CYCLICAL PRODUCTIONS OF GANG AESTHETICIZATION;
DOMINANT AND COUNTER-RHE TORICS SURROUNDING THE MARA
SALVATRUCHA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis approaches the field of Working Class Studies by analyzing the multiple aesthetic forms of the Salvadoran gang, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). To do so, this argument is divided into two sections. First, I analyze the way specific films and memoirs formulate the popularized reception of the MS-13 by echoing middle-class values (Rodriguez, Anders, Fukunaga). The second section of this thesis looks to the gang’s development of counter-narratives as a response to these dominant narratives. Through disidentification of the body, language, and homeland, the MS-13 negotiates predetermined class boundaries and enters the mainstream view. How is cultural capital defined through formulaic representations? How do dominant narratives about the MS-13 follow a history of working-class symbolic capital? What does it mean to willingly embody themes of savagery, excess, tastelessness, and the unmodern? Ultimately, the MS-13 demonstrates an unwillingness to perform conciliatory productions of labor for the Latino body within a hypercapitalist structure. By looking at these cyclical productions, we may better understand the classed and racialized politics of representation in popular U.S. culture.

Keywords: Working Class, Latino, Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13, disidentification
The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to Ivy Ung, Pechetes, and Pamela Fox.

Many thanks,
Lindsey Cienfuegos
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INTRODUCTION
“BUT THEY DON’T ACTUALLY WORK”: THE MARA NATION AND THE WORKING-CLASS CRIMINAL

After a week in El Salvador, my uncle took me aside and asked me about Jorge-town. I giggled, smugly letting him know it was actually pronounced “George-town,” and he responded with a playful wink. And maybe it was this silence that pushed me to keep speaking, but as I looked down at the table and rolled the mangoes underneath my sweaty palms, I told him, “My research is all about the mareros.”

His playfulness fell flat, and he didn’t respond. But it made sense--because how can someone respond to that? The Mara Salvatrucha had changed his life. He wasn’t allowed on the street anymore to light fireworks with his son, he couldn’t take walks to get an horchata on a hot day, and the marks on his walls told a community that the house into which he had invested his life was really owned by someone else. And there I was, glorifying the group by recognizing its existence and incorporating it into the larger academic conversation of Jorge-town. “Feo,” he eventually told me, and began to walk away. “Feo la situación.”

While it certainly shocked me to hear this from a family member, this sort of reaction was something I had grown used to as I told my peers in English Literature about this project. They would tilt their heads in confusion, asking questions about my primary sources and about how the MS-13 and the working class could possibly be related. It was difficult to prove that tattoos, rap music, and graffiti were a valid rhetorical form, especially when I wanted to include the gang in the same conversation as the more vague “immigrant working-poor.” This also angered the people in my life who struggled to make ends meet, who argued that the MS does something, but it shouldn’t be considered “work.” They reminded me that the MS rob and ruin
the lives of those who do work. Needless to say, I struggled to define the intervention I wanted to make into working-class studies. But this struggle is an essential aspect of my project as a whole. Why isn’t the MS-13 considered working class? Why aren’t there more stories of gangs in popular forms of media and literature? And what does this say about the state of inclusive scholarship that focuses on marginal identities? Most importantly, can a criminal be working class?

It is my belief that the humanities must reassess the word “transgressive” and its attachment to people, places, and politics. This summer, I taught at-risk youth who had recently immigrated to the United States from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. My students were reluctant to discuss the difficult topics associated with mass migration, hyper-capitalism, and the inescapability of globalized languages and forms. Although perhaps unintentional, this reluctance illustrates that the rhetorical forms of the MS-13 are not equally valid as canonical texts. As new students arrive in the classroom, they quickly learn what can and cannot be written and spoken about. After weeks of government-funded activities to build community-based learning styles, I asked the students to free-write about their experiences in the U.S., about what had surprised them the most. I explained that if they didn’t feel comfortable writing about this, that was fine too. Maria, a 15-year old, raised her hand and told me she learned in school to never write about these things—to never complain. She paused before she proceeded, took a breath, and told me that she had always learned that in the U.S., people are more open to diversity, but in her first week here she went to the White House with her family and someone screamed at her, “Go home!” That surprised her, and writing this story on paper was
unfathomable. Writing makes things real, which is perhaps why my uncle was angry that I was writing the MS into some sort of academic significance.

