defined as “ruler” or “owner.” When combined, the tag may signify that MS-13 is the ruler of this tagger’s crazy life, aside from the obvious implication that this southern neighborhood Mara Salvatrucha clique controls the wall that is pictured. The three dots appear in many other combinations, most in conjunction, or pieced together, with other symbols that represent specific messages. And as is the case with the different fonts, and the many cemeteries, the dots representing the crazy life do not only appear in *placasos*. They extend from the painted surfaces to the bodies of maras, as they appropriate the sentiment associated with *la vida loca* onto their flesh, as a physical and ever-present indicator of this counter-cultural and violent life that they have chosen to follow. The dots often manifest just underneath an eye (see Figure 47), perhaps symbolizing the “crazy” things that the maras have seen. Also, gang members recurrently tattoo the pyramid on the back of their hands, in the fleshy part between the thumb and index finger, or on the protruding round bone on the wrist (see Figure 48). In these cases, it could be that they construct their crazy life with their own
hands; the hands that hold the guns, the money, and the cans of paint that scatter the Mara Salvatrucha language on the public spaces in cities all over the Americas.

The Mara Salvatrucha philosophy of their “crazy life” is not only represented in the saying *mi vida loca*, nor is it solely manifested in the pyramid made up of dots. It is critical to understand that the average MS-13 member lives a life of incomparable trauma. From very early ages, the majority of Mara Salvatrucha members sees and experiences a level of tragedy and hardship that is foreign to most “regular” members of society. The original members of Mara Salvatrucha began as children who had to walk over the dead bodies of their friends as they walked to school every day. While in school these first, future MS-13 members were forced into serving in the national military by troops entering their classroom and kidnapping them, as demonstrated in movies such as *Voces inocentes* (*Innocent Voices*), books like *Salvador’s Children* (Lea Marren), and other texts. Many maras began as orphans whose parents were killed in the Salvadoran civil war. Others were deported or exiled to Los Angeles where they had to survive constant attacks from other racial groups within the neighborhoods in which they settled, and even the police groups that were supposed to protect them. Once these Salvadorans organized Mara Salvatrucha, the gang’s members lived an even more violent and bloody existence where death was a daily, if not hourly, possibility. Today’s embodiment of the gang perpetuates the past dangers, and amplifies them. Theirs is a constant struggle for territorial expansion and economic growth, both of which are accomplished, primarily through illegal means. Also, in both cases, Mara Salvatrucha faces competition from other gangs looking to expand and profit, as well. This competition results in bloody
combat in the streets, with high-powered, automatic weapons and close-quarter machete attacks. From a legal perspective, the illicit techniques draws attention from the police forces whose aim is to stop the drug running, arms sales, and human trafficking that the gang is most known for. And as they do against rival gangs, Mara Salvatrucha defends these criminal endeavors violently, murdering police officers and engaging in shoot-outs in the middle of the street, seemingly unconcerned with non-affiliated, bystander casualties. Another source of trauma lies in the prison sentences that many maras receive, as they enter a hostile environment where they are closed in with some of their most vicious rival gangs, and face further assault from other racial gangs that form within the penal system. Shankings (stabblings with homemade knives often constructed out of hair, fingernail filings, left over plastic, and various other things), beatings, and even murder become daily consequences of Mara Salvatrucha affiliation while in prison. This is the vida loca, the crazy life that MS-13 members refer to in their graffiti and tattoos.

3.6 “Laugh Now, Cry Tomorrow”: Negotiating Trauma Through MS-13 Graffiti

Despite acknowledging that la vida loca is the existence that they have chosen for themselves, it becomes critical to understand how they cope with the trauma and loss examined throughout this dissertation. The cemetery tattoos and murals are one way, where lost loved ones are forever immortalized on the skin and in the wide-open spaces of the city, and the pain from the loss is somewhat mitigated through this constant memory. I carry a picture of my late father in my wallet. I could lose my wallet, or drop the picture, losing it forever. Juan will always have the memory of his first child’s mother tattooed on his body. He will never lose that. Other symbols within the Mara Salvatrucha
expressive language register also serve as a means to come to terms with their trauma, specifically by creating a separation between the present and the future, where trauma is dealt with in some vague, forthcoming time period that, in fact, may never arrive. In other words, managing present feelings of loss and tragedy is put off until the future, knowing fully that this future may never come to pass, considering the violent Mara Salvatrucha way of life. The next logical assumption, then, is to suppose that they may never have to deal with the trauma. To this end, the gang has taken on a saying that appears all over the MS-13 world—“laugh now, cry tomorrow.” As is the case with many of their other sayings, for example *mi vida loca*, they have substituted the motto with a specific symbol.

Mara Salvatrucha has appropriated the classical two-faced drama mask, one representing comedy and the other tragedy. The faces are often stylized, and not traditionally depicted, yet their base characterization remains. On one side there is a smiling, laughing face, which mirrors a sad, crying face. Both seem maniacal and fierce, with the smiling face tending towards a particularly aggressive and sadistic look. This image is widely seen in Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, oftentimes pieced together with the cemeteries and gravestones that are so common (see Figures 27 and 42). These symbols are a pictorial way in which the maras deal with the death of the people that are entombed in the graffiti and tattooed graves. To them, the present is the most important time, and dealing with loss in the present is impossible as the constant trauma can add up to the point of utter despondence and depression. Moreover, having to deal with the trauma in the present may interfere with their own goals of expansion and profit. As such, they
push the trauma into an uncertain future, implying that they will negotiate with the massive amount of death and violence at a later date. One could also argue that the Mara Salvatrucha members that put off dealing with the trauma of their present lives understand that, for many, the future is an uncertainty at best, considering the constant hazards of their street life. Ultimately, by pushing away an emotional engagement into some ephemeral future, they may never have to fully deal with their feelings of sadness and loss.

As in all other cases described thus far, the masks not only appear on murals, but also as tattoos, further reinforcing the theory that Mara Salvatrucha visual culture represents a constant narrative quality that infiltrates all expressive forms that the gang creates (see Figures 49 and 50). It is not a coincidence that the same masks that are pictured above also appear on the bodies of MS-13 members. Perhaps they need to find some way to mitigate the psychological damage caused by the trauma that they experience. Because of this, the expression of loss in their lives transcends the public spaces of city walls and finds its way onto the flesh, where the idea of “laugh now, cry later” becomes, literally, a part of the mara’s body. And even though the masks, themselves, take on many different kinds of styles, the message behind them is identical to the one communicated in the tags. These MS-13 members have to live in the now, the present, in order to continue their vida loca. If not, the weight of the loss and the pressure caused by the tremendous trauma inherent in the hazards of their street life may become too great to endure in the present, especially if it is dealt with as it occurs. For this very reason, these tags and tattoos suggest that they put off handling the pain, in effect
delaying having to bear the trauma, acknowledging that there is a chance that this future
time for reconciliation and emotional healing may never come.

This separation between present emotional anguish and future conciliation does
not mean that the mara refuses to grapple with the psychological issues involved with
seeing constant death and violence. In their own particular way, MS-13 members attempt
to negotiate with trauma as it occurs, or shortly thereafter, through the various forms of
expressive culture that have been discusses and pictured thus far. In the cases of the
cemeteries, the reference to *la vida loca*, and the comedy/tragedy masks, these images
portray recognition, and a contemporary attempt to cope. With graffiti, the Mara
Salvatrucha member presents this trauma publicly, in spaces that are seen all over the
city. They share their losses and the lunacy of their existence with the urban resident, the
same resident whose idea of the gang is almost entirely constructed from secondary
sources. Such a public performance of tragedy gives Mara Salvatrucha a specific kind of
agency, where they can control, at least in some way, the way in which the important
aspects of their culture is depicted. They control the graffiti, and so they can control the
messages that are announced on the walls. As has been discussed, oftentimes these
images consider trauma and death, situations that, in a secondary, sensationalized
mediatic depiction are considered positive when it happens to an “enemy” or “other.”
Society, at large, considers it a good thing when an MS-13 member dies, or when one is
arrested, because they are villanized in the media. And even though this vilification is
definitively justified in many of the cases of brutal crime and attacks, these deaths, from
within the Mara Salvatrucha community, represent the permanent loss of a friend or a
family. And so, to counter the out-group representation of the dehumanized, villainous mara, Mara Salvatrucha members rely on graffiti in order to broadcast the importance of these same MS-13 members as integral parts of their culture and community, humans that will be missed because they are now gone forever.

In the same way, the tattooed images of cemeteries, dotted pyramids, and drama masks, images which extend from the walls onto the flesh, embody in-group coping mechanisms that allow the mara to continue his or her harsh life without breaking down emotionally. Of course, the last chapter mentioned a number of examples that reflect how MS-13 tattooing is meant for the out-group as much as for the Mara Salvatrucha culture, particularly because of the prominent placement of some of these inked design. Still, as we can see in the above images, the cemeteries are on the chest, the dots are subtly placed on the hand or under the eye with no obvious explanation of the meaning, or on the arms. All of these specific cases demonstrate the personal nature of such displays of Mara Salvatrucha allegiance. Shirts cover up the tattoos on the chest and arms, and the dot pyramids, standing alone with no specific definition, hold little to no significance to an onlooker. In other words, they are more intended for the Ms-13 member, personally, and less for society outside of Mara Salvatrucha, especially when compared to the exposed tags. Every time the mara looks down, whenever he or she stands in front of the mirror, or when he or she takes off their shirt, the ink is there to remind him of the particular sentiment that is alluded to. The tattoos become an intimate statement of remembrance, particularly when considering the gravestones or the suggestions of la vida loca or “laugh now, cry later,” as they are private ways of coping with the trauma of gang life. They take
the trauma onto their own skin, in a process that directly relates the psychological pain of loss to the very physical pain of the tattooing process. The trauma becomes part of them, and stays with them, on their body, for as long as the mara lives. In this way, the MS-13 member can never forget, never ignore the deaths and the barbarity of their crazy life.

3.7 Maybe Not Different but Certainly Original: The Connection between Mara Salvatrucha Graffiti and the Imaginary of Violence

However, this form of self-representation, based on a gamut of images and sayings that originate directly from the gang, does not necessarily negate all of the second-hand depictions of the gang found in the most popular forms of media. In some cases, Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture confirms and even amplifies the accounts of crime and illegal activities. And this image of Mara Salvatrucha presented on television and in the printed media, as agents of social unrest and urban criminals, in many cases is not only understandable, but justifiable. A negative media portrayal is reasonable, when considering the gruesome and violent acts perpetrated by many MS-13 cliques all over the Americas. Specifically in circumstances involving the drug trade, prostitution rings, and human trafficking, Mara Salvatrucha has been at the center of some of the bloodiest and most violent exchanges in urban centers in both Latin America and The United States. Even so, the importance of Mara Salvatrucha visual culture does not merely reside in the fact that their own version of themselves is less negative than the mediatic depictions. However it is irrelevant whether the narrative that comes out of the MS-13 community is positive or negative. The central issue is that Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture is autochthonous, independent, and original. MS-13 graffiti and tattoos denote a
kind of expression that belongs only to Mara Salvatrucha. Any community that depends on second-hand representations relinquishes agency in the construction of social identity. Such a community is at the mercy of what others say about them, and therefore they are enslaved by possible out-group sensationalization that defines their own private community to others. As we shall see more specifically see in Chapter Five, anything can be said, any claim can be delivered, and thus, a community with no expressive outlet suffers from the inability to construct a counter-narrative that can confirm or deny the stories emitted by outside groups. Therefore, it is not surprising that the narratives originating from the gang corroborate those seen in the media. After all, the violent, aggressive nature of Mara Salvatrucha daily life requires that the members of the gang emit a tough, hardened image of themselves. They cannot appear weak to their various enemies, specifically those that they battle physically—rival gangs, the police, paramilitary groups. And so, their expressive culture, particularly the sort that the out-group absorbs, speaks to a ferocious and cruel nature. It is a nature that is unmerciful; one that eliminates any weakness in the face of their opposition. This is the reason for the allusions to Satanism, demonology, and the consistent appearance of the grim reaper, reflected in the images in Chapter Two. And while it may seem that such imagery confirms the mediatic portrayal of the gang, in fact the evil symbols respond to a different necessity. They represent the need for Mara Salvatrucha to speak for themselves, regardless of the image delivered and despite the fact that these kinds of images run parallel to the popular and official portrayals of the gang in documentaries, news broadcasts and the printed press. In other words, even though the communication
coincides, it is a communication that is authentic to the gang, emitted directly from Mara Salvatrucha, and therefore an in-group demonstration of community culture.

Such demonic and satanic imagery in Mara Salvatrucha tattoos responds to Patrick Colm Hogan’s theories of opposability in the consolidation of a Mara Nation. The devils, succubae, horns, the image of death and imps all underscored Mara Salvatrucha’s statement of difference. One repeated picture that shows up often in murals in Mara Salvatrucha territories is the demon hand. It is painted scaly, with sharp fingernails that more resemble claws. The hands are depicted in the shape of demon horns, with the index and pinkie fingers pointing up. If these hands are flipped over, they form the letter “M,” referring to the gang name, MS-13 (see Figures 51 through 53). By relying on these frightening, vicious pictures, MS-13 members make salient the idea that they are different from the unaffiliated society that surrounds them. This difference, manifested in such wicked tags, cements unity within the Mara Salvatrucha culture by setting MS-13 against all of those communities that marginalize and condemn them. Simultaneously, it relays affirms that they understand that in “normal” society they are the enemy, and the maras use this villainy as a form of empowerment. The statement is similar to the facial tattoos, whereby MS-13 members tattoo there face in defiance of what is expected in a normative urban culture. Placing ink on the face goes against what is generally accepted, and so the process of facial tattooing results in a voluntary separation from society. This is a very important technique considering that toughness, or “being hard,” is a key component in the Mara Salvatrucha community. As such, the MS-13 member shifts the power of agency into their own hands, with a willful and voluntary act of marginalization that
occurs before society can alienate them. In other words, they are not passive actors in the imaginary of violence, but active agents, who choose to separate of their own volition, relying on the gang for community and nationality. These evil images painted on walls serve a similar purpose. Mara Salvatrucha members accept the role of enemy and foment the idea by relating their behavior, their crazy life to demonic imagery. Mara Salvatrucha members could choose any way to draw or tattoo these hands. They could take the form of regular hands, for example. Still, the demon hand is, by far, the most common way in which this particular symbol is depicted. This tagged imagery, and thus this acceptance, harmonizes with Mara Salvatrucha tattoos in the same way as in the images that are presented throughout. In other words, across all forms of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, the gang members represent themselves as malevolent, as entities that appropriate fearsome symbolism in order to confirm their contempt for regular society.

The bodies of the Mara Salvatrucha gang members depicted in Figures 12 and 13 mimic the scaly hands in the form of demon horns that are seen in the various pictures presented above. One has the demon hands in the center of his chest, while the other places the sign on his cheek, in a very visible and prominent part of his body. These tattoos, then, serve as mobile billboards for their statements of opposability. Graffiti is static, immobile, and left for those from the out-group who pass by. The tattoos, however, move as the mara moves, etched into a living, breathing body of text that takes its message of voluntary segregation everywhere.
3.8 Images for Chapter Three

Figure 27. Example of "piecing," where various independent MS-13 tags come together to form a more intricate mural (fbi.gov).

Figure 28. Another example of piecing, where the original "MS" tag serves as the grounds for the tombstones. This is also an example of the extension of the graveyard motif past tattoos and onto walls in MS-13 territories (bombingscience.com).
Figure 29. Mara Salvatrucha battles the 18th Street Gang on a wall in the Pico/Union area of Los Angeles.

Figure 30. Detail from Figure 29 showing an 18th Street tagger "going over" or crossing out the MS-13 graffiti.
Figure 31. MS-13 tag written in diamond font. The sparkles above the main word "sur," represents the diamond shining. Also, it includes the phrase "rifa," meaning "ruler" (fbi.gov).

Figure 32. "P/V" tag meaning "por vida," or that the MS-13 member is in the gang for life (Courtesy of Stephanie Aubrey).
Figure 33. "P/V" together with "rifa" on a pieced together mural. A rival gang has "gone over" the main tag (flickr.com/photos/northwestgangs).

Figure 34. The word "puto" tagged on the back of a street sign on 7th Avenue, in downtown Los Angeles.
Figure 35. Graffiti tags many feet above a busy freeway (melroseandfairfax.blogspot.com).

Figure 36. Mara Salvatrucha tag written in diamond font (nsgangcops.org).
Figure 37. MS-13 tattoo inked in a diamond script that is almost identical to the tag shown in Figure 36 (zimbio.com).

Figure 38. Another example of how the diamond script transcends graffiti and spreads to tattooed MS-13 members (tattooidea.org).
Figure 39. An example of an easy-to-read Mara Salvatrucha tag in straight font. The letter "M" when joined with the Roman numeral X and the number 3 signifies MS-13.

Figure 40. Another MS-13 tag in straight font, in McArthur Park, Los Angeles. The tagger has gone over the rival gang tag, and inserted the MS-13 name in a display of territorial dominance.
Figure 41. The Mara Salvatrucha gang name appears over a gone-over 18th Street Gang tag. Along with the straight font, we see the common devil hand in the form of the MS-13 hand-sign, as well as three dots representing la vida loca (ptoday.blogspot.com).

Figure 42. Sprawling MS-13 graveyard commonly seen across all forms of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture (coreydaymission.blogspot.com).
Figure 43. Going over in a different way—city attempts at covering MS-13 graffiti in the Pico/Union of Los Angeles.

Figure 44. Another example that the battle over wall space is not only limited to rival gangs. Here, as in Figure 42, city agencies go over, or cover up, Mara Salvatrucha graffiti in Pico/Union.
Figure 45. These two sets of pyramidal dots represent *la vida loca*. Interweaved within the loop, it could suggest that the tagger believes that the crazy life is an inseparable part of MS-13 life.

Figure 46. Another example of the *la vida loca* dot pyramid, in Korea Town, Los Angeles.
Figure 47. *La vida loca* dots under a mara’s eye, possibly signifying the crazy things that he has seen as an MS-13 member (whiskerino.org).

Figure 48. *La vida loca* dots on the back of the hand, possibly representing that the subject built his crazy life with his own hands (drtattoff.com).
Figure 49. An example of a "Laugh/Smile Now, Cry Later," tattoo (northernsoultattoo.co.uk).

Figure 50. Once again, the "Laugh Now, Cry Later" motif, this time with skulls instead of the drama masks. This ink, as well as the kind pictured in Figure 49, closely resembles the masks seen in previous Figures with MS-13 graffiti (mafiatattoos.blogspot.com).
Figure 51. Mara Salvatrucha devil hand tag in San Salvador (Courtesy of Stephanie Aubrey).

Figure 52. Another example of an MS-13 hand-sign tag, this time joined by a crossed-out 18, representing the rival 18th street gang (tomdiaz.wordpress.com).
Chapter 4

Hip-Hop is not Dead: The Emergence of Mara Salvatrucha Rap as a form of MS-13 Expressive Culture

4.1 Introduction

In 2006, hip-hop veteran, Nas, declared that hip-hop was dead. This may seem like an unusual proclamation to those who have witnessed the proliferation of hip-hop culture and rap on the radio and on music television over the last two decades. This boom, however, is precisely the reason for the genre’s death, in the rapper’s opinion. Nas’ thoughts on the perceived demise of rap are especially relevant, considering his position as one of hip-hop’s founding fathers. He released his first album, Illmatic, in 1994, at a time when rap music still held on to its modest roots. Around the same time, Tupac rapped about his mother coming to visit him in jail after an arrest incited by racial profiling, Public Enemy lyrically battled racist police procedures in some of the most underprivileged neighborhoods in the United States, and The Notorious B.I.G. reminisced how “birthdays were the worst days,” since his mother had no money to buy presents.

The last twenty years have seen a shift from these foundational concerns towards a more superficial set of themes. Today, rap has largely become a way to boast about monetary gain and material wealth, using toned down language that separates itself from the gritty, rough lyrics associated with the rap of the late eighties and early nineties. Alongside this
new superficiality, Nas’ criticism of what rap has become lashes out against commercialization, technological over-production, and “studio gangsters,” or rappers who claim to be gangsters in the studio, but who themselves came from middle class, even affluent, upbringings with little or no knowledge about the violence in the inner city. In his song, “Hip-hop is Dead,” Nas asks “what influenced my raps? Stick ups and killings, kidnappings, project buildings, drug dealings.” This street narrative “went from turntables to mp3s, from Beat Street (1984 movie about hip-hop culture) to commercials on Mickey D’s, from gold cables to Jacobs (Marc Jacobs, fashion designer), from plain facials to Botox and face lifts.” For Nas, rap has lost its edge, and it has separated itself from its roots.

This chapter argues that a specific sector of the population still produces a kind of rap that remains true to those hip-hop originators who felt that their style of music and lyrics shed light on an underrepresented, ignored, and often vilified culture. Mara Salvatrucha rap draws from the 80s and 90s Black gangsta rap in order to relate their own stories of growing up and surviving on the streets. This gang music reflects violence, poverty, and hardship while also asserting that banding together as a community provides the only real protection from these societal ills. What is more, Mara Salvatrucha rap extends beyond the limits of Compton, Watts, or other localized environments, and spreads its narrative past the United States, and on to Latin America. The listener can hear about life on the streets of El Salvador and in the neighborhoods of Guatemala, in addition to inner city and suburban Los Angeles. With this connection to Los Angeles, it should come as no surprise that Mara Salvatrucha rap borrows from such performers as
N.W.A., Tupac, and Ice-T, as the gang itself originated from areas of Southern California which were very close to these popular artists’ home bases. And so, MS-13 rap includes guns, drive-bys, and a defiance of police and other state run authority structures. The videos that accompany many of the songs perpetuate the same gang aesthetic started thirty years ago by Los Angeles-based West Coast rappers. They show cars on hydraulics, added to make the vehicle bounce up and down. The rappers wear different color bandanas, sports jerseys, and sag their jeans well below their waists. Even the construction of the song, from the production side, reflects the influence of West Coast gangsta rap. They use similar beats, and like their Blood and Crip-related musical forefathers, they cannot rely on the expensive technology that Nas so vehemently opposes. There is no access to expensive equipment, multi-million dollar recording studios, or any of the other polishing methods that, Nas would argue, make contemporary mainstream rap songs sound artificial. Mara Salvatrucha rap is a grassroots endeavor, raw, largely because the gang uses the same rudimentary tools that were available to the originators of rap all more than three decades ago.

