

Saving Souls Transnationally: Pentecostalism and Gangs in El Salvador and the United States

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To claim that adolescence is a period fraught with conflicts and identity crises is hardly novel. Erik Erickson (1963), for example, saw adolescence as a perilous liminal period involving the simultaneous articulation of a strong, autonomous self and the formation of stable social ties ensuring successful integration into community life. What if we add poverty, violence, disintegration of community life, and anomie as a result of a protracted civil war to adolescence's normal growing pains? What happens when young people are subjected to "multiple marginalities" (Vigil 1988), as in the case of post-war El Salvador?¹ Is this condition of multiple marginality aggravated by global processes like economic restructuring and democratic transition? If so, will it result in increased anti-social behavior at a time when El Salvador is struggling to reweave its torn social fabric and create democratic subjects? What roles does religion play in addressing the outward expressions and root causes of multiple marginality in a globalized setting?

In this chapter, we compare and contrast the ways in which gangs and Pentecostal churches help young Salvadorans to respond to dislocation resulting from war, migration, and economic change. After a review of recent social changes in El Salvador, with special reference to the evolving situation of young people, we turn to the issue of youth gangs (*maras*, as they are known in the country), which, according to a study sponsored by UNICEF, are the "most important and complex cultural-generational problem in the country in the decade of the '90s. The high number of young people involved in this form of youth organization and socialization and the presence [of gangs] throughout the national territory have made this phenomenon, and its accompanying forms of violence, an integral part of quotidian life among Salvadorans."² Since

¹ Multiple marginalities refers to the "sociocultural stresses and ambiguities" generated by a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors operating cumulatively and diachronically at the macro (group history), meso (family history), and micro (life history) levels to produce multiple forms of exclusion (Vigil 1988: 11).

² In a 1996 survey by the IUDOP (The Institute of Public Opinion at the Central American University in San Salvador) 65% of those interviewed stated that "crime and gangs" were the most important national problem.

Salvadoran gangs had their origins in the U.S. and now operate transnationally, we will be drawing from fieldwork in Morazán, an area in eastern El Salvador which was deeply affected by the war, and in Washington, DC, where many Salvadorans, particularly from the eastern part of the country, fled during the armed conflict.

In our reading, gangs offer disenfranchised and dislocated Salvadoran youths discourses, practices, and forms of organization that allow them to reterritorialize their lives, that is, to reassert locality against global forces that have disarticulated their communities and families. Gangs also provide a context where the self can be re-centered in an intimate setting, where loyalty and collective identity are central. We argue, however, that the localizing and re-ordering resources provided by gangs are themselves shot-through with conflict and implicated in some of the same global (deterritorializing) processes they seek to address.

In light of these contradictions, evangelical Protestantism has emerged as an alternative space, where the synthesis between self and community that Erickson saw as key to the successful negotiation of adolescence can take place. Although Pentecostals are often locked in a battle for young souls with gangs, the two groups share striking similarities in terms of their practices and the unintended consequences of their actions. Both Pentecostal churches and gangs operate through transnational networks leading to a re-inscription of locality through the creation of tightly-knit community and a strong sense of individual identity. Moreover, both groups, perhaps unintentionally, are implicated in reproduction and expansion of larger hegemonic dynamics, such global crime syndicates and authoritarian regimes.

Our case study illustrates how in the context of globalization religion is involved in complex articulation of multiple spaces and subjectivities. We end the chapter with a call to take religion seriously in the study of emerging cartographies.

El Salvador and Salvadoran Youth in the Post-War Period

From 1981 to 1992, El Salvador experienced a full scale civil war that claimed the lives of at least 80,000 people.³ While the conflict had local roots, traceable to centuries of socio-political marginalization of the vast sectors of Salvadoran society by a recalcitrant elite, it became a flash point in the geopolitical struggles that preceded the collapse of the Berlin Wall

³ For an overview of recent Salvadoran history see Montgomery (1995).

and the Soviet Union. With neighboring Nicaragua in the hands of the socialist-nationalist Sandinistas, the Reagan administration made Central America, particularly El Salvador, the lynchpin in a hemispheric counter-insurgency campaign. More concretely, the U.S. poured upwards of \$ 4 billion to prop up a notoriously repressive and corrupt Salvadoran army in its fight against leftist guerrillas supported by the international solidarity in countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico, and France. This globalized conflict had profound local effects. In addition to the large number of civilian casualties, the conflict brought widespread dislocation, uprooting about one-fifth of the country's population. Particularly in areas where the army followed a scorched-earth strategy, as in the eastern and northern parts of the country, in which guerrillas operated, entire villages were erased, literally wiped off the map. This radical deterritorialization was exemplified perhaps most dramatically by the massacre at El Mozote (Danner 1993), where close to 1,000 people were executed by the army, leaving just one survivor. The massacres and aerial war sent masses of people fleeing to precarious refugee camps in San Salvador and in neighboring countries like Guatemala and Honduras. Others fled to United States, Canada, and as far away as Australia. For many Salvadorans, especially young people, the end result of all these upheavals was the dismantling of the local webs that constituted family and community life, the terrain where their daily interactions were sustained. Often men were the first to flee the conflict, leaving behind female-headed households struggling to survive. The corollary of all this was that a whole generation has grown up in broken families, surrounded not by tightly-knit nurturing communities but by a daily reality of uncertainty, violence, and death. The case of Agustín, a former gang member from Morazán and now a theology student at the Assemblies of God, is typical.

I begun my life in the *maras* when I was twelve. I was looking for something that would fill the void left in my heart . . . you see, I come from a family that has experienced a lot of hardship. My father died when I was seven years old, when the war started. He was a soldier in the army, and was killed just like one of my older brothers. Then, there was a void in my life and knowing that my father could not fill it, I tried to look for friends. I began to drink with them, to do drugs and to look for the money I needed to satisfy my cravings.

In this context, youth gang violence can be seen as the reproduction of anti-social and violent patterns internalized during the civil war. These patterns are now deterritorialized, displaced from the combat zones to every street and neighborhood in the country, serving as the

only vehicle to resolve any type of conflict. The pervasiveness of a culture of violence helps us understand why El Salvador has the highest annual per capita rate of homicide in the Americas (150 per 100,000), even exceeding those of Colombia and Haiti. DeCesare (1998: 23) observes that violence in El Salvador is now greater “than during the 1980s, when the civil war grabbed international headlines and hundreds of thousands of peasant refugees escaping mayhem and economic collapse sought sanctuary in the crowded slums of Los Angeles.”

On the surface, by putting an end to the armed conflict and creating the conditions for reconciliation and reconstruction, the 1992 peace accords between the Salvadoran government and the guerrillas would seem to address the problem of violence. Indeed, a central part of the accords is the demilitarization of Salvadoran society, with a drastic reduction in the size of the army, the disarming and incorporation of the guerrillas into a competitive electoral system, and the creation of an independent, civilian police mindful of human rights. Moreover, following investigations by special commissions, the military has been “cleansed” of those in leadership positions who committed egregious human rights violations. Other important provisions of the accords include measures like the transfer of land to ensure the productive re-insertion of ex-combatants.

Despite significant advances, the impact of the peace accords in creating a truly peaceful and democratic El Salvador has been limited, first by endless delays in the implementation of land transfer provisions, and second, by the failure of the accords to deal with the underlying causes of the conflict, i.e., the concentration of economic power in the hands of few. In fact, in the 1990s wealth has become more concentrated in El Salvador as a result of neoliberal reforms introduced by ARENA, the rightist party in power since 1989. As in other Latin American economies that have become globalized, the brunt of “social cost” of economic restructuring has been borne by poor families, particularly by women and children. While the Salvadoran economy has continued to expand, aided by the \$ 1.2 billion pumped in by Salvadorans abroad, wealth has not trickled down to the masses. For one, the Salvadoran economy is not generating enough jobs to employ a growing, young population (44% of the population is under seventeen). Further, new jobs tend to be in the service and construction sectors, which are characterized by low wages and instability. *Maquiladoras*, which have been one the government’s key strategies to link the Salvadoran economy to the global market, also employ many Salvadorans in similar

harsh conditions.⁴ Many *maquiladoras* and export-trade zones are located in areas like San Marcos, Soyapango, Apopa, and San Martin, where the gang problem is particularly acute. The scarcity of secure, well-paying jobs with full benefits has dovetailed with a drastic downsizing of the welfare state, leaving many poor families in precarious circumstances.

