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Fools Banished from the Kingdom: Remapping Geographies of Gang Violence between the Americas (Los Angeles and San Salvador)

Elana Zilberg

The topographical reform of the civic body by the unceremonious exportation and dumping of libido in the countryside and in the far away colonies . . . is the perfect representation of the production of identity through negation.

—Peter Stallybrass and Allon White¹

This essay explores how the policing, incarceration and, most dramatically, the deportation of Salvadoran immigrant youth are reshaping the parameters of urban experience between Los Angeles and El Salvador. These disciplinary governmental practices have transformed the geographies of belonging, exclusion, and citizenship between the once putatively separate cultural and political spheres of the United States and Central America. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with deported youth, the essay focuses on the crucial place of the city in the production of their transnational subjectivities. Following the work of James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, I argue that at this juncture in globalization and with the attendant unsettling of national citizenship, cities such as Los Angeles and San Salvador emerge as crucial spaces for the appearance of radically unfamiliar and new identities. They are key sites for the mediation between the national and the global and for the localization of global forces.² The role played by the city in mediating between the local, national, and global is most evident in the production of the deportation narratives under consideration here. In the case of deported Salvadoran immigrant youth, it is on the streets of the urban *barrio* that the United States is most effectively policing the boundaries of its nation-state.³ Moreover, the emergent transnational identities of these youth are, in fact, created by the very forces of nationalism directed at them through the collusion between local law and federal immigration enforcement bodies.

The local police beat has thus become both a staging ground for managing the pressures of globalization and for the globalization of youth violence. Take, for instance, the corruption scandal surrounding CRASH (Community Re-

sources against Street Hoodlums), the zero tolerance gang abatement unit in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)'s Rampart division. That scandal, which erupted in 1999 in the heart of a Latino immigrant neighborhood just west of downtown Los Angeles, was in many ways a sequel to the 1991 Rodney King beating. Indeed, the Rampart police scandal brought back the ghost of King's bruised body in another form: the paralyzed, framed, and wrongfully imprisoned body of undocumented Central American immigrant and member of the 18th Street Gang, Javier Ovando. Under pressure of the corruption charges leveled against him, officer Rafael Perez agreed to cooperate with an investigation into the illegal activities of his unit. Perez's testimony described how he and his fellow CRASH officers engaged in bank robberies, drug deals, and organized prostitution rings. The officers were also accused of wounding and killing unarmed gang members and planting guns and drugs on their victims.

If not for the eruption of the scandal and the subsequent revisiting of his case, Javier Ovando would more than likely have been turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and deported at the end of his prison term. Indeed, at the time of the scandal, the LAPD had targeted ten thousand purported gang members for deportation, and the INS and Border Patrol agents maintained a regular presence in LAPD's booking-and-charging out facilities. As a result of this collaboration, even when criminal charges against gang and purported gang members were overturned, the INS still maintained a deportation hold on them. According to the Federal Public Defender's office in Los Angeles, this tactic had been employed by the LAPD to push many a key hostile witness into and through the deportation pipeline, thereby hindering efforts of defense attorneys in pending cases against immigrant youth and of those seeking to prosecute rogue officers in the Rampart case itself.

As journalist Peter Boyer explained, "The [Rampart] investigation was a messy process, because it had no precedent. [Rampart CRASH officer] Perez [the key defendant and informant in the case] would tell the task force about a bad case, and the detectives would fan out to . . . village[s] in Central America" in search of wrongfully deported immigrants.⁴ Rampart was an unprecedented scandal for the Los Angeles Police Department only because of its transnational dimensions. While Rampart police officers patrol a very limited and highly localized beat, their actions on the streets of L.A.'s urban neighborhoods have transnational reach. Well beyond the scope of the Rampart scandal, deportation, following incarceration, of immigrant gang youth has become a key management strategy for the United States. Zero-tolerance gang-abatement

strategies combined with changes in immigration law as a result of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act of 1996 have resulted in the deportation to El Salvador of thousands of Salvadoran immigrant gang youth—including permanent residents and some for nonviolent offenses.

Speaking from San Salvador, then twenty-seven-year-old deportee from Los Angeles Weasel explains his situation this way:

I've got this document right here. It says my full name and it has a little box right here that's checked and it says deportable under section blah blah blah. Removed from the States. Anyways the bottom line is that I've been banished from the U.S., you know, like they used to do in the medieval days, they used to banish "fools" from the kingdom . . . people who did something that was considered a threat to the crown (in my case society). Anyway, that's how I felt. They kicked me out of society [the United States] and sent me into the jungle [El Salvador] to live alone in my own solitude.⁵

But Weasel is far from alone. He is surrounded by "fools," "homeboys" from "Elay" . . . "banished from the kingdom." Indeed, El Salvador is now host to a new social formation built on this puzzling relationship between space and identity. Deported Salvadoran immigrant gang youth—banished from the United States after spending the better part of their young lives in this country—are returned "home" to a place where, in their memory, they have never been. As Bulldog exclaimed five days after his rude return to El Salvador: "Shit, homes, I've never been here. I mean, I know I'm from here, homes, but I've never been here." And then with disbelief, "You from here too?"

Weasel, who left El Salvador for Los Angeles when he was five years old, continues thus:

Ey, you know (a little laugh) . . . I went to kindergarten in Elay, elementary school, junior high school, high school. Man, I grew up singing—you know—my country 'tis of thee (he laughs again) . . . the song "America the Beautiful" . . . and—you know—pledging allegiance to the flag. Well, I grew up with all of that . . . and here they are, you know, twenty-something years later, kicking me out.⁶

When these Salvadoran immigrant gang youth, deported from the United States, run into each other in the busy, congested streets of El Salvador's capital, San Salvador, or in those cobbled streets of its dusty *pueblos* (towns), the first thing they ask one another is, "Where you from, homes?" This is a multiply determined question about origin, geography, affiliation, and identity, which takes this much in common—the territory of the Latino *barrio* in the United States.