Although the influence of gangsta rap is evident, there is a particularly original narrative that comes out through MS-13 lyrics and beats, one expressing a specifically Mara Salvatrucha reality. In some cases, traditional gangsta rap themes and language are recoded to better fit the MS-13 culture; in others, an entirely new set of symbols are incorporated, pulling from the previously discussed Mara Salvatrucha language, as seen in their tattoos and graffiti. Both the influence of, and the break from, gangsta rap results in an in-group form of expression whose main aim is to create a representation of the
gang in its own terms, and without the interference or intrusion of non-members. Like Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti, MS-13 rap epitomizes a self-representative narrative, where the rappers formulate the messages in a way that they, as in-group members, believe best identifies their culture. The following analysis will look at the various ways in which Mara Salvatrucha rap negotiates the creation of this identity through its lyrics and music, in a general sense. Additionally, by focusing attention on two songs that are most representative of the messages that predominate in Mara Salvatrucha rap, it will become apparent that a strong link exists between this musical genre and other examples of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture. Hip-hop is not dead. It is alive and well, flourishing in one of the most marginalized and feared communities in the world.

4.2 “No Message, Just Reality:” Rap and Gangsta Rap Criticism and Mara Salvatrucha Rap

Rap music evolved from a simple, grassroots movement started in basements and garages all over underdeveloped, inner-city neighborhoods, into the worldwide enterprise that exists today. The evolution is paralleled in rap’s importance within academia, shifting its original perception as a rebellious, underground phenomenon to an artistic form that has assumed a prominent role in scholarly debates converging on topics such as urban postcolonial studies, postmodernism, and subalternity, among others. This critical focus on the musical genre serves as a testament to the importance of rap as an urban form of expression. Of all of the rap subgenres, “gangsta rap” best relates to the current study. Gangsta rap engages many of the same social and economic topics that Mara Salvatrucha
members face daily, in particular poverty, violence, fear, marginalization, and the attempt to elevate oneself from the dreadful conditions of the slums and government projects that the rappers may have called home. What follows, then, is a synopsis of theory published on rap music that most pertains to MS-13. Such a critical framework allows us to better understand how MS-13 rap came into existence, and it introduces a methodology with which to critically examine how Mara Salvatrucha rap has become an important form of expression within the gang.

Individually, scholars such as Timothy Francis Strode, Tricia Rose, Craig Watkins, Hashim A. Shomari, Bakari Kitwana, Sami H. Alim, John Hagedorn, and others have traced the origins and evolution of rap. All of them consider rap a sub-section of hip-hop culture, a countercultural movement that also includes activities such as graffiti, break-dancing, and beat boxing (creating rap beats using sounds created from the mouth). Previous chapters have already established that ink and tags play a vital role in the MS-13 community. These cultural expressions relate to Mara Salvatrucha rap in that, together, all three interact in a specific hip-hop culture that is specific to the gang. Rap, graffiti, and tattoos produce a narrative that characterizes MS-13 in their own, specific language.

These scholars confirm that the term “hip-hop” originates from the song “Rapper’s Delight,” recorded by the Sugar Hill Gang. Released in 1980, “Rapper’s Delight,” begins with the lyrics “I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop, and you don’t stop,” establishing the term “hip-hop” as the widespread word used to describe the lifestyle. The song’s title also placed the use of the words “rapper” and “rap” into the popular cultural mainstream as a way to identify the music and those that
perform it, especially when considering that “Rappers Delight” was the first rap single to reach Top 40 status. The popularity of the song spawned a number of groups and individual performers that cemented rap music as the popular form that persists today. Watkins, Shomari, Strode and others emphasize that before the commercial success of the Sugar Hill Gang, however, urban youths had spent years grouping together and improvising lyrics that related the difficulty of inner-city life. This technique, known as “flowing” or “free-styling,” shed light on the violence and squalor that these young men and women dealt with on a day-to-day basis. Once the Sugar Hill Gang gained popularity with a broader audience, many of these youths saw rap as a viable expressive form that could extend outwards, past their own neighborhoods. Mara Salvatrucha rap, except for a few exceptions that will be analyzed later, shares in the genre’s more general, incipient roots, where MS-13 members with little access to any kind of musical recording equipment flow over beats created with fists that bang on table tops. Their rap songs deal with death, with making money through any means necessary, and with the many other details that make up Mara life.

From a cultural studies perspective, Theresa Martínez considers rap a way in which oppressed urban groups discover a method to resist systematic injustice (267). This injustice manifests itself in the form of perceived institutional discrimination, racial profiling, and urban decay (268). She argues that these oppressed groups developed rap as a culture of resistance that embodies a set of values, beliefs and practices which mitigates the effects of subjugation, and, in turn, reaffirms that which is distinct between the rappers and the majority culture or out-group (268). In other words, music provides
an outlet, a way to vent about the crushing social conditions that many of the rappers face, a release valve which allows a way to let out the frustrations which arise from urban life. Rap, then, represents resistance towards social isolation, economic fragility, and the shrinking of social service organizations (272). At the same time, rap assumes the role of a means by which inner-city dwellers can survive within the dominant social order by giving them a way to articulate their frustrations in a creative fashion (272). In providing a platform on which to create a voice for urban youth, within the atmosphere of neglect and crisis, rap music serves as an internal threat to the global social order by way of its obvious and vocal critiques of hegemonic structures (273). This is particularly relevant to Mara Salvatrucha. The prior chapters have already discussed many of the ways in which these hegemonic structures have pushed MS-13 members to the margins, even before they were ever members of the gang. They were deported from or incarcerated in their home nations, and so their countries of origin represent political constructs that consistently shove them towards the periphery. Schools do little to provide a proper education in their own impoverished neighborhood, and so they feel as though the educational system ignores them. Police organizations fail to protect the youngsters from gang violence; therefore many join Mara Salvatrucha in order to, literally, save their lives. The poverty and lack of economic opportunity in their urban communities means unemployment, and the necessity to look for alternative methods to sustain a living, mainly through the illicit activities in which Mara Salvatrucha engages. These are just a few examples of the hegemonic structures that Martínez alludes to when she argues that
rap music is a declamation against certain social mechanisms that were supposed to exist for the protection and wellbeing of the citizens.

Gangsta rap, a popular subgenre, focuses specifically on la vida loca explained in the previous chapter. Various street groups have different nomenclature. For example, Tupac made the idea of “thug life” popular, during the nineties, as a descriptive which highlights the illegal actions many young Black gang members relied upon to make money. Yet, despite the different source and name, the idea of a “thug life” creates a synergy between the various minority groups who depend on street gangs in order to survive. Both terms engage the idea of desperation, the necessity to survive, and the reality of violence that urban youths in underprivileged neighborhoods deal with. Gangsta rap songs talk about drive-by shootings, drug trafficking, pimping prostitutes, and other illegal activities that are undertaken in the name of the gang they represent, but also as a form of street braggadocio, confirming their credibility as tough-guys. Simultaneously, gangsta rap also mentions the protection and support provided by their gang community, how their “homies got their backs.” In other words, the illicit activities are justifiable because they are done in order to cement the relationship with those in the gangs that they belong to. Other gangsta rap songs pay homage to fallen gang members. They mention pouring beer and liquor on the sidewalk pavement, a street metaphor that represents paying your respects to dead gang members, an act similar to placing flowers on a headstone. And so, these acts of remembrance parallel the already mentioned graveyards that we see tattooed on the bodies of MS-13 members and spray painted on the walls.
Gangsta rap, then, hones in on the very particular social dynamics that exist within the street gang community.

To that end, Hagedorn, in *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*, believes that rap is a central way for gang members and “other young people” to make meaning out of their lives (93). Rap gives the youngsters a “life-line,” and it serves as way to “pull kids from the self-hatred and destructive behavior” originating from poverty and racism, through a creative and artistic act—a very human act in a world that attempts to strip humanity away from gang members (95). Hagedorn quotes the rapper Ice Cube, who says that rap has “no message, just reality” (97). And this is a violent, cutthroat reality, where just about everyone in the out-group is an enemy. Because of this existence, the in-group of fellow gang members develops into the only community that the rapper feels that he or she belongs to. Still, this kind of violent imagery, the murder and beatings, the car-jackings, the rough language, and more leaves gangsta rap regarded as one of the most controversial forms of music of the last quarter of a century. However, rap is intended to be negative because the rappers believe, through their first-hand experiences, that the streets are negative (97). Therefore, rappers channel this negativity in order to come to terms with living in ghetto conditions that the government and business sectors are unlikely to fix (98). Hagedorn believes that rap is a form of testimony for these underclass residents and the gangs that flourish in their neighborhoods (98). It is their chance to “tell it like it is,” so to speak, basing their stories on first-hand, witnessed events that many in the out-group are unaware of, or simply do not care about. Rap allows these urban youths to tell their stories, to narrate their lives
and the history of their community, much in the same way that tattoos and graffiti do. It is a way to persevere in spite of the violence and misery, a way to become durable and permanent in a fleeting and often truncated life (98).

Alexander Riley extends Hagedorn’s research, arguing that rap music reflects the perceived external destiny of inner city teens (304). This destiny, often times involve death or incarceration, more than likely, at a very young age. If the youngster can escape murder or jail, he or she must face horrible economic situations, and few job prospects that allow anything more than living hand-to-mouth. This external destiny, like gangsta rap, is mostly negative. Rap provides one of the only means of transcending that destiny in an exercise that meets the fear of death and poverty head-on, in order to overcome this fear (304). The rapper sees suffering as inevitable and he or she embraces this suffering as parts of life that cannot be changed, even in the case of his or her own death (304). They proceed despite this fact. They accept this destiny, recognizing that there is no solution that can change their life (304). It is a case of affirmation and acceptance, as opposed to rejection and denial (305). A comparable sentiment can be seen in the “laugh now, cry later” tattoos seen on MS-13 members. The rappers do not see a future. Their outlook is bleak, when taking into account the experiences rapped in their songs. So they contend with this harsh future by confronting the present, confronting it head-on. Similarly, rap music accepts the present by affirming its existence, without shying away from it, or denying it, leaving the future as some ephemeral possibility that can be dealt with when, or if, it arrives. This would explain the number of rap songs that deal with mourning the loss of a friend or family member who died on the street. Riley draws a
connection to *Hamlet*, claiming that the rappers are in possession of a dreadful piece of knowledge that others lack or refuse to see, and they know that this knowledge will prove fatal. In this way, rap serves as an important way to understand and explain already-existing violence on the streets—a violence that has been there for generations, and shows little sign of letting up (305).

However, it is essential to point out that, although studies such as these provide interesting perspectives from which to analyze both rap and gang culture, I believe that they homogenize gangs into one essential body. Although they give researchers a foundation to work from, they fail to take into account the specificity of each different gang culture. I have pointed out the similarities that unite all rap, and, more specifically, gangsta rap. These connections are examined in order to place millions of urban youths along a common social, economic, and political continuum with the aim of relating the musical genre between a vast group of people who relies on rap music as their primary form of oral expression. Yet, all the children and teenagers that join gangs are not the same, nor are their reasons for joining the gang. In the United States, West Coast gangsta rap differs greatly from East Coast gangsta rap. Likewise, the rap that comes from different ethnic groups is also very different. How does Chicano rap differ from Black rap, or even Salvadoran rap? How does the rap that comes from different neighborhoods containing the same predominate minority differ from community to community, from country to country? What is the difference between Bloods, Crips, Latin Kingz, and Mara Salvatrucha rap? Although the current study does not intend to answer these particular
questions, the queries do bring attention to the problematic that arises from over-arching analyses of gangsta rap.

This problem becomes apparent in the complete lack of scholarship on Mara Salvatrucha rap. Almost nothing has been written discussing rap from an MS-13 standpoint, and what little has been released often appears in those same forms of media and communication that I argue serve only to sensationalize and even glamorize the Mara Salvatrucha way of life—newspapers, magazines, news reports, cable documentaries, and even websites dedicated to extolling the virtues of the Mara Salvatrucha \textit{vida loca}.

Alexander Riley questions how other audiences, outside of the gang world (that is to say the out-group), might bring different symbolic tools in their deciphering of rap music and culture, a notion that becomes particularly interesting when considering that the little contact that those outside of MS-13 have with Mara rap often come from viewing videos that are posted on Youtube.com and other websites (300). How do these viewers of the Mara videos react to the words that are rapped, and simultaneously, to the images of tattoos, graffiti and hand-signs that are demonstrated in the videos? There is the possibility that it leads to entire sectors of non-gang affiliated populations that look at MS-13 members as kinds of folk heroes, anti-establishment personalities who are seen as villains by the status quo in their desire to resist and clash against the social order. Such a dynamic is examined in Kitwana’s \textit{Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America}. Kitwana’s “new reality” includes adolescents of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds who emulate the images and styles seen in rap that shouldn’t otherwise correspond to them from a social, economic, or
even racial perspective— in other words, the suburban youth who comes from a middle-class background, who has had a substantial public school education, and the hope for a future that doesn’t involve gangbanging. Saggy pants, wearing bandanas of certain colors which represent a particular gang, changing their way of speaking and language in order to copy the vocabulary heard in the rap songs, these are just some of the many ways in which the youngsters that Kitwana studies demonstrate their connection to an in-group that really isn’t theirs at all. Conversely, another sector of the population could see the transnational nature of Mara Salvatrucha and the sensationalized depictions of violence as portrayed by the media, and react in a completely opposite way. The at-home viewer or casual listener might vilify MS-13 members in a way that their gangsta rap predecessors were not, at least in the hip-hop community. Later, a close reading of various online forum messages will prove that many hip-hop fans do not view MS-13 members as folk heroes; instead, they are conceived as evil, maniacal, and irredeemable.

These doubts and the lack of scholarship on Mara Salvatrucha serve as the driving force behind this chapter. I add to the existing scholarly research on both rap and gang culture by establishing an analysis that stems directly from the Mara Salvatrucha community. How is Mara Salvatrucha rap different from all others? How does it connect with the other forms of cultural expression, mainly tattoos, graffiti, and hand signs? How does MS-13 rap, like the aforementioned forms, work to solidify Mara nationalism? In what ways does Mara Salvatrucha rap respond to, conflict against, or even affirm the presentation of the gang in various forms of popular and social media? These are some of the pressing questions that a close study of MS-13 gangsta rap hopes to answer.
4.3 Uncertainty and La vida loca: An Overview of Mara Salvatrucha Rap

Uncertainty stands as one of the most significant obstacles that interfere with the study of Mara Salvatrucha rap. In the expressive culture examined before, there is a certain degree of separation between the mara, the cultural articulation, and the out-group. For example, tattooed MS-13 members deal almost exclusively with their gang when modifying their bodies. Even the artists who work on their ink tend to claim Mara Salvatrucha allegiance. Likewise, graffiti taggers employ their skills under the cover of night, or shrouded amongst the shadows of large buildings and overpasses. The murals appear on a wall overnight, quickly, in places where a blank wall existed just hours before. As an example, Figures 54 and 55 show how the side wall of my hotel in Los Angeles changed from bare to tagged and back to bare over the course of one evening. This hidden tagging and covering up persisted for the two weeks that I spent on West Seventh Street. The tagger remains anonymous in his or her work, arriving, spray-painting, and disappearing—the only evidence of his or her identity in the gang-name signature intertwined with the script. They remain largely unseen, and therefore unidentified individually by the urban population at-large, aside from the gang members that out-group members may see in news reports, documentaries, and other media sources.

Producing rap for a mass audience presumably removes the anonymity associated with tattooing and graffiti because it involves an identifiable voice that circulates around a neighborhood or city. The voice raps about la vida loca, threatening violence, admitting to the possession of caches of weapons, and narrating past crimes. This is both dangerous to the rapper, in terms of rival gangs, and incriminating, in terms of the risk of openly
admitting to committing a crime. As recently as 2008, Pico Rivera police officers arrested Los Angeles MS-13 member Anthony Garcia in connection with an unsolved 2004 murder outside of a liquor store (Faturechi). His tattoos, specifically one depicting the liquor store murder on his chest, provided the key piece of evidence needed to convict him for the crime. The indictment came as a result of expressing too much, in this case with ink. Mara Salvatrucha rappers confess to dozens of these kinds of crimes on every album that they create, and therefore run the risk of arrest and incarceration, particularly if the CD falls into police hands.

More so, a rap artist who has Mara Salvatrucha affiliations may find it more difficult to succeed in the rap industry, not only because of the possible legal repercussions, but also because of the negative perception of the gang on a global scale. Of course, it could be argued that connections to the Bloods and Crips increased the album sales of performers and groups such as Ice-T, N.W.A, and Tupac in the nineties. Still, neither of these gangs was ever allegedly associated with terrorist activity both in and out of the United States. Although not officially on the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, recent studies have linked Mara Salvatrucha activities in both the United States and Central America with Al-Qaeda cells, with special emphasis placed on MS-13’s alleged ability to smuggle weapons and terrorists into the United States (Starita, Williams, et al.). Whether these allegations are true or whether they exist in order to perpetuate a state of fear in this country is questionable, as most of these accusations rely on questionable second-hand sources. Regardless of the authenticity of these claims, however, the accusations are broadcast via internet and television programming.
propelling the Mara Salvatrucha threat into a much more transnational arena, where anyone in the public sphere has the opportunity to believe in the gang’s connection to Islamic fundamentalism. The violence and “thug-life” rapped about in Blood and Crip rap of the nineties represented a localized force of resistance against an oppressive system, and therefore made it appealing to an audience that had never heard such music. Alternatively, for those who accept the Department of Homeland Security’s statements as unquestionable fact, Mara Salvatrucha reflects countless international atrocities enacted in dozens of countries, culminating in the terrorism narrative and the gang’s supposed connection to the greatest enemy of them all—Al-Qaeda.

These connections to international terrorism, and the mediatic depiction of the gang in general, then, possibly hinder the sales of albums. An Amazon.com search of both already-established and up-and-coming rappers with Mara Salvatrucha links reveals very little selection, mostly in the form of individual MP3’s and seldom in full albums. In comparison, a search for Street Military, an obscure and gang-affiliated Houston group, results in numerous hits. In other words, Amazon’s selection includes little-known, often out of print music, as evidenced by the Street Military example. Yet, Latino rappers with MS-13 connections do not have the same exposure on such a site, and even less on Best Buy, iTunes, Wal-Mart, and Barnes and Noble’s web-based music stores. This lack could be attributed to the popular aversion towards Mara Salvatrucha, less as a street gang, like the Crips and Bloods, and more as a transnational, murderous entity that threatens the safety of the world and its citizens. This is evident, even within the online rap fanatic community, where members of various forums and message boards constantly look for
new rap artists and songs to enjoy. In a thread titled “Any good MS-13 related rappers?” on the Rapworlds.com hip-hop forum, the responses to the original poster’s question are predominately negative. One member answers “MS13 cut throats; not tracks.” Another typed “MS are out of there fuckin’ minds, in staton on Long island they got initiation nights where they drive around, bump into your car, and if you stop and get out they have to shoot you in the face. Just happened recently, shit’s sick.” I am quoting directly from the post, and so keeping the misspelled words. GrandNOBLE (a username) replied “I didn't know Mara Salvaruchua members knew how to do anything but seek, kill and destroy. Oh yeah. Mutilate. 4 skills they possess in abundance.” Other reactions include: “Fuck MS 13... The gang shit never ends,” “fuck gangsters and rappers who promote that lifestyle.” It is very important to highlight that these users come to these kinds of forums in order to get recommendations on new rap music, because they want to talk about their favorite artists or albums, and foremost for the sake of their love for hip-hop music. Simultaneously, these same users who responded with aggressive, anti-gang retorts, list artists such as N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dog, and Ice-T as their favorite rappers, on their user profiles—performers with well-documented gang roots. Others include Eminem, who frequently describes instances of murder, child abduction, and rape in his music. All of these performers, and various others, not only openly discuss their gang affiliations, but also rap about violence, crime, and death.

Why, then, would the rap of Mara Salvaruchua members strike such web posters any differently? I propose that the answer lies in the perception of MS-13, as opposed to the Bloods and Crips, where Mara Salvaruchua is considered more than just a street gang.
MS-13 activities differ very little from the crimes perpetrated by other gangs. The Bloods and Crips murder, they have stolen property, and they have both been known to engage in full-scale shootouts in neighborhoods across the United States. The posters specifically mention their distaste for Mara Salvatrucha acts of mutilation and murder, perhaps suggesting a reason for the more aversive reaction to MS-13 rap. Yet, Eminem has songs that describe torturing and killing his ex-wife and disposing of her body. Likewise, the examples of murder and gang belligerence recorded on albums over the course of the last three decades of gangsta rap have been well-documented. From a narrative perspective, these actions are the same as those lived by Mara Salvatrucha gang members. One could argue that the violence performed in Eminem’s lyrics are substantially worse, since they occur outside of the realm of any kind of gang activity. In other words, Eminem’s violence is a demonstration of individualized, sociopathic behavior, and not the result of violence for the sake of street survival. Still, there is a distinct difference in perception between Eminem, the Bloods and Crips and MS-13. Mara Salvatrucha is perceived as an international crime syndicate, bordering on a terrorist group, which transcends physical boundaries in their control of neighborhoods and, ultimately, entire countries. In 1988, a Midwestern American, suburb-residing teenager who played an N.W.A cassette in his Walkman listened to the brutal, anti-establishment lyrics knowing well that the narrated criminal behavior existed in a small neighborhood, thousands of miles away. The same is true for an early nineties teenager listening to Eminem. Compton, California and 8-Mile, Detroit were imagined places where people died, where guns were fired, and where the gangs ruled entire street blocks. The distance provided a sense of safety, and so the music
could be heard without anxiety. Today, this same kind of teenager, the kind who reads the forums mentioned above, with access to the internet, cable, and movies, believes that Mara Salvatrucha is in their neighborhood, across the street from them, maybe even in their own backyard. They or their parents may watch television documentaries such as National Geographic’s *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, in which the narrator warns the viewer that Mara Salvatrucha “may already be in a neighborhood near you.” This understanding of the gang from the out-group, public sector may be one of the reasons why the reaction to MS-13 is so negative, and why their rap neither receives the exposure nor warrants the popularity of gangsta rap from the nineties.