Like families, young people face economic insecurity. A 1997 survey of 1,025 gang members by the IUDOP (The Public Opinion Institute at the Central American University) in the greater metropolitan area of San Salvador found that 75% of the respondents were unemployed. Of those employed only 52% had stable jobs, with women more likely than men to have stable employment. Only 41% of those employed held “specialized occupations,” as shoemakers, bakers, mechanics, and seamstress. The rest worked either as errand boys, maids, drivers, and street vendors, all unskilled jobs with relatively low pay. And while gang members had an average of 8.4 years of schooling (as opposed to 4 for the entire nation), only 32.5% finished high school. About 76% of those surveyed had dropped out of school.

In addition to the landscape of broken families and communities, drastic economic change, and educational crisis, there are other factors that shape the life world of young Salvadorans. Among them are the availability of weapons left behind by the war, a still weak civil police and judicial system, the formation of shadowy crime syndicates by former ex-military men now turned businessmen, and finally the presence of another global dimension, transnational youth gangs founded by Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S., which are now operating not only in the capital but in cities in the interior, such San Francisco Gotera, where we conducted our field work.

Salvadoran Youth in the United States

For many Salvadorans migration to the United States has not resulted in the fulfillment of the American dream. Sarah Mahler’s (1995) study of Salvadorans in Long Island is full of poignant stories of many undocumented Salvadorans migrants caught in “niches of low-paying jobs,” with little security and hope for mobility – a sort of “parallel world” of disillusionment and alienation at the margins of mainstream society. Some have been able to bring their

⁴ *Maquiladoras* are labor-intensive industrial operations normally supported by multinational corporations (in cooperation with local capital or management). *Maquiladoras* have been connected to labor and environmental abuses.

families to the United States after saving some money by working two or more jobs and rooming with several other immigrants in small apartments. However, even they have experienced considerable turmoil in the form of family and intergenerational conflicts. In addition to parental absence due to the demands of the labor market, many immigrant men became involved with women in the U.S., forming new families. This set the stage for transnational conflicts, as families vied for limited resources.⁵ In many cases, men abandoned their families in El Salvador or brought only the children to live in their new U.S. households, generating conflicts among half-brothers and sisters and between children and their new stepparents. The story of David, a Salvadoran gang member in Los Angeles who came to the U.S. when he was seven years old, serves to illustrate our foregoing discussion.

David was initially excited about coming to the United States. He remembered thinking that 'Everyone in the United States had a big car, fancy house, and lots of money.' But when he arrived in Los Angeles, he and his mother lived in a tiny apartment in a small building that itself was incredibly overcrowded, with 10 to 15 people sometimes living in one apartment. His neighborhood, in the middle of Los Angeles, was teeming with other recent Salvadoran immigrants. Despite the presence of other Salvadorans, however, he felt incredibly homesick, as he was separated from his extended family and even from his mother. To support their new life in the United States, she cleaned houses 7 days a week, 10 to 14 hours a day. His mother remarried, and David transferred all his anger and disappointment with his biological father to his stepfather. Consequently, David refused to obey his stepfather, and his mother who was often absent (Vigil and Yun 1996: 150-151).

Added to this complex set of problems are the general crisis in urban public schools and conflicting views on parenting. According to Carmen Sosa, a counselor at *Comité Hispano de Virginia*, which conducts social work among Hispanics in Fairfax, an area with a high concentration of Salvadorans,

One of main problems in the Latino community is how to discipline kids. The parents usually are first-generation immigrants, the majority coming from the countryside, where they are used to clearly defined roles and authority structures. The kids, on the other hand, either came to the U.S. very young or were born here. They are more used to American mores. However, their parents want them to be like they were when they grew up in El Salvador or Colombia and this leads to conflict. Parents don't know how to deal with all the freedoms and options their kids have here. They often resort to violence to discipline their kids, which in my view, leads to violence at home and in the streets. Or they ignore what's going on, because they really don't understand this society or because they don't have the time to be there with their kids. I also have cases where parents are

⁵ See Matthei and Smith (1998) for a similar case among Belizeans in the U.S.

afraid to physically punish their kids for fear that they will report the case to the police and possibly face deportation.

Salvadoran youths thus suffer “multiple marginality,” a complex host of economic, social, cultural, and ecological (spatial segregation in barrios) factors that place them at the margins of society, that push them to find alternative sources of “attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief” (Vigil 1988). For Salvadoran youths multiple marginality occurs transnationally: they do not find conventional vehicles for identity-construction and empowerment in El Salvador or in the U.S. In fact, their “bi-focality,” the fact that they straddle two cultures, that they are sent back and forth, from parents to grandparents or aunts and uncles, across national borders, is part of the problem, adding to the fragmentation and dislocation they feel. Trapped in a transnational cycle of marginalization, Salvadoran youths, like other Latino and African-American gangs, develop their own unconventional subculture, social structures, and localities. This represents an attempt reterritorialize their lives, that is, to cut social problems down to size and to deal with the structural and systemic forces that have wreaked havoc with their families and lives. Before we explore in more detail what gangs do for youths in El Salvador and the U.S., we need to provide more information on the history of Salvadoran gangs as well as on their configuration and *modus operandi*.

Transnational Salvadoran Youth Gangs

Maras are not a new phenomenon in El Salvador. According to Smutt and Miranda (1998: 30), the origins of Salvadoran youth gangs can be traced to the late 1950s, among students in elite high schools in San Salvador. “These students taunted and confronted each other in the streets during and after basketball games played by their high schools. These rivalries, however, did not go beyond sporadic street fights without consequences.” As Salvadoran society began to slide into chaos and civil war in the 1970s, *maras* became more violent and organized, establishing bases in various city neighborhoods and zones. Although it is difficult to establish precise dates, organized Salvadoran gangs like *the Mara Salvatrucha* (MS) and *Los de la 18* (The Eighteenth Street gang, the 18th) emerged in full force the late 1970s, when, as a result of the civil war, large numbers of Salvadorans and other Central Americans migrated to cities like Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, DC, settling in poor neighborhoods previously occupied

by older, more established Latino groups such as Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans. Particularly in Los Angeles, young Salvadoran immigrants felt the need to carve out their own space at schools and in the streets vis-à-vis Chicano gangs, which have been active in the city since the 1920s (Mazon 1985). This led to the creation of “self-defense” groups structured around national identity. Because Salvadoran youth have created a subculture in the context of a dominant Chicano culture, they have adopted a lifestyle, speech, and dress similar to that of *cholos* and *cholas* (gang members). Vigil characterizes the “choloization” of first and second generation Latino youth as the process of developing a hybrid culture that blend elements of both the sending and receiving societies. “Although cholos are Americanized, either by accident or by design, they refuse or are unable to be totally assimilated” (Vigil 1988: 7). An example of this hybrid culture is *mara* language, which combines Salvadoran Spanish (with words such as *pijiada* [a beating]), Chicano Spanish (*raza* [neighborhood, gang, or Latino ancestry]) and African-American English (homeboys).

Drawing from newspaper sources and their own interviews, Smutt and Miranda (1998: 35) estimate that the MS has 3,500 members in the Los Angeles County alone, with possibly as many as 8,000 members in the state of California. The Eighteenth Street gang, on the other hand, is considered the largest gang in Los Angeles, with more than 10,000 members. In contrast to the MS, the Eighteenth Street gang has a reputation for being pan-ethnic. The 18th has moved from its Chicano origins in the Pico Union District of Los Angeles and is now dominated by Salvadorans. Nevertheless, the gang has members of other Latin American nationalities and even includes Asian-Americans and some African-Americans. Both the MS and the 18th have established chapters virtually everywhere there are Salvadorans, especially in places like Long Island, NY, Fairfax and Alexandria, Virginia and Langley Park, Maryland.