Much of my research is set in Los Angeles and focuses on the contentious social production of the Pico Union district as a Central American immigrant

barrio, where many of these deported youth are “from.” Pico Union, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Rampart police division, is Salvadoran Los Angeles’s symbolic, if not demographic, center. While still predominantly Mexican and Mexican American, it is also home to nearly every Central American community organization and has served as the central stage for their political protests and cultural production. My research there tracks the spatial logic of the cultural politics behind the expulsion of “fools” like Weasel “from the kingdom.”⁷ Yet as the emergent subjectivities of these transnational protagonists suggest, any such study must be agile enough to traverse local, national, and global scales and to track flows—material, discursive, and affective—between the immigrant *barrios* of Los Angeles and *barrios populares* (working-class neighborhoods) of San Salvador. Certainly, the inner-city *barrio* in Los Angeles is a complex articulation of local forces. It is a space acted on by the contradictory pressures of urban redevelopment and law enforcement agencies and social justice organizations, as well as the enabling and disabling everyday practices of residents themselves.⁸ But there is still more at stake. There is the cultural politics of forced repatriation on the other side—in Central America. Indeed, the Central American *barrio* in Los Angeles is haunted with voices from and banished to El Salvador.

Youth deported from Los Angeles walking the streets of San Salvador calling themselves “homies” are the shock effects of globalization as it clashes with nationalism. They are the embodiment of a forced transnationality. While the literal mobility of these deported youth may have been arrested, contained, and reversed by the forces of nationalism, their narratives—which leak beyond the bounds of the nation-state—tell us volumes about the complex relationship between space and identity. They reveal a painful rupture between culture and nation, where cultural identity does not correspond to, but is, rather, excluded from national citizenship. It is to those narratives that I now turn and through them, to an interrogation of the ways in which the geographies of violence, of belonging and exclusion, of Los Angeles’s immigrant *barrios* have been relocated and reinscribed within the post-civil war landscape of San Salvador’s *barrios populares*.

Gato’s Story

I met Gato in Modelo, a *barrio popular* in San Salvador, and territory to a *clika* (clique) of the gang La Mara Salvatrucha (MS). In Los Angeles, Gato was a veteran of the MS archrival, the 18th Street Gang. We began our conversation in English sitting outside his home, a modest concrete apartment, attached to a small liquor and convenience store run by his mother. Gato is fully conver-

sant in both Spanish and English. However, as is clear from the transcription below, he is not a native U.S. English speaker. His speech—a mixture of street English, the Spanglish of Chicano gangs, and the *caliche* of Salvadoran colloquial Spanish—still marks him as Salvadoran, and as immigrant to the United States.⁹

Gato is originally from Modelo. I am confused and curious. How does he navigate this terrain—living inside enemy territory and with the enemy? He begins to explain:

G: First they told me, “Don’t write on the walls.” You know, write 18th Street . . . And I told them, “I won’t do that.”

Z: So you came to an agreement with them?

G: Yeah, we came to an agreement. I told them, “If you guys don’t bother me, I’m not going to bother you guys.” But, if they do . . . planning to do something, do it good. You know, kill me.

Z: So nothing’s happened?

G: No, that’s because I don’t . . . I’m working, I have my life together. If they know I’m still gangbanging, of course, they could kill me man, you know.

Z: But this is your *barrio*, where you’re from?

G: All these guys, they were my friends when I was a little kid, and they get mad because [they say], “Why don’t you be jumping in an MS neighborhood?” You know, I told ’em, “Hey, when I went to California I grew up at 6th and Junior.” That was PBY territory, now it’s 18th Street. You know the hangout for my neighborhood? Of course, they all go in Normandie or Olivar and other streets that was from MS. I would jump in MS because I love my country, but . . . it’s not that.

Back in his neighborhood in El Salvador, Gato must now explain why he did not join La Mara Salvatrucha, the gang, at least at its inception, associated with Salvadorans, and which broke away from the Mexican-dominated 18th Street Gang. I look at the *barrio* around us and wonder at how its territorial identifications have been reshaped by the war and by U.S.-bound migration. Gato and his, at least up until then, benevolent enemy hosts grew up together in the same *barrio* in San Salvador—Modelo. But by virtue of their relocation to adjacent inner-city neighborhoods in Los Angeles—Pico-Union versus Korea Town—they are now from different neighborhoods in L.A. and, therefore, inside El Salvador. While they hail from the same home, they are not *homeboys* to one another, but enemies. Salvadoran geography has been rewritten—its political boundaries redistricted, if you will—by this migration, U.S. inner-city politics and deportation.

As Gato explains later, “The problem is that we came deported from the States. Someone . . . they’re bringing the neighborhoods down to my country . . . That thing of the neighborhood [is] from California.” Gato launches into

a critique of the naive transposition of Los Angeles's political terrain onto El Salvador by Salvadoran "wannabes" and poor copies of the real thing in the United States. I have heard this critique from one deported gang member after another.

Whoever brought my neighborhood back here in the 90s, they fucked up, really fucked up my country. Because man, you really see the writing on the walls in the streets. That came in the 90s . . . It's like you're seeing the freeways from L.A., and they don't even know how to write on the walls. They write real stupid, you know. They put "Westside 18th Street" or "Northside MS," and we're not really on the Northside or Westside here. We're in South Central. Or they put area "213." Man, that's a telephone call from downtown California, . . . or put "818." That's El Monte, you know. They get me real mad because they don't even know about the Southside thing, or the Northside thing. They just know enemy 18th Street, or enemy MS.