Rappers with MS-13 links do not boldly claim their affiliation to the gang, as Blood and Crips members did twenty years ago. Conversations with Los Angeles anti-gang task force officers revealed that Mara Salvatrucha members recorded compact discs as a recruitment tool, but that these were very difficult to acquire and even more difficult to use as an identifier of possible MS-13 members. Simply put, the rappers never revealed their names on these recordings, and their lyrics always used the kinds of codified messages seen in MS-13 tattoos and graffiti. The song’s references to the gang are veiled in the same kind of insular language of symbols and metaphors reflected in MS-13 tattoos and graffiti. According to the task force agents, these albums mostly come from amateur rappers who rap as a hobby. In these cases, outwardly pronouncing their gang nickname in the song would identify them not only to the police agencies looking to arrest them, but also to rival gang members who would like nothing more to retaliate violently against their enemy. Alternatively and like Blood and Crip gang members in the
nineties, some Mara Salvatrucha members have the desire to become professional rappers. For those who look to make a public career out of recording and performing music, the same kind of dangers prohibit them using direct references to the gang. Additionally, a brazen mention of MS-13 gang life could hurt their exposure, or diminish record sales. The forum posts examined above substantiate this fear, as a large number of self-professed rap lovers overtly demonstrate disgust for the MS-13 lifestyle, meaning that they conceivably would not buy their albums. Such negative feelings effectively reduce the market for any MS-13 rap that blatantly affiliates itself with the gang. More importantly, my interviews with maras revealed that the primary aim of Mara Salvatrucha is the accumulation of money, and revealing direct links to the gang could encumber this goal, precisely because of the perception of the gang from the out-group.

This desired anonymity results in the biggest challenge associated with studying Mara Salvatrucha rap—identifying MS-13 rappers. To this end, I had to rely on internet message boards and forum posts that hinted at possible Mara Salvatrucha rappers, and then listen to their songs, searching for illusive mentions of the gang’s culture. This research revealed possible MS-13 rappers who have recorded albums individually, and who have also appeared on tracks recorded by more well-known hip-hop artists in the industry. It is important to underscore that rappers such as L’il Cuete, Dr. Dyablo, Mr. Pelón 503, Galeano el HJ, Mentes Criminales, Mr. Shadow, as well as others, do not officially or publicly claim affiliation to Mara Salvatrucha. As we shall see, their connection is inferred via their song lyrics, and additionally their music videos, both of
which are replete with the same kind of symbology and slang of Mara Salvatrucha discussed previously in regards to MS-13 tattoos and graffiti.

This brings about a question of motivation. Considering all of the adverse results associated with declaring a connection to Mara Salvatrucha, either directly or in an encoded manner, one has to wonder why rap artists would risk their futures as performers, or more, their lives, by recording music reflecting the MS-13 way of life. Why jeopardize a rapping career by subjecting yourself to attacks from other gangs, the chance of arrest, limited exposure, negative feedback, or stunted record sales? For the amateur rappers who produce recruitment compact discs, the answer to the question is straightforward. They want to expand the gang by drawing interest to their lifestyle through their music. But for more public rappers linked to the gang, the reason behind the need to release albums characterizing their Mara Salvatrucha connections becomes much more complicated. Galeano el HJ, for example, one of the rappers most associated with the Mara Salvatrucha version of *la vida loca*, has appeared on songs by popular, Grammy nominated artist Game (formerly The Game). Such a cameo cements Galeano el HJ’s position as a mid-level, yet profitable and widely heard rapper. And while Galeano’s rumored relationship with Mara Salvatrucha could reinforce his credibility within the gang, it could also threaten this position as a professional artist. In Galeano’s case, the answer to the above question of motivation may lie in a sentiment as simple as the desire to “tell the truth,” or, as Hagedorn says “tell it like it is.” Rappers like Galeano may seek a means by which to narrate all of the difficulties related to living on the streets. These challenges could include poverty, marginalization, and/or the violence that is analogous
to the Mara Salvatrucha way of life. More importantly, this need tell their version of the truth must manifest in a way that does not depend on characterizations of the gang that originate from outside of the group. Returning to Alexander Riley, Mara Salvatrucha rap serves a therapeutic purpose, where the gang member/rapper faces the aforementioned hardships head on and in their music, without ignoring or giving in to apathy. In any of these cases, the testimonial obligation to tell their stories, in their language, and in their own specific discursive format seems to outweigh all of the presumed risks. This is precisely why we see a number of these more popular rappers keep hold of their Mara Salvatrucha roots, even if in an encoded manner. The encrypted language relates directly to the previous examples of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture previously seen in this dissertation, with nuances that become clear after further analysis. For now, however, it is important to understand that accepting the risks of incarceration, low record sales, and even death parallels the reasons why MS-13 members join the gang in the first place, killing for them, serving time for the crimes that they commit in the MS-13 name, and sacrificing their own personal well-being for the greater good of Mara Salvatrucha. The importance of the community, the Mara Nation, overrides their individual concerns and their obligation to the gang supersedes any other categorial identity.

What follows is a close reading of two rap songs that best exemplify a Mara Salvatrucha aesthetic that is entirely independent from out-group portrayals, whether those originate in movies, cinema, or news programming. “La mara anda suelta,” by Galeano el HJ, and “We Got Guns,” by L’il Cuete represent autochthonous characterizations of MS-13 that clash against the more sensationalized accounts of the
gang, manipulated by the media and also law enforcement organizations. Despite these songs’ resistance against such portrayals, they do not necessarily negate these mediatic and authoritative depictions entirely. Many of the lyrical images therein may in fact support the common perception of Mara Salvatrucha as violent, globalized criminals. And yet, Mara Salvatrucha rap narrates this violence on its own terms, using its own register of pictures and jargon, thereby creating one of the few MS-13-specific cultural articulations that broadcasts an in-group representation of the gang.

4.4. Mara Salvatrucha Running Wild: Galeano el HJ and “La mara anda suelta”

Analyzing the song “La mara anda suelta” reinforces the intentional anonymity related of Mara Salvatrucha rap. There is no clear indication as to who sings the song. Internet video sites and the user comments attached to the music (YouTube, Metacafe) attribute the song to two different rappers, Galeano el HJ and Mr. Pelón 503, both of which are rumored members of MS-13, or at least have some kind of connection to them. There are two different rapping voices in the song, one of them possibly Galeano and the other Mr. Pelón. The low quality of the recording makes it difficult to compare either voice with other recordings that these rappers have made. After further exploration, and considering Galeano’s work as a producer on albums made by other Latino, and specifically Salvadoran, rappers, it would seem as though Galeano el HJ is the principal architect of the song, perhaps providing the beat, the lyrics, and the focal point of the vocals. Mr. Pelón 503 appears in a cameo role; much like Galeano himself has done in songs recorded by Game. Galeano, then, at various points and depending on the recording assumes the position of both public hip-hop artist (his work with Game) and underground
Mara Salvatrucha rapper (“La mara anda suelta”). Here, both aspects of his rapping career converge into one track. I believe that he lends his professional skills as both a producer and emcee in the construction of this track. Likewise, he also assumes the position of the more covert rappers from the alleged recruitment CDs, where promoting a characterization of the gang supersedes the need to sell albums and make money.

Hector José Galeano uses the moniker Galeano el HJ as his rap name. Of course, assuming a pseudonym is very common in the rap industry, but it is also worth noting that gang members also traditionally assume nicknames in order to separate themselves from the lives that they had before they were in the gang. Very little biographical information is available on Galeano el HJ’s background. There are at least seven MySpace pages that claim to be the Galeano el HJ official page, but one specifically is linked to a number of the performer’s YouTube videos. This page (www.myspace.com/galeanoelhj) lists San Miguel, El Salvador as one of his locations, possibly meaning that this city is his birthplace, and also a hotbed for recent Mara Salvatrucha activity. His Twitter feed confirms San Miguel as his birthplace, stating “Nacido y Crecido en San Miguel El Salvador [sic].” Also under the location category, his profile names Compton, California, Los Angeles, New York, and “el mundo entero” (the entire world). This interesting detail may relate to his own connection with Mara Salvatrucha, and the gang’s own spread across the Americas. Like his gang, he is at once in Los Angeles, New York, El Salvador, and all over the rest of the globe.

Reverbnation.com, an online music website dedicated to independent label music, has a very small bio of the performer:
Hector Jose Galeano conocido por la Gente como Galeano el hj o H'ache
Nacido en San Miguel El Salvador C.A. Uno de los Mejores Exponentes
del Hip hop Salvadoreños con Miles de personas que siguen su musica con
mas de 400 temas grabados este no es tu rapero regular esto es historia
apunto de pasar. asi q se testigo q no te cuente.

This blurb, which I did not edit for spelling, grammar or usage, further corroborates that
he was born in San Miguel, presents another nickname (H’ache, which points to a
Spanish spelling of his middle initial, but also recalls the word “hacha,” meaning “ax”),
but most importantly contextualizes Galeano’s position within the rap industry. He has
thousands of followers, over 400 recorded songs, and the biography page claims that his
music is history in the making, presumably because of the level of success that he has
attained as one of the most well-known Salvadoran rappers. The profile aids the in the
analysis of his song “La mara anda suelta” in two important ways. First, it provides us
with Galeano’s life story and cultural heritage, therefore providing biographical context
for the recording. Secondly, these social networking pages confirm that Galeano el HJ is
a professional rapper responsible for various songs, albums, and live appearances. He has
a dedicated and substantial following. In other words, with over 400 songs, hundreds of
Twitter followers, over 250,000 MySpace profile views, and with his guest work on the
albums of artists such as Game, Galeano el HJ is no garage or dining table rapper. He has
established himself beyond the amateurs who appear on the already-mentioned
anonymous recruitment compact discs, which, according to Los Angeles gang
enforcement officials, are put together hastily and with subpar equipment. He has much
to lose in terms of his career as a hip-hop artist. A direct relationship with Mara Salvatrucha could not only hurt his sales, but it could also incriminate him as a purported gang member. Yet, despite the risk associated with admitting allegiance to Mara Salvatrucha, Galeano el HJ still has tracks that allude to the gang, as evidenced by the lyrics of the song “La mara anda suelta:”

Pa’que respeten hijos de puta.

Te dije que iba a hacer esta canción, hijo de puta.

¿Que pasó “manita?”

Tranquilo.

“Pater,” esta va para vos hijo de puta.

Ojalá que Dios te tenga en la Gloria, papá.

(Said while the beat transitions into the main lyrics)

Fíjese.

Mírenme.

Dígenme.

Escúchenme.

Porque la mara anda suelta.

Póngase estuche que ahí vienen “Los Salvas”

caminando despacio por la cuadra.

Sus enemigos se van de espalda,
Y si hay un problema los arregla la escuadra.
Calma, calma, calma.
Si joden con la mara les sumen las nalgas.
Calma, calma, calma.
Si tienes pantalones luego tendrás faldas.
La mara parándola allí controla
Desde Los Angeles hasta plena Mariona.
Claro Simón los reyes de la zona,
Y el que no lo piense así que me pele la mona.
Manos arriba Santa Ana.
Manos arriba San Salvador.
Manos arriba San Miguel.
Manos arriba todito El Salvador.

Fíjense.
Mírenme.
Oíganme.
Escúchenme.
Cuídense.
¿Saben por qué?
Porque la mara anda suelta.
Mira, para, ya llegó la Mara

¿Dónde están esas chavalas que no dan la cara?

La cosa es simple y sencilla:

En esta tienda no se espía.

Estamos bien armados contra mocos,

Granadas y cuchillas.

[Unintelligible] Somos Mara Salvatrucha,

Y a los chavalas las matamos

[Unintelligible]

Si se pasan por los [Unintelligible] tumbamos.

Y hasta 47 [Unintelligible]

Por traer la panocha en la frente

Y no me importa si me llevo al presidente.

[Unintelligible]

No se juega con mi gente.

Before I begin my analysis of this song, it is important to note that the words are not readily available online. As opposed to the countless other songs from a variety of genres, whose lyrics appear on websites scattered across the internet, I was unable to find any page that documents these verses.

Upon a first listening, the low sound quality of the song stands out. The voices, in places, are muffled and difficult to understand, and the music gives the impression of
distance; the beat sounds far off, almost quiet. This beat is a generic, West Coast hip-hop beat, reminiscent of the Los Angeles, gangsta rap beats heard on albums by artists such as N.W.A., Ice Cube, and Snoop Doggy Dog. West Coast beats are often characterized by a slow, deep bass beat on either side of a quick snare drum beat, repeated in a loop. Bridging these beats, a synthesizer-created violin instrumental weaves in and out, connecting the drum sounds in order to complete the track that the rappers sing over. The music in “La mara anda suelta” follows this pattern closely, and seems almost anachronistic in this day of high-tech beat creators and sampling machines. There are a number of possible reasons why this particular beat-style was chosen. The resemblance to early nineties, gangsta rap music could be a way to establish their link to their adopted neighborhood, and the pride that the rappers have for their own community. After all, Mara Salvatrucha began in Los Angeles, Galeano el HJ claims Compton as one of his “locations.” There is the distinct possibility that West Coast rap served as an influence to his own formation as an artist. In a rap industry that today still feels the clash between East and West Coast hip-hop, using this kind of music highlights their pride for the Los Angeles rap-style, and therefore affirms respect for their particular barrio (otherwise known as repping your block).

Secondly, this beat may reflect the modest means available to the rapper when producing a song of this nature, one that so blatantly and controversially discusses the Mara Salvatrucha way of life. Contemporary rap relies on very expensive machinery—drum machines, Auto Tune sound processors, complex sound boards, computer equipment, and libraries of thousands of songs from which producers take samples.
Perhaps the construction of this particular song occurred in such a way that such equipment was not available. As has been noted, an MS-13 member looking to become a professional rapper, could jeopardize a chance at a career by publicly admitting to their association with Mara Salvatrucha. Turning to a more modern recording studio, with state of the art technology would incite unwanted exposure to their self-incriminating music, not to mention an escalated cost that perhaps they cannot afford. This means that an established artist, one such as Galeano el HJ, would have to resort to alternative, cheaper, and less-exposed forms of recording. This could include a simple drum machine owned by an MS-13 brother, or a vocal recorded into a microphone directly connected to a laptop. In either case, the production value suffers, the music must become simplified, and the final track turns out rough and gritty, lacking the polish of a more processed hip-hop song. This same phenomenon appears in some Mara Salvatrucha tattoos, whereby the inability to go to a proper tattoo parlor or the unavailability of a skilled tattoo artist results in low-quality ink work representing the gang’s symbols. Yes, there are cliques with more specialized artists or artists who are not directly affiliated with the gang but sympathize with the community, but Figure 24 and the “MS” in Figure 25 reflect the kind of elementary ink that dominates in a number of Mara Salvatrucha communities. The lines are not straight. The black coloring has splotches and uncolored spots. The outlines look as though they have been traced over and over again, a sure sign of an amateur artist who does not have command of the tattooing art. And similar to the muffled, distant sounding lyrics and music in “La mara anda suelta,” the ink work in its entirety looks unpolished and rudimentary, the lines faded and not bold, possibly because the artist did
not have the proper equipment necessary to create a more professional-looking tattoo. In the same way that a Mara Salvatrucha rapper cannot rely on the more advanced methods of track production, an MS-13 member cannot enter just any tattoo parlor, and ask for a Mara Salvatrucha tattoo. Doing so would immediately incriminate them in *la vida loca*, associating them with all of the illicit activities that the gang undertakes.

Additionally, a basic, underwhelming beat draws attention away from the music and focuses the listener’s ears onto the lyrics. As the Wu-Tang Clan rapped in their 1997 single “Triumph,” “The dumb are mostly intrigued by the drum,” implying that a more refined listener should concentrate on the words, and not the beat, in order to fully appreciate the delivered message. The modest beat in “La mara anda suelta” is not the key element of the song; the narrative is. And this narrative is clearly about Mara Salvatrucha. True, the slang and jargon may be difficult to understand for someone not versed in MS-13 terminology, but the references to the gang, unlike in the gang’s tattoos and graffiti, are not encoded in symbols and cryptic combinations of signs and images. The term “mara” is generic slang for “gang” in Central America, yet the combination of the word “mara” with the word “salvas,” clearly indicates a reference to Mara Salvatrucha. Later, the second rapper, possibly Mr. Pelón 503, clearly states “somos Mara Salvatrucha” eliminating any doubt as to the ambiguity of the word “mara.” Whether this second rapper is Mr. Pelón 503 is unclear, but his affiliation is not. The use of the first-person plural verb form “somos” accentuates this rapper’s membership in the gang. Likewise, all of the cities that are mentioned in the song have a strong Mara Salvatrucha presence. The gang began in Los Angeles, California. Santa Ana, El
Salvador is a battleground for Mara Salvatrucha and one of their principal rivals, the 18th Street Gang. Santa Ana is also the location of Apanteos Jail, the site of one of the worst jail riots in modern history, with the two rival gangs at the center of the violence. The pictures of beheadings and body mutilations that occurred during this riot have circulated on the internet for the last five years. Mara Salvatrucha also has large cliques in San Miguel, El Salvador and the country’s capital San Salvador. Besides “repping” MS-13, in other words honoring these cities with Mara Salvatrucha contingencies, listing Los Angeles, Santa Ana, San Miguel, and San Salvador speaks to the transnational nature of the gang. Galeano el HJ is reinforcing the idea that Mara Salvatrucha is not a simple, localized gang, but instead a transnational organization that controls (controla) neighborhoods all around the Americas.

And although these places mentioned do refer to geographic locations, the rapper does not affirm any kind of political loyalty, leaving the impression that the lyrics underscore the gang’s separation from such affiliations. These cities are not acknowledged because of some sense of national or civic pride, in any political sense, but instead because of the influence and power that the gang asserts in them. In this way, they are showing disdain, even irreverence, towards these geographic, political and social structures, and the authority figures that best exemplify them. For example, after the initial gun shots that start the track, and the introduction of the beat, a rapper, presumably Galeano el HJ, speaks as the song initially progresses. He asks “¿Qué pasó manita?” or “What happened little hand?” This may be a reference to the Mano dura policy of dealing with gangs that has become the law of the land in Central American countries dealing
with elevated levels of gang violence. Literally translated as “hard hand,” a more appropriate English equivalent would be “heavy hand,” “strong arm,” or “iron fist.” The 

*Mano dura* approach entails arresting any citizen suspected of having gang links, regardless of the lack of evidence. In order to apprehend these suspects, heavily armed paramilitary troops sweep entire neighborhoods in acts tantamount to urban warfare, often with collateral casualties resulting from the very violent crackdowns. Once arrested, the suspect’s legal rights are often suspended, as the trial procedure is expedited in order to get the alleged perpetrators to prison as soon as possible.

The term “mano dura” is supposed to instill fear and create apprehension in gang members. Yet, Galeano el HJ’s name for the program, “manita,” strips the policy of its ominous and somber intended interpretation. It makes fun of it by snubbing its alleged importance through the use of the diminutive “ita” ending. Furthermore, Galeano asks, “¿Qué pasó?” literally “what happened” or “how’s it going.” Or to translate the question in a more colloquial, slang way, Galeano sarcastically wonders “What happened little hand?” The 

*Mano dura* policy was supposed to dramatically curtail gang activity in Central America, and yet the lyrics of this song clearly indicate that Mara Salvatrucha is still active and influential. The rapper is asking, in a snide register, what happened to the alleged goal of stopping MS-13. In other words, Galeano el HJ disrespects the effectiveness of this transnational policy, and its ability to curb the gang violence that is taking over hundreds of Central American neighborhoods. In the war between the Mara Nation and El Salvador, Galeano impudently asserts, Mara Salvatrucha has the upper hand. Despite the aggressive anti-gang stance, MS-13’s enemies “se van de espalda.”
They turn their backs, and run off. “Si joden con la mara les sumen las nalgas,” or “if anyone fucks with Mara Salvatrucha, they jump on their asses.” “Si tienes pantalones luego tendrás faldas;” in other words, if you wore pants before challenging Mara Salvatrucha, afterwards you leave wearing a skirt, emasculated. Galeano’s lyrics challenge the state program, and, in a direct way, the state’s policies towards the gang, by sneering at its attempted tough position. He ridicules the Salvadoran government, essentially calling them weak in the face of Mara Salvatrucha, feminizing them, in a misogynistic slur aimed to accentuate their impotence. This feminization of the gang’s rivals could also come into play with an alternative interpretation of the word *manita*. Perhaps the term is a shortening of the word “hermanita” (little sister). In other words, the rapper is calling his opponents little girls, a slur that is consistent with the way in which his enemies are characterized throughout the song. Regardless of either interpretation, in this battle and within the context of this song, Galeano clearly argues for the superiority of the Mara Nation.

The second rapper in “La mara anda suelta,” who begins his section of the song after the second chorus, extends this display of Mara national pride by way of discussing the armory of weapons available to the gang. He states that the gang has enough guns to compete with the paramilitary groups, as they are “bien armados” with “granadas y cuchillas,” or well-armed against the *Mano dura* attacks, boasting grenades and switchblades. He is ready to attack anyone who moves against his gang, in almost militaristic fashion, including “el presidente.” This is another assault on the political structure that persists beyond the Mara Nation. Although the definite article “el”
designates specificity, not naming which president or what country the president governs implies ambiguity, generality. In other words, he would be willing to kill any state head, in any nation, if this person or government intends to confront Mara Salvatrucha. Galeano earlier affirms this military mentality, rapping “si hay un problema los arregla la escuadra.” The squadron is ready to fix any problem that arises in their neighborhood, presumably ready to use the grenades and other weapons at their disposal. This language, “escuadra,” alludes to an army of MS-13 members, organized into squadrons, similar to a military unit, ready to attack anyone, and certainly those Mano dura paramilitary groups who oppose them in their communities. He does not say “clique,” “set,” “clicka,” “mis homies,” or any other form of slang traditionally associated with different Mara Salvatrucha cells. His use of the word “escuadra” is deliberate, insinuating that his own country, the Mara Nation, has its own sector of enlisted soldiers ready to spill their blood in defense of their community. Returning to Patrick Colm Hogan, the techniques of nationalization become most salient during times of war, where opposability becomes the most useful tool in separating two social groups, thereby accentuating affectivity towards one in order to clash against the other. The idea of war, opposability, and the cementing of national identity in “La mara anda suelta” previews the analysis undertaken in L’il Cuete’s song, “We Got Guns,” which extends the militaristic trope in a Mara Salvatrucha context.