The formation in 1992 of a special anti-gang unit at the INS, together with changes in immigration laws that have made it easier to deport aliens who have committed crimes, has added a transnational dimension to Salvadoran gangs. In 1993, 70 gang members were deported back to El Salvador. A year later, 600 Salvadorans with criminal records, including gang activity, were sent back. By 1996 more than 1,200 Salvadorans involved in crimes had been deported, more than half of them with connections to gangs. Because of their hybrid, *cholo* identity, many of the deported find themselves alienated from Salvadoran culture. In a context

of high unemployment, social breakdown and violence, deported gang members have been able to form Salvadoran chapters of their gangs quickly. In the metropolitan area of San Salvador alone, the National Civilian Police have identified 54 “clicas” (cliques) connected with the largest Salvadoran *maras* in the U.S.⁶ Smutt and Miranda (1998: 38) have found that the connection between Salvadoran and U.S. groups is so tight that local actions, like the peace accords between the MS and the 18th in San Martín and El Congo, small towns in the Western part of the country, are not considered valid without approval from Los Angeles (Mahler 1998). In the IUDOP survey of gang members in San Salvador, close to 20% of those interviewed indicated that they had entered the gangs in the United States. The great majority of them (99 out of 111) had joined gangs in Los Angeles.

Despite the close links between U.S. and Salvadoran-based gangs, Decesare has shown that transnational relations are not without conflict. On the one hand, *maras* in El Salvador respect those who have been gang members in the U.S. They are considered older brothers, wiser and closer to the originative gang experience. Nevertheless, many gang leaders in Los Angeles and Washington, DC criticize those in El Salvador for being “wild,” “reckless,” interested only in “el vacil” [the fun and games associated with gang life] and not concerned about *la raza* and the neighborhood. This critique has filtered down to El Salvador through the transnational networks. Smutt and Miranda quote Julio, gang member in El Salvador:

There are many *vatos* [guys, gang members] from Los Angeles who don’t like what goes on here [*el rollo aqui*]. When they return to Los Angeles they say that here [in El Salvador] we rape, kill children, and that is not approved of. There [the U.S.] they respect children, being Salvadoran, you respect your partner [*compañero*]. So the styles are different, because those who come to form *clicas* of the MS in El Salvador are those who have had problems there [Los Angeles] with the *vatos* in the *mara*. They are kind of mercenaries, they kill for enjoyment and because of that the MS doesn’t want to see them. And because they can’t find refuge there they come here.

Julio’s declaration provides clear evidence of transnationalism among Salvadoran gang members. To borrow from Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994: 7), gang members “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” Gang members, like other transmigrants, “take actions, made decisions, and

⁶ Salvadoran officials estimate that there are more than 20,000 gang members in San Salvador alone (Wallace 2000).

develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states.”

Youth Gangs, Locality, and the Network Society

Now that we have enough elements to understand the history, composition, and field of activity of Salvadoran gangs, we can ask why Salvadoran youths join these groups. What do they find in these groups? As Jankowski (1991: 313) reminds us, “it is a gross oversimplification to attribute all gang members’ reason for joining a gang to any one motive, such as the lack of a father figure, the desire to have fun, or submission to intimidation. Gangs are composed of individuals who join for a wide variety of reasons.” Nevertheless, we can discern some patterns among Salvadorans. For example, Larry Carrasco, a twenty-year old leader in *Barrios Unidos*, a group of former gang members that works to promote social awareness, explains the appeal of youth gangs in the following terms:

There ain’t nothing here for us young Latinos. No jobs, no rec-places, you know, like places to play *futbol* [soccer] or basketball. The schools stink and the police is racist. Our parents ain’t there or just want us to be like them. But you have your homies *que te alivianan* [who help and take care of you]. You have your barrio where you live *la vida loca con tu raza* [to live a crazy life with your race, meaning your people/gang]. And *la vida loca vale* [crazy life is worth it], you know, because you’re saying that you’re somebody to be respected. It is a way of telling your parents, teachers, the police to go to hell. [Interview conducted in English]

Along the same lines, Dimas, an eighteen-year old Salvadoran who recently left the MS, reflects on his experience with gangs: “Gang life is crazy but it has some good things about it: if you live by the rules you’re somebody, somebody for your brothers. They respect you and are loyal to you. You belong to some place, your barrio, with your homeboys, which you defend from outsiders, even they are just other Latinos.”

Larry and Dimas demonstrate that gangs contribute to the simultaneous re-affirmation of self, family (as an extended community), and place. Gangs allow young Salvadorans to respond to dislocation and multiple marginalities by reasserting territory in the most radical way. Through initiation beatings and turf battles centered around the neighborhood, gangs reconstruct local geographies in response to the deterritorializing processes they confront. These geographies are embodied: scars and *mara* tattoos inscribe locality in the bodies of gangs members, making the

self part of the constructed landscape. Just as graffiti marks the territory the gang controls, so do tattoos map a certain way of life and a certain sense of belonging and group control onto the body of the gangbanger. As Appadurai (1996: 179) reminds us,

A great deal of what has been termed *rites of passage* is concerned with the production of what we might call *local subjects*, actors who properly belong to a situated community of kin, neighbors, friends, and enemies. Ceremonies of naming and tonsure, scarification and segregation, circumcision and deprivation are complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies. Looked at slightly differently, they are ways to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities.

In other words, *la vida loca* is gang's distinctive and creative way of "being in the world," a way to re-articulate selfhood, locality, and community at the margins of national and global processes. In the Washington area, many Salvadorans have tended to concentrate in geographic enclaves that correspond to the specific towns from which they migrated. There is, for example, the now famous area of Chirilandia in Virginia, made up by Salvadorans who came from the town of Chirilagua. Here the "landria" stands for Alexandria, where their residential complexes are located.

To understand the full localizing thrust behind youth gangs, we can draw from Manuel Castells's discussion of the network society and informational capitalism that characterize contemporary society. According to Castells (1996: 469), because of recent changes in information technology, "networks constitute the new social morphology of our society." For example, "capitalism itself has undergone a process of profound restructuring, characterized by greater flexibility in management; decentralization and networking of firms both internally and in their relationships to other firms; considerable empowering of capital vis-à-vis labor . . ." (1). In this "society of the Net," those social actors organized as flexible, decentralized, and open-ended interconnected networks of local nodes thrive, while traditional corporate actors such as unions and political parties suffer. Working under the shape of global capitalism, the Net creates "a sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales. Globalization proceeds selectively, including and excluding segments of economies and societies in and out of the networks of information, wealth, and power, that characterize the new dominant system" (1998: 161-162). Castells calls those social segments excluded by the new economy "the black holes of informational capitalism," which together form a Fourth World of often territorially confined and

“systemically worthless populations, disconnected from networks of valuable functions and people.” People within these black holes, in turn, form “defensive” identities, “trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to those permeating the institutions of society” (1997: 8). People within these trenches seek to find value in the identities denigrated by the system and in the locality shut off by globalization. Those in the trenches operate according to the principle of “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded. That is, the building of defensive identity in the terms of dominant institutions/ideologies, reversing the value judgement while reinforcing the boundary.” Thus, facing a condition of multiple, recalcitrant exclusion, young Salvadorans in El Salvador and the U.S.

may then refuse to accept the rules of the democratic game, or accept them only partially. Their response may then become social *violence*. The economically excluded do not become individual or collective subjects in the newly emerging public and political sphere: They may resist and protest, living under different rules, the rules of violence. Their (limited) energies and resources are not geared to integration, “acting out” instead of participating; at times, this is manifest in forms of communitarian resistance (Jelin 1998: 408).

The foregoing discussion would seem to imply that gangs provide transnational spaces for the articulation of subaltern oppositional practices. While this indubitably carries an element of truth, Castells’ and Jelin’s own assertions indicate that reality is more contradictory: gangs may oppose the systems that have marginalized them, but they do so by recognizing and reproducing the exclusion, by failing to produce subjects empowered to participate in the system in order to transform it. This reality challenges the tendency among some scholars to see transnationalism “as something to celebrate, an expression of a subversive popular resistance ‘from below.’” In these simplified and overly optimistic portraits, “cultural hybridity, multi-positional identities, border-crossing by marginal ‘others,’ and transnational business practices by migrant entrepreneurs are depicted as conscious and successful efforts by ordinary people to escape control and domination ‘from above’ by the capital and the state” Guarnizo and Smith (1998: 5).