At the same time I was working with the at-risk youth, I was also teaching upper-class high school students who came to a $5,000 three-week program to learn how to write a personal statement for college applications. When we did a short activity using Junot Diaz’s 2014 *New Yorker* article, “MFA VS. POC,” they squirmed as they read that discussions about race at Cornell, well, don’t happen. After a minute of silence in response to my discussion questions, one brave soul--Martin--finally told me, “This makes us uncomfortable.” I realized in this moment, that although from seemingly different worlds, both Maria and Martin dealt with a sort of grief that had not yet been addressed in their academic worlds. The grief I refer to comes when people are thrust into a system of unfair economics, violence, and race and gender inequities. These students were on an academic path, but their understanding of what subjects were favored in academic writing illustrates that the English classroom is currently adhering to the distinctions between the “good” and “bad” poor that it has historically worked to eradicate.

The field of Working-Class Studies works to change these patterns of grief within the academy, and as a result my project is heavily invested in these theories. In *Hands*, Janet Zandy calls for scholars to negotiate this sort of grief not by “silencing, forgetting, or hiding grief for the comfort level of people” but rather by embracing the difficult task of putting the same feeling “to democratic and cultural use” (40). Maria and Martin’s uncomfortable reaction to learning, thinking, and writing about race and inequality in the U.S. highlights the reason for my gravitating toward the MS-13: It is my idealistic hope that we can begin to address the holes in interdisciplinary studies. Uncomfortable as gangs may make people, their counter-forms of
rhetoric are essential to the disciplines founded on the inclusion of marginal identities. By abandoning these difficult discussions, Martin and Maria learn the ironic fact that the classroom favors certain bodies over others.

In this thesis, I therefore examine the dominant and counter-rhetorics of the MS-13 not to celebrate violence but rather to negotiate the field of Working-Class Studies and, more broadly, interdisciplinary studies. These dual modes of aesthetic representation are consistently propagated by dominant classes that have historically formulated marginalized populations on their own essentialized terms. My hope that this project will prompt discussions of gangs within an academia again draws on Zandy’s postulation that curriculum should be crafted in such a way that “working people are included at the center of study rather than on the margins of a syllabus or not on the page at all” (40). This inserts into the humanities the working bodies that many students and professors do not see in their daily lives. In literature, we know the difference because these texts have an “emphasis on the physicality of work” (Zandy 43). Ultimately, I argue the MS-13’s form of world-making signifies a labor that works with and against the dominant discourses that currently surround gang subjectivity. The unique forms of rhetoric I highlight in this thesis also illustrate the physicality of the labor necessary to identify as a member of the MS. I hope that by addressing this rhetoric, we will come to understand that the issue may not be as simple as being feo (ugly). Rather, I call for an interrogation as to how these forms have been largely ignored because they aren’t doing the right sort of labor and production within the globalized hyper-capitalist system.

This topic goes far beyond the current state of scholarship. Popular media depicts the working-class Latino male and the Latino gang member as two very different figures who
struggle within two very different spheres of culture and thought. The narratives discussed in this thesis represent the working-class Latino experience as it shifts between the globalized city and rural farmland. These experiences are typically gendered: the masculine farmer and the feminine caretaker. Popular novels like *The Rain God* (Islas, 1984) and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Viramontes, 1995), as well as films like *César Chavez* (Luna, 2014), tell a similar story—that of the immigrant experience in the rural barrio as a day laborer. The domestic caretaker lies on the opposite side of the spectrum—the popular film *La Misma Luna/Under the Same Moon* (Riggen 2008) and “Loin du 16e” from *Paris, Je T’aime* (Salles/Thomas 2006) take us out of the barrio and into the globalized city through a very different, generally feminine immigrant, working-poor experience. Admittedly, these are generalizations, with some exceptions. The fictional narrative *Under the Feet of Jesus*, for example, is told from a woman’s perspective. And Héctor Tobar’s 2008 novel, *The Tattooed Soldier*, likewise tells the story of two men struggling between migration and violence in Los Angeles. Although not all stories are the same, the thread of similarity weaves through working-class (Latino) narratives as we currently know them: gangs are not a part of this subjectivity. In the rare instance when a gang member *does* appear in these narratives, they are completely separated from the main characters and do not share in the same sort of labor struggle.