And yet, despite all of the belligerence, the violence, and the murderous imagery, there persists the intrinsic need to express oneself, to relate a Mara Salvatrucha narrative that does not depend on secondary sources for legitimacy. This narrative necessarily
manifests itself as the “testimonial” quality that Hagedorn mentions in his research on gang rap. Hagedorn uses the term outside of the academic realm of Latin American cultural studies, whose focus on testimonio attempts to resolve the problems of expression within communities at the margin. Yet, both the idea of testimony, as Hagedorn posits it, and testimonio relate to this rap song, as well as to others centering on Mara Salvatrucha, in that they fulfill the necessity to vent, to “let it out,” particularly in society where media and political representations attempt to drown out MS-13 voices with “the prevailing televised images of the city [that] have been incapable of going beyond the sensationalism and gruesomeness of murders, of assaults and armed robberies” (Martín Barbero 27). And yet, “La mara anda suelta” is clearly not testimonio. John Beverley’s seminal article, “The Margin at Center,” localizes testimonio within a written context, as “a novel or novella-length narrative in a book form” (25). Unlike “La mara anda suelta,” and its musical contribution to subaltern discourse, there have been a number of Latino-gang-related testimonios that take a more traditional, written approach, most notably No nacimos pa’ semilla: La cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín, by Alonso Salazar, and Luis J. Rodriguez’s La vida loca: El testimonio de un pandillero en Los Ángeles. These texts rely on the traditional testimonio model, where subjects unable to write book themselves, relate their stories to an interlocutor who later transcribes the stories into a book. Although they are not written, bound, and printed, tracks such as the one produced by Galeano do fall into what Beverley calls “testimonio-like texts” which have existed at the “margin” (25). These represent “in particular those subjects—the child, the ‘native,’ the woman, the insane, the criminal—excluded from authorized
representation when it was a question of speaking or writing for themselves” (25). Therefore, although not specifically testimonio, “La mara anda suelta,” and other Mara Salvatrucha rap songs like it, share in the longing for self-expression, in an autochthonous and in-group manner, and from the position of subalternity. It is logical to connect Beverley’s thoughts on the exclusion of authoritative representation to MS-13, since they are predominately a community of young people (“the child”), many claim indigenous ethnic roots (“the ‘native’”), they live la vida loca (“the insane”), and their illegal activities have been well-documented for two and a half decades (“the criminal”). Accordingly, “La mara anda suelta” desires an “other” who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Laub 68). This is why, interlaced within all of the violent imagery and threats, the rapper demands that the listener hear what he is saying. The chorus of the song, repeated throughout the track, asks, even commands the listener to “fíjense/ mirenme/ oíganme/ escúchenme.” The voice wants the listener to hear him, pay attention to what he is saying, and above all, he wants them to really listen to his message. Before all of the rough and aggressive vocals begin, the main rapper speaks above the beat, dedicating the song to “‘Pater,’ continuing with “esta va para vos hijo de puta. Ojalá que Dios te tenga en la Gloria, papá.” This song is for Pater, who Galeano el HJ speaks to directly, a probable member of Mara Salvatrucha who lost his life living la vida loca. This act of remembrance mirrors the cemetery motif already analyzed in both Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti. In order to offset the flashes of MS-13 carcasses lying in pools of their own blood, commonly shown in news broadcasts around the world, this song reconstructs the memory of a person who
may have otherwise been forgotten, and if not, most certainly vilified, for his involvement with Mara Salvatrucha. Galeano addresses “the anguish of one’s memories” by calling to him, and by honoring his life in this song. In this way, “La mara anda suelta” “affirms and recognizes” the “realness” of a person lost to this militant and dangerous way of life.

Furthermore, the name “Pater,” most likely a gang nickname given to the mara after joining MS-13, draws from the Latin word for “father.” This nomenclature, at once, recalls other terms: Paterfamilias, Pater Noster, and padre. In other words, the dedication honors a fallen Mara Salvatrucha member who was a father figure within the rapper’s own MS-13 community. This is further confirmed when Galeano el HJ calls him “papá,” at the end of his dedication. By itself, the word “papá” can signify “dude,” “friend,” or “pal.” When combined with the gang name “Pater,” however, the meaning moves from a simple synonym for “buddy,” towards a patriarchal, fatherly designation that underscores the fallen comrade’s role in this specific Mara Salvatrucha community. This rapper has lost a father, an important family member who most likely had an enormous amount of influence on the artist, as well as the MS-13 clique. This dedication attempts to perpetuate the memory of this key member of the in-group, immortalizing him in a song that now appears on some of the most viewed video websites in the world. Thousands of people can now access “Pater” whenever they want—an act of remembrance that clashes against the fleeting, dehumanizing, and sensationalized “prevailing televised images” of murders and the murdered.

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This idea of Mara Salvatrucha as family, and additionally the militarization of the
gang against attempted state control, is not individual to “La mara anda suelta.” L’il
Cuete’s track, “We Got Guns,” similarly engages these concepts, perhaps even more fully
developing the narrative of Mara Salvatrucha as an army, first and foremost, but also as a
family unit which has served as an instrumental influence on the rappers gangbanging
lifestyle. With a stockpile of weapons and ammunition, L’il Cuete attempts to
convince the listener that he and his gang are formidable opponents for anyone who attempts to
threaten them, or take what he believes belongs to him and his family.

4.5 “We Got Guns” and Know How to Use Them: The Militarized Mobilization of MS-13
in Defense of the Mara Nation

Unlike Galeano el HJ, who migrated to Los Angeles from El Salvador, L’il Cuete was
born and raised in the Southern California suburb of Norwalk:

Lil Cuete was born in 1984 into a gang-infested district of south east Los
Angeles. His family is 3rd generation Chicano and his grandfather was a
notorious pachuco back in the day. His Grandfather (the original Cuetero)
and his uncle (Mr. Cuete) have handed down his legacy as Lil Cuete in his
barrio. The hard knock streets of L.A. are where Lil Cuete learned to
survive and rise above gang violence through his music. With 4 LP's to his
credit, since 17 years old, Lil Cuete has built up a loyal following of fans
who understand street life because they live it. Lil Cuete's music is
insightful and real with solid songwriting skills with which he is able to
reach out to today's young urban Chicano's everywhere. Real issues, real
experiences, real talent, and real sincerity with a style all his own are what make Lil Cuete a great artist and rapper (Jango.com).

According to this blurb, and other biographical information listed on various online music and rap websites (Reverbnation.com, Jango.com, and others, including the artist’s own Facebook and MySpace profiles), the rapper is a third generation gang member. Immediately, this speaks to the importance of the gang affiliation over racial, ethnic and national categorial identities, for example his Chicano heritage. Above their own ethnicity, Mara Salvatrucha predominates as the primary community that both Galeano and L’il Cuete most have a sense of affectivity towards, and either rapper’s lyrics reflect this loyalty to Mara Salvatrucha. Originating from a family of gang members may have provided the impetus for his own affiliation. According to internet posts and forum messages on the aforementioned websites, L’il Cuete is part of the Varrio Norwalk Los One Ways X3, with the X3 symbolizing the number 13, which implies Mara Salvatrucha association (see Figure 56). With four recorded albums to his credit, it can be said that L’il Cuete has achieved at least moderate success in the rap industry. Like Galeano HJ, L’il Cuete’s success in the rap industry may force him to refer to his gang in a clandestine way, without drawing undesirable attention to himself as an MS-13 member in a direct manner. Whereas Galeano was able to avoid this pitfall by disconnecting his name and image from the song, L’il Cuete relies on encrypted references similar to those seen in Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti:

[Chorus:]
My little homie's got way more kora than you,
And you could try to roll up,
We'll just do what we do.
And I ain't lying we got guns, we got ammo, we got clips,
We ain't trippin',
We get sick for that Norwalk Click.

They say they're coming for my life,
But it don't mean shit.
I'm 'bout to show these levas the real meaning of sick.
I keep my pistol loaded, like 24/7.
I got so much artillery, they call me Armageddon.
I'm living like a soldier, one that's suicidal.
Leave 'em D.O.A ese, Dead On Arrival.
Never feel remorse 'cause that's the way I was taught.
I'll take away your life and with only one shot!
Go and hit it, roll up.
You should know where to come,
But don't let the name fool you,
I got big, big guns!
Puttin' in work, but my familia's to blame,
'Cause all my family's Walkero,
So I gotta gangbang.

You know!

Don't make me pull the trigger back, while aiming at you.
I bet a Hydra-Shok bullet puts an end to our feud.
I got a thick vendetta for my fallen Walkeros.
Smokin' all these levas, like I'm smokin' the leno.
When you could ask anybody 'cause they know I'm legit,
And L’il Cuete talks about that serio shit.
I could rotten you in day or night like if it was nothing.
I keep a bullet in the chamber, pull the trigger start dumpin'.
And ese Cuete, he's somethin', that you couldn't be.
I got plenty and many 'stilos, that you couldn't see.
And you could try to come and take it, but survival's a must,
'Cause me and my Walkeros know that you ain't fuckin'with us.
What?

I'm takin' a life, to be specific, it's yours.
I got my soldiers strapped up and we're ready for war.
We can go toe-to-toe or we could all get down.
I'm talkin' 'bout matching guns and going round for round.
I've been in crazier shit than dealing with you.
I've got a million other cholos trying to get me too.

It doesn't start with me, check my family line.

I was brought up to be crazy and sick in the mind.

Ain't no question about it, I represent 'til I die.

I got this music thing locked down, without even trying.

I put that on my life, I won't settle for less.

Man I'm a gangbang 'til the day they put me to rest.

So C'mon!

These lyrics contain a number of the words often associated with *la vida loca*, generally, and Mara Salvatrucha culture, specifically. The definitions of these words were derived from interviews with Mara Salvatrucha members, as well as the accumulated knowledge of gang language amassed from my research in other areas of this dissertation. His homies have “kora,” a shortened form of the word “coraje,” which means courage, and in another context extreme anger. “Leva” are snitches, those who have given information about the gang to the police, often ex-members of the gang who sought to lessen their own criminal sentences by giving the authorities the details of other, more felonious activities. “Levas” are also known as “rats,” and “La mara anda suelta” references the hatred against these kinds of ex-Mara Salvatrucha informants, as well, when Mr. Pelón 503 says that in his community there are no “espías,” or spies. “Walkeros” are L’il Cuete’s fellow gang members, a linguistic structure deriving from the Spanish way of designating group association. In this case, Walkeros come from Norwalk, L’il Cuete’s neighborhood. More precisely, the term “Walkero” refers to the members of his clique,
“Smokin’ the leno” refers to smoking marijuana, a key component in the Mara Salvatrucha subculture, both because of the drug’s importance as a commodity that brings money, but also as a recreational pastime that many of the gang members undertake. Additionally, the use of code-switching, between English and Spanish, also reveals a gamut of words and phrases connected to MS-13 culture. L’il Cuete talks “about that serio (serious) shit,” and boasts about the many different “‘stilos” that his rap can take—“‘stilo” referring, of course, to styles, from the Spanish “estilo.” The “million other cholos” references the vida loca nickname for Latino gang members, a word that has been in use for decades. Also, the word “ese,” roughly translates to “dude,” and much like the use of the word “papá” in “La mara anda suelta,” is a term of familiarity and acquaintance, which often takes on a challenging and aggressive connotation when used with an enemy. All of these different words and the combination of their usage strongly suggest gang affiliation, on the part of L’il Cuete, without directly mentioning Mara Salvatrucha, as is the case with Galeano el HJ’s song. In the latter, the rapper can directly summon the name of the gang, because his own artist name does not appear anywhere in the song, and his own connection to the track remains a thing of internet rumors and conjuncture. “We Got Guns” appears on an album that has sold thousands of copies all over the country, therefore L’il Cuete cannot disassociate himself from the possibly incriminating material contained therein. And so, the performer mitigates possible dangers by comfortably using the language of Mara Salvatrucha, a language that is not readily known by the out-group, aside from perhaps local police organizations.
With his gang affiliation established, a return to his biographical blurb creates a problematic in terms of his artistic aims. Hailing from “the hard knock streets of L.A.,” it is evident that at least a portion of his success comes from a “loyal following of fans who understand street life because they live it.” The incongruence between the blurb and the lyrics of the rap song lay in whether he has in fact found a way to “rise above gang violence through his music,” or whether he is actually perpetuating this same violence, even participating in it, through his continuous discussion of guns. Quite simply, this song focuses on weapons. Much like “La mara anda suelta,” L’il Cuete raps about the stockpile of (“big, big”) guns and pistols, in the same way that Galeano el HJ talks about his grenades and switchblades. Of course, it is not uncommon for rappers to discuss guns in their songs. Rap songs of all kinds, over the course of the last thirty years, have glamorized and paid tribute to the weaponry needed in order to survive on the streets. But Galeano el HJ and L’il Cuete’s mention of guns differs from these other types of songs in two distinct ways. First, the song title is “We Got Guns,” not “I got guns.” In other words, he is not speaking of his own, personal armory. L’il Cuete uses the first-person, plural pronoun “we,“ indicating the group that he belongs to. Whereas a number of rap songs talk about individual ownership, L’il Cuete’s weapons belong to a collective, a community; these aren’t his guns. They are the property of his in-group, the particular Mara Salvatrucha clique that he is a part of. The reason for this accumulation of arms leads us to the second distinct difference between “We Got Guns” and other rap songs that narrate gunplay. L’il Cuete, Galeano el HJ, Mr. Pelón 503, and their MS-13 society are getting ready for war.
Patrick Colm Hogan writes that “we explain a war by telling the story of the war” (12). Such stories are critical in hierarchizing the nation over all other categorial identities because the previously discussed techniques of nationalization best function in times of struggle against one or many out-groups: “Moreover, patriotism is often affirmed most acutely in times of international conflict thus in opposition to a national enemy” (23). This affirmation becomes most evident in the rally-around-the-flag effect seen after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center towers. For a few months afterwards, the national narrative focused less on political differences and economic policies. We were not merely Republicans or Democrats, Jewish or Catholic. In the face of terrorism, we were primarily Americans, or so the national media at the time would have us believe. To put it another way, “war brings home the functionality of the national category” (79).

Both “We Got Guns” and “La mara anda suelta” are stories of war. The language in these two songs implies an arsenal far beyond the kind that is readily available to a regular civilian. Sure, the songs refer to switchblades and pistols, but they also talk of grenades and “artillery,” a term which conjures images of mortar shells and missiles. What is more, L’il Cuete’s name sounds like a derivation of the Spanish word “cohete,” which means “rocket.” Additionally, L’il Cuete and his Mara Salvatrucha group have the needed ammunition to equip these “big, big guns.” They have “clips,” the cartridges used when loading semi-automatic weaponry, and “Hydra-Shok” bullets, a kind of ordnance specifically designed to tear through human and other organic targets. L’il Cuete displays his armaments lyrically, confirming his gang’s preparedness against anyone who would enter MS-13 territories in order to dispossess them of their property. Such a rapped,
public showing relates to Hogan’s observation regarding how “military parades, displays of weaponry, and so forth contribute in obvious ways to the salience of the national category, and to a sense of national unity across regions, races, religions, and other subnational categories” (75). L’il Cuete and Galeano el HJ represent different cliques of Mara Salvatrucha, spanning El Salvador, Los Angeles, and suburban Southern California. One is Salvadoran, and the other is of Chicano origin. And so, despite the regional and ethnic separation of these two rappers, both of their songs confirm that, regardless of location or ethnicity, Mara Salvatrucha is prepared to defend their culture and community against anyone. Their Mara Nation stands primed for battle, with their “soldiers” or “esquadras” who are “strapped (carrying a weapon) and ready for war.” And they can “match guns,” go “toe-to-toe,” and “round for round” against any of their perceived enemies. These enemies could include national programs, such as the previously mentioned Mano dura campaign or more standard police groups, levas, or rival maras. No social group is more important to him than Mara Salvatrucha, and he is “suicidal” in his defense of this community. L’il Cuete’s song reflects the most integral part of nationalism, whereby “people are willing to sacrifice their own lives (and, of course, the lives of others) for what they see as service to the nation” (Hogan 65).

The Mara Nation preparation and mobilization for war, as evidenced by “La mara anda suelta” and “We Got Guns,” assumes a completely different dynamic when considering a 2007 report from the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) entitled “Gang-Related Activity in the US Armed Forces Increasing.” The NGIC, a branch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, published evidence that “gang-related activity in the US
military is increasing and poses a threat to law enforcement officials and national security” (3). According to the intelligence assessment, “members of nearly every major street gang, including the Bloods, Crips, Black Disciples, Gangster Disciples, Hells Angels, Latin Kings, The 18th Street Gang, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Mexican Mafia, Norteños, Sureños, Vice Lords… have been documented on military installations both domestically and internationally. These members are present in most branches and across all ranks of the military” (my emphasis, 5). And although the report lists a number of differing reasons why a gang member would join the military, the most alarming justification resides in the desire to “enlist to receive weapons, combat, and convoy support training; to obtain access to weapons and explosives,” eventually resulting in a gang member who, upon discharge “may employ their military training against law enforcement officials and rival gang members. Such military training could ultimately result in more organized, sophisticated, and deadly gangs” (3). The danger in this, according to the NGIC, is that “both current and former gang-affiliated soldiers transfer their acquired military training and knowledge back to the community and employ them against law enforcement officers, who are typically not trained to engage gangsters with military expertise” (3). Additionally, the gang-affiliated soldiers steal weapons, explosives and artillery from local bases that they then donate to the Mara Salvatrucha war effort. Of course, in the United States, these weapons can be acquired through other illegal means. But three specific circumstances make stealing these weapons from government installations more appealing. Firstly, they do not have to pay for the weapons. Secondly, they can access larger amounts of weapons than they alternatively
would be able to through an illegal guns dealer on the street. Finally, the MS-13 member in the armed forces be able to come across certain kinds of weapons that otherwise would not be readily available. Incidents of stolen shoulder-mounted rocket launchers, bazookas, hand grenades (recalling “La mara anda suelta”), and even bullet proof vests appear in the report. All of this equipment presumably enters the MS-13 community to further reinforce their arsenal.

A further problem facing the United States armed forces, and subsequently police forces across the country and in Central America is that Mara Salvatrucha members use the military in order to recruit more gang members (7). They are sent around the world with their regiments, and have the “opportunity to travel and recruit members internationally and may place gang members in a region with an untapped drug or weapons market” (8). The report cites numerous documented examples in which gang graffiti, including Mara Salvatrucha tags, have appeared on walls and structures in Italy, Germany, Japan, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. The placas also appear in military barracks and on assault vehicles.

In short, according to the NGIC report, Mara Salvatrucha uses the American military in order to train a better gang member, and to further spread their cliques all over the world. This report ignores a number of problems that may arise from the use of the armed forces as a source of military training. For example, in a combat situation which in-group loyalty takes precedence? Does the MS-13 member assert his or her gang affiliation above the military association? And what of rival gang members in the same unit? Is a gang rivalry suspended until the tour of duty is over? Or does the Mara
Salvatrucha member take advantage of an easy access to weapons in order to eliminate an enemy gang member when out on patrol? The lack of detailed information in the report leaves these important questions dangling. One is left to speculate whether in combat situations, the MS-13 and military loyalty are one and the same, in terms of safety. That is to say, the MS-13 soldier needs to rely on their non-affiliated fellow servicemen for protection and support. And in regards to rivals stationed in the same areas or in the same units, it could be possible that murdering an enemy gang member is more difficult than one may think, due to the strict discipline and constant observation that troops live with. Another possible, if even more likely, answer to the problem of housing rival gang members together involves judging the risk against the ultimate reward. Is it more advantageous for MS-13 to kill one rival, risking a dishonorable discharge and a lifelong jail sentence? Or is it better for the gang, as a whole, to avoid an attack on a single rival in order to eventually return to the neighborhood clique and kill dozens of rival gang members in many different gangs? It would seem as though the long-term benefits of training, and then returning home to train others in order to control a neighborhood outweighs the advantages of eliminating an individual rival. All of this, of course, is pure conjecture. The report does not address the potential issues involved in the complicated relationships between split loyalties and conflicting in-group affiliations. This forces the researcher to theorize possible resolutions to these problems.

But if we are to believe the NGIC report, from a critical perspective, this use of the Army, Marines, and Navy as tools for the better training and expansion of a Mara Salvatrucha force introduces a very interesting point, as it relates to Patrick Colm
Hogan’s theories on the heirarchization of categorical identities in times of conflict. The armed forces serve as one of the most important catalysts in the fomentation of a nationalistic ideology among a country’s population, especially in times of conflict. This is very apparent in the United States, where, in the midst of two wars, soldiers and veterans take center stage in narratives that involve freedom, protection, and defense. According to such nationalizing narratives, these soldiers fight for our right to vote, they battle so that we can continue to access the privilege of personal liberty, and they keep us safe from foreign attacks that threaten to assault us in our own country. Baseball teams like the San Diego Padres wear camouflage uniforms in order to honor the troops as they take the field, ready to play “America’s pastime,” and fully uniformed National Guard members raise the flag at Ohio Stadium every Saturday afternoon, before collegiate football games. It would be difficult to conceive of any other organization that more fits into the discourse of national pride, not only in the United States, but all over the world.

But Mara Salvatrucha members do not tap into this nationalistic vein, at least not in terms of a geographical or political entity. The previous chapters have demonstrated that many of these youngsters join MS-13 precisely because they do not feel as though they belong to any official nation. Deportation and incarceration, as well as a consistent lack of social programs that focus on eliminating poverty and violence have pushed Mara Salvatrucha members to the margins of a normalized society. And so it is logical to presume that they do not join the Marines so that they can serve their country. They are not on Navy battleships because they want to fight for the freedom of the citizens of the United States. These very citizens, outside of a military environment, fear and shun Mara
Salvatrucha, looking for ways to eliminate them entirely from their urban lives. MS-13, then, members enlist so that they can better do the work of the Mara Nation. Better said, the United States national category is unimportant when compared to their citizenship in the Mara Nation. The more cherished, and therefore vaulted, categorial identity is Mara Salvatrucha. As such, they are not training and fighting for any reason other than to further advance their gang agenda once they return to their neighborhoods. When set against one another, the Mara Nation takes priority over the political nation, with the latter serving a very technical, yet unpatriotic purpose. The military, otherwise considered a representation of national allegiance, becomes a means to an end for Mara Salvatrucha servicemen, and they use their enlistment, take advantage of it, so that they can apply the skills and training in order to better battle police forces, so that they can more efficiently handle weapons against rival gangs, and so that they can learn vital first aid and survival techniques for their own, more important war, fought against the out-group out on the streets.