And so it is to the "real" landscape of California that our conversation wanders. Gato's vivid account of the globalization of his *sureño* (Southside) identity politics demonstrates how deeply linked San Salvador is to the spaces inside Los Angeles and vice versa. As Gato begins to explain the geography and genealogy of his criminalization, he guides us through the familiar landmarks of Pico-Union's built environment. Gato was a student at Belmont High, "right there on Wilmont and Lucas." He jumped into (was initiated into) his neighborhood gang when he was fifteen or so as a means to seek revenge against "a guy from Rockwood" who stole a gold chain. His father, who was killed in El Salvador for his political involvement, had given the chain to Gato before he died. His gang life culminated in an arrest for the attempted murders of two members of Crazy Riders, who had driven into his neighborhood and pulled out an AK-47, hitting his homeboy. "It happened right there by a Jack in the Box, on 6th and Bonnie Brae, by what used to be the Hotel California [infamous first stop for many a newly arrived immigrant], next to a place called La Barata." He was chased down Westlake, close to MacArthur Park—the symbolic center of Pico-Union.

Like so many in his situation, in order to get a lighter sentence, Gato accepted a deal with the judge, and pleaded guilty to the felony counts. Gato begins to talk about the minefield of cultural politics inside the prison, which jump between these scales of identification: neighborhood (the gang), nationality (El Salvador vs. Mexico), geographic orientation (Southsider vs. Northsider), and racial identification (Latino vs. black, white, and Asian).

Every time the door opens and you step out, you don't know if the problem's going to be with a Blood, a white boy, or Japanese, and you got to react because you're Latino man, you

are Hispanic. Inside prison, believe it or not, we're united man. We are united as Southsiders, *sureños* . . . It would be cool if . . . neighborhoods could get along like in prison man. Not because you're Mexican, you're from Peru, or you're from El Salvador. No. We're all Hispanic man, we're all brown, we all speak the same language. Just because I'm a Salvadoran, you're going to feel better than me? No. We're all equal, man. Some of my homeboys, and the guys from MS, they don't think that way.

Once inside the prison, the city's geography seems to lose some of its primacy. The relationship between space and identity now transcends the borders of the urban *barrio* that were so crucial to identity formation prior to incarceration. Local *barrio* identities give way to racial, ethnic, regional, and national differences. The prison thus becomes a crucial site for the remediation of urban identities, and deportation takes this reidentification one step further. Gato's discussion concludes with an elaboration of an intricate geography of belonging: a continental American and pan-ethnic identity as Latino. But upon deportation to the streets of San Salvador, this *concientización* (consciousness raising) as Latino and as *sureño*, is more often than not overwhelmed by the reproduction of divisions between *barrios* in San Salvador, reworked as they are by those in Los Angeles.

Gato's words weigh heavily as I write. He was killed not long after this interview by an MS gang member. The burden of representation looms large.

Weasel's Story

You have already been introduced to Weasel briefly in the prologue to this essay, where he describes himself as that "fool banished from the kingdom." Weasel captured my anthropological imagination from the start because, unlike the deportees I had met up to that point, Weasel bore no traces of his Salvadoran identity. I was thrown by Weasel's style and his speech. The latter—filled as it is with the stylistic markers of Chicano and of Californian youth culture, as well as playful appropriations of African American linguistic forms—is unmistakably U.S. English. Indeed, Weasel describes his reencounter with his "native" country as a "complete culture clash."

Nor did Weasel fit into the dominant configuration of gang affiliation among Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles: MS or 18th Street. I asked him about his gang.

W: My gang was called the Westside Los Crazies, and we're in Echo Park.

I tell Weasel that I live in Echo Park. His eyes light up, and he jokes about me being his *homegirl*, and from there on out, Weasel always introduces me as

“Elana, she’s from my *ex-barrio*.”

W: The members are mostly Chicanos, or if they’ve got any Salvadoran or Cuban background, Puerto Rican, whatever, you know they’re born there, they’re born in the States, you know.

Z: So it’s not an immigrant gang?

W: No, no, not at all, not at all. I mean, they’re all born there. I mean their parents could’ve been immigrants.

Z: Or you were an immigrant?

W: Yes, but I didn’t even recognize that word “immigrant” you know until I got a little older. You know, I just . . . I grew up like, I guess you could say like, naive to the fact that I came from another country and I was living in the States, and I just, I never thought about you know like . . . backgrounds . . . because everybody around like me spoke Spanish or English and you know they were Latino in general, the majority was Mexican, and Chicanos, very few blacks. But I did grow up seeing black people and so it wasn’t a total Latino neighborhood.

Z: Do you remember what you said to me the other night over dinner? You said, “I guess you could say, I am, or I was a Salvadoran living in America living a . . .”

W: Living a Chicano lifestyle! Yeah, that’s what I said.

. . . [T]he funny thing, is that everyone thought I was Mexican, ’ey. I kept on telling them, “I’m not, you know, I was born in El Salvador, ’ey.” You know, every time they would ask me, I’d say, “I’m Salvadoran. I was born in El Salvador.” But uh . . . after a while they’d forget about it because they’re so used to you and you’re so much like them that it doesn’t even matter, you know.

. . . [L]ike I was telling you, you know, I had like a Mexican upbringing. And in Los Angeles they have this like, this multicultural uh, uh . . . I guess, they teach you, about other cultures, and since there’s a lot of Mexicans there, they teach you a lot about that, you know. They teach you about Cinco de Mayo and stuff like that.

Our conversation turns to the shock of deportation and his complete unpreparedness for such an eventuality. He was, after all, a permanent resident.

W: [W]ell I thought I was a permanent resident you know . . .

Z: Because you thought permanent resident meant permanent?

W: Yeah, permanent, and plus I never paid much attention to that legal status too much, you know. It was just something that was . . . I mean I thought I was at home you know. I thought . . . that was me forever.

Z: You had no idea that that was a possibility—that you would be deported?