Scholars in a number of disciplines have latched onto these narratives, and rightly so. Likewise, the mainstream popularity of these films and novels attests to the consumption of the narratives involving working-class subjectivity. People want to hear these stories, to think of working-class subjectivity beyond its white male archetype; to attach an economic value to these narratives may be uncomfortable, gruesome, or devastating. While the stories I have mentioned
center on characters of Mexican and Central American nationality, I also recognize the term “Latino working class” encapsulates multiple experiences precisely because of multiple latinidades, locations that are not transparent, and fluid sexualities that stray far beyond the binary. The inclusion of gangs within these disciplinary fields therefore complicates the current understanding not only of Working-Class Studies but also of Latina/o and Ethnic Studies. I am not trying to discredit these stories, the narrative forms they come in, or the scholarship associated with such bodies of work. But by focusing only on these stories, we refuse to analyze a darker history and ignore the unhappy endings that are very real within the conversation of latinidad. By looking to the expressive culture associated with the Mara Salvatrucha, we may begin to create a newer Working-Class Studies, one that opens the discussion by paying “attention to language and images as well as economic and social structures” (Linkon/Russo 11). It is not the complete answer to a more inclusive understanding of working-class subjectivity, but rather a step in thinking about different marginal identities and the languages and images they use to insert themselves into the mainstream culture.

My analysis of the MS-13’s expressive culture pushes me towards the work of Ralph Cintrón. The forms of rhetoric associated with gangs are nontraditional, and in “Gates Locked,” Cintrón asserts “the body can “speak” rhetorically, thereby displaying the thought systems that a person identifies with and (implicitly or explicitly) “argues” for (6). I contend that tattoos, graffiti, and rap formulate a certain argument by MS members, allowing them to enter popular discourses, mainstream media, and the profit-based marketplace while simultaneously evading normalized labor and identity practices. By focusing on the body, space, and performance as a form of argument simultaneously working in and against the popular narrative, I hope to
highlight how certain bodies are formulated amid “transgressive” working-class representative politics.

Furthermore, my understanding of tattoos and graffiti is informed by Cintrón’s argument in that “rhetorical analysis need not be about famous speeches and/or the written word. Indeed, it need not be about the discursive at all, and should also include the non-discursive and the performative” (6). These non-discursive forms of rhetoric are important precisely because they are non-discursive. While tattoos and graffiti quite literally illustrate their way into mainstream society, rhetorical analysis seems to steer away from these complicated forms. Rap is likewise a similar form of wholly performative rhetoric. Together, these forms mirror Fiona Devine’s reconfiguration of the idea of narrative in Rethinking Class. Narratives, she explains, arrive “at a specific point in time and space [and are] able to make sense and articulate their placement in the social order of things. This however, also means the recognition of the narrative as an action, as a performance” (Devine 43). The narratives I explore in this thesis articulate an aggressive insertion into the larger society but are often unrecognized by the rhetorical analyses in the discipline of English Literature. Ultimately, because MS-13 subjectivity expresses itself in mixed media, this study is influenced by cultural studies projects that also sift through public and literary discourses to explore the politics of our present day (Cintrón xi). While I read the body and space as text and rap as a narrative of performance, these seemingly differing forms turn out to be rather similar. They each work toward inserting the MS-13 into the public eye and are popularized through dominant discourses of fear, infiltration, and anti-immigration feeling.

In order to answer the difficult questions I have raised thus far, this thesis will move between two contradictory forms of identity. The first is nationality. As the MS-13 is produced
and consumed through dominant forms of discourse, we witness the inevitable growth of what many news outlets call the “Mara Nation.” This form of identification is transparent—when you’re a member of the MS-13, everyone knows. Furthermore, the Mara Nation is a sort of identity imposed on the gang through dominant forms like the documentary, the novel, or the news article, all of which are about the MS-13, rather than by the MS-13.

My understanding of nationality derives from Patrick Colm Hogan’s aptly titled book, *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Identity, and Cognitive Science*. He splits nationality into five distinct characteristics: salience, opposability, functionality, durability, and affectivity. While the Mara Nation is by no means a physical nation that is recognized within the globalized structures of power, the production of the MS-13 through popular media outlets does indeed follow this pattern of nation-making. This is a nationality that is neither Salvadoran nor American, but has its own transgressive form of identity that creates traditions, mores, and patriotism and is feared by those working toward upward economic movement through more traditional forms of labor. My archive of Latino gang aestheticization illustrates the struggle in the representation of a transparent nationality. As I point out in Chapter One, the Latino gang member becomes an oversimplified form with distinct traits and places—gang members always live in Echo Park, they always have tattoos, they are proudly Mexican or Salvadoran, etc.