The NGIC report relates very specifically to “We Got Guns” in that it reflects this military training in a very real and practical sense. L’il Cuete is not a rapper merely threatening owning an entire arsenal of weapons. His use of the term “soldier” is not only metaphoric. There is a certainty about his lyrics that West Coast rap of the eighties and nineties did not have. His soldiers could very well be trained in the art of war. They may know the exact technique of properly using a hand grenade. Their aim with guns may have been improved with range training. Specific strategies for urban warfare may have been amassed in order to better assault the streets of their neighborhood. Mara
Salvatrucha involvement in the military moves the mention of guns from the symbolic and traditional lyrics heard in rap songs over the course of the last thirty years, into a realm where the words are not just threats or boasts. L’il Cuete and Galeano el HJ have these guns, this artillery, and they now know how to use them with deadly efficiency, in the defense and expansion of their own Mara Nation. When these Mara Salvatrucha rappers say that they “are ready for war,” they mean it in the most literal sense.

But what are they defending? Of course, they want to protect their own way of life, they want to avoid going to jail, and, as L’il Cuete raps, “survival’s a must.” More precisely, he says that “you could try to come and take it,” but the bullet that he has in the chamber of his gun is ready to fire against any threat. The word “it” is a multi-layered and complex pronoun, as it could represent any number of things that are important in the Mara Salvatrucha community. It could mean the accumulated wealth, their territory, their respect, or even the very guns that he raps about. Yet, his repeated mention of the word “family,” implies that he does not want to lose his community, his fellow gang members. And so, he must be ready with all of these weapons to defend the members of this Mara Salvatrucha family, so that he does not suffer further loss. Regardless of the violent, criminal behavior of Mara Salvatrucha, they are still human beings who must deal with the trauma of death in their social group. Graveyard tattoos and graffiti and Galeano el HJ’s honoring of Pater all represent methods of coping with the trauma of death. L’il Cuete also raps in remembrance, speaking of the “vendetta for my fallen Walkeros,” or dead gang members who belonged to his clique. These deaths represent the murder of family members to these maras, and the public, out-group justification for taking out
Mara Salvatrucha members is irrelevant to the member of the community who has lost an important, influential member. L’il Cuete admits that his family has been instrumental in his own development as a mara: “My familia's to blame/ 'Cause all my family's Walkero/ So I gotta gangbang.” Furthermore, L’il Cuete considers himself an heir to a violent and insane lifestyle considering that “it doesn't start with me, check my family line. / I was brought up to be crazy and sick in the mind.” In other words, he was raised in this family, and his views and actions reflect a social unit with traditions and behavior that have roots in a rough, urban past. He has to use these guns, this artillery, and this lack of remorse in order to protect, not only the material and territorial gains, but also the integrity of his family-unit, his Mara Nation. Simply put, he does not want to see another Walkero die, and in order to protect his most important social category, he and his fellow Mara Salvatrucha kin are ready for war.

These two songs represent a distinctly Mara Salvatrucha narrative that originates directly out of the MS-13 culture, one that does not allow itself to take a secondary role to a more official, authoritative depiction. Although both out-group and in-group representations share in violence, crime, and death, the rap recorded in the Mara Salvatrucha attempts a completely different message than those portrayed in the media. They are not just a street gang. They are not a bunch of kids with guns looking to terrorize the world for the sake of urban and social destruction. Galeano el HJ and L’il Cuete both indicate that they have a distinct aim with their violence. They are first and foremost a family, with father figures and influential members who inspire and motivate their actions. Secondly, they are an army, trained and primed for battle when any threat
from the out-group arises. Sick and tired of losing their culture and kin, they are willing to defend this family, and the Mara Nation, in any way possible.

This is their life, in their own words. However, unlike tattoos and especially graffiti, both of which are to some degree exposed and available for members of the out-group to see, rap music is an aural experience. Considering Patrick Colm Hogan’s belief that salience best functions to cement nationality in a visual sense, the predominate manifestations of Mara Salvatrucha culture released by the out-group take the form of video, movies, and pictures. These are the visual ways in which those outside of Mara Salvatrucha attempt to foment opposability, and so perpetuate the imaginary of violence through fear and sensationalization. This would also explain why, from the in-group perspective, “La mara anda suelta” and “We Got Guns” have music videos. Both the music and the importance of a visual image synergize, creating an authentic Mara Salvatrucha message not dependent on the out-group. The next chapter will look at the video associated with “La mara anda suelta,” as well as other examples of specifically visual Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, and compare them to movies and documentaries arising from the out-group. How do these varied representations differ? Are there similarities? If so, what do these points of connection reveal about in-group derived Mara Salvatrucha depictions? The answers to these questions disclose invaluable critical perspectives in the study of Mara Salvatrucha.
4.6 Images for Chapter Four

Figure 53. MS-13 tag on the side of the Mayfair Hotel, in Los Angeles at 8 in the morning.

Figure 54. The wall of the Mayfair Hotel, roughly 13 hours later. The MS-13 tag has been covered up, leaving little trace of the original graffiti.
Figure 55. An X3 which stands for the 13 in MS-13, also seen in the name of L'il Cuete's supposed clique, Varrio Norwalk Los One Ways X3.
Chapter 5
Street-Level Xenomorphs: Mara Salvatrucha Audiovisual Representation and the Imaginary of Violence

5.1 Introduction
Don Jorge drove me through San Salvador. He is in his late fifties, and like most people of his age in the country, he had been a victim of the civil war in one way or another. Long before the peace accords, he fled his homeland and came to the United States, fearing that his own leftist political and social beliefs could jeopardize his freedom, or worse, his life. In the U.S.A. he worked as a bus boy, as a waiter, and even spent time power washing benches and sidewalks under the blistering summer sun before he was deported back to El Salvador in the mid-nineties. Upon his return, he began a taxi service that still thrives today. Don Jorge does not sleep, or at least he says he does not, as he zigzags the crowded capital at all hours of the day and night, collecting fares in his attempt to secure a somewhat comfortable life.

I relied on Don Jorge, not only for rides, but also for safety. Possessing a knowledge that only the most skilled of travelers can claim, he knew where to go, the best way to get there, and the times that posed the least amount of danger as I crisscrossed San Salvador looking for Mara Salvatrucha activity. After days of traveling in his yellow Nissan Sentra, listening to his stories and points of view, it became apparent
that he served as a living, breathing example of the ideas presented by scholars who study the imaginary of violence. His understanding of the geography of the city, and of the denizens of each of its neighborhoods, elicited a connection between his San Salvador existence and Jesús Martín Barbero’s reading of urban Colombia, published in “The City: Between Fear and the Media.” For Martín Barbero, there are two Bogotás. The first is the Colombian capital that he grew up with, the one he walked, the one he came to know through first-hand, experiential processes. Martín Barbero knew this Bogotá of the past because he lived it, getting to know its streets and barrios, talking with his neighbors and fellow citizens. The other Bogotá, the modern-day capital, is the city of a younger generation. This Bogotá is less experienced practically as much as it is “lived” via a television screen or computer monitor, through the medios or media. Martín Barbero believes that today’s urban society derives most of its information in second-hand fashion, reading about the city on web pages, watching programming on cable networks (26-27). Rossana Reguillo’s concept of the imaginary of violence foments this modern perception of the city, sensationalizing crime, underscoring the need to fear the metropolitan landscape. Scared, feeling helpless, the contemporary urbanite stays at home, receiving their information from the very source that works to instill alarm and apprehension—a self-perpetuating relationship that Nestor García Canclini calls “la cultura-a-domicilio” (190). When the citizen does leave his or her home, they travel very precise pathways en route to their destinations. They know where to go and how to get there, avoiding danger according to what they learn on news broadcasts. In short, fear controls this modern vision of Bogotá.
Don Jorge cannot afford the luxury of creating an exclusively at-home vision of the world. His livelihood depends on driving through all of San Salvador, even its most dangerous areas. And so, Don Jorge stands shoulder to shoulder with Martín Barbero’s original Bogotá. He knows what he knows not because of the imaginary of violence, but because he has driven through the “bad” neighborhoods, or waited for clients in the most violent areas of the capital. The understanding of his home city is almost entirely pragmatic, and this is the knowledge that I relied upon to keep myself safe as I spent time studying one of the most dangerous cultures in the world.

And yet, Don Jorge’s practical awareness of San Salvador proved disheartening at one point during my stay. His familiarity with the capital forced me to come to grips with the idea that even I, as a scholar of urban violence in Latin America, fell victim to the misinformation diffused by the imaginary of violence. After a morning trip into Soyapango, a Mara Salvatrucha-dominated area of San Salvador, Don Jorge wanted to know more about my specific research. I explained that I study Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, and told him the particular type of cultural expressions that my dissertation examines. He politely waited for me to finish before asking me “¿Y por qué Mara Salvatrucha? Todos sabemos que la 18 manda por aquí.” As I struggled to find the answer to that question, I came to the realization that I had been taken in by the imaginary of violence. Despite numerous hours of field-work, interviews, pictures taken, and extensive research, I had been swayed by the narratives which prevail in the imaginary. I had always considered Mara Salvatrucha the gang—the biggest, most influential gang in the Americas. And although I knew that they had their rivals, I hadn’t
really acknowledged that another gang could overtake them, even after the number of images that I had captured in Los Angeles where the 18th Street Gang crosses out the number 13 on walls all over Pico/Union, pictures that are included in this dissertation.

That is not to say that this epiphany affected my own research goals or methods. I never chose Mara Salvatrucha because they were the biggest, baddest gang on the block. My interest in MS-13 stems from the ways in which this gang, specifically, represents notions of nationality and community in the face of outside mediatic representations. Still, until this conversation with Don Jorge, I had not recognized that the manipulation of gang violence by the media always resulted in the selection of one main antagonist in the drama of urban crime, as it unfolds on the television screen. In the 80s and 90s, the Bloods and Crips were the main villains. In the first decade of the new millennium, Mara Salvatrucha took center stage. Today, we begin to see newspapers and news programming shift their attention from MS-13 onto the Zeta drug cartel.

This chapter analyzes this dynamic of sensationalization and manipulation, considering various audiovisual texts from both the Mara Salvatrucha in-group and those who fall outside of that social sphere, in order to understand the ways in which the imaginary of violence manipulates the gang’s image for its audience. Furthermore, I will examine how the in-group texts clash with the more sensationalized depictions of the gang. First, a close reading of the National Geographic documentary, *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, will demonstrate how the program exemplifies MS-13 representation within the imaginary. Afterwards, my analysis of *Sin nombre* will reveal how an out-group representation that attempts a more “realistic” depiction of Mara Salvatrucha
collides with documentaries such as *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, but also simultaneously reaffirms the sensationalistic tone of the National Geographic documentary. As such, the rendering of MS-13 in *Sin nombre* communicates a much different approach, purpose, and message, although still working within the confines of the imaginary of violence. Finally, the focus will shift to an in-group expression of Mara Salvatrucha, the music video connected to the rap song “La mara anda suelta,” in order to understand how this particular portrayal of the gang differs and provides a counter narrative to the documentary and movie mentioned.

**5.2 From the Inside?: Misrepresentation, Fear, and the Perpetuation of the Imaginary of Violence in the National Geographic Channel’s The World’s Most Dangerous Gang**

With the 1979 release of the movie *Alien*, director Ridley Scott introduced one of the most terrifying creatures in cinematic history. The Xenomorph, more casually referred to as “the Alien,” was the perfect killing machine. It had acid for blood and an impenetrable chitin exoskeleton, making it nearly unstoppable. The Xenomorph could survive the vacuum of space, unfettered by the lack of oxygen or the frigid temperatures. It was a master of stealth, able to attack from the shadows without detection. Even more fearsome, the Xenomorph did not eat its victims. It did not look to hunt prey for sustenance. There was no discernible reasoning behind its massacres. True, it relied on organic hosts as incubators for its young, but these hosts needed to be alive for the reproductive process to succeed. In other words, the Xenomorph murdered for the sake of destruction; its killings had no logic other than fulfilling some primordial need to kill. It was evil in the most literal sense of the term.
The Xenomorph’s victims, the crew of the *Nostromo*, were returning to Earth after a long mining mission. Futuristic blue-collar workers in outer space, this community of seven miners spent years on their ship, traveling from planet to planet while excavating extraterrestrial ore for their livelihood. The spacecraft served as their mini-city, complete with dining facilities, housing units, and entertainment programming. The Xenomorph, brought onboard the *Nostromo* from a foreign world, kills the crew one by one, without giving even the slightest hint as to why. What is more, the monster has no origin, no real beginning. Of course, from a biological perspective, the crew learns how it reproduces, where it comes from. But in terms of psychology, there is no way of learning the creature’s intentions, its driving desires. It just appears on the ship, with no history, no antecedents, no previous point of reference, and exterminates the crew one by one, an agent of chaos and destruction.

Before 1979, and certainly in the years since, there have been many examples of this kind of movie monster. *John Carpenter’s The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) have monsters that fall into the same category as the Xenomorph. All that is known is that they have come from a faraway place in order to upheave the established social order through fear and violence. The audience never really knows, sequels notwithstanding, the origins of these monsters. They do not know exactly where they came from, or what made them evil. The audience only sees the damage that they cause, the blood that they spill, and the fear that they engender. The degree and nature of engagement with these creatures differs from that of other famous cinematic monsters. If there is something in a monster’s past that
may have necessitated violence, then sympathy could make their violent actions at the very least understandable, if not justifiable. King Kong was kidnapped, drugged and made to perform in a circus-like atmosphere. Frankenstein was a jigsaw puzzle of corpses, an aberration created from one man’s scientific obsession. In many cases, then, if the main antagonist is given a background story, an origin, then the reasoning behind their rampages becomes more salient. On the other hand, the Xenomorph just kills. Nothing more is known. And this lack of understanding leads to very little sympathy, as the alien is seen as an agent of evil. Sympathy breeds compassion, and compassion softens the evil depiction. Concealing the origin of the creatures from *Alien* would tend to curb any sympathy that the viewer might feel for them.

In 2006, The National Geographic presented such a monster, not in a cinematic medium, but in the form of a cable documentary. In *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, this monster is described as a “cancer,” a spreading “virus” leaving its “bloody mark” all over the globe. The narrator questions its origins, asserting that it is truly unknown where the monster came from, as its unprecedented and unexplainable level of violence “somehow spreads” to neighborhoods that had never dealt with such a menace in the past. Of course, this monster is Mara Salvatrucha, and this documentary provides a perfect example of the sensationalized nature of out-group depictions of the gang within the imaginary of violence. The documentary is, on the surface, meant to teach its audience about this hermetic community of maras. The National Geographic Society has, since 1888, sought to educate and inform the U.S, public on various topics, ranging from astronomy to global. As a child, my father always had a subscription to *National
Geographic Magazine, and he and my family would gather to read the articles, and discuss the information contained in order to learn a bit about the world outside of Houston, Texas. And yet, despite this didactic mission, after watching The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, one has to wonder about the intended and perhaps unintended consequences of the documentary. Does it attempt to teach the viewer about Mara Salvatrucha? Or does it serve another more sensationalistic purpose? Does it try to educate the out-group on the history, customs, and spread of Mara Salvatrucha? Or is this production meant to perpetuate fear and misunderstanding? Is this documentary a valid study of the gang? Or are its aims shrouded in a more nefarious perpetuation of the inaccurate characterizations that serve only to further marginalize the gang’s members?

Jesus Martín Barbero discusses the importance of the media in creating an image of violence that pulls people from the streets and pushes them into their own homes. He theorizes that “television constructs serve, to a great extent, to reinforce imaginaries of fear” because “the prevailing images…have been incapable of going beyond the sensationalism and gruesomeness of murders, of assaults, and armed robberies” (27). Going beyond the sensationalism would involve addressing the causes of these criminal acts, and by extension those who execute them. Such analysis would ask why these acts occur. What would cause this behavior? Failure to ask and answer these questions results in the Xenomorph-like depiction of a monster, one without an origin or a reason—a monster whose only purpose is to scare and murder the “innocent” out-group. Susana Rotker believes that “en la crisis del significado que produce la violencia… entran a la vez la prensa y los medios de comunicación con su tendencia de magnificar o distorsionar
la aprensión de lo real” (Rotker 9). The imaginary of violence thrives on this distortion and magnification, as well as the mediatic entities that diffuse and perpetuate them. This is the distortion and magnification that overpowers the presumed educational agenda of *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. Although referring to Mara Salvatrucha as a cancer or virus could be justified considering the various criminal activities that they have participated in, it is entirely untrue that they “somehow” spread across the Americas. There are concretely defined, specific reasons behind Mara Salvatrucha’s creation and expansion, and one must question the reasoning behind ignoring the mechanism that produced this expansion.

Rossana Reguillo refers to this kind of representation as the imaginary of violence because it seldom seeks to actually understand the rationale behind criminal activity and illicit behavior, and in the case of MS-13, the impulse that would force children to join the gang in the first place (“Teens at the border” 14-15, 17-18). Instead, the imaginary concerns itself with and is fueled by glimpses of dead bodies mowed down by gang violence—nameless, brown-skinned bodies face-down in pools of their own blood. These are the images offered to us by the media, and they are shocking, impressive, but seldom provide the entire story. The same holds true in Los Angeles, the birthplace of Mara Salvatrucha, where “the prevailing images of such places as South Central paint only a picture of violence, crime, and despair” (Soja 54). It is an imaginary because it avoids origin, shies from the causes that would bring forth this violence, therefore ignoring the procedures that may alleviate the violence, or at the very least help to understand it. Reguillo continues: “La ciudad… está poblada de fantasmas y de monstruos,” where “los
medios de comunicación, con su discurso ‘extranjerizante’ incitan a la violencia”
(“Imaginarios globales, miedos locales” 11) And like the filmic depictions of the movie
monsters mentioned above, the media represents these villains as violent for the sake of
violence, devoid of any real, underlying causes. In the imaginary of violence the stripping
of origin results in the near elimination of sympathy. The elimination of sympathy, then,
creates a filmic villain, one who has no desire other than to scare, kill, and destroy. This
villain has no real background or psychology. He or she is only interested in hurting
others. In other words, by removing the possibility of sympathy, the imaginary of
violence creates a truly evil persona. And this evil character, without real motives or
origin, deserves eradication for the sake of social wellbeing. As Luis J. Rodríguez asks in
his testimonio La vida loca, “¿qué hacer con aquellos que no puede acomodar la
sociedad? Hacerlos criminales. Proscribir sus acciones y sus creaciones. Declararlos
enemigos, luego hacerles guerra” (271) Returning to Patrick Colm Hogan’s theories on
opposability, it is much easier to wage war on the hated, the evil, the “other,” in a binary
that establishes the in-group as benevolent, and the outsiders as evil (97). Hogan
understands that “war brings home the functionality” of a specific social group, where
“an enhanced distrust of the out-group will foster the categorization of out-group
members as malevolent” (79, 97). In the imaginary, social construction of mediatic
violence, few groups are considered more wicked than Mara Salvatrucha. The World’s
Most Dangerous Gang works to support this declaration of war, presenting a foreign
monster that has no justifiable reasoning or explanation for its acts.

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I chose the National Geographic documentary as my entry point in the examination of filmic depictions of Mara Salvatrucha because it is the most well-known representation of the gang, outside of newspaper articles and news reports. Over the course of the last six years, this documentary is the one most often mentioned during question and answer sessions following presentations I have given, or in conversations after panel discussions have ended. Along with the movie Sin nombre, professors and graduate students alike invariably ask about The World’s Most Dangerous Gang. Typically they want to know whether the information presented is “true.” On other occasions, I have been asked about my research and its legitimacy from those whose perspective is grounded in the villainous representation of the gang in this documentary. Why would I interest myself in this band of “savages?” The former was an actual question posed by someone who took the documentary as truth. This acceptance of the documentary as an accurate depiction of Mara Salvatrucha represented, to me, a success on the part of the imaginary of violence. In these academic settings, people who have made a living questioning culture and the means by which culture is represented ignore their own training by affirming that the documentary presents an unshakeable reality. But a close reading of the program, contextualized with the previous examination of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture, proves that rather than educating, the documentary perpetuates a sense of hatred towards the gang, a hatred forged in sensationalization, distortion, and mediatic manipulation.

The first thing that stands out is the documentary’s title. The World’s Most Dangerous Gang communicates, in a very simple way, the over-dramatic strategy that the
program will undertake. The word “world’s” suggests expansion, moving the Mara Salvatrucha problem from the local to the global. The narration in the documentary confirms this spread, utilizing the terms “virus” and “cancer.” The menace of Mara Salvatrucha could eventually come to a neighborhood near the viewer, into their world. This menace is further amplified by the next two words in the title, “most dangerous.” With all of the crime, all of the uncertainty associated with urban life, Mara Salvatrucha represents the largest, most salient danger to the citizens of the world. Finally, the word “gang,” ties the group together. The connotation is one of fear, murder, and illicit activity. At once, it brings together unruly youth, social unrest, and terror into one communal identifier.

Of course, many of the suppositions engendered by the title are true. They are a gang. They have been known to undertake acts of horrible violence, murder, and even mutilation. Yet, they are not the most dangerous group in the world, even at the time of the documentary’s production. The constant battle between Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang confirms that there are other, just as deadly groups that exist in urban Latin America and the United States. Drug cartels, for example, control entire cities throughout Central America, often taking their shoot-outs with the police out onto the streets, with non-affiliated citizens serving as collateral victims of a drug war that wages daily. Furthermore, although technically a transnational organization because of their presence in many countries in the Americas, the word “world” suggests that they reach past this continent and across the oceans into Europe, Asia, Africa, and other sectors of the globe. The documentary attempts to prove this claim by mentioning, in passing, that
there may be cliques in Spain, but there is no evidence presented that confirms this assumption. And yet, it appears on a National Geographic documentary, and so serves as a kind of official truth to any viewer who knows nothing about Mara Salvatrucha. I have often been asked about Mara Salvatrucha’s presence in Spain, Japan, and in the Middle East. These questions stem from the information given in the National Geographic feature. My own research shows that although there have been Mara Salvatrucha tags in these countries, the most likely explanation is that they come from enlisted soldiers who have Mara Salvatrucha connections. In other words, within the context of the documentary, there is no concrete proof that the gang has crossed the Atlantic, and yet The World’s Most Dangerous Gang asserts this unproven spread of the gang as if it is unobjectionable truth.