W: I thought that was just for illegals, you know, and since I was legal, you know, I was a resident, and meanwhile my brothers [and sisters] were becoming citizens.

Of course, Weasel couldn’t have known that he was vulnerable to deportation because the law—which was applied retroactively—was only put into effect in 1996, once he was already in prison and the year before he was deported.

Z: When did you find out that you were coming back to El Salvador?

W: Well, the first time I went to prison, an immigration guy, agent, came to talk to me, but I was still lost, you know. I was a kid you know.

Z: What did he tell you?

W: He just told me, you know, “Where were you born,” and this and that. He goes, “You better be careful, you know messing about. They’ll send you back . . .” But I thought he was just, you know, joking or something. I said like, “How’re they going to send me back? All my family’s here.” I didn’t even think of anything like that. I’m here growing up thinking I’m this (American) when, in reality, I’m this (Salvadoran) because I was born here, you know . . . When I got out [of prison] the INS agent came to visit me. I didn’t think nothing of it. Thought that he just wanted to see my green card and papers. The INS officer was trying to prove that I was a Salvadoran. He kept asking me questions like what was the biggest river in El Salvador. I kept trying to explain that I didn’t know nothing about El Salvador. I mean I hadn’t been there for twenty years. I mean the biggest river around here is the L.A. River. I grew up in L.A. you know. Anyhow, he said that given my criminal history, he didn’t see no chance for me, couldn’t see me changing . . . Now I know that the biggest river here [El Salvador] is the Rio Lempa.

Weasel then recounts his arrival scene, an amusing—if not intended—parody of the ethnographer’s first encounter with a strange culture.

W: I arrived with a lot of rumors in my mind about there’s like this death squad that’s going to kill you if you’re all tattooed.¹⁰ So I’m a little nervous and scared. Then the police come and snatch you and put you in a little room, and I said, “Oh fuck . . . that’s it, forget it. They got me. They’re going to kill me.” They started asking me like where I live, and where I’m going to live, and took pictures of me, of my tattoos, my fingerprints, looked through my stuff, you know . . .

Z: How did San Salvador feel to you? What were your first impressions?

W: It was like they were sending me to Mars or something. I hadn’t been in the country for twenty something, twenty-two years. And then I come back and I’m completely lost, man.

As it turned out, Weasel began his new life in San Salvador in San Jacinto, one *barrio* over from Gato’s *barrio*, Modelo. He goes on to describe his shock at his new surroundings.

W: It was like real dirty to me, and I was like, “G-d man, where am I?” you know. “What am I going to do here?” They had trees everywhere and, you know, a lot of shacks. So I was like, “What did I get myself into man. Where am I? . . . Hell no, hell no, I ain’t staying here, I ain’t staying here. . . . I tried to go get my passport and they, uh, denied me a passport because they didn’t think I was from here, coz I couldn’t speak Spanish that well. And if I did speak Spanish, I spoke a different Spanish.

Like Modelo, San Jacinto’s local geography had also been reinscribed by Los Angeles’s territorial conflicts. Unlike Gato, however, Weasel occupied a

much different relationship to that geography. Indeed, local gang members, although initially suspicious, did not in the end know where he was from, which is to say, did not recognize his *barrio*. This initially afforded Weasel a modicum of autonomy and space in relationship to Salvadoran gangs, although to Salvadoran society at large, he was just another *marero* (gang member).

In El Salvador, Weasel entered into an identity crisis.

W: Yeah, I was telling you about the crisis I had. I'd been in a crisis. It goes back to the same thing too. People look down at you because, you know, the way you dress, baggy clothes . . . they call it *marero* here, and that's like something real low to call a person.

When I first got to San Jacinto, I couldn't really relate to nobody in the house, so I started going out a little bit, hanging out in the front of the house, and the neighborhood kids they would see me. [But t]alking to those people is like, you know, whoever talks to them is part of 'em . . . so you're scum, you're trash, whatever. So I didn't really want to be classified with [gangs], you know, even though I could relate to them.

In an effort to reinvent himself, Weasel started to go to punk concerts.

Z: This is you moving from your *mara* (gang) to your punk stage?

W: Gangster.

Z: *Cholo*? Is that how you would describe your look?

W: Gangster.

Z: Is that different from *cholo*?

W: Not really, but gangster's like, I feel it's a step above *cholo*. *Cholo's* . . . anybody could be *cholo*. Okay, I started going to concerts. I liked it. These guys were cool. . . . I started going out with them. Found a place called La Luna (he laughs), started going there a lot.

Z: La Luna is a very different scene . . .

I'm astounded at the cultural fusion here. La Luna is a cultural cafe reminiscent of any number of places in, say, Coyocan, Mexico, or Silver Lake in Los Angeles. For me, as a U.S.-based anthropologist, it is one of those places I would retreat to when I needed to escape the assault of being a foreign woman in a conservative society. So I'm curious that Weasel, self-described "gangster" from Echo Park, seeks refuge there too. But there is a spatial logic at work here, which brings both Weasel and me into the same space—globalization. La Luna caters to middle-class leftists, many of whom fled El Salvador as political exiles during the civil war—American, European, and Latin American expatriates working with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom forged links to El Salvador through the solidarity movement during the same period. It also attracts unconventional middle-class Salvadoran youth drawn to experimentation with the global cultural flows of punk, rock en español, rap, spoken word, etc. Both Weasel and La Luna are produced and

enabled by the spatial logics of globalization—albeit in and through markedly different registers of transnationalism: bohemianism and youth gangs.

Thus, while the focus of this essay is on transnational geographies of violence, the presence of spaces like La Luna in Weasel's narrative demonstrate that these global flows are not simply about violence. If anything, La Luna, which is dedicated to opening up cultural spaces in a socially conservative society, has a utopian dimension. Weasel, who is an accomplished tattoo artist, was able, through contacts made at La Luna, to employ gang expressive culture to build an “art tattoo” business for himself catering to middle- and upper-middle-class Salvadoran youth. Weasel then comes to embody the fusion of both these dimensions of globalization—dystopic and utopian.