And while these forms generally intend to eradicate gang membership, they ironically only intensify gang identity as the Mara Salvatrucha works its way into mainstream view. Thus, the “Mara Nation” in this thesis is viewed as a dominant discourse that creates a distinct identity for a group of people who cannot accurately be defined under such essentialized terms. While
these outlets work to formulate an easily recognizable identity through the lens of nationality, it comes with a number of obvious gray areas.

The second aspect of this thesis therefore looks to the opposite end of the spectrum through disidentification. I argue that the MS-13 responds to dominant discourses through complete non-transparency. In Chapter Two, I explore the counter-rhetorics by gang members, and how tattoos, graffiti and rap function together to muddle distinct identities among cultures, languages, spaces, and people. Disidentity is a form of world-making that accepts what is not easily defined with open arms and, importantly, provides an outlet for gang members to enter dominant discourses. Here, I loosely draw upon José Muñoz’s Queer of Color criticism in Disidentifications. Muñoz defines disidentity in many different ways, and by setting his argument this way, readers are never given a concrete definition of his understanding of the term. Because there are so many ways to grasp this complex concept, what may initially appear as a theory invested solely in queer theory is actually a form that directly illustrates the politics of counter-rhetorics for Latino gangs. For the MS-13, disidentification does not buckle “under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation),” but rather should here be thought of as a process working in and against these dominant ideologies “to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (12). What I call counter-rhetorics functions as this very labor towards structural change as the MS-13 quite literally paints a recognizable space in the larger society. Muñoz also adds that disidentification “can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production” (25). This idea is essential to my argument as a whole: transparent nationality and multi-definitional
disidentity must work together, and the opposition they create in this context sets up the necessary friction for the cyclical pattern to allow both dominant and counter discourses to evolve through history.

The structural and literal violence the MS-13 enact on mainstream society also shows how this form of identification is “not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist past if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere” (Muñoz 5). Without a clear language and culture (and often without a clear, individualized identity), this group identity is overpowered through the hostile forms of dominant discourses. Nevertheless, as Muñoz points out, “a position such as disidentification is open to the charge that it is merely an apolitical sidestepping, trying to avoid the trap of assimilating or adhering to different separatist or nationalist ideologies” (18). I would like to again emphasize that although the MS-13’s disidentificatory politics do not assimilate to dominant forms of discourse, they also, and perhaps more importantly, are never completely separate from these discourses.

An example of this may be through higher sovereign powers and migratory patterns beyond MS-13’s control. This is all part of a longer history that can be identified as beginning with the Salvadoran civil war, which set the stage for an intensely complex migration. Through its bloody twelve-year life, the war produced a rhetoric that parallels the coverage of the “international gang crisis” today. During this time, Salvadoran children, almost always from rural towns, were taken from their homes by militant groups and taught how to use weaponry. Elana Zilberg in Space of Detention, connects San Salvador and Los Angeles, noting that “boys
no more than twelve years old were forcibly conscripted into the army” during this time (28). Once indoctrinated into military order, they “learned to make Molotov cocktails, to kill and to torture” (28). This violence would follow the young men to Los Angeles in the years to come.

Media coverage of the Salvadoran civil war centered on the savagery practiced by both guerrilla and conservative groups. Moreover, the photographs that depicted the war focused primarily on children with AK-47s in their hands, and the weaponry of choice became a major aspect of the overall discourse around the war. The focus was not on the age of the children or on the war itself but on the use of a technologically advanced weapon seemingly unknown to the rural poor. The beginning section of this thesis is invested in this larger history. The trope of savagery that formed during the civil war trickles into the contemporary rhetoric used to discuss the MS-13.