At once, a comparison between the title of this documentary and the titles of the films that I examine later presents an obvious difference in the representation of Mara Salvatrucha. The tile of director Cary Joji Fukunaga’s 2009 movie, Sin nombre, asserts a lack of a real identity, though it is questionable whether this namelessness applies to the immigrants riding the train into the United States or the members of Mara Salvatrucha. If the latter holds true, the movie title recalls the numerous pictures of dead Mara Salvatrucha members printed in newspapers or flashed on the screen during nightly news broadcasts, where they are only identified as gang members, and seldom by their names. The cemetery tattoos and graffiti prevalent within MS-13 communities also address this idea of namelessness, in an inscription that remembers the murdered and dead long after the newspaper falls into the trash bin. Additionally, within an urban society, Mara
Salvatrucha members are nothing more than an extension of their gang, not individuals, but members of a voracious mob, much like the army ants that their name comes from. This mob mentality, often perpetuated by the imaginary of violence, and specifically underscored by *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, strips individual identity from the mara in such a way that they are in fact nameless, as part of some larger homogenized, collective entity. This will become even more apparent after a close reading of both the documentary and the film. For now and in a general sense, Mara Salvatrucha members are nameless because many of them belonged to marginalized groups before they ever joined the gang in the first place. Many were poor, uneducated, unemployed representatives of a minority ethnic group. Society has often overlooked these peripheral members of society, especially in the case of MS-13, where many youngsters join the gang precisely because they are ignored by the social structures that are presumably in place to help them survive—the police, schools, social welfare programs.

Other examples of Mara Salvatrucha movies, such as the 2007 documentary *Hijos de la guerra*, directed by Alexandre Fuchs and Samantha Belmont, give the viewer a title that differs in tone and initial message from *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. This specific title refers to the gang’s origin, as the first members of the gang were products of the Salvadoran civil war. There is a polarity in this title. On one end there is the idea of the child—young, innocent, with the hope and promise of life ahead of them. On the other end is the finality of war—as old as mankind, soiled by blood and violence, with little hope for anything other than death. Combined, the words “children” and “war” offer a bizarre juxtaposition, where the innocence and promise of youth is stripped away by the
reality of war. Aside from the figurative interpretation, Fuchs and Belmont’s title addresses the reality of thousands of youngsters who were displaced, exiled or deported, without their families, many of whom immigrated to a Los Angeles community that may as well have been a different planet. Unable to fit in and always under threat from other ethnic gangs, these children, born from violence, relied on the only past that they knew in order to protect themselves and survive. In this title, we see a distinct origin, a reason for being. Their criminal acts are not random or merely performed in order to upset the social order—violence for the sake of violence. Instead, this behavior has a decipherable place of birth, and although the acts of murder and mayhem may not be justified in and of themselves, the title of this documentary certainly speaks to a motivation, a logic, and above all a reasoning for Mara Salvatrucha actions.

With these three titles, the viewer has differing introductions to the gang, with each title implying a diverging entry point for an understanding of the gang. In the National Geographic documentary, there is no origin, trauma, or hardship. The viewer, confronted first with the title, sees the gang as a worldwide danger before the narration even begins. The titles Sin nombre and Hijos de la guerra, however, bring into question issues that pertain to identity, background, and social injustice. Most importantly the second two titles humanize the Mara Salvatrucha gang member. The World’s Most Dangerous Gang purposely avoids this process of humanization because to make the gang member human would allow for the very same sympathy that runs antithetical to the creation of an urban monster, an entirely evil and murderous entity looking to destroy the established social order. The MS-13 member, then, is introduced in this title as a creature
similar to the Xenomorph from Alien. It is a heartless, mindless savage who kills simply for the joy of killing, a truly demonic antagonist in our own lives. Conversely, *Sin nombre* and *Hijos de la guerra* refer to a lack of identity and to the fact that the original Mara Salvatrucha gang grew from a vicious civil war, which allows the viewer to consider the many social, economic, and political elements that were fundamental in the gang’s violent birth and current nature. These explanations may not necessarily absolve the gang from its behavior, but they do stress to the viewer that they should question the processes that created the gang in the first place. When considering poverty, alienation, racism, the need for security, and a lack of available education, an entirely different vision of the gang develops, one that runs contrary to the depiction in *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. They are no longer just evil. They become, to a certain extent, victims themselves—victims of a situation where joining a gang became the nearly obligatory way to regain some kind of social identity and to confront the trauma of war and poverty.

Entering into the content of the documentary, questions concerning the intent of the diffused message become even more pronounced. Is this an educational film? Or does the program merely serve the purpose of entertainment? Is the *World’s Most Dangerous Gang* a genuine, journalistic examination of Mara Salvatrucha? Or is it meant to scare the viewer through the introduction of an evil, irredeemable “bad guy?” To varying degrees, all four of these questions are addressed, but specifically the induction of fear and the desire to determine a specific villain take a primary position in the production. Beyond the title, the introduction, featuring reporter Lisa Ling giving a brief overview of the forthcoming footage, speaks directly to the audience. “It’s the most violent gang in the
Americas… It’s a name *you* might have heard and *you* need to remember.” Ling uses the second person, not the customary third person used in these kinds of documentary exposés. The narrator is speaking directly to her audience, stressing the importance that the viewer remembers Mara Salvatrucha because the gang “may already be in a neighborhood near *you*.” The program appeals, in a personal way to those watching. The use of the second person closes the rift that may be caused by a third person narrative. Instead of constructing a distance between a third person depiction and the audience at home, the second person use of the word “*you*” engages the viewer, it incorporates them into the documentary. The narrator is talking to them, warning them of the fear that they *should* feel as they watch the images that unfold on the screen. Their life, their very safety, is at risk, and they need to fear Mara Salvatrucha because they may already be in their own backyard. This second person approach affirms Jesús Martín Barbero’s assertion that such “television constructs serve, to a great extent, to reinforce imaginaries of fear” and further supports Rossana Reguillo’s claim that many mediatic representations of urban violence assert that “la ciudad es… esencialmente peligro” (Barbero 27; “Imaginarios globales, miedos locales” 10). And so, under the guise of warning, or even protection from future violence, the documentary’s narration enters a relationship with the viewer, where the seemingly authoritative information presented serves to prepare the watcher for impending criminal activity. They need to remember the name Mara Salvatrucha because they need to fear them. As Reguillo tells us, you hate what you fear, and hatred often precludes sympathy, identification, and above all, humanization of the subject that is hated. Patrick Colm Hogan confirms that this fear of
the other, this hatred, leads to opposability—the clear distinction between groups—which in turn confirms allegiance with the in-group (112-115).

The relationship between the viewer and the documentary, that is to say the imaginary of violence, goes beyond the initial use of the second person. Aside from serving as a kind of protector, warning the audience of a looming danger that they may not yet have heard of, the documentary looks to confront this danger head-on, sacrificing itself for the sake of gaining knowledge for the watchers, so that these same viewers do not have to take on the danger directly, themselves. *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* promises “answers from the inside,” entering gang infested neighborhoods, interviewing current gang members, and even risking life and limb in a Salvadoran prison which assumedly holds only Mara Salvatrucha members. In other words, the documentary undertakes a dangerous voyage into the out-group, into the evil monster’s lair, so that it can better inform the in-group of the perils that the viewer should fear. In this situation, the documentary becomes an entity, an investigative force that bravely engages the enemy on their own turf, piecing together valuable information that may help to protect the viewer. Of course, the documentary crew is made up of dozens of people who travel together with Lisa Ling in order to produce the program. This includes camera operators, lighting crews, producers, drivers, make-up artists, writers, and many others. Yet the narrative perspective, and specifically Lisa Ling’s presence at the forefront, clouds this group effort. The documentary itself becomes a character within the imaginary of violence, a character that informs, protects, and sacrifices itself for the safety of the in-group. The audience cannot go into these areas to learn about this secretive, lurid
underworld, so the documentary, in its role as the faithful and dependable voice on Mara Salvatrucha, takes the burden on for them.

The most salient example of this shifting relationship with the audience arises when the documentary crew first attempts to interview inmates at a Mara Salvatrucha controlled prison in El Salvador. Before we see the footage of them approaching the prison, there is a montage of supposed MS-13 violence within these kinds of prisons. The collage of images shows guards battling inmates, in full riot gear, prisoners running through the open areas of the prisons, loose and unruly, and ultimately, to end the montage, dead, tattooed, and bloodied bodies lying face down on the concrete, assumedly in the aftermath of the riot. Aside from depicting the prison violence, this footage, presented immediately before glimpses from the inside of a car on its way to a similar prison, demonstrates, in vivid and shocking fashion, the danger that the documentary crew faces as they try to bring the audience an inside perspective on Mara Salvatrucha activity within the prison. Lisa Ling could end up as one of these bloody bodies. And as if this insinuation is not enough to foment a feeling of both dread and sacrifice on the part of the film crew, Ling receives a phone call as they drive to the facility. The voice on the other end warns her about impending danger. The caller has informed her that there is a scheme in place. Lisa Ling tells the viewer that “the inmates are planning to kidnap us.” The crew decides to avoid the prison for now, but soon thereafter, they are given the green light to return to the prison, because there are assurances in place that guarantee their safety. At once, this entire scene provokes a number of questions to an expert on Mara Salvatrucha who has spent time in the field. Who was planning the kidnapping?
Who tipped the inmates to the arrival of the documentary crew? Who was on the other end of the phone, warning the crew of the possible kidnapping? And most importantly, what changed? Who made these assurances of safety, and how was this safety negotiated? The interviewed gang specialists speak definitively of the influence Mara Salvatrucha members have on fellow maras that live outside of the prison, manipulating contract kills and drug deals from their cells. Such information implies that if the MS-13 associated prisoners had advanced knowledge of the film crew’s approach, there is the chance that they could have kidnapped them anywhere in El Salvador, especially considering that Lisa Ling enters various neighborhoods dominated by Mara Salvatrucha. It would be much easier to kidnap them in one of these areas, where the maras are free and not hindered by the various channels that an inmate must go through in order to contact the world outside of prison. The average home viewer has little knowledge of these inner workings. They do not think to ask these kinds of questions because the only information that they have is the knowledge presented by the documentary itself. Therefore, the audience does not consider that this entire scene may have been fabricated, or at the very least exaggerated in order to exacerbate the events that transpired on the way to the prison. Because the audience does not question this chain of events, they take it as truth. And because they take this fearful situation as truth, they appreciate the work of the film crew as one grounded in the sacrifice of life for the sake of awareness and insight. Lisa Ling and her colleagues take the danger on themselves, so that the audience does not have to interact with these evil personas in any direct way. In turn, the information gained from this ostensibly deadly excursion serves to further promote a fear
of the gang. While the viewer is safe and sound, at home, this agent of the imaginary of violence not only warns them of imminent danger, but also enters the most menacing and perilous environments in order to demonstrate, empirically with images and words, that there is a very real reason to be scared. The documentary, then, becomes a part of the in-group. It includes the home viewer and engages them as one of their own, going so far as to show the in-group what they should fear and why. This fear extends the gap between the in-group and the out-group, further crippling any possibility of objectively learning about the trauma and tragedy that would create the gang in the first place.

Notwithstanding, it is important to re-iterate that there is a reason, in some communities, to fear Mara Salvatrucha. Their criminal activities have been well documented over the course of the last decade. They are violent, and they are involved in the drug trade, prostitution, arms-dealing, and human trafficking. And yet there are very specific socio-economic and political reasons why these youngsters engage in these kinds of illicit activities, conditions that this dissertation has already elaborated. Within the context of the imaginary of violence, Rossana Reguillo contends that “youths feel cornered by daily evidence of lack of possibilities and the enormous difficulty posed by integration, or in other words to fit in and be included… Within this landscape, the culture is ripe for illegality,” an illegality that “becomes a viable option for excluded youths” (“Teens at the Border” 14-15). Fomenting fear by speaking directly at the audience as a sort of expert on the issues of Mara Salvatrucha, as The World’s Most Dangerous Gang does, bypasses an understanding of the landscape that both Reguillo and my research examine. It evades the question of origin, because the main goal of the
documentary is to create a sensationalized account of the evil subject, and not to generate a real dialogue that fleshes out the more complex issues that define the gang from a social standpoint. It becomes obvious, then, that the primary objective of this documentary is not to inform, but more to sensationalize the gang, make them scapegoats by manipulating the truth, under the assumption that the information presented derives from an expert authority on the subject of Mara Salvatrucha.

I use the term “manipulating the truth” because the documentary does not necessarily lie about everything related to MS-13. *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* does present some valid information. The birthplace of the gang is identified as Los Angeles. The audience sees some examples of authentic Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti. The viewer witnesses the kind of graveyard mural that this dissertation discusses earlier, where dead MS-13 members pay homage to the community members that have died as a result of street violence. The documentary mentions the *Mano dura* strategy used by Central American police agencies to combat growing gang activity. The case of murdered ex-Mara Salvatrucha member turned informant Brenda Paz takes a prominent role in the narrative, complete with police interrogation videos. There are interviews with supposed gang members and gang specialists from various police organizations, which lend a distinct authority to the images that the documentary presents. These are all examples of realistic aspects of the Mara Salvatrucha gang portrayed in *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. Yet, there are a number of scenes that are incongruous with any intention of presenting the truth. For example, as the documentary presents a series of images of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, one picture clearly shows an 18, and not a 13,
meaning that the tag belongs not to Mara Salvatrucha, but to the 18th Street Gang, MS-13’s greatest rival. In an early segment, the documentary intends to confirm the spread of Mara Salvatrucha activity by flashing newspaper headlines from specific cities all over the country, each overlaid on a map of the United States. It mentions a particularly gruesome crime that takes place in Houston, Texas but the heading is from a newspaper in the Rio Grande valley. And although this last point may seem almost insignificant, it begs the question as to why they were not able to find a headline from the Houston Chronicle. After all, if this newspaper article is proof positive of crimes committed in Southwest Texas, one wonders why they were not able to find a corresponding scarehead directly from the United States’ fourth largest city.

These slight inaccuracies bring into question the authenticity, the truth, of the rest of the documentary. But the prime example of the manipulation and misrepresentation of Mara Salvatrucha returns to the avoidance of origin that has served as a constant unifying thread in this close reading of The World’s Most Dangerous Gang. To be fair, the documentary correctly names Los Angeles as the gang’s birthplace, and identifies deportation to Central American countries, and specifically prisons in the area, as the source for the spread of Mara Salvatrucha. However, any documentary promising “answers from the inside” should engage the gang’s inception in a more developed manner. The gang’s roots in social injustice, war, and discrimination explain, in large part, their current violent existence. Yet, the feature only briefly touches upon the Salvadoran civil war. In fact, the words “civil war” are only used twice in the entire feature, and both times in a very general sense. It mentions that many Mara Salvatrucha
members are products of a 1979 pattern of immigration arising from the need “to escape a civil war.” The stress on the indefinite article “a” is mine, underscoring the generalization of not specifically identifying which civil war. The country name, El Salvador, does not precede or follow the phrase “civil war.” The social and political current underlying the Salvadoran civil war correspond to very specific Salvadoran issues. Ignoring this specificity homogenizes all the countries in Central America that fought, at different times and for different reasons, civil wars during the seventies, eighties, and nineties. For the viewer, there is no separation between the Salvadoran civil war, and the one fought in Guatemala, for example. And so, to the at-home viewer Mara Salvatrucha suddenly appeared as a result of some typically savage, Third World war in a far off land. Perhaps the documentary ignores the specificity of the Salvadoran situation in order to avoid addressing the military and financial aid provided by the United States to the same Salvadoran government that committed severe human rights violations and acts of mass murder in the name if quelling rebellion. Whatever the reason behind not including this information, the Salvadoran civil war was a key component in the birth and eventual growth of Mara Salvatrucha. The San Salvador children who stepped over the dead bodies of their classmates on the way to school became the traumatized and battle-ready teenagers who looked to defend themselves from racial violence in 1980s Los Angeles. Ignoring this critical part of Mara Salvatrucha history severely brings into question the educational intention of the documentary. This MS-13 history is incomplete, inadequate, and not truly geared towards understanding “where it came from and where
it’s going” or “what led them from being a bunch of kids to the most violent gang in the world.”

The viewer has to wait almost 25 minutes, in a 51-minute documentary, before these roots are discussed in any definitive way. The film mentions “a civil war” twice, and in a cursory manner throws around words like “alienation” and “discrimination,” leading towards a superficial mention of how Los Angeles immigrants “banded together to protect” themselves from other groups in their new neighborhoods. This information, which otherwise proves essential to understanding Mara Salvatrucha, flashes on the television screen for less than fifteen seconds. These hints at social inequality and violence serve as limited jumping-off points for an interview with a founding member of MS-13, who explains how the gang formed. In a blatant misrepresentation of the true origin of the gang, the documentary spends five or six minutes of edited interview footage to “prove” how the gang began as a bunch of teenagers who simply got together so that they could go to heavy metal concerts. Described as a bunch of stoner, metal-heads the segment segues into how the typical rock and roll sign of the devil horns, made with the index and pinky fingers of the hand, evolved into the gang’s most used hand-sign. The alleged MS-13 member’s voice is heard over images of a concert, with smoke rising from the crowd, and hundreds of fans pumping their handmade devil sign, while heavy metal music plays in the background. This is not a real concert, nor is it any kind of stock footage of a heavy metal performance. Instead it is a staged, fake show produced specifically for the purpose of the documentary. A long shot places the viewers near the back of the auditorium, with the stage directly in front of them. The camera eventually
enters the sea of crazed adolescents, who slam-dance and bash each other as the shot shakes to reflect the violent motion of the mob. From this footage, the narrative moves to a montage of tattooed Mara Salvatrucha members flashing the devil sign for the camera in an arrogant display of gang allegiance. Therefore, the viewer does not see the narration of a gang beginning that includes the specific Salvadoran civil war, the hardships associated with living in the Pico/Union area, or the agonizing poverty that these original MS-13 members lived under, conditions that forced them to group together in order to survive, both physically and economically. Instead, Mara Salvatrucha is represented, from its very inception, as a bunch of drug-addicted, teenage troublemakers who eventually morphed into the violent, arrogant gang that we see today.

These two very different origins incite different responses from the viewing audience. The brushed-aside, even overlooked beginning, stemming from war and misery, has the possibility to arouse a sense of pity, even sympathy, from the audience if otherwise included. That is not to say that the component of fear does not persist, but this fear is mitigated by the idea that, at least upon its initiation, the gang had few options but to group together. Additionally, making reference to the United States’ involvement in the Salvadoran conflict could beget the idea that these children of war are a product of an American intervention that facilitated the murders of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee to South Central Los Angeles. In other words, including this United States participation could lead to the revelation that the Mara Salvatrucha problem is, in part, the United States’ fault. On the other hand, establishing that the MS-13 members have always been stoners, that is to say drug
addicts, and that they always looked towards extreme behavior promotes the idea that they have always been dangerous, that they only ever cared about illicit behavior. In other words, in this documentary, Mara Salvatrucha crime is inherent and innate, and not a response to marginalized and traumatic antecedents.

This, of course, sets up the Mara Salvatrucha member as one of the villains within the imaginary of violence, an entity like the Xenomorph, who just appeared one day, from a faraway land, with the sole purpose of fomenting social unrest via random and impossible-to-qualify violence. And so, while *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* does, in fact, present some truth to the MS-13 phenomenon, its greater purpose is to put a face to the crime, to create a hateable antagonist that can take the blame for a fear that is, in large part, perpetuated by its own representation, as an agent of the imaginary of violence. The documentary tells the viewer whom they must fear, why they must fear them, and then gives this villain an easily recognizable face, so that the audience has someone specific to indict as the guilty party of their own feelings of terror and angst. The alternative approach, one that, in an objective and honest way, portrays Mara Salvatrucha as a criminal organization, but one that shows lives forced into violence and crime, humanizes the maras. This approach shifts the blame from MS-13 onto the structures that caused this deviant behavior in the first place. That is not to say that Mara Salvatrucha lacks agency. The gang is responsible for its own actions as its members ultimately decide whether they want to commit crimes and act out with violence. Yet, the causes behind why they choose illegality and belligerence are complex, and certainly not as simple as *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* asserts. During my interviews and also
in the various sources cited thus far, MS-13 members feel as though they have no legal alternative for survival. The existing authoritative powers have eliminated the chance for an honest way of life. This complexity is what leads a viewer to question the identity of the real bad guy. Lacking a more conventional path towards social and economic advancement, maras, to a certain extent, become victims of a system that, at best, marginalizes them, and at worst consistently attacks them. The National Geographic Channel’s program attempts to remove this complexity through sensationalization and the manipulation of truth. And as a representative of the media and an organization that has, for decades, promoted education, there is a strong chance that the audience takes the words of the documentary as authentic, conclusive evidence of the evil nature of the gang. The World’s Most Dangerous Gang asserts that “MS uses fear as much as violence to control its turf.” If we consider the audience’s opinions and perspectives a kind of mediatric turf, where various images and messages collide and combine to create a worldview, then we can say the same about the National Geographic Channel. In this documentary they use fear and brutality to claim their turf within the imaginary of violence.

5.3 Mara Salvatrucha “por siempre?” But why?: Sin nombre and the over-stylization and sensationalization of Mara Salvatrucha

Released in 2009, Sin nombre attempts, on the surface, a much different tone in its portrayal of Mara Salvatrucha, especially in regards to The World’s Most Dangerous Gang. Most importantly, whereas the latter claims to take the form of documentary film, Sin nombre is a feature film. The characters are not real people. The plot is fictionalized,
though based on a combination of possible true-to-life stories pulled from current headlines (Mara Salvatrucha activity, human smuggling, illegal immigration). It follows the traditional structure of a cinematic narrative, with protagonists and antagonists, rising and falling action, a climax, and an ultimate resolution. Whereas The World’s Most Dangerous Gang purports “reality,” Sin nombre is a dramatization. Notwithstanding, the two programs share a number of qualities. Both consist of out-group portrayals of the gang. Despite Sin nombre’s insider approach to Mara Salvatrucha culture, specifically with its development of the main characters El Casper and L’il Mago, the film was produced and directed by individuals who live outside of the MS-13 culture. And as with The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, this out-group influence begs questions within the context of the imaginary of violence. What is the film’s intention? How does its filmic portrayal differ from the effort put forth by the National Geographic Channel? How are the two similar?