In contrast, the experiences of Salvadoran gangs reveal that transnationalism does not always result in the formation of transgressive, counter-hegemonic subjects. Building further on Castells’s work, we might even say that the construction of a rebellious identity through *la vida loca* is “a twisted mirror of informational culture,” defined by a “culture of urgency . . . a culture

of the end of life, not of its negation, but of its celebration. Thus everything has to be tried, felt, experimented, accomplished, before it's too late, since there is no tomorrow." Gang identity would be a type of "communal hyper-individualism," or as Jankowski (1991: 28-31) puts it, "organized defiant individualism." Such an individualism combines a radical Hobbesian emphasis on the self and the immediate gratification of its needs – be it respect, catharsis or the latest brand of sneakers – with a reactive defense of immediate networks and localities. Indeed, in the IUDOP survey of gang members in San Salvador, 46% of the respondents affirmed that they joined gangs because "*les gustó el vacil*" [they liked the gang's carefree lifestyle]. This percentage is substantially higher than those for "problems with parents" (12.3%), "lack of understanding" (10.3%), and "searching for protection" (5.8%), the other significant responses offered. In addition, slightly more than 60% indicated that what they liked the most about gang life was "el vacil" and "llevarse bien con los homeboys" (getting along well with your fellow gang members), demonstrating again the tense simultaneous affirmation of self, family, and locality enshrined in "communal hyper-individualism." A further example of this tense affirmation is provided by an untitled poem written by Nika, who is involved in the Washington chapter of *Barrios Unidos*.

It's hard to think straight when you lose somebody you love.
 You look for the easiest way to escape tu pasado y tu dolor homes.
 La botella de whiskey and the funny cigarettes que make you laugh becomes your family
 And the trigger of a .45 becomes part of you,
 They beat at the same beat that your heart does.
 They all embrace you in a circle of bittersweet memories.
 The feelings que te dan cuando te hacen volar compadre,
 Te llevan a tocar las clouds, they play a sweet melody that you don't want it to stop.
 It's love, it's friendship, it's sadness, it's triumph, it's sorrow, it's darkness, it's light.
 Oh, who gives a fuck homes, nobody man, nobody.
 It's only us now young'n, it's only us . . . Drink me! Inhale me! Smell my sweet aroma.
 Take me higher, don't ever let me go.
 Take me sweet Mary, indulge me sweet Jane, soy tuyo Baby.
 Has de mí lo que tú quieras. I'm yours, take me 'cause I don't give a fuck no more.

While Castells is right in seeing gangs as local, highly territorialized cultures of urgency that are "the reverse expression of global timelessness," we would like to take his argument further and propose that gangs are not only defensive reactions to contemporary social change, particularly globalization as expressed by transnational migration. Gangs do not just oppose

globalization (in ways that reproduce its exclusionary effects) but also may participate actively in global processes. In other words, gangs deterritorialize as much as they reterritorialize.

Recent newspaper articles (Alder 1994, O'Connor 1994, Farah and Robberson 1995, Wallace 2000) have uncovered how organized crime, including the Colombian drug cartels, the Mexican Mafia, and other U.S. gangs, has taken advantage of the neoliberal push to open markets to set up "branches in countries such as El Salvador and [recruit] new foot soldiers from among the poor and veterans of the region's recently ended civil wars" (Farah and Robberson 1995: A01).⁷ Transnational gangs like the MS and the 18th are now becoming part of a "growing array of organized crime rings that specialize in cross-border trafficking and have turned Central America and Mexico into a hemispheric clearinghouse for drugs, contraband and stolen property." A particularly flourishing transnational business for Salvadoran gangs has been the practice of indiscriminate kidnaping and the smuggling of stolen vehicles and car parts, some of which have been traced to place like Belize, Colombia, and Jamaica.⁸

Castells himself discusses how transnationalism allows for the formation of networks in the informal economy (particularly that sector connected to criminal activities) that mimic the *modus operandi* of global capitalism. According to Castells (1998: 179), "The key to the success and expansion of global crime in the 1990s is the flexibility and versatility of their organization. Networking is their form of operation, both internally, in each criminal organization . . . and in relation to other criminal organizations. Distribution networks operate on the basis of autonomous local gangs, to which they supply goods and services, and from which they receive cash." Castells elaborates: "It is this combination of flexible networking between local turfs, rooted in tradition and identity, in a favorable institutional environment, and the global reach provided by strategic alliances, that explains the organizational strength of global crime" (180). In this sense, youth gangs such as the MS and the 18th are part of a "perverse connection" in which crime takes advantage of "desperate attempts" to affirm identity, community, and place to "foster the development of a global criminal economy" (337).

⁷A word of warning is in order here. The media has a long history of criminalizing youth groups and building public panic around them. This having been said, the IUDOP survey found that more than half of *mara* members in San Salvador had been admitted to ER units because of wound inflicted by other people (other gang members or the police). One third had been wounded in the six months leading to the survey. In addition, 70% of gang members have had a close person killed. Violence is, thus, part of everyday life for gangs in El Salvador.

If young gangs betray the desires of their members for self-recognition and for solidarity and intimacy in the face of globalization by re-inscribing global processes at the heart of *la vida loca*, what options are left? In the next two sections, we argue that Pentecostal churches offer an alternative, though not unproblematic, way for Salvadoran youth to negotiate the tensions between the local and the global.

Saving Pablo

We have seen that, despite their cynicism towards and rejection of mainstream culture and their re-assertion of self and community at the margins, Salvadoran gangs reproduce, and even magnify, some of the most deleterious aspects of globalization. To illustrate how churches provide alternative ways for young Salvadorans to negotiate dislocation and multiple marginality, we will focus on the testimony of Pablo, a 24 year-old former *mara* member who is now a minister in training in the Assemblies of God in San Francisco Gotera, Morazán. Pablo started his involvement in the *maras* in El Salvador when he was 14 years old, recruited during his frequent visits to San Miguel, the most populous city in the area, as he sought to escape “the boredom of Gotera.” After years of petty criminal activity in high school, he left for Maryland (Langley Park) to join his mother and “to get away from it all.” There he entered a drug gang and eventually became the leader of 144 youths. Pablo characterizes his life as gang member before his religious conversion in the following terms:

My life was real garbage because I lived in the streets. When I worked I used the money to buy drugs. I felt strong; I felt that I was on top of the world, that I was handsome, and a superman. And yet, quite the contrary, I was getting thinner and thinner. People would tell me that in the U.S. you are supposed to get strong because of the food. “Why don’t you get vitamins?” I would respond: “yes” but in my mind I was thinking of buying marijuana, that will make me strong. Eventually I didn’t just buy the drug, I also sold it with my gang. I also started ingesting drugs, I snorted coke, drank alcohol, and smoked crack.

One day, some of his friends disappeared. After asking around, he learned that a mysterious van, which he thought was associated with the INS, had taken them. Later on he learned that his friends had been taken to a church for rehabilitation.

⁸ Wallace (2000: 54) argues that still dominant reactionary forces within El Salvador “might see the perpetuation of gang warfare as a useful mechanism for blunting whatever danger of revolution [that] might remain” as well as a smoke screen for their own corrupt activities.

And from then on I also wanted to look for God, so I started to search for the address of the church, calling numbers in the phone directory. I told all the pastors: “I want to change my life. I don’t want to be what I am anymore. I am trapped by drugs and alcohol. I need somebody to help me.” But I couldn’t find the right phone number, because the church had just set up the house, a home, especially for young people trying to get away from the drug. Finally, the van arrived again. I saw some policemen get down the van; for a moment, I thought that they were immigration agents because they were wearing suits and ties; their hair was short and prim; they had shaved and were wearing nice shoes. I didn’t recognize them. But then I looked at them more closely and they were my friends. And they told me: “Hey *Flaco*, get up and let’s go. We are taking you to the church.” And I went. It was a wonderful experience to arrive at my new home. In two days I received the fullness of the Holy Spirit and I began to pray for my family, my family who were the guys in my new home.

For all its intensity, the conversion proved to be short-lived. Within a week of his conversion Pablo returned to the streets and drug addiction. The police arrested him, took him to jail, and eventually transferred him to an INS detention center.