Throughout the war, children fled to the United States, making contemporary Los Angeles the second most populated region of Salvadoran people next to San Salvador. This mass migratory movement shook up the already-dwindling American suburbs, and the media shifted its focus from the weaponry of the war to the “Salvadoran refugee crisis in Los Angeles” (29). Rhetoric around this time focused on an invasion of sorts. In both El Salvador and the United States, the popular media constructed the Salvadoran body as both invasive to the middle-class lifestyle and prone to unbelievable amounts of violence. Salvadoran youth were thus rejected by both their homeland and their supposed safe haven. This time period is what scholar Arturo Arias defines as a double-edged sword, as Salvadoran refugees “not only had to cope with the trauma of dead relatives or villages razed in their home countries, but now they also had to deal with survival in near-impossible economic conditions in an environment totally different from the one
they left behind” (Arias 179). On both sides of the border, the Salvadoran body was constructed as criminal. This sets the stage for the rise of the Mara Nation and of disidentification, in that a large group of Latino migrants found themselves between physical spaces, languages, and most importantly arrived in the U.S. with a clouded understanding of how to define their own transparent nationality. But this would contrast with the rhetoric coming from the U.S. media, which specified all Central American immigrants as coming from El Salvador, and typecast them as looters, Spanish speakers, and all living in Los Angeles.

The Rodney King verdict in 1992 intensified this construction. During the L.A. riots, the United States was torn by racial tension, and migrant Latinos were filmed as taking advantage of what was seemingly a very black-and-white issue. Film crews focused on Latinos breaking into stores, and holding big-screen televisions as they ran down the street. Rhetoric once again shifted--from the refugee crisis to the more ominous “inner-city crisis,” as the inner-city Central American transitioned seemingly overnight from the migrant to the looter. In the end, 61 percent of the looters arrested were Latino. News coverage from both liberal and conservative parties depicted “Latino immigrants as a threat to American national sovereignty” (Zilberg 61). Criminality was now being televised live, and middle-class America witnessed from the comfort of their living rooms “purely criminal opportunists taking advantage of black rage to rob American businesses” (63). This importantly sliced the notion of “labor” in half--there was the right sort of labor (i.e., business owners), and the wrong sort of labor (i.e., looters). The wrong sort of laborer also became a racialized body that threatened American upward economic mobility by unabashedly stealing from small (and big) business owners.
According to investigative journalist Ana Araña, the riots signified a pivotal shift in the trajectory of gangs, as California then implemented strict anti-gang laws, thus increasing the overall number of people incarcerated. If there wasn’t a confused understanding already, during this time the cultural differences between “refugee” and “criminal” imploded. After the rise of mass incarceration, Clinton-era legislation created the “three strikes and you’re out” law (Araña 100). This meant that after people went to prison three times, they would then be deported to their country of origin. The three-strikes laws in the U.S. were enacted at the same moment as the Mano Dura (“heavy hand”) form of politics was taking hold in Salvador. As the prison system was transformed into a site of constant movement and migration, deportation only intensified this experience. Discourses surrounding the Latino looter made clear this was a Salvadoran/American issue, and further located the place of occurrence as strictly between San Salvador and Los Angeles.

This essentialized the criminal body through simplified binaries. But the history of the migratory movements both within and outside the United States tells a very different story. Latin Americans during this time were migrating from many nations in addition to El Salvador, including Mexico, Guatemala, Panama, and Nicaragua. Of course, many Salvadoran immigrants moved to Los Angeles, but many others went to Washington D.C., Dallas, and Nashville. At this point, the Mara Salvatrucha existed, but it was then small and unthreatening within the larger context of inner-city gangs. The name Mara Salvatrucha is difficult to translate and thus brings me to the parallel points of identification in this thesis. The MS-13 embraced the sticky understandings between multiple identities to provide the group with an opportunity to be noticed within the dominant culture that had historically rejected it. In the context of Salvadoran
immigrant youth, Zilberg perfectly describes the diasporic group as “banished” from the United States, only later “returned ‘home’ to a place, where, in their memory, they have never been” (Zilberg 761). I am interested in the gray area of nationality and the “homeland.” While popular media outlets formulate the group of men as the Mara Nation, the gang’s shifting nationalities ironically allow them to enter popular rhetoric.

To fully understand what I mean by this, it is worth taking a look at Zilberg’s interview with Weasel, a gang member who traveled between Los Angeles and San Salvador and proudly identified as an MS member. By covering his body in tattoos, speaking a certain language, and wearing certain clothes, Weasel “refashions himself as the Martian, the alien he is made to feel by the stares, reactions, and disapproval of the people around him” (769). Disidentification works in two distinct ways by playing between self and imposed identification: Weasel functions as a double alien once deported to El Salvador—an “other” through his literal tattoos, and an “other” through his language and culture when sent “back” to a country that was never his own. I am interested in the deliberate act of “refashioning” oneself as the Other. As the Martian, Weasel fits into no specific dominant identificatory group and may therefore travel freely among news media outlets, film, literature, and general public fascination. Although his story is not told in his own words, Weasel’s personal form of rhetoric is present within these dominant forms.