Cary Joji Fukunaga’s words provide a bit of perspective on the aim of the movie, especially in terms of his desired “realistic” tone. In order to achieve his ambitions, Fukunaga spent months interviewing Mara Salvatrucha members in prisons, some still affiliated and others, like the protagonist Casper, who were looking for a way out of the gang. After speaking to these inmates, he was able to secure a number of street-level contacts who provided details about MS-13 culture that Fukunaga later incorporated into his movie. According to a conversation with Interview magazine, Fukunaga “wanted everything to be as authentic as possible” (Franco). In this way, Sin nombre parallels other movies (La vendedora de rosas, De la calle, Cidade de Deus) that have tried to
create gritty, “realistic” cinematic experiences that engage the subject of gang and youth violence in urban settings. Fukunaga wanted to separate himself from journalists and documentarians who interviewed people in the Mara Salvatrucha community to later “write a sensational piece about how powerful the gang is” (Complex).

To a certain extent, Fukunaga succeeds in his endeavor. As with The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, the depiction of the gang in Sin nombre does provide access to some aspects of Mara Salvatrucha culture. The spoken language and terminology in the film is correct, as the characters talk in MS-13 slang appropriately. The MS-13 tattoos are faithful to the traditional ink work seen on maras on the streets, insofar as the images presented. Maras salute and communicate with each other through valid hand-sign stacking. The graffiti is nearly perfect, with its devil hands and gothic lettering. The gang nicknames, L’il Mago, Casper, Smiley, El Sol, and others replicate the renaming of maras once they become legitimate members of the gang. The viewer sees the mandatory jump-in of a new recruit. Even Casper’s trip into the Destroyer, his clique’s neighborhood safe house, reflects the reality in many neighborhoods across the Americas—a well-guarded location where Mara Salvatrucha members congregate and spend time together. As Casper walks the clique’s youngest recruit, Smiley, through the halls of the Destroyer, we see many of the activities correctly associated with Mara Salvatrucha culture, activities confirmed through my own interviews with gang members. There are teenagers smoking weed. Others are just “chilling,” or relaxing and talking. In another room, a mara tattoos his gang brother. In short, similar to the National Geographic documentary and perhaps even more so, certain authentic details are in place, details that demonstrate that, despite
Fukunaga’s outsider status, the director was able to construct a moderately accurate depiction of the more superficial aspects of Mara Salvatrucha culture.

However, a more detailed examination of the gang’s filmic representation casts doubt on Fukunaga’s ostensible intention to produce an authentic characterization of the gang, one that breaks from the sensationalized articles that he seems determined to demystify, according to his interview in *Complex*. On the contrary, *Sin nombre* renders a negative image of the gang, one that parallels *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* in terms of creating a societal villain that must be feared and avoided, one whose actions are unexplainable and unjustifiable within the context of the urban existence. As is the case with *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, ignoring vital aspects of the community transfigures the gang into an evil presence, one without origin that is easily hated without criticizing the social structures that led to its development. For example, whereas the tattoos, graffiti, and rap analyzed in this dissertation confirm the gang’s desire to vault their own Mara Salvatrucha allegiance above all other social categories, this particular movie forces the viewer to question why a youngster would ever join MS-13 in the first place. This question stems from the stripping of functionality in the community dynamic, relegating the need to join Mara Salvatrucha to a simple desire to have a surrogate family.

This representation of Mara Salvatrucha is problematic when considering the film’s apparent attempt at a realistic depiction of the gang. It ignores the complex underpinnings involved with the mara’s need for community. In various interviews, Fukunaga claims that distorted and broken families serve as one of his primary artistic motivators, when screenwriting for a movie (*Complex*, Franco, et al.) Of course, Mara
Salvatrucha members do look to the gang to provide a family structure that they may not have in their own lives, outside of the gang. Beyond this need for family, however, the compulsion to join Mara Salvatrucha stems from a young, poor urban resident and his or her ability to rely on certain services and conveniences within the gang that they otherwise could not receive outside of the gang. This recalls Patrick Colm Hogan’s discussion of functionality, and how it refers to a community’s “bearing on access to opportunities, services and goods” (77). Hogan explains that “functionality is the degree to which a particular category affects one’s freedom of action or choice,” adding that “the more functional a category, the more likely it is to be high in the hierarchy of one’s self-concept” (60). Before joining the gang and as citizens of a traditional national model, future Mara Salvatrucha members have little access to opportunity, scarce money to access most services and goods (health care, housing, food), and their freedom of action or choice is severely limited by their position as marginal entities in an urban space. Therefore, traditional national and community categories do not prove functional in the lives of would be Mara Salvatrucha members. They are discriminated against, marginalized before ever joining the gang, harassed by police agencies and ethnically different rival gangs. The impoverished neighborhoods that many of these future Mara Salvatrucha members live in impede any kind of economic progress, and the lack of legitimate jobs in these regions assure that, unless they find a more functional social category, they will play out a life of hunger and want. Future MS-13 members cannot rely on police or state protection. During the course of my interviews with Mara Salvatrucha members, when the conversation led to them revealing why they joined the
gang in the first place, they invariably cited protection as a main justification. One mara specifically told me that he was tired of getting beat up, “jumped” as he put it, on his way to school when he was twelve. Telling his parents, and their subsequent calls to the police, did nothing to secure his personal safety. Joining MS-13 was the only way that he really felt safe in his McArthur Park neighborhood, as they protected him and even sought out those who had been abusing him. This story mirrors some of the reasons why the original Mara Salvatrucha banded together in order to battle rival gangs that were threatening their lives and livelihood, threats that were ignored, in large part, by an ineffectual and altogether absent Los Angeles Police Department.

And so, customary social categories give no sense of functionality to future Mara Salvatrucha members. They join MS-13 because this community allows them a functionality that they did not have when they were non-affiliated. They have a consistent source of income, as they perform jobs for the gang. They feel protected by the gang, as any attack on individual MS-13 members represents an attack on the entire gang. In short, as Mara Salvatrucha members, they can access many of the goods and services that they could not before, as marginalized members of the quotidian social category. Therefore, the Mara Salvatrucha community is not only about substituting a family. MS-13 is not merely a replacement for a lost family, and certainly not just a source of kinship and companionship. The community provides a specific series of beneficial interactions that bolster sources of revenue and reinforce survival.

Which, then, is more important to the Mara Salvatrucha member: social identity or functionality? In truth, they are inextricably linked, each relating to the other. Based on
my experience with MS-13 members the desire to belong to a bigger group, one that allows them a chance to create a sense of belonging with a network of like individuals, does not outweigh the importance of the functional benefits provided by their affiliation to the gang, or vice versa. Both necessities are salient in their decision to join Mara Salvatrucha. I have already mentioned the subject of protection in response to an absent police presence in certain neighborhoods. Likewise, in the ten or so situations where MS-13 members discussed their reasoning behind joining the gang, a lack of money consistently came up, as well. There were no legal options that would help them rise above poverty; little or no chances of finding a job with the pay level that would help them overcome the want that they experienced. And so, Mara Salvatrucha gave them the opportunity to seek this kind of employment, however illicit, so that they could negotiate with and eventually prevail against being poor, abused, and ignored.

Simultaneously, as the many figures throughout this dissertation confirm, Mara Salvatrucha members seem to feel a need to consistently demonstrate their affiliation to the gang. Some of the most intricate and prominently displayed tattoos and graffiti have the gang name as their focus. The name appears on foreheads, chests, and as the central components in pieced together murals. These expressions clearly indicate that there is an undeniable affectivity towards Mara Salvatrucha, therefore reflecting the importance of MS-13 to its individual gang members. This affection for the gang indicates a connection to Mara Salvatrucha that further cements the mara’s own social identity as a member of the community. In short, they are MS-13 members, and this group affiliation proves central to their own conceptualization of who they are as individuals.
These two notions, functionality and identity, work together as equally important factors of the Mara Salvatrucha member’s daily life, or rather functionality is one quality associated with certain kinds of group affiliations that can make up one’s social identity. Without the gang, they would not have the access to the kinds of goods and services needed to live comfortably in a political nation. But in order to rely on this functionality, they must be loyal, dedicated members of the gang, in the first place. The fact that Mara Salvatrucha gives them the opportunity for a somewhat better existence, in terms of money, perhaps housing, and certainly as a means for professional growth, reinforces the mara’s love for the very dangerous lifestyle. Therefore, both interweave insofar as their importance to Mara Salvatrucha membership.

However, while considering the importance of functionality and a sense of identity within a social group proves critical in the examination of why youngsters join Mara Salvatrucha in the first place, neither of these key concepts comes into play in Fukunaga’s movie. *Sin nombre* ignores both components in its characterization of the gang. As such, the viewer questions if there is any real advantage to becoming a mara. This leaves a one-dimensional representation of the gang, one that further confirms that there is no origin, no real justification for gang affiliation. And so, the Mara Salvatrucha members presented in the movie take on a villainous form, one not focused on either functionality or identity, but instead on savagery, violence and death. For Fukunaga, Mara Salvatrucha is a cinematic antagonist, the primary, evil force which keeps the immigrants from safely reaching the United States.
Fukunaga’s portrayal of MS-13 does not promote the gang as functional. Rather, the gang seems to interfere with and even hinder the goods and services that its members may have access to in a variety of differing ways. Even before Casper murders L’il Mago, the viewer never sees any specific activity that would motivate a youngster to join Mara Salvatrucha to begin with. Casper is never shown making money for the gang, and in turn, himself. We do not see Casper protecting anyone of his “brothers,” or any of them protecting him. Instead, in almost every early scene in the movie, Casper’s fellow gang members execute vicious and violent acts against one of their own, putting into question the notion that Mara Salvatrucha will always be there for its members. The gang’s rules, in the movie, are totalitarian, and the punishments for breaking these rules are severe. Of course, “check courting” is a common disciplinary practice in the gang, a process in which several maras beat a fellow gang member in cases where important rules are broken. Casper’s punishment, however, results from a simple white lie that had nothing at all to do with gang activity. He was not in enemy territory or ratting the gang out. He was simply visiting his girlfriend. The beating, however, is brutal, and leaves a scar over his eye. Furthermore, as Casper sits with his girlfriend in the train yard, El Sol, the clique’s second-in-command, indirectly threatens his life, advising him to watch himself because one never knows what kind of person is waiting to attack him. Instead of security, this kind of interaction breeds fear and contempt, feelings which both serve to derail the functionality that Mara Salvatrucha supposedly provides for its members.

The ultimate act of betrayal occurs when Casper’s girlfriend comes and visits him during a clique meeting in a cemetery. She is there against his wishes, and immediately
Casper jumps up to escort her away from the meeting. L’il Mago interferes, and offers to walk her out, instead. Knowing that he cannot go against the demands of the clique leader, Casper tells L’il Mago that he needs to walk her out, and nothing else. This veiled warning proves that Casper does not trust his leader, and that, in turn, he does not trust his gang. True to Casper’s suspicions, L’il Mago attempts to rape the girl, ripping her jeans and panties off, as he bends her over a gravestone, ready to penetrate her from behind. In the ensuing skirmish, she falls and hits her head on the cement, killing her instantly. My fieldwork revealed that in real Mara Salvatrucha circles, where loyalty and respect for your brothers takes precedence above everything else, raping a brother’s girlfriend would result in a check court. In the most extreme case, murdering the girl, regardless of the position of authority of the mara, could result in the death of the offender. In the filmic portrayal, however, L’il Mago’s position in the gang is enough to absolve him and free him from punishment. What is more, rather than apologizing to Casper or offering a familial, father-figure method of consolation, L’il Mago brushes the incident aside, telling Casper that he’ll find another just like her. This attempted rape and murder would be a serious trespass in real-world Mara Salvatrucha communities. In the various examples of MS-13 expressive culture presented thus far, an important emphasis is placed on others not taking what they believe belongs to them—money, territory, their lives. This is especially underscored when it comes to maras taking from their brothers. Stealing from a fellow mara, or forcefully snatching another gang member’s belongings, results in some of the more brutal punishments dealt by the gang. They believe that the world outside of the gang tries to take everything that they deserve, and so taking from a
fellow brother is perceived as the ultimate trespass. Yet in *Sin nombre*, this action is viewed as commonplace, as if it is a typical occurrence that Casper must deal with because that is the way that life goes in Mara Salvatrucha.

And so Casper does not make money for himself, despite recruiting new members and assumedly undertaking various tasks for them. He distrusts his fellow gang members. Instead of protection he hears threats. And ultimately his ability to access “the freedom of action and choice,” the key mechanism behind functionality, becomes completely compromised by the most influential member of the gang. In short, functionality as an MS-13 member is not cultivated in this movie. Casper is no freer in MS-13 than he would be in the outside world. Mara Salvatrucha, then, destroys his access to goods and services and curbs his freedom of choice and action. The breakdown of the functionality parameter, as explained by Hogan, leads to another problematic within the film’s representation of Mara Salvatrucha. How can Casper feel affectivity towards a group of people that threaten him, that stifle his ability to advance, even within the confines of the gang, and who murder the people that he loves? In other words, with the images presented on the screen, what in the behavior and actions of Mara Salvatrucha would reveal any kind of affection to the gang? What would keep Casper in the gang? Why did he join in the first place? Casper must leave the gang because there is no affectivity for it. To him, the phrase “mara por vida” rings empty and untrue. With the elimination of Casper’s affectivity, the viewer has no real indicator as to why joining Mara Salvatrucha is an attractive option for its members. This representation of the gang portrays a group of savages, animals who are just as willing to hurt their own members as they are to kill
rival gang members. The audience does not see the complex situations that lead a youngster to enter this violent life, because the audience is not made aware of the various benefits that the gang provides, benefits that are not available to the youngsters as members of other social groups. Erasing the functionality of the gang, and therefore wiping out the associated affectivity deriving from the love for the community, we are left with another violent group of kids, and nothing more. The viewer wonders what scenes in the film illustrate that Mara Salvatrucha is a community worth living and dying for. Why is Mara Salvatrucha “por vida?” What is more, the audience questions if there are any benefits at all associated with MS-13 membership, and therefore fail to understand the driving force behind the gang’s expansion and its importance in the lives of marginalized children all over the Americas. They do not join Mara Salvatrucha in order to steal, rape, and murder. They join the gang in an attempt to overcome their almost nonexistent capacity to function as a regular member of society.

*Sin nombre* also ignores the compulsion that the would-be gang member feels towards becoming part of an accepting social group that he or she can later draw upon when creating his or her own conceptualization of identity. The character Smiley represents a missed opportunity for Fukunaga to engage the idea that future MS-13 members lack a connection to a social group that accepts and nurtures them. The movie opens with Casper coming to Smiley’s house, in order to pick him up and take him to the Destroyer gang hang out. Before Casper meets with the MS-13 recruit, an elderly woman sticks her head out of the window and insults Casper. She tells him that he is up to no good, that he is a piece of crap, and that his influence as a gang member will hurt young
Smiley. Smiley, then, *does* have some kind of support structure, someone who cares for him enough to confront a purported gang member face to face, without fear of what this gang member may do to her. Later in the movie, after Casper has fled, Smiley is seen talking to a group of what appears to be his friends. They talk to each other, sharing a moment as children, separated from *la vida loca*. Again, this scene demonstrates that Smiley has a network of companions that accept him, a group of youngsters that he belongs to, outside of Mara Salvatrucha. And so, with both some semblance of a family and a dedicated group of friends that he belongs to, the viewer does not understand why he would eschew both and run to Mara Salvatrucha. Why would Smiley want to join MS-13 if he has a protective elder and a concrete network of friends? This question remains unanswered, and yet again, the impulse to join Mara Salvatrucha is unexplained. Devoid of intention or justification, Smiley becomes the principal villain in the movie once Casper kills L’il Mago. Smiley’s only motivation to remain in the gang after L’il Mago’s murder is his overwhelming desire to kill for a gang that has done nothing but attack and abuse him, from his initial jump-in to El Sol’s violent threats after L’il Mago’s death. The viewer does not see a child screaming to belong to some group, a youngster frenetically looking for an accepting social group that will take him in, unconditionally. Instead, all the viewer sees is a bloodthirsty kid, one who, without any real, logical motivation, will kill for an MS-13 community who has not shown any kind of affection towards him. This perpetuates the sensationalistic depiction of Mara Salvatrucha in *Sin nombre*.

*Sin nombre* further compounds an absolute rejection from the viewer through its over-stylization of both Mara Salvatrucha and its members. The tattoos are bold; a deep
dark black that appears as if the ink has been painted on with a sharpie pen. The previous chapters in this dissertation have shown how many of the tattoos are blurry, unprofessional, with the original black lines bleeding away towards a washed out green or blue hue. In *Sin nombre*, the maras have clear lines, all of which are filled in completely, with no gaps or breaks in the color. This ruptures the reality that many of the gang members receive their tattoos from amateur artists living within the in-group. They receive little or no formal training, and their tools are rudimentary, many times pieced together from spare parts and left over scraps. The inked image, therefore, suffers in quality. In the film, the tattoos appear on sculpted, toned bodies, obviously developed after hours of working out. These are beautiful people, with beautiful tattoos. They are clearly actors with make-up ink work who look much different than the street children used in movies such as *De la calle*, *Cidade de Deus*, and *La vendedora de rosas*. This stylized characterization does not promote authenticity. Instead it turns the MS-13 members into cinematic caricatures, over-refined counterfeits who do not serve to represent real people. Rather, the Mara Salvatrucha members become nothing more than stereotypes that fill the role of villain in a movie about immigration.

The over-stylization becomes more apparent when comparing two of the main characters in the movie, Li’l Mago and Casper. Li’l Mago, the original leader of Casper’s Mara Salvatrucha clique, has bold, filled-in facial tattoos, which stand in stark contrast to the gleaming white set of professionally cleaned teeth. He is tall, muscular, beautiful, and menacing, thereby giving the viewer an imposing and hard-to-ignore antagonist that they can root against. Beyond L’il Mago’s physical presentation, his personality is portrayed
as sadistic and perverted. He smiles as Casper’s juvenile recruit, El Smiley, undergoes the brutal “jumping-in” ceremony, circling the violence like a vulture, slowly counting off the thirteen seconds. He relishes in watching the youngster suffer as the gang kicks and beats him. Afterwards, he kisses the child’s forehead, promising him that he will always have a family, in a pseudo-tender gesture that only reveals a bipolar, almost manic disposition. He speaks softly, remains cold and calculated in the face of any affront, and is ultimately unremorseful after any of his cruel actions. L’il Mago enjoys rape. On two occasions, we see him sexually assault a woman, never under the auspice of Mara Salvatrucha business. Of course, both rapes take place during or after MS-13 activities, but the violations occur outside of the gang’s desires. First he rapes Casper’s girlfriend Martha after a gang meeting, and then a second girl during an attempted robbery onboard a train. These are his rapes, not the gang’s. Yet the viewer, watching this, seeing the close relationship between Mara Salvatrucha and L’il Mago, may think that this is kind of assault assumes a typical role in MS-13 culture. L’il Mago is also a murderer. And although many Mara Salvatrucha members are, in fact, murderers, the clique’s leader does not kill Casper’s girlfriend in the name of MS-13 business. Martha dies defending herself from the same kind of random act of violence that the viewer is led to expect from Mara Salvatrucha, even though, in reality, such a murder would constitute grounds for punishment within the gang community.

L’il Mago’s portrayal as a cruel, sadistic, murdering rapist paints him, and by extension, Mara Salvatrucha, as the “bad guy.” He and his gang are the main antagonists of the movie, in the same way that Mara Salvatrucha is the evil presence in The World’s
There is no attempt at representing an authentic, non-sensational version of the gang. Mara Salvatrucha, in *Sin nombre*, serves as the chaotic force that disrupts and attacks the lives of those who are non-affiliated. This becomes even more evident when contrasting L’il Mago with the character El Casper. Unlike L’il Mago, Casper does not have highly visible tattoos on his face. The one mark on his face, a single teardrop tattoo, looks like a simple mole under his eye. He is seldom seen with his shirt off, brazenly displaying his tattoos in the same manner that L’il Mago does. In other words, he is easier to accept because he has not mutilated his body in the name of the evil gang to the degree that his brothers have. He looks more human. The plot reinforces Casper’s humanity throughout the movie, as we see him with his girlfriend behaving like any typical teenager would—making out with her, whispering pillow talk, and taking pictures with Martha. The audience also sees Casper’s humanity in his facial reactions to the violence that surrounds him. Whereas L’il Mago smiles sadistically during Smiley’s initiation beating, Casper looks concerned. L’il Mago’s cold, distant face when telling Casper about Martha’s death stands in direct contrast to Casper’s own hurt, tearful reaction. Casper looks disgusted as L’il Mago attempts to rape Sayra on the roof of the train, and his attack on L’il Mago is a physical reaction to this feeling of disgust. He machetes L’il Mago in the side of the neck, and unlike most of L’il Mago’s violent acts, Casper’s assault is justified in the protection of a defenseless girl. This killing, the attack on L’il Mago, is the only time the audience sees Casper commit an act of homicide in the movie, despite a train rider’s later claim that Casper “es un asesino.” In fact, according to what the viewer sees on the screen, Casper is anything but a murderer. He is a protector,
only resorting to the machete when the situation escalates to the point of rape. Clearly, L’il Mago’s murder of Martha still lays fresh in Casper’s memory, but this need to protect Sayra eventually catalyzes action.

And so, the movie establishes a polarity for the viewer. On one end of the spectrum they see L’il Mago: twisted, insane, and brutal; his tattooed face a salient indicator of his place outside of the norms of society. On the other end, the viewer comes to know Casper, a kind-hearted, concerned, and honorable youngster, willing to sacrifice his own life and the standing in his gang in order to protect a stranger. This polarity, then, translates into the oldest binary recognized in stories of any genre, whether cinematic, literary, or anecdotal. *Sin nombre* narrates a battle between good and evil. As Casper separates himself, further and further, from the gang, he becomes less an animal and more like a human being. In short, as he slowly detaches from Mara Salvatrucha, Casper assumes the role of the good guy. His transformation from mara to redeemed hero relies on vital key moments, so that the viewer can see the metamorphosis clearly and without question. Of course, Martha’s rape is the initial impetus for his decision to leave the gang. This is his primary motivation. From there, slicing through L’il Mago’s neck assumes the role of the foundational moment when he breaks from the gang, officially. His transformation, however, is not complete, as he must shed all of his connections, both psychological and physical, to Mara Salvatrucha. In the next step in the process, Casper reads a text, on his cell phone telling him that his death has been green-lit, or approved, by the gang. Instead of responding, he drops the phone onto the train tracks below him. At this point, he no longer has any line of direct communication with the gang. Soon
after, he sheds his gang nickname, affirming that his name is no longer Casper, but Willy. He has now shed the gang nomenclature, the most obvious way in which MS-13 gives its members an identity outside of normal society. In his final act of morphing, Willy looks at his teardrop tattoo in a rearview mirror, and peels it off. Using his fingernails, he cuts underneath the ink and pries it from below his eye, leaving only a bloody mark. Now, he is completely disassociated from his feelings of belonging to the gang. No longer able to communicate or take orders via text, rejecting his gang name, and ultimately removing any trace of MS-13 ink, Willy has made the change from mara to human.