Z: You [said you] had a Mohawk?

W: Yeah, I did.

Z: Here in San Salvador?

W: San Salvador. That really tripped people out. Nobody's ever seen stuff like that here. In a way I was . . . I wanted to make a statement . . .

Z: You were still living in San Jacinto at the time?

W: Yeah . . .

The absurdity of a punk rocker with a bright green Mohawk hairdo in a *barrio popular* in post-civil war El Salvador will be lost on those unfamiliar with that landscape. Weasel said being deported to El Salvador felt like being sent to Mars. And once in El Salvador, Weasel refashions himself as the Martian, the alien he is made to feel by the stares, reactions, and disapproval of the people around him. In a follow-up e-mail to me in Los Angeles, Weasel modifies his initial description of himself as “a Salvadoran living a Chicano lifestyle in the United States,” to this: “Now [I'm] more like a deported gang member from L.A. living a mixture of a Chicano, Gringo, weirdo lifestyle.”

Geographical Disorientations

Contemporary Los Angeles has become intimately associated with Fredric Jameson's essay on the Bonaventure Hotel (or Bonaventura), which Jameson posits as the architectural pronouncement of a depthless postmodern space, and against which he sets the culturally deep “great Chicano markets,” located below and just east of that hotel's towering glass surfaces.¹¹ I began this essay by taking you just west of the Bonaventure to a Central American *barrio*, the Pico-Union district, where—despite their distinct *barrio* identities—both Gato and Weasel were picked up by LAPD officers for the last time before they were pushed through the deportation pipeline. I invoke Jameson here in part to

locate and to orient you—although there is a certain irony here since, according to Jameson, spatial orientation is, of course, precisely what we have lost to postmodernism. It is to the latter point that I would now like to turn: Jameson’s plea for “new maps” that correspond to this “multi-national global moment,”¹² and to his invocation therein of Kevin Lynch’s work on cognitive mapping as a means of way finding.¹³

The cultural history and geography of Weasel’s criminalization is different from Gato’s. Gato remembers his old *barrio*. Despite his pan-Latino discourse, he retains his identity as Salvadoran. Gato migrated at a different age, a different epoch—at the height of the civil war in the early 1980s—and into a gang politic specific to that era and to that migration. Nonetheless, his geographical knowledge and the old maps no longer work upon his return to El Salvador. The *barrio*’s designation, its geography, has changed on him, even as he was by it—both have been transnationalized, and their transnationalization has left them on different sides of the war, a new civil war. Gato’s attempt to be from one *barrio* and live in another, to marry across *barrios*, to stake claim to his childhood territory—all proved fatal. His migration story begins and ends in violence. His father was killed in front of him for his political involvement with the FMLN (the then-leftist guerilla force) in the very same spot where Gato was shot and killed in front of his infant son for his past affiliation with the 18th Street Gang.

Weasel, on the other hand, moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1970s, well before the Salvadoran civil war and the attendant massive influx of refugees. As a result, Weasel had no social or geographical memory of El Salvador, no attachment to a *barrio* in San Salvador, or mental maps thereof. He knew nothing of the place from where he came. The test the INS officer gave him on Salvadoran geography is a perfect manifestation of his geographical disorientation—his reference point is the Los Angeles River, not the Rio Lempa. It is only two years after Weasel’s return to El Salvador that he can construct the geography of the county. As he put it, “I feel like a tourist, a permanent one.”

Gato and Weasel would eventually meet through the Salvadoran branch of Homies Unidos, the transnational youth violence prevention program, which has offices in both Los Angeles and San Salvador. Their different orientations to their Salvadoran identity notwithstanding, both Gato and Weasel found themselves at Homies Unidos precisely for reorientation to their “homeland,” and both drew upon the organization to teach them how to navigate hostile and foreign terrain, or to derive a sense of place, a familial bond. While the writing may be on the wall in San Salvador—in the form of gang tagging—the meanings are not the same as they are in Los Angeles. Both deportees

depended on Homies Unidos for the translation of these deceptively familiar codes.

As Gato told us:

For us, it's kind of hard for us to live in our country. Wherever we go, we're always watching our back, our necks. I thank Homies because they showed me my country, man. From them, I learned where my enemies were, because when I came here I didn't really know where I was going. When people would say, "Let's go out, or let's go buy something," shit, I'd only go to the corner and come right back. Magdaleno and Huera [of Homies Unidos] would take me out for coffee, and would tell me [as they drove through the city of San Salvador]: "They are MS, and this corner, this is 18th."

Weasel started coming to the office after he had seen Homies Unidos's rap composer and performer Bullet at concerts. He explains:

I came down and checked it out. I liked it, you know. I felt like that bond was there again—the one I left in L.A. . . . where I felt comfortable . . . Plus to top it off, I came to the office one day, and I see this guy walking down the street. And I said, "Damn, that guy looks familiar, 'ey." I got closer and closer, and then I said "Damn, I know that fool!" "Hey fool!" I say, "What's up?" And it was Grumpy. And me and Grumpy had been locked up together, so that even . . . so that even made the bond stronger. . . . I ran into other guys I knew from prison . . . Alex, Frank, Rabbit. It was like I'd found my family again.