This complication becomes easier to explore if we return to disidentification and understand it as a reaction against the “phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4). As a criminal, always blocked from normative citizenship through these Mano Dura policies, with no stable place of origin, Weasel incorporates disidentification into his
own politics of identity to traverse Los Angeles and enter the classed spaces of suburban living rooms. This majoritarian sphere reacts with stares and disapproval. While Weasel may aggressively enter as a normative citizen through collective visibility, his form of disidentification and rejection of individual subjectivity is not liberating in the Muñozian sense. In fact, Weasel’s form of world-making is entirely alienated, and this alienation is a reflection of the very alienation pushed upon him, and a counter-rhetoric thus sprouts from the way Weasel presents and aestheticizes his body.

Thus the policies, spaces, and identities formed from 1994 until what we may consider contemporary gang formation were in constant transition, remediation, and banishment. Deportation then led the men during this time to be what Arturo Arias describes as “tattooed aliens” (182). He explains:

> When we look at the phenomenon of Central American-Americans captured in the United States and deported to their alleged country of origin, where they are perceived as tattooed aliens--that is, doubly alien, alien in the sense of being foreigners to the nation-state that does not recognize their blood tie to it, their belongingness to their particular sovereign space, and aliens in the sci-fi sense of appearing to be a different species all together with their innumerable tattoos, postmodern space travelers of a sort--what is global, and who is, indeed, local? (Arias 182).

Highlighting yet another imploded binary, mass incarceration and deportation confused definitions between the global and the local, and yet again points us to my interpretation of Muñoz’s disidentificatory politics. This thesis will work to highlight how gang members may
take this form for their own expressive culture in order to react with and against the out-group forms of identity-making.

On the final note of disidentity within the historic context, Arias clarifies “identity had already become somewhat entangled in the politics of Latino identity in Southern California. Some Central Americans were ‘acting Mexican,’ namely, identifying with that internalized and idealized image, a stereotype, of what Mexicans in the area were… but whereas a few ‘crossed over,’ many more were left in limbo of no longer being Central American but not being accepted by Mexicans either” (Arias 180). As Central American men in Los Angeles traversed the global and the local, Mexican and Central American, their identities became entirely fraught. This would create the contradictory element of the dominant discourse which positioned them within singular identifications.

All of this is part of a much larger history of colonialism and directly coincides with Marxist understandings of the undivided subject. In her influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak notes the ideology of the undivided subject is problematic for marginalized communities. *Mareros* reflect this tension by rejecting both their Salvadoran and U.S. classed values in order to create their own set of values that defy traditional notions of nationality. This form of world-making thus embraces the identities that were not coherent or continuous. Just like the scholarship surrounding subaltern identity, the MS-13 do not seem to “fit” any particular category.

Sensationalized narrative forms therefore permit the Mara Salvatrucha to enter mainstream culture through a rhetoric of fear that gang life is infiltrating middle-class America. Memoirs like Luis Rodriguez’s *Always Running* and films like Alison Anders’ *Mi Vida Loca* set a pattern of
circulation and mark the traits necessary in order for these stories to sell. And to an extent, these dominant media narratives are not completely off. The MS-13 is indeed growing rapidly, and as a result spreading beyond major urban landscapes and into American (and Salvadoran) suburbs, and the fear that stems from these communities is worthy of note. However, this fear is situated in a realm of specific patterns and tropes that ironically (re)create the very groups they hope to eradicate.

The second section of this thesis approaches the gang’s counter-voice within the context of this master narrative. While these narratives obsess over forms like tattoos and graffiti, it is the depiction of these very forms that allow the members of MS-13 to tell their own stories within these formulaic representations. This is my attempt at developing Linkon and Russo’s idea of a “new” Working-Class Studies, which must go beyond traditional representations by “collecting and studying representations that capture the voices of working-class people, such as oral histories, songs, poems, and personal narratives” (Linkon/Russo 11). In this section I am interested in how rap, tattoos and graffiti do not necessarily diverge from the mainstream construction of the MS-13 but at the same time enter the dominant rhetoric on the gang’s own terms.