Then I humbled myself before God. I asked Him for forgiveness for everything I had done. I told Him I wanted to be a clean person. I told him that if He got me out of jail that I would never turn my back on Him. And God helped me grow spiritually in jail. In jail I taught the Bible, prayers and hymns to young people. One day American *hermanos* [missionaries from the Assemblies] came to preach and I accepted God again. I didn’t care that they spoke English. God was building up my soul. My heart was joyous; I didn’t feel sad or frustrated because I was in jail. Then I was sent back here [El Salvador]. And I came directly to this church [the Assemblies of God in Gotera, Morazán]. You see, the *hermanos* here knew about me, they prayed every day for me. They came looking for me once they knew I had arrived in Morazán after eight months in the INS detention center in the U.S.

After joining the church in Morazán, Pablo started working with youth ministry. “I’m the commander of the Explorers of the Kingdom,” he states with great pride. The Explorers, which include former gang members, are youths who are training to stay away from the contaminating power of the street vices. These young men, many of whom have recently returned from the U.S., “are learning how to control themselves. They are taking control of their lives not through drugs but through the spirit of God. You see, a Christian person must live in brotherhood. That is what I preach to young people; they must walk in brotherly love. Just as Christ loved us so we must walk. A Christian home must persevere in love. Today when we get home we behave more like wolves.”

Pentecostalism's Multiple Territorialities

Pablo's case raises several important points in relation to the roles Pentecostalism plays vis-a-vis transnational Salvadoran gangs. First, Pentecostal churches operate transnationally due to a mixture of theological and sociological variables. In Pentecostalism conversion marks a radical transformation, an experience of being born again in Jesus Christ. It follows, then, that the greater the sin, the greater the glory to God, who has redeemed an utterly depraved sinner. And who is a greater sinner than a gang member who has rejected all societal conventions to live a life of crime and drug addiction? This logic, in effect, turns conversions of gang members into a symbol of status, a sign that the churches who achieve them are filled with the spirit and thus should be taken seriously in the fierce competition for souls that now characterizes the Salvadoran religious field. Since gangs are transnational, churches then must follow their potential converts, tracking them, as in the case of Pablo, across national borders. This is not difficult for a global organization like the Assemblies of God, which can mobilize its network of local congregations to deal with the challenges posed by transnational migration. Pablo, who has experienced a transnational conversion, now becomes the anchor for local efforts in local prisons to convert other transnational gang members. Working with other transnational youth ministers he has been able to bring "about fifteen" former gang members to the church. Several of these gang members have been deported from the Washington, DC area.

Pablo's case supports Berryman's (1999) contention that Pentecostalism has grown rapidly throughout the Americas largely because Pentecostal churches function as Castells's network society, that is, as decentralized, flexible yet integrated networks providing customized services and goods to individuals and communities. Pentecostalism succeeds because it combines deterritorialization (the operation of transnational webs) with reterritorialization (re-centering of self and community).

This reterritorialization, highlighted by Pablo's identification of the church with his "new home," his "new family," is the second point we would like to develop. The solidarity and intimacy Pablo found in the gang gives way to new intense and close ties within the safe environment of the congregation, where he can learn to control himself through "the spirit of God." The re-articulation of family and a place called home is accompanied by the emergence

of a new, cleansed self. While the physical scars of his involvement with the *mara* remain, Pablo now inscribes a new locality onto his body by wearing the signs that mark his “community of the elect:” his neatly cut hair, his carefully ironed shirts and pants, his deliberate yet soft voice.⁹ The testimony of Juan José, an eighteen year-old former gang member in Morazán, mirrors Pablo’s experience:

There have been times this month that I have felt tortured [atormentado] but because the power of Jesus is great I have been able to contain them [the members in his gang] no matter how hard they have tried. I base my life on Jesus because by myself the gang would be dangerous. When I wasn’t Christian and I didn’t go [to their meetings] they would beat me and six of them would follow me around. Now they see me and send me messages from Tabuco [the gang leader] that they will spy [*vijiar*] on me with their weapons, their guns, and I felt my heart [beat fast] but I began to pray and everything went away. You feel it in your heart, things have changed.

Amid the dislocation and inequity that characterize Latin America, sociologist David Martin argues that evangelical Christianity represents a “migration of the spirit” through which poor people break the ties that bind them to their precarious condition. In Martin’s reading, Pentecostalism helps “to implant new disciplines, re-order priorities, counter corruption and destructive machismo, and reverse the indifferent and injurious hierarchies of the outside world. Within the enclosed haven of faith a fraternity can be instituted under firm leadership, which provides for release, for mutuality and warmth, and for the practice of new roles” (Martin 1990, 284).

Martin’s insights can be applied to our case. Pentecostalism allows gang members like Pablo to break with their “communal hyper-individualism” and to articulate a new form of relational self. In other words, Pablo breaks with previous ties (i.e., the gang with all its notions of loyalty and honor) and re-builds new strong ties within the “enclosed haven of faith.” There he learns about “mutuality and warmth” (“brotherhood and love,” in his own words) as well as about discipline (“control,” as he puts it). Pentecostalism has, in effect, redrawn the Pablo’s lived geography: now his new sanctioned territory is the church, as the community of the elect, and his body, over which he must establish sovereignty.

⁹Some churches go even further, offering tattoo removal programs as part of their pastoral work among former gang members. Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC) in the South Bronx offers a striking example how the body is reconstituted in the process of religious conversion. Part of LPAC’s youth outreach includes a fully equipped gym set against the backdrop of a large mural of a muscular Christ rising from the streets of the barrio, carrying on his back a cross representing the sin of the world.

It is interesting to note, however, that while Pentecostalism's reterritorialization is couched in the language of control and brotherly love, there are constant references to a vivid war imagery. This is the third important dimension of Pablo's testimony. The struggle to build a new self and community takes on the trappings of a cosmic war against evil, a manichean conflagration that pits God and his armies (with a battalion under Pablo's command) against Satan and his minions. As Pablo puts it: "we are in a day-to-day struggle with the enemy, Satan. He's always trying to make us fall, to trick us, to get inside of us. Only strong prayer can defeat him." In El Salvador, this rhetoric of spiritual warfare appears to displace remnants of the civil war, such as crime and the culture of violence, to the symbolic field. Put in another way, all the real, physical violence that pervades everyday life in El Salvador as a result of socio-political changes now finds a safe outlet in the struggle to produce controlled, disciplined subjects of a sovereign God. Through Pentecostalism, young people, the segment of the population with the greatest potential for violent, destructive behavior, can re-direct all their energy to the spiritual struggle of staying clean and of cleansing society.

Martin (1990: 44) argued that in Latin America, evangelical Christianity, particularly Pentecostalism, is contributing to, among other things, a "feminization of the male psyche." With its fierce moral asceticism, Pentecostalism is transforming the Hispanic-Catholic culture of machismo by helping to create peaceable subjects who find the violence of the state or guerrillas, the right and the left, "deeply repugnant" (267). Roque, a twenty two-year old former gang member and now a youth pastor at the Assemblies of God in San Francisco Gotera, illustrates Martin's point. He characterizes his encounter with Jesus Christ in the following terms: "Since that moment there was total change, a radical change in my life. My nasty thoughts, my mind, everything that I had inside, the hatred, the rancor [*el rencor*], the emptiness, all fell by the wayside."

It seems, thus, that through Pentecostalism Salvadoran former gang members break with the cycle of violence that has defined the country's history from the conquest and that finds its latest manifestation in *maras*. Pentecostal churches are simultaneously dealing with the social dislocation produced by globalization and transnationalism and producing respectful and ethical subjects. The implications for the democratic transition in El Salvador are significant. After all, democracy is built not just on free elections and a competitive party system. The foundations of

democracy go beyond institutions like parliaments and court systems, to what Jelin (1998) has called a “culture of citizenship,” where all social actors, institutions, movements, and individuals share a civic intersubjective world. From Pablo’s testimony, it would seem that Pentecostalism is “domesticating” Salvadoran youths’ most destructive behaviors in response to multiple, transnational marginalities . Angel Reyes, a deacon at Prince of Peace, a Salvadoran Pentecostal church in Hyattsville, Maryland, puts it bluntly: “We started in an apartment in Virginia, and we were evicted after two services for singing and praying. It made no sense, because the building was full of people who drank and fought. The authorities should be grateful because we rescue so many people they can’t control. In those two services, we saved five people” (Constable 1995: B07). Along these lines, evangelical Protestant churches in El Salvador have formed a movement called “United Against Delinquency,” which, in addition to organizing prayer vigils (*jornadas de oracion*), stresses the need for prevention rather than just harsher law enforcement. United Against Delinquency emphasizes the need to return to “moral and Christian values” and strengthening of institutions like families, schools, and churches, “in which the individual learns to socialize and integrate into society”(Diario de Hoy, 07/27/2000).