Homies Unidos is an organization born of and devoted to countering the alienating forces of globalization as they combine with nationalism. In his oft-cited study of cognitive mapping, urban planner Kevin Lynch takes up the problem of spatial alienation wrought by modernization and urbanization.¹⁴ Drawing on this same study, Fredric Jameson suggests that "the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves" and that "[d]isalienation in the traditional city . . . involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place."¹⁵ Certainly Gato's and Weasel's narratives speak to a similar need to mediate a jarring and troubled relationship between space and identity. The spatial alienation and fettered mobility of these deported immigrant gang youth, however, result from very different conditions than those affecting the middle-class city dwellers, tourists, and business travelers in Lynch's and Jameson's respective works. Beyond the generalized destabilizing effects of contemporary urban life, deported gang youth must contend with the effects of zero tolerance policing tactics as they are deployed on the streets of the inner-city immigrant *barrio* and with the subsequent transnationalization of the geographies of gang violence between Los Angeles and San Salvador.¹⁶

Not unlike the gang itself, Homies Unidos serves a “way-finding” function for these deported gang youth, and provides them with a map of the ways in which Los Angeles’s geographies of violence have been rewritten into and altered through their encounters with San Salvador’s urban landscape. This geographical reorientation is intended to avert the reproduction of violence itself. Gato’s story, alongside the many other deaths within the organization’s membership, is, sadly, testimony to just how complex a task this is, and that, in many instances, these navigational maps help to prolong but may not ultimately save lives, stop the violence.

Nonviolence is not simply an individual choice to change one’s lifestyle. In San Salvador, Gato is forever marked by “where he is from,” which is to say his territorial affiliations in Los Angeles. No longer an active gang member, in El Salvador, Gato remained a target for gang vendettas. Moreover, affiliation with violence and intervention projects like Homies Unidos carries its own dangers. Active gang members might misrecognize or misconstrue the organization as a rival gang and/or view the organization’s outreach into their barrios as encroachment and violation of their territory. So, for instance, Weasel, who hailed from territory in Los Angeles unknown in San Salvador, became more vulnerable to gang violence through his subsequent participation in Homies Unidos as a gang peace activist. Beyond gang violence, there have been cases of death squad and police violence directed at gang youth and at deported gang youth in particular.

But the spatial alienation of these Latino others stands outside Jameson’s implicitly racialized account of Los Angeles’s late capitalist spatiality. In his discussion of the postmodern Mexicano, José Limón argues that Jameson relegates Latino spaces such as the Chicano market to an old modern space, which stands in contrast to the new cultural dominant represented by the Bonaventure Hotel.¹⁷ Similarly, Roger Rouse urges us to look for signs of late-capitalist spatiality beyond architecture and aesthetics in the everyday literal footsteps of Mexican “(im)migrants” and in the emergent transnational space between their hometowns in Mexico and cities such as Redwood, California.¹⁸ Deportation narratives demonstrate how the Latino immigrant *barrio* and the Salvadoran *barrio popular* have both come to occupy what Jameson terms the “global space of the postmodernist or multinational moment.”¹⁹ Granted, Weasel may experience El Salvador as the primitive past—a veritable jungle of mud huts. But as a result of his deportation, he in fact becomes an agent in and foil for, and offers an immanent critique of, postmodern spatiality. Indeed, the cognitive mappings of deported immigrant gang youth involves constructing legibility not only within but *between* cities of formerly

distinct hemispheres that have, as a result of migration and forced repatriation, become intimately connected, their geographies inextricably linked and complicit.

A Politics of Simultaneity

These narratives of deported immigrant youth speak eloquently to the need for interpretive maps, which interrogate the relationship between space and identity, and the blurred boundaries between the local and the global. They also call into question what constitutes the terrain of study for American, Latino, and Latin American studies at this particular moment in globalization. In this sense, Gato's and Weasel's stories are reminiscent of the texts José David Saldívar draws upon to propose a new continental or pan-American studies. Like the novels of those "other Americanists"—Black, Latino, and Latin American—the deportee's narrative challenges the "limiting set of tacit assumptions that result from perpetual immersion in the study of a single American culture" and demands that we retheorize the very premises upon which the concepts of "American hermeneutics, alterity, history and historiography rests."²⁰ This need to cross geopolitical lines between the Americas to grasp the blurred cultural zones that people inhabit has been a defining tenet and contribution of borderlands theory.²¹ While that literature's primary geographic reference is the U.S.-Mexico border region, Salvadoran transnational migration and community formation allows us to see just how much further south that contact zone between the United States and Latin America extends.

In terms of their immediately experienced scale and size, Latino immigrant *barrios* like Pico-Union are veritable anthropological villages. But the highly localized neighborhood Pico-Union is linked to a complex system of places and politics well beyond the boundaries of the *barrio* and even those of the nation-state. Moreover, the life stories that that emerge from it pose a methodological and representational challenge to the study of culture. They not only require multisited fieldwork, but they also call for a dialogic mode of analysis²² in order to grasp the shared or contrapuntal histories²³ of these cities—Los Angeles and San Salvador, and these Americas—United States and Central.

In this sense, the identity formation made visible in these deportation narratives bears a relationship to the postcolonial narratives discussed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said sets out to demonstrate how the imperial power and its colonies were produced in relation, or counterpoint, to each

other. He argues that the nineteenth-century British novel, the quintessential genre of British cultural production and expression of British identity, is intimately related to and dependent upon the social space of Empire. National identity is thus worked out through the relationship between home and abroad, the metropole and its colonies. Others have discussed how the postcolonial era has been, in turn, marked by a reversal in this cultural production of identity. The “periphery” emerges at the “center” in the form of the now well-known trope, the *Empire Strikes Back*.²⁴ I would suggest that these Salvadoran narratives of forcible return reveal a similar structural interdependence and complicity in identity formation between the United States and El Salvador in general and those between Los Angeles and San Salvador in particular. In the north-south relations under consideration here, deported Salvadoran immigrant gang youth oscillate between “home” and “abroad,” where both home and abroad are themselves unstable locations. At the same time, Salvadoran gang youth who have never been to the United States construct their identities around imagined urban geographies of cities like Los Angeles.