This change endears the viewer as they see a young man looking for freedom from an oppressive and murderous community and culture. Willy is not Casper, not anymore, and this move from one identity to the other affirms the audience’s feelings of compassion and instills a sense of redemption in the Willy character. Because Willy can break from Casper, and by extension Mara Salvatrucha, he becomes the good guy, the hero of the movie, saving Sayra from L’il Mago, and ultimately providing for her the means by which to enter the United States and unite with her family in New Jersey. Conversely, the constant threat, violence, and antisocial behavior demonstrated by MS-13 sets them up as the antagonist. L’il Mago, reminiscent of other Hollywood bad guys, serves as the primary villain in the movie, as his actions are the most grotesque, the most unexplainably vicious. He sits upon a throne made up of headstones during the Mara Salvatrucha meeting that ultimately leads to Martha’s death, a king to these vandals. And from his throne he leads this force of evil, this Mara Salvatrucha, as they attack the vulnerable—the children, the poor immigrants, the physically weaker women. Willy is
more familiar to the audience in appearance and demeanor. He is not as violent as the rest of his homies. His assaults are justified. He looks more like the typical audience member, without facial tattoos. And as he separates himself from Mara Salvatrucha, he comes closer and closer to the group that watches his actions on film. This dynamic, in turn, sets MS-13 as the other, as the enemy. Therefore, as with The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, Sin nombre confirms the need to fear Mara Salvatrucha and its members. As portrayed in the movie, these criminals could lash out at any random urbanite, killing them, raping them, taking what belongs to them. This characterization does not take into consideration the functionality of the group, the inner workings, agreements, and exchanges between members that allow the youngsters access to certain goods and services otherwise unavailable to them. Instead, the film creates a simplistic dichotomy that attempts to represent a complex social and cultural structure. Willy is good. He is good because of his desire to leave the gang, and as he transitions towards this break, his actions reinforce the idea that he is a hero. On the opposite side of the binary, L’il Mago, and by extension Mara Salvatrucha, represent the bad guys within the imaginary of violence. Such simplification annuls Fukunaga’s purported objective of steering away from sensationalism and towards authenticity. Rather, Sin nombre confirms the viewer’s fear by misrepresenting Mara Salvatrucha in such a way that reinforces hatred within the imaginary of violence. And yet again, the imaginary of violence presents a definitive face to scapegoat, and a group of characters easily recognized as the villains.
5.4 “La mara anda suelta”: A Filmic View From Within

So far, both of the films discussed have come directly from the out-group, as non-affiliated filmmakers look to expose Mara Salvatrucha culture for varying reasons and social purposes. The video for Galeano el HJ’s song, “La mara anda suelta,” differs from the previous movies in that it comes directly from the Mara Salvatrucha community. In other words, unlike The World’s Most Dangerous Gang and Sin nombre, the video for the song is a filmic representation of the gang originating from the in-group, and not from agencies unaffiliated with MS-13. This disconnection from the out-group immediately brings into question how this “inside look” differs from the others. Simultaneously, “La mara anda suelta” and the documentary and movie also coincide in regards to the kinds of images that the viewer sees on the screen. These similar images, then, set up an apparently contradictory relationship between the three films. At the same time that “La mara anda suelta” creates a narrative space that originates from the Mara Salvatrucha community, the video also seems to reinforce the violent characterization of the gang seen in The World’s Most Dangerous Gang and Sin nombre. A close reading of the video, however, reveals much different intentions and cultural goals. This song video looks to build a truly authentic vision of the gang, incorporating varying images that not only reaffirm the gang’s toughness, but also look to prove that they are community who, when threatened, can defend itself from any attacks. The video serves as a kind of jactancia, as heard in many border corridos, where the main protagonist arrogantly boasts about his abilities and heroic attributes. Unlike the jactancia, however, this video boast is not exaggerated, fictionalized, nor unsubstantiated. On the contrary, the viewer
sees a group of people who can obviously back up their bravado with fists, kicks, and guns. The images prove that, when pressed, Mara Salvatrucha is ready for battle against any outside transgressions. Furthermore, they demonstrate that they can protect their own. In doing so, “La mara anda suelta” also manipulates fear, but for a much different reason. Whereas The World’s Most Dangerous Gang and Sin nombre disseminate a fear of villainy from their filmic portrayal of some unknown, random group of murderers and rapists, this music video attempts to scare any viewer who may consider confronting the gang directly. This in-group representation relies on fear, yes, but this particular fear is one tethered to the defense of the community. The video shows a group of survivors who, as a result of years of marginalization, discrimination, and outside aggression, know well how to take care of their own. They are tough, strong, and battle-ready. Confront them at your own risk.

Before entering a more critical analysis of the video, however, it is essential to establish its authenticity as a Mara Salvatrucha-specific cultural expression. Simply put, how do we know that this video originates from the in-group? The video begins with a number of pictures of tattooed MS-13 members, pictures which are easily found using any search engine. In fact, some of these faces appear in the first chapter of this dissertation. From these images however, the footage shown better reflects an in-group production. The video feels as though it comes from Mara Salvatrucha. Unlike The World’s Most Dangerous Gang or Sin nombre, there is no sheen, no polish. The quality of the visual recording is gritty, out of focus, and much rougher than those seen in the documentary or film. The film’s under-produced condition parallels many of the other
manifestations of Mara Salvatrucha expressive culture. For example, I have already discussed the faded, grainy tattoos that many maras have on their bodies, a product of having amateur artists working in the ink-on-skin medium. The color black often fades to green or blue, because the tattooing process, the tools that are used, and even the ink that goes into the skin are far from professional standards. Lines are not straight, filled in spaces suffer from blotches, and in many cases, the tattoos are simple in design because the amateur artist is incapable of etching more intricate or detailed designs on the flesh of his gang brother. Likewise, my second chapter includes a number of graffiti images that look rudimentary when compared to the more intricate, pieced-over murals of graveyards tagged by graffiti specialists. These simpler tags come from MS-13 members who do not have the technical capability of producing elaborate placas, but still want to rep the gang on their city streets and neighborhoods. Additionally, the song accompanying “La mara anda suelta” also reveals a kind of rawness, to the point that the low-quality of the recording makes certain parts of the song’s lyrics unintelligible. The video resembles these other examples of MS-13 expressive culture in that it looks underdeveloped, without the technological means available to those producing a syndicated documentary or feature film.

This gritty aesthetic becomes especially marked when considering the depictions of jump-ins across all three films. As the foundational initiation rite, the thirteen-second beating of prospective Mara Salvatrucha recruits must assume an important role in any representation of the gang, whether the representation originates from the in-group or out-group. In The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, the narrator describes the jump-in as a
beating that lasts “no more than thirteen seconds,” and interviews with a current MS-13 member confirm that it is a “good ass beating” where you “cover yourself and take it.” Playing while the viewers hear these words, stock footage of a jump-in validates the brutality. The fact that the footage comes from Telenoticieros y documentales, S.A. indicates that the film crew was not able to get access to the ritual first-hand, and so they must rely on secondary footage in order to address this critical aspect of Mara Salvatrucha culture. Left unsaid amidst a mix of violent images and fearful words of the mara, the narrator never gives an explanation behind the meaning and purpose of the jump-in. Instead, the narrator mentions that “violence is the first lesson” upon entering Mara Salvatrucha, as if the recruits had not learned that lesson well before joining the gang. Eliminating the reasoning behind the jump-in strips the ritual of its importance in the community, while simultaneously manipulating the induction ceremony in order to further perpetuate the portrayal of Mara Salvatrucha as a group of blood-thirsty monsters.

Although Fukunaga’s movie promotes a different tone than the National Geographic documentary in its conceptualization of the jump-in, the ceremony, again, becomes a tool for sensationalization and manipulation, and not as means to help the viewer understand the ritual. Sin nombre’s stylized attention to the jump-in plays out like a choreographed fight scene in and action movie. The primary mara cocks his arm back and delivers the initial haymaker, towards the camera, and at the viewer. The action, contrived and exaggerated, better mirrors Rocky Balboa than a typical MS-13 gang member. The subsequent kicks and punches look more like a dance than the ferocious, hectic rain of blows that are seen in “La mara anda suelta.” To add to the over-dramatized
scene, the evil L’il Mago walks around the beating with perfect, snow white teeth gleaming from his wicked, loathsome smile, as he counts the thirteen seconds down slowly, relishing every moment with a twisted joy that is typically reserved for only the most sadistic and vile of movie characters. All of this transpires in a crisp and clear image that benefits from 35 millimeter, anamorphic film printing. In other words, in the movie’s depiction of the jump-in, the polish, sheen, and choreographed ceremony does not help in understanding the gang from an inside perspective. Rather, similar to The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, the jump-in that the viewer experiences in Sin nombre manipulates fear and anger by enhancing the ceremony as a larger-than-life, over-the-top display of random belligerence, completely unjustified and unnecessary. The viewer just sees six maras beating a child, and that is all.

“La mara anda suelta” breaks from both of these jump-in representations, and in doing so affirms its in-group origin. Much attention is given to the ceremony, with various seconds focused on vivid footage of the rite. The most common similarity between the beatings seen in the video resides in the quality of the image presented. It is not the sharp, over-produced image seen in Sin nombre, nor is it taken from stock footage from a news and documentary service, as in The World’s Most Dangerous Gang. In “La mara anda suelta” the scene quality is grainy and out of focus. The images appear as if they have been taken with cheap video cameras, at best, but most likely with camera phones. The lens flares in and out, the picture is shaky, and often appears as if it will bump in to the attackers, and in some cases it is difficult to ascertain who the initiate is, with the elbows, feet, and fists flailing violently and out of control. The jump-ins seen in
the music video are not choreographed or stylized. On the contrary, we see already initiated maras mistakenly hitting their own brothers, and not the target neophyte, because of the explosive and manic nature of the ritual. In other words, without the convention of art direction, production, cinematographers, and choreographers, the mara captures one of the defining customs of the gang with the only tools that they have at their disposal; tools that do not match the cutting edge technology available to the film crews that make cable documentaries and feature films. The jump-ins presented in the video take place in dimly lit alleyways, in the back rooms of houses, and in the middle of streets presumably in gang territory, considering the MS-13 graffiti surrounding the participants and the Mara Salvatrucha tattoos brandished by the attackers. Taken from deep within the in-group, the more authentic “inside look” at the gang activities are presented as seen and experienced by those filming, amateur cameramen who most likely underwent the same tradition at some point in their lives. This gives the jumping-in a personal viewpoint, not from those trying to speak for the gang, but instead from an agent within the gang who truly understands the rationale for the beating. The words from the song, working in conjunction with the video, further emphasize the logic behind the jump-in.

When combining the images and lyrics it becomes evident that, however violent, there is a definitive logic behind the jump-in. Unlike Sin nombre and The World’s Most Dangerous Gang, where the act is manipulated as a prominent example of unjustified violence, “La mara anda suelta” relies on the idea of defense, protection, and readiness as its primary motivation for jumping-in its recruits. The lyrics associated with the footage
provide a perspective on jump-ins, and Mara Salvatrucha culture in general, that the documentary and film do not. There is an explanation, of sorts, as to why Mara Salvatrucha behaves this way towards its newest members. The violence, then, is grounded in an explanation, and not presented as an arbitrary ritual with no real justification other than the perpetuation of random, senseless violence. The rapper raps about “chavalas,” that is to say members of rival gangs. Also, he mentions being “bien armados,” well armed against any outside attacks. “Somos Mara Salvatrucha,” he boasts, ready to defend themselves against anybody, including “el presidente.” The artist raps these lines above the footage of the neophytes taking blows from all sides. And so, the lyrics correspond with the jump-in scenes, providing a necessary motive for an otherwise misunderstood event. They must defend themselves from the chavalas that may intrude on their territory. They are Mara Salvatrucha, and they are equipped enough to protect themselves from anybody, including some general idea of an outside political structure, as represented by the president. In order to succeed in this defense of their community, they must make ready physically, practice, and toughen up in a marginalized community where only the strongest can survive. This jump-in, then, is a kind of Mara Salvatrucha boot camp, where the initiate must show that he is conditioned enough to serve as a soldier in the Mara Nation army. It is a baptism in blood, very similar to receiving tattoos in the most painful parts of the body. It shows toughness, both in the body and mind, and the ability to take pain in the name of Mara Salvatrucha. The rapper calls out “panochas,” a misogynist, slang term for someone weak and cowardly—a pussy. Those who live through their jump-in, confirm that they are not weak. According to the lyrics that join
the footage, “pussies” cannot live in the Mara Salvatrucha community. Such weaklings are weeded out quickly, and the jump-in becomes the very first gate-keeping mechanism in putting together a culture of soldiers who must be hardened “so nobody can come into [their] neighborhood and take the bread out of [their] mouths” (Hayden 3).

Simultaneously, the jump-in scenes integrate with various other images of Mara Salvatrucha members in candid moments. Therefore, the intention is to show that the jump-in is just part of life, a commonplace aspect of MS-13 culture that every member must deal with. “La mara anda suelta” shows glimpses of many such quotidian activities. On the contrary, none of the maras shown in Sin nombre or The World’s Most Dangerous Gang do anything typical. Every appearance of the gang, in Sin nombre, ultimately results in something extreme, a spectacle of violence that leads the viewer to believe that there is no life other than the crimes that the gang commits. Young Smiley is introduced to the gang, and he is then beaten during his jump-in. A walk through the Destroyer, the nearest approximation of the gang’s daily activities shown in the movie, culminates in the murder of an imprisoned “chavala.” A simple stroll in the train yard turns into a shrouded death threat from El Sol towards Casper. Even something as simple as a gang meeting becomes a melodramatic exaggeration of Mara Salvatrucha excessiveness. L’il Mago sits, theatrically placed, on his headstone throne, as he conducts MS-13 business. Afterwards, L’il Mago attempts to rape and eventually murders Casper’s girlfriend. All in all, there is no reflection of a real Mara Salvatrucha existence outside of the scenes that eventually lead to brutality and/or murder.
Likewise, The World’s Most Dangerous Gang shows only the extreme side of Mara Salvatrucha. A documentary that promises an inside look at the gang should provide exactly that. But the viewer never truly gets that look. Instead, minutes after getting off of the plane in El Salvador the crew rushes to a Mara Salvatrucha murder. They are threatened with kidnapping while approaching a prison. Interviews with purported MS-13 members seemingly always culminate in some kind of violent language. Riding along with the supposed active member, Jester, a simple drive through a neighborhood turns into a life-threatening ordeal, where he and his fellow Mara Salvatrucha members point out rival gang members on the roof. Of course, they discuss taking him out. Intermingled within these scenes are various flashes of guns shot in the street, people assaulted, and dead, brown bodies. In the cases where they could not find footage to correspond with these over the top characterizations, the National Geographic documentary simply makes them up. Often, the audience sees dramatizations of assumed Mara Salvatrucha behavior, with faceless hands exchanging money over bags of drugs, or cocking back the barrel of an automatic pistol. Already having stripped the gang of an origin, the two features also eliminate the idea of Mara Salvatrucha members having anything resembling a “regular” life. Aside from separating gang membership from the functionality that they seek in the first place, such portrayals reaffirm audience fear because the gang members never do anything considered “normal.” All of their activities, at all hours of the day, revolve around crime, violence, and social disorder.

Conversely, along with the footage of jump-ins, weapons, and demonic graffiti, “La mara anda suelta” features Mara Salvatrucha members living their regular lives,
away from the brutality. To phrase it in the appropriate vernacular, the music video provides glimpses of maras simply living their lives. The viewer sees MS-13 members showing off their tattoos. There are pictures of groups of Mara Salvatrucha members together, and footage of maras flashing their hand-signs, stacking the symbols in order to make a message. Mara Salvatrucha members in the video tag walls, an activity that, although criminal in nature, does not directly translate to a violent act. Most importantly, there are various scenes that show the maras walking down the streets, in groups of two or three. They are traveling through their neighborhoods, casually walking what they consider their home, their territory. All of these images, when juxtaposed with the initiation beatings and the street shoot-outs, reveal a second side of Mara Salvatrucha that neither the documentary nor the film engages with any specificity. One side of Mara Salvatrucha involves raging belligerence, criminal activities, and the need to defend what they feel belongs to them. The other side, nearly unmentioned by The World’s Most Dangerous Gang or Sin nombre, reflects community, togetherness, and a feeling of safety as part of the gang. The video demonstrates that there is an MS-13 life beyond violence, and although their daily lives are surrounded by threats and attacks, Mara Salvatrucha members can still spend time with friends, they can still tag and create murals, but most importantly they can feel secure enough to walk the streets of the neighborhoods that they control without fearing rival gangs or police intervention. This safety is a key component of functionality, and the Mara Nation can claim to provide this benefit, with their training, weapons stashes, and through the psychological asylum that comes inherently with feelings of loyalty.
Within the types of impoverished neighborhoods where Mara Salvatrucha cliques begin and flourish, few fear the lack of functionality more than the youngest members of the population. Of course, the children do not recognize this absence as the vacancy of functionality. Instead, they feel hungry, poor, and consistently in danger. And so, children become integral components within Mara Salvatrucha culture, whereby they represent the most vulnerable of society’s residents who, at an early age, look to confront marginalization and insecurity by pledging their affiliation to the gang. “La mara anda suelta” presents footage of youngsters, who like their older counterparts, walk the streets freely, in groups, smiling happily. In one particularly interesting scene, a large group of children is shown standing in front of an MS-13 mural, flashing gang-signs with their tiny hands, already performing the part of a grown-up mara. The graffiti tag behind them stands as a kind of flag, emblazoned with many of the already-discussed symbols associated with the Mara Nation cultural canon. These kids, flashing in and out of the picture, already claim their allegiance to the Mara Salvatrucha community, in front of this salient and unmistakable exhibition of MS-13 nationality. Of course, the children serve as recruits, used to strengthen gang numbers, in turn helping the gang grow. But simultaneously, they arguably represent the gang’s efforts to shield young members of the urban community from the anxiety and uncertainty associated with the out-group and the lack of functionality found therein. Yes, they are the next generation of Mara Salvatrucha, but more importantly they stand as children who will always have a home, a family, food, money, and protection against those sectors of society who have traditionally sought to impede their social progress. In this way, Mara Salvatrucha
strengthens the bond between its community members, pulling the youngest out of the misery of unaffiliated life, placing them into a culture that promises access to many of the same services that they would otherwise live without. Affectivity, then, is promoted at a very early age, as these children grow up understanding that the Mara Salvatrucha categorial identity supersedes all others.

The inclusion of children in the video assumes a particularly important role because it reflects the origin and functionality that is all but swept away in *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* and *Sin nombre*. These two films either ignore children altogether, or use the image of the soon-to-be child gang member as a metaphor for the propagation of a senseless, unreasonable violence that plagues society. The National Geographic documentary barely, if at all, engages children in the MS-13 community, at most making reference to the next generation of criminals working their way through the cliques. In *Sin nombre*, an important part of the plot revolves around a young child. And yet, aside from wanting to be a Mara Salvatrucha member for vague reasons, the audience never sees the lack of functionality and categorial belonging that would drive Smiley to join Mara Salvatrucha. Rather, all of the interactions that Smiley has with MS-13 cliques all over Central America rely heavily on the projection of violence. Smiley has a brutal jump-in. He is witness to L’il Mago’s murder, and after threats and accusations of treachery agrees to kill Casper. Afterwards, with his gun in hand, he sits and talks to other children around his age. Instead of talking about his new community and a sense of support and belonging, he boasts that he can kill one of the youngsters, while pointing the weapon at his face. As he departs, they all exchange “mara por vida” salutations, even
though a viewer would be forced to question why this “vida,” this life, is an attractive option. Even Fukunaga’s desire to examine a problematic family unit, in this case Mara Salvatrucha, comes into question, as Smiley has some semblance of a familial structure in place. The movie begins with Casper arriving at Smiley’s house, and an elderly lady, perhaps his grandmother, insulting Casper, yelling that he should leave Smiley alone. Therefore, Smiley has someone at home that is willing to stand up to a mara, and declaim the lifestyle, in an attempt to protect him from the Mara Salvatrucha monsters. Smiley’s characterization in the movie does not address a child’s search for functionality in the way that “La mara anda suelta” does. He has a home, some kind of family unit. And when he leaves this environment, he is met with beatings, treachery, planned revenge, and, eventually, claims his first life—the life of the very person who most provided for him the kind of benefits that Mara Salvatrucha was supposed to give. By not portraying the reasons why a child such as Smiley would join MS-13, the film ignores a fundamental quality of Mara Salvatrucha culture: protection from poverty, from rival gangs, from the police, from homelessness, and from starvation.

“La mara anda suelta” and the lyrics that play over the video do not ignore questions of origin, affectivity, or functionality, and in doing so it presents a more layered representation of the gang. Obviously, the video is just as violent, or even more so, than *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* and *Sin nombre*. At the same time, it gives a justification for the gang’s behavior, a reason for existing. This complexity clashes with the one-dimensional caricatures seen on the screen in both the documentary and the feature film, as it presents a more complete vision of the gang, one that addresses all of
the various societal preoccupations that cement notions of nationality. Instead of a stereotypical movie villain (L’il Mago) or a swarm of hungry ants, “La mara anda suelta” provides an in-group characterization that, albeit brutal, originates directly from the gang, both in sound and image. It is important to note that the music video does, in fact, take from stock footage and easily available Mara Salvatrucha pictures and film. And yet, these are edited and pieced together in such a way that the ultimate message relays a much a different characterization of the gang. Yes, they are violent, but only when they are trying to defend themselves from those that they believe seek to take what belongs to them. Yes, they rely on guns and violence, but only to protect their community. Yes, they recruit young children, but primarily because they are trying to save these youngsters from the dreadful situations that surround them in their own meager and deadly urban settings. And so, to call them evil, or violent for the sake of violence, results in an inaccurate characterization of Mara Salvatrucha. Instead, “La mara anda suelta” gives the viewer an in-group portrayal, a true inside look, which results in a video that more authentically reveals the complex relationships and culture that make up MS-13. The lyrics indicate that they are not victims, but also that they are certainly not originless Xenomorphs, aliens who simply appeared one day to scare society at large.
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