There is no doubt that the work of Pentecostal churches among transnational youth gangs is helping to reweave the moral fabric of post-war El Salvador. Here our findings are in line with a growing literature that points toward the transformative potential of Pentecostalism in the Americas (Garrard-Burnett and Stoll1993, Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997, Shaull and Cesar 2000). With its emphasis on the collective and personal experience of the sacred rather than on high theology and its capacity to address the most pressing problems of the poor (i.e., illness, alcoholism, and the violence of everyday life), Pentecostalism is a truly a grassroots religion. However, Pentecostalism among Salvadoran youth gangs is not without contradictions. Pentecostalism offers *mara* members a disciplinary and bellicose articulation of self and space which may hinder the production of a truly participatory and deeply rooted democracy in El Salvador.

The relation between religion and discipline has received substantial attention in the sociology of religion. Weber (1958) and Tawney (1926) explored how the notions of calling and this-worldly asceticism among Puritans and Calvinists gave rise to values such as self-discipline, individualism and acquisitiveness that contributed to the emergence of modern capitalism. E. P.

Thompson (1966), in turn, documented how the Wesleyan call for a “methodical cultivation of the soul” served to discipline the English working class, helping the “millowner ‘to organize his moral machinery on equally sound principal with his mechanical.’” Thompson’s argument has been extended by Comaroff (1985) and Ong (1987) to describe the role of religion in mediating the process of proletarianization at the periphery of the capitalist world system. Ong, in particular, offers an interesting analysis the role of Islamic revivals in regulating sexuality and family life among female industrial workers in Malaysia. We would like to go beyond these economy-based readings to suggest that the work of Pentecostal churches among youth gangs religion involves a deeper logic of discipline and domination, one that takes place at the level of subjectivation, to borrow Foucault’s term.

In his later work Foucault studied the link between Christianity and what he called “techniques of the self,” practices which “permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on” Carrette (1999: 162). Among these techniques are confession and self-examination, part of a general “discourse of self-disclosure,” which constitutes self around the need to “declare aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself.” Foucault ties these techniques to the rise of modern disciplinary society, which he documented in his works on prisons, hospitals, and asylums. While the testimonial, which is central to Pentecostalism, is different from confession, it is a technique of the self defined by the “tyranny of the gaze.” The issue, then, is whether there is an elective affinity between self-surveillance in Pentecostalism and the panoptical society built by the Salvadoran military during the civil war.¹⁰ More concretely, we need to ask whether Pentecostalism, in appeasing the communal hyper-individualism of gang member, is not also producing “docile subjects” that are not empowered to participate fully in the democratic

¹⁰Foucault traces a move in the West from highly visible and physically violent forms of discipline to more subtle systems of control. In the latter, “there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself” (Foucault 1980: 155). Weber (1958: 36) makes the same point regarding the role of religion in the process of rationalization in the West. “The Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church’s control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control which was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice . . .in favour of a regulation of the whole conduct which, penetrating to all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.”

experiment. As Jelin argues, the construction of citizenship also requires a critique of the “culture of domination-subordination” that in Latin America is the legacy of authoritarian regimes and the violent movements that opposed them. While Pentecostalism might be producing peaceable and disciplined subjects, it may be less successful at eroding the larger culture of domination and subordination among former gang members. In fact, Pentecostalism may exacerbate and legitimize this culture by mapping the sacred onto it.

When asked why one of the group in which he participates is called Castles of the King [*castillos del rey*], Pablo replies:

It is called like that because God is our true king. But his kingdom is not of this world, the world as we know it with all its sins. All we can do is be soldiers for him, fight Satan, and convince people to join his castle. And because we really know sin, *ex-mara* members are some of the best soldiers. But in the end it will only be him [Jesus Christ] who will build his kingdom on fire, when the wicked will be condemned and the just [*los justos*] saved.

As a key eschatological image in Christianity, the notion of the Kingdom of God has been subject of multiple interpretations. Pohl (1999) shows how the Kingdom of God has consistently been a metaphor of hospitality, reconciliation, and fullness in the Christian tradition. A particularly poignant example is the representation of the Kingdom as a communal feast to which everyone is invited. Liberation theology, for its part, presents the Kingdom of God as the *telos*, the divine fulfillment of human history. In contrast, among gang members who have become Pentecostal, the Kingdom of God points to a time and space that is qualitatively different, even opposed, to profane history. The Kingdom of God is a sacred territory that, at the end of times, irrupts into and cancels the fleeting and flawed world of human praxis.¹¹ It is true that God acts in this world through the tangible gifts of the Holy Spirit, healing the bodies and psyches of gang members. These charismas, however, are but incomplete (albeit powerful) signs of an eschatological reality in which only those who have accepted Jesus as their savior will participate. In other words, for our informants the in-breaking of the Kingdom does not to refer

¹¹¹Dualism in Christianity is certainly does not arise with Pentecostalism. In fact, the distinction between God’s way and the way of the world is part of a long tradition that includes Augustine’s sharp disjuncture between the city of God and the city of man and the Lutheran notion of two kingdoms. While Salvadoran Pentecostals might have never read Augustine or even Luther, they stand within this tradition. Drawing from Weber, we might say that high theology is translated into a “practical religion” that informs personal ethos at a particular time (Laitin 1978).

to a real but fragile “city on the hill” or “beloved community” on this earth, but to an individualized sense of redemption within a highly particularistic group.

Eladio, a former gang member in the Assemblies of God in Gotera, offers a good example of how the notion of the Kingdom of God operates among *mara* converts. When asked about his future, he states: “I don’t know where I will be. If Jesus Christ has not come yet, maybe I’ll studying in another place or at the university. I really don’t care. I’m in the things of God [*las cosas de Dios*]. If God wants something to happen in my life, it will happen. He is all-powerful in his majesty. Only that which pleases him happens.” Eladio’s sense of fate is predicated on the surrender of his agency, the exercise of which has, in his view, only brought him trouble. Eladio sets a sharp dichotomy between his free will, which has led him to drugs and suffering, and God’s will, which has given him peace and joy. In his words: “I lived in the world [*anduve por el mundo*], but God rescued me. I saw the things of the world and they were a hell, they were rotten [*podridas*] to the core. The world is the path of death [*el camino de la muerte*]. But now I abide [*persevero*] in the God’s way [*las cosas de Dios*] and fulfill his commandments and his laws [*estatutos*].” Because the former gang members whom we interviewed set up a sharp dichotomy between the “things of the world and the things of God,” they attempt to establish an exclusionary territory that limits their participation in the outside world. Thus, when asked about the role of church in politics, Juan José, whom we met before, answered: “No, the commitment [*compromiso*] of the church is to take the message, that is the one and only goal, to take the message of salvation and the rest must be left alone. The world of corruption is something that must be forgotten. The world and people are going to stay just as they are now. It is their choice.”

Prima facie, the rejection of “the things of the world” and the affirmation of the Kingdom of God at the end of time appears as a radical theological deterritorialization, marking the emergence of a new divine geography that puts an end to all human attempts at dominion. The deterritorialization enshrined in the notion of the Kingdom of God represents an unequivocal refusal to partake in “principalities and powers” in the secular world, including globalization.¹² The Pentecostal believer is ultimately not a citizen in any hegemonic nationalist or transnational project, but a subject of God’s reign. What we have here is an “absolute space, the space of

¹²See Wylie-Kellermann (1994) on William Stringfellow.

religion” consisting of “the places of what has no place, or no longer has a place – the absolute, the divine, or the possible” (Lefebvre 1991: 163-164). This is, of course, the heart of the claim that Pentecostalism carries enormous revolutionary potential (Cox 1995).