An examination of the spatial cultural politics behind the expulsion of “fools” like Weasel and Gato “from the kingdom” requires, therefore, a wide-angle lens and a methodology agile enough to jump geographic scales: local, national, and global. Imagine, for instance, riding buses through the streets of San Salvador with two deportees from 18th Street territory in Pico-Union. The stories of these young men and of the geography of their everyday lives in Los Angeles, captured by my tape recorder, are filled with the booming sounds of the street life in San Salvador. Back in Los Angeles, I would drive through Pico-Union and its surrounding *barrios* trying to relocate these narratives in their original geographies of action. Echo Park Lake and its gang-graffiti-covered walls by now had become enlivened by Weasel’s stories and disturbed by his absence. As I drove by MacArthur Park, the Hotel California, the corner of Berendo and Eighth, Belmont High, the Jack in the Box, pieces of these narratives would flash into consciousness: This must have been where Gato’s friend was shot, this is where Ringo lived, that’s where Gato’s father’s necklace was stolen, and that’s where Weasel was last picked up. Los Angeles’s urban landscape became saturated with the narratives of these people whom I had encountered in El Salvador, and—even more hauntingly—by those who had since died in the streets of San Salvador. I felt this not just as time warp but also as space warp—the “time-space compression” of simultaneity.²⁵

Like nationalism, transnationalism is equally beholden to and built upon what Benedict Anderson terms a grammar of simultaneity.²⁶ In Gato’s and Weasel’s transnational narratives, Los Angeles and San Salvador have been

compressed into the same field of view, and the chronotope (time and space) of the Latino immigrant *barrio* and the Latin American *barrio popular* now overlap in crucial ways—not only from the privileged perspective of the traveling ethnographer, but from the vantage of Salvadoran immigrants themselves. Indeed, these narratives of forcible return do not simply function as haunting memories or as residues of past lives. They do more than refer back to or recollect their *barrios* in Los Angeles. Banished though these fools may be from the kingdom, they remain linked to that landscape through, among other things, ongoing ties with family—be they actual or fictive kin.

Take for instance Doña Ofelia, who lives in a one-room apartment in the Pico-Union district. I first went to visit Ofelia at the urging of her son Pajaro, a deported member of the MS gang. Pajaro had asked me to look his mother up upon my return to Los Angeles from El Salvador. During our first meeting, Doña Ofelia and I talked as she readied herself for her evening janitorial shift in one of Century City's towering glass executive suites. When our conversation turned to Pajaro, she began to cry, "He can never come back, and now, I cannot go back to El Salvador to retire as I had planned, because I must work to support him there." Ofelia's was just one of many a mournful tale I heard from mothers, who, separated from their children once by civil war, were reunited in Los Angeles only to be separated once again, this time through the forced repatriation of those same children.

Every three weeks or so, Doña Ofelia sets out from her apartment to catch the bus at Pico and Union bound for a neighborhood close to the University of Southern California in South Central Los Angeles. On her way to the bus stop, she traverses a streetscape littered with signs of Central American and Mexican diasporas—the *pupuserias* (restaurants of typical Salvadoran fare), street vendors selling green mango with lime and chile, and the *botanica* windows filled with plaster of paris figurines of saints popular to Central Americans. She continues past Transportes Salvadoreños and Cuscatleco Travel and an array of other delivery and travel services that transport people, goods, money, documents, and letters back and forth along those now well-worn travel routes between Los Angeles, Mexico, and Central America. Doña Ofelia is herself on her way to drop off clothing and money with a personal courier for her deported son. The courier, Doña Leti, who travels back and forth between Los Angeles and cities and towns in El Salvador, navigates this transnational space for those Salvadoran immigrants who cannot themselves travel, but who must find a means to maintain a transnational household.²⁷

Deported gang youth are after all the children of immigrant parents, who toil in service to global capitalism as janitors, piece workers in the garment

industry, cooks, nannies, gardeners, and day laborers and sometimes against its grain as longtime community organizers and labor activists. Their brothers and sisters—often college students, police officers, or schoolteachers—might well be lauded as exemplars of successful incorporation into the nation-state and its institutions. The banishment of gang-affiliated youth from the United States thus stands in contrast, but in relationship to, their parents' and siblings' naturalization as U.S. citizens. Gang-affiliated young adults also leave U.S.-born children, wives, and girlfriends behind. Moreover, many of these deportees, fearing Gato's fate, reenter the United States illegally even though they risk reimprisonment followed by deportation if caught.²⁸ Far beyond this literal return of the repressed—the illegal reentry of those excluded from the nation—the absence of the deportee is a strongly felt presence in the neighborhood. Deported gang youth remain an integral part of the “structure of feeling”²⁹ of the *barrio*, of its internal relations and the everyday practices of its residents.

Toward Transnational Urban Studies

The experiences of forced transnationality presented here have important implications for urban research and point to the need for transnational urban studies as a new domain for research. Clearly, I am not arguing for the declining salience of the nation-state at this juncture in globalization. I am, however, suggesting that the urban scale regains the former importance attributed to the city-state before the rise of the modern nation-state in the exercise of social regulation and the formation of new subjectivities. It is, after all, in the city and through the fabric of its built environment—its streets, intersections, sidewalks, commercial strip malls, parks, and overcrowded apartment buildings—that the boundaries of the nation-state are both regulated and exceeded. The contentious border between the United States and Latin America thus extends into the city and into its immigrant neighborhoods, where it is policed and transgressed. Moreover, a local urban scale of analysis allows us to see that “transnational practices do not take place in an imaginary [deterritorialized or utopian] third space” but are situated in and between specific localities³⁰—in this case, between the immigrant *barrios* of Los Angeles and the *barrios populares* in San Salvador. Yet the introduction of the city as a new scale for the analysis of the effects of globalization does not simply serve to reassert the geopolitical scale of the nation.³¹ Rather the city, Los Angeles, marks a crucial space of conjunctions and disjunctions between local, national, and global spheres of action and experience.