There are, nevertheless, countervailing dynamics at play. The ex-gang members that we interviewed also imagine the Kingdom as a dominion under an utterly sovereign subject, el “varon de varones,” [the lord of lord], God. This dominion is territorialized in and mirrored by the hierarchical structures of churches to which our informants belong. Despite claims of otherworldliness, converted gang members act as “territorial spirits,” to borrow from evangelical theologian Peter Wagner, of a particular kind of rulership, commanders and soldiers in God’s army in the struggle to defend and expand his Kingdom in the here and now. As Adrian Hastings (1997) argues, the Kingdom of God is inextricably political, often associated with a Christian nation at God’s service. Indeed, the notion of the Kingdom of God among former gang members in El Salvador and Washington, DC, parallels the example of Guatemala in the early 1980s, when under born-again General Efraín Ríos Montt morality, order, and discipline became intertwined with right-wing nationalism and geopolitics. Ríos Montt saw himself as a latter-day King David battling against the forces of evil to build a “New Jerusalem.” In the construction of the new Guatemala, the struggle for “one soul at the time” and for a morally reformed society became “a divinely sanctioned ‘final battle against subversion’” (Garrard-Burnett 1998: 138-161). In Ríos Montt’s eyes, subversion, poverty, and violence “were not the product of inequality or class conflict, but the products of the ‘rottenness of mankind.’ This rottenness, he said in 1982 ‘has a name: communism, or the Antichrist, and all means must be used to exterminate it’” (148). This rhetoric justified a brutal scorched-earth campaign in Guatemalan highlands, where many indigenous groups lived. Thus, here we see how the radically deterritorializing thrust of the notion of God’s dominion can lead literally to the obliteration of whole communities, in ways reminiscent of Salvadoran army’s counter-insurgency tactics.

It has become a common practice among secular Latin American intellectuals to raise the specter of Rios Montt to disqualify Pentecostalism politically. Ríos Montt’s case is unique, a peculiar combination of *caudillismo*, the Reagan administration’s Cold War politics, and the premillenarianism of Church of the Word, [a.k.a “Verbo”], to which the general belonged. Rios Montt might have acted more as a soldier than a Pentecostal, given that he did not grow up as an

evangelical Christian.¹³ Even with these caveats, however, the fact that the general was able to use the Pentecostal theology to cosmicize his anti-insurgency campaign is an indication of the dangers in Pentecostalism's rhetoric of discipline, war, and territory.¹⁴

Martin (1990) has argued that evangelical Christianity's impact on Latin America's civil society likely to take time. Because the new selves and communities produced by evangelical Christianity are still precarious, they are likely to be "circumscribed against the intrusive and hostile 'world'" (107). "Once we take into account the coiled up resistance of the social mechanism in Latin American society to any moral initiatives, it is not surprising that Pentecostals erect a dualistic wall between the safe enclosure of faith and the dangerous wilderness of the world. For them that wilderness is occupied by a 'satanic' violence from all sides which will seize upon and destroy those who stray carelessly into it" (266). Before a hostile and chaotic world, Pentecostal churches must rely on a protective, firm leadership, which will eventually give way to the principle of priesthood of all believers and the anti-structural work of the Holy Spirit. In Martin's estimation, Pentecostal congregations are "experimental capsules," with a "latent capacity [for] cultural change held in religious storage to emerge over time when the circumstances are propitious to activate them, or when things are safe enough for people to make open political claims" (44).

Martin's hypothesis helps us avoid uncritical stereotyping of Pentecostals as purely conservative or reactionary. Nevertheless, Martin's concept of "experimental capsules" is problematic because it assumes that conversion and participation in church life create hermetically sealed enclosures. The territoriality created by Pentecostalism cannot be totally static and self-contained. Pentecostals dwell in multiple, intersecting spaces, which demand multiple subjectivities. Even the most committed church members, who spend 10-15 hours per week at church activities, must lead lives in the outside world, at school, work, the street, and/or

¹³¹¹See Garrard-Burnett (1996). Melander (1998) disagrees with this assessment. In her view there is no contradiction between the instrumental demands of military strategy and what she calls political evangelicalism. Verbo "legitimized direct violence, the war and Rios Montt. His enemies were demonized and identified with Satanic forces. The Verbo Church implicitly supported massacres of Mayas, because the demons that must be killed were embodied in the Mayas. To be rid of the demons was also to be rid of the Mayas. The Christians were considered to be involved in spiritual warfare. This corresponded to the ideological warfare aspect of counterinsurgency."

¹⁴¹²Recently, a yearning for order, discipline, and stability among ordinary Guatemalans (in the face of a post-civil war wave of crime not unlike that experienced in El Salvador) has resulted in the election of a new president with close ties to Ríos Montt.

market. There they are exposed to a myriad of alternative messages and lifestyles, including politics. It is, in fact, not surprising that many Pentecostals, such as Pablo, are constantly falling out of grace, an experience which they describe as “volver al mundo.” Like any other religious institution in Latin America, Pentecostal churches are embedded in socio-political fields marked by power asymmetries, which they must negotiate daily. In countries like El Salvador, with a fragile civil society and an acute concentration of power, the question is whether religious institutions have the ideational and organizational resources to make power distribution more transitive.

Contrary to Martin’s claims that Pentecostalism feminizes the psyche, the disciplinary and bellicose worldview among former gang members who have converted to Pentecostalism does not eliminate the violent patterns that have characterized Salvadoran life. Instead, it displaces them, cosmizing them into a life and death struggle for souls.¹⁵ By displacing the war from the social to the spiritual, Pentecostalism turns the multiple marginalities experienced by transnational Salvadoran youths into a religious sectarianism grounded on a dualistic worldview. If to be a true Christian is to wage total moral war against an omnipresent satanic enemy, Pentecostalism can only give rise to narrow selves in tension with the cosmopolitan pluralism that, according to philosopher Charles Taylor (1998), is an essential ingredient of robust democracies. The words of Cesar, a twenty-year old former gang member now attending a Pentecostal church in Arlandria, are illustrative: “there are times when I wish that the angel of Jehovah would come down and burn the world in its wickedness [*en su inundicia*] and maybe then we Christians can finally be in peace, not tempted, as we always are, by all the vices of the world that made me fall and become a *mara* member.”

Conclusion: Religion and the Production of Heterogeneous Space

Despite sharp ideological differences, transnational Salvadoran gangs and Pentecostal churches exhibit many similarities. They both simultaneously deterritorialize and reterritorialize, producing spaces that have contradictory consequences for individuals and their societies. Gangs reterritorialize, creating hybrid subcultures anchored in geographically bounded spaces (the street or the neighborhood). While these local spaces may serve to nurture “cartographies of

¹⁵¹³It is worth noting that the notions of the Kingdom of God and spiritual warfare carry strong patriarchal undertones. Our thanks to Liza McAlister for this insight.

resistance” (Harvey 1996: 290) against marginalization and exploitation, they can also become isolated islands of expressivism, mirroring the globalized culture of immediate gratification. Further, the incorporation of gangs as foot soldiers in the global drug trade points to the fragility and contradictory nature of their “militant particularism.”

Scholars have shown that Pentecostalism in the Americas exhibits great diversity on the ground and sustains complex relations with society and culture. Single case studies, thus, can only tell part of the story. Droogers (1991) characterizes Pentecostalism as a “paradoxical” religion, which involves rupture as well as continuity, individualism as well as communitarism, other-worldly eschatology as well as this-worldly pragmatism, and ascetic discipline as well as psychosomatic release.¹⁶ Transnational Pentecostal churches working among Salvadoran gang members in the Washington D.C. area evince similar paradoxes. At one level, they provide resources for less destructive spaces and subjectivities for gang members. In providing morally-sanctioned territories to homeless, transnational *mara* members, these churches “domesticate” the new converts. By mitigating the most damaging effects of multiple transnational marginalities, Pentecostalism might be helping to reweave the Salvadoran fabric of sociality torn by centuries of violence.

At another level, however, Pentecostal churches reproduce the patterns of domination over the self and the body that have been central to Salvadoran authoritarian politics. Here churches, with their language of spiritual warfare, inculcate a *habitus* of exclusionary difference that has potentially negative consequences for a sending society struggling to strengthen the values of solidarity, tolerance, and reciprocity among its citizens and for the migrants seeking full participation in the public sphere in United States.¹⁷ Among gang members who have turned to Pentecostalism, there is a destabilizing undercurrent of deep resentment and aggression,

¹⁶Politically, Pentecostalism includes in its ranks right-wing dictators like Rios Montt and left-wing activists like Benedita da Silva, an Afro-Brazilian Senator from the Workers’ Party. Chesnut (1999) sees this diversity as an expression of the maturity and breadth of Pentecostalism in Latin America. Rios Montt and da Silva “represent the ideological extremes of a continuum on which the great majority of Pentecostal political action falls somewhere in the middle Pentecostal political action in Brazil and most Latin America tends to avoid the two extremes but is closer to the right of center than to the left.” In the case of Brazil, “Pentecostalism reinforces the political status quo by engaging in clientelistic politics that predominate in the republic.”