The experiences of deported Salvadoran immigrant gang youth under consideration here demonstrate the analytical power both transnational and urban studies stand to gain from a mutual engagement with each other, and how both scales of analysis are essential to our understanding of the contemporary form of the nation-state. On the one hand, these stories of forced repatriation and the ongoing criminalization of Salvadoran immigration demonstrate how a transnational perspective can enrich the traditional research domains of urban poverty, racial segregation, ethnic and racial identity formation, and urban youth cultures. On the other hand, they show us that an urban-scale of analysis is essential in our work to unravel the human consequences of globalization.³² Finally, they reveal that efforts to reassert national sovereignty through zero tolerance policing strategies only, and most ironically, reproduce transnational flows and formations. The complex flows and the multiple geopolitical scales of analysis at work in the urban *barrio* make it impossible to engage with the cultural politics of one side of this social field (Los Angeles) without *simultaneously* accounting for those at play on the other side (San Salvador). Within these politics of simultaneity, the immigrant *barrio* in the north—linked inextricably to those *barrios populares* in the south—serves as a key ethnographic site through which to view the lived and felt effects of urban restructuring as it combines with efforts to manage the dialectical pressures of globalization and nationalism.

Notes

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1. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 89.
2. See James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, “Cities and Citizenship,” *Public Culture* 8.2 (1996): 188–89.
3. For a discussion of the microphysics of policing the space of the *barrio* at the street level, see Elana Zilberg, “A Troubled Corner: The Ruined and Rebuilt Environment of a Central American *Barrio* in Post-Rodney King Riot Los Angeles,” *City and Society* IVX.2 (2002): 31–55.

4. Peter Boyer "Bad Cops," *New Yorker*, May 2001, 71.
5. This quote is excerpted from "Radio Diaries," *This American Life*, National Public Radio (May 21, 1999). The show was produced by Joe Richman and narrated by José Huezto Soriano (AKA Weasel).
6. *Ibid.*
7. By the spatial logic of these cultural politics, I am referring to those politics surrounding the production, representation, use of, and arguments over the space of the *barrio*. My work here draws upon the fruitful and contemporary marriage between geography and anthropology (see A. Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7.1 [1992]: 7–23), Henri LeFebvre's notion of the production of space (see Henri LeFebvre, *The Social Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994], 36–46), and a number of urbanists who focus on Los Angeles's built environment (Margaret Crawford, introduction to *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. J. Chase, M. Crawford, and J. Kaliski [New York: Monacelli Press, 1999]; Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* [London: Verso, 2000]; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995]; E. W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* [London: Verso, 1989]).
8. For a discussion of the dialectical tension between the *barrio* as a community enabling and disabling space, see Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 1–18.
9. While mine is hardly a linguistic study, I have chosen not to "clean up" the transcription of Gato's English in order to leave these traces in his speech.
10. In El Salvador, the tattoo is taken as a sign of criminality. Those bearing tattoos can be barred from attending school. It has been used as grounds for failing to provide timely medical attention to the wounded in hospital emergency rooms, resulting in unnecessary deaths from bleeding. The discrimination can be so fierce that even the most innocuous tattoos can be misconstrued. For instance, one deportee I knew used to wrap a bandage up the length of his arm before he left for classes in a private college. This, he explained to me, was to avoid conflict with the local gangs and the police and to enable him to enter the college. His tattoo, the source of so much discrimination and danger, was simply the name of his youngest daughter, who lived in Los Angeles. He had tattooed her name into his arm so that "she would always be close" to him. Some gang members try to remove their tattoos, but when I was last in El Salvador, there was still only one laser tattoo removal machine in the whole country, and it was common to be badly scarred and burned by the cruder tattoo removal systems available.
11. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 62.
12. *Ibid.*, 89–92.
13. See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960).
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Jameson, "Postmodernism," 89.
16. These U.S.-style zero tolerance policing tactics have, alongside youth gangs, also been successfully exported to El Salvador. In July 2003, the then Salvadoran president, Francisco Flores, launched a "tropicalized" version of U.S. gang abatement strategies in the form of *El Plan Mano Dura* (the Firm Fist/Strong Hand Plan).
17. See José Limón, *Dancing with the Devil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 106–7.
18. See Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* (spring 1991): 8–23.
19. Jameson, 91.
20. See José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America, Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 3–4.
21. For a discussion of borderlands theory, see, among others, Robert Alvarez, "The Mexican–U.S. Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 447–70; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza=La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Michael Kearney, "Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire" in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 4.1 (1991): 52–73; Américo Paredes, "With a Pistol in His Hands": *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958); and José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
22. See Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America*.
23. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 66.

24. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: CCCS, University of Birmingham, 1983).
25. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Blackwell, 1989).
26. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).
27. Elana Zilberg, "La Viajera: The Globalization of Face-to-Face Communication across Borders" (presented at the International Communications Association 2003 annual conference, "Communications in Borderlands," San Diego, California, May 23–27, 2003).
28. These return gang members are emerging as a new, albeit controversial, refugee class. See Elana Zilberg, "Traveling Bodies, Traveling Policies: A Cultural Politics of the Forced Repatriation of Salvadoran Immigrant Youth in Post–Civil War El Salvador" (presented to the Youth, Globalization, and the Law project, Social Science Research Council, New York, September 18–19, 2003).
29. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.
30. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, "The Locations of Transnationalism," in *Transnationalism from Below*, ed. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith (London: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 11. For a discussion of third space as a utopian space of liberation, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Edward Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996). Clearly, the third space under consideration in this article is hardly utopian.
31. Holston and Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship," 189.
32. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (London: Verso, 1998).