¹⁷While conversion to Pentecostalism may have ambivalent effects for first generation immigrants, it may benefit the second generation. Once charisma is routinized, the machinean stance vis-a-vis the world may give way to subjects with more moral and social capital, which in turn may translate into political empowerment. More longitudinal studies of the link between religion and social performance across generations are needed to assess this claim. We are grateful to Min Zhou for this insight.

which, while justified by the multiple forms of marginality they suffer, rejects wholesale the “secular” world, including modernity’s self-critical tools. This rejection is symbolically intensified by proclaiming a totally deterritorialized Kingdom of God. Further, because the rhetoric of an ever-present spiritual warfare opens this eschatological notion to re-territorialization in this-worldly projects like national moral crusades, the rejection of modernity’s critical reason leaves gang members unable to engage in a full critique of the power relations that have led to their disenfranchisement.

We have used the notion of territory to underscore the link between religion and the production of space in a transnational setting. Critical geographers like Edward Soja and Doreen Massey argue that modern social science with its emphasis on progress has privileged time over space. In this Enlightenment-based perspective space is an inert reality in and against which historical subjects exercise agency. Against this view, critical geographers demonstrate that space is a dynamic reality constructed and interpreted by subjects located at the intersection of multiple and shifting webs of social relations spanning the local and the global. Space is not opposed to time; rather, they form “envelopes of space-time,” through which subjects articulate identities and lived experiences (Massey 1994: 5). Because “the spatial is socially constituted [and] . . . the social is spatially constituted . . . space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation” (264-65). As a source of narratives about home, community, selfhood, and utopia, religion is part of the symbolism and power involved in the construction of space.

In Pentecostalism we see religion contributing to the “dynamism of the spatial.” Pentecostalism among Salvadoran gangs forces us to conceptualize space and time in terms of simultaneity and paradox. As Mircea Eliade (1959: 20, 68) puts it: “For the religious man [sic], space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others . . . time too . . . is neither homogeneous nor continuous.” Pentecostalism articulates at least three “envelopes of time-space,” which overlap and enter into tension with each other. One is the time-space envelope of the church, as a local, embodied redeployment of the community life undermined by geopolitical conflicts, transnational migration, and the restructuring of the Salvadoran economy. As we saw, despite its highly sectarian nature, this envelope is porous, in tensions with various spaces and roles in secular life.

Then there is the transnational time and space in which the churches operate to minister to migrants across national borders. Finally, Pentecostalism involves a realm of life constructed at the end of times, through the obliteration of all human-made boundaries. We may draw from Tweed's (1997: 91-98) work among Cuban Catholics in Miami to characterize these interacting spaces as "locative," "translocative" (connecting horizontally sending and receiving societies), and "supralocative" (linking between human and divine histories).

While the "spatialization" of critical theory is a recent phenomenon (Soja 1989), space has always been central to the study of religion. A longstanding tradition, from Durkheim through Eliade to Jonathan Z. Smith, has focused in on the ways in which religion maps and re-maps space according to multiple tensions, such as those between the sacred and the profane, the this-worldly and the other-worldly, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and between elite/institutional and popular practices. Religion, in Smith's words (1978: 291), "is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's 'situation' so as to have 'space' in which to meaningfully dwell. . . What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power [i.e., over the natural and social environment] through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation."

Analysis of religion's role in the creation of space has hitherto concentrated on "primitive" and "ancient" religions – exploring the links between sacred cosmology and architecture in Mesoamerican religions or the role of mythology and ritual in mapping landscapes among Australian aborigines. However, Orsi (1999: 47) observes that dwellers in modern American cities have drawn from religious resources to appropriate "public spaces for themselves and transformed them into venues for shaping, displaying, and celebrating their inherited and emergent ways of life and understandings of the world. They have remapped the city, superimposing their own coordinates of meaning on official cartographies." Religious cartographies,

disclose coordinates of alternative worlds for practitioners, re-making the meaning of ordinary places and signaling the location of extraordinary ones, establishing connections between spaces of the city and other spaces, real and imaginary, between humans and invisible sacred companions of all sorts. American cities are composed of complex topographies of interleaved, sometimes incongruous domains of experience and possibility, knowledge of which is borne in the bodies and sense of city people who move through urban worlds in their everyday lives (Orsi 1999: 54).

Religious mappings are particularly important to transnational migrants, who faced with the dislocation produced by globalization must draw from their religious traditions “to delineate an alternative cartography of belonging. Religious icons and sacred shrines, rather than national flags, proclaim these religious spaces. The moral and physical geographies that result may fall within national boundaries, transcend but coexist with them, or create an additional place that supercedes national borders” (Levitt 2001: 19) Religion is often implicated in a “hermeneutics of movement,” whereby migrants transform their travels across national borders into moral journeys, theodicies of religious conversion, re-birth, and edification (Peterson and Vasquez 2001). For many of these migrants, pilgrimages of the soul framed by narratives of exile, diaspora and captivity, of exodus and the search for the promised land, or of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus become the interpretive lenses through which their transnational migration is understood. Borrowing from cognitive psychology (Golledge 1999), we may say that religious narratives provide resources for “route learning” and “wayfinding,” offering migrants moral and ritual landmarks to situate oneself amid dislocation.¹⁸ These narratives are not of one piece; they are contested and inflected by variables such as the migrant’s gender, race, class, and conditions of arrival.

The discipline of religion, thus, has much to contribute to migration and cultural studies in understanding how the present round of globalization is re-drawing boundaries and how people embedded in global processes negotiate multiple locations and identities. Religion is both a model of and a source for “heterotopias” (Soja 1989: 16-21), the multiple, intersecting “envelopes of space and time,” that accompany globalization.

¹⁸¹⁷McRoberts (2000: 96-126) uses Erving Goffman’s concepts of framing and frame extension to show how migrants from Haiti, the West Indies, and the U.S. South use the biblical notion of exile to make sense of their experience of “being culturally and/or geographically out place” in Boston. The Jewish exile in Babylon becomes an interpretive frame for the experiences of life at the margins in a bewildering city, for “the irony of faith in an apparently faithless world.”

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United States. Back to Main Menu. Future of Conflict. In El Salvador, gangs found fertile ground for recruitment with the country roiled by post-war political upheaval and mired in economic stagnation. Thousands of adolescents were roaming the streets with no jobs and little else to do. The sense of belonging offered by the gangs was too much for many of them to resist. Their influence has grown so great that every major political party in El Salvador and Honduras has at some point paid gangs during elections. That's why it's so hard to arrest high-ranking gang members, who are usually tipped off about police raids in advance. And that's why it's been so difficult to combat the threat the gangs pose. A mass grave containing the remains of at least 24 people has been unearthed at the home of a former police officer in El Salvador, who authorities reportedly believe may have been part of a gruesome murder ring. The suspects include people smugglers, ex-soldiers and police, El Salvador's National Civil Police (PNC) chief Mauricio Arriaza Chicas was quoted as saying in La Prensa newspaper on Wednesday. Chicas said investigators believe some of the victims may have been approached by their killers on social media, with offers to help them leave the country or find employment. El Salvador's security minister, Osiris Luna, said the idea behind making rival gang members mix was so as to break up lines of communication between members of the same group and thereby limit their ability to plan attacks. Before President Bukele came to power, members of the two rival gangs that are behind much of the violence in El Salvador - Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street gang - were housed in separate prisons in order to prevent deadly prison fights. But President Bukele put an end to that arrangement, arguing it allowed the gangs to impose their own rules and take control of "their" p Saving Souls Transnationally: Pentecostalism and Gangs in El Salvador and the United States. W: Manuel A. Vasquez: Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas. 2003, s. 119-144. ISBN 0-8135-3284-1. Please help us solve this error by emailing us at support@wikiwand.com Let us know what you've done that caused this error, what browser you're using, and whether you have any special extensions/add-ons installed. Thank you!