Ultimately, I hope this research questions the natural body, distinguishes the clashes between popular narrative forms of the Mara Salvatrucha as opposed to the narratives by the Mara Salvatrucha, and explores the value of counter-narratives. Popular culture’s lack of concern for gang-related death reflects a lack of respect, and so we should look at the ways in which the maras attempt to gain the respect they lack, and how these forms circulate.
Many marginalized bodies in the U.S. are marginalized precisely because of their racialized class status, which brings me to the end of my story with my uncle, as I think it may help point us in the right direction. As he walked away from me, I caught his shoulder and demanded an explanation. I couldn’t handle something as simple as the mere notion that gangs are feo. He shrugged, asking me, “Why don’t you want to write about the good Salvadorans? What about the ones who go to Gringolandia for work? The ones who haven’t seen their families in years? You should write about the ones who are doing things right.” I wanted to open my mouth and tell him it was much more complicated than good versus bad. But in the end, maybe it really is that simple.

The Mara Salvatrucha is formulated as the wrong sort of working poor, opening the door to rhetoric highlighting the good sort of working poor. Gang aesthetics are therefore shoved off to the side, ignored or misrepresented by creative interpretations and journalistic endeavors. To return to Spivak, she explains that in current scholarship there are two sorts of representations of subaltern/marginal identities that rarely work together. One is the problematic rhetoric of those that “speak for” a marginalized group of people. The second form of representation is through art and philosophy, which explicitly interpret and represent the members of the subaltern community through their own understanding. That is, practitioners of art and philosophy are not speaking for these groups of people, but rather creating their own understanding of these groups (Spivak 28). I agree with Spivak’s statement that “radical practice should attend to this double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire” (Spivak 31). I am interested in exploring the totalizing concepts of power and desire through the particular lens of popular media, literature, and art, with the aim
in understanding how the Mara Salvatrucha have come to be understood in contemporary popular culture. But this is a tricky project, as it may disregard other, equally important subaltern Latino identities. I hope this project pushes us to consider aesthetic forms of world-making as both relevant and important by understanding that they cannot be differentiated from literary and cinematic narratives involving other subaltern groups of people.
CHAPTER ONE
“THEY DID WHAT?”:
CONSUMPTION AND CIRCULATION OF LATINO GANG IDENTITY

What to do with those whom society cannot accommodate? Criminalize them. Outlaw their actions and creations. Declare them the enemy, then wage war. Emphasize the differences - the shade of skin, the accent in the speech or manner of clothes. Like the scapegoat of the Bible place society's ills on them, then “stone them” in absolution. It's convenient. It’s logical. It doesn't work.”

-Luis Rodriguez, Always Running

In 1994, Sony Pictures Classics released Mi Vida Loca, My Crazy Life, the story of young Mexican-American women living in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. By no means a grand success in the box office, it was the debut film for both Salma Hayek and Jason Lee, and put them on the radar for a successful career to come. An hour-and-a-half in length, Mi Vida Loca was innovative in that it shifts between multiple perspectives and is a rare illustration of the female perspective in male-dominated gang life. The director, Allison Anders, did her best to paint a portrait of inner-city gang life with no inherent bias.

The release of the film came a year after the publication of Luis Rodriguez’s incredibly successful memoir, Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A., which tells his story of impoverished life in Los Angeles, the gang that cared for him, and his ultimate escape from that very gang. Although a member of the Mexican-Kings, Rodriguez makes a point throughout his memoir that the specific gang he joined was insignificant compared to the specific place he inhabited. Gangs were in all neighborhoods of Los Angeles, and had he lived in a different
neighborhood, he would have been in a different gang. This would be the beginning of a pattern of Latin American gangs that are portrayed through traditional forms—the specifics no longer mattered within the discussion. All Latin American gangs were enclosed within a box of ‘Latin American,’ and all became associated with Los Angeles.

The film and memoir coincided with the large-scale media consumption of the criminal body trope following the historic Rodney King trials. African-American rap during this time had found a place within the white middle-class house because of the rise of Music Television culture that popularized films and music like that of Boyz N The Hood, and Tupac Shakur, which highlighted the dangers that working-class persons of color bring to an urban area. Suburban America was provided with a glimpse in understanding the foreign dangers of the inner-city, and such narratives became an exoticized form of living from which the suburbs would seemingly always remain separate.

This popularization of course follows a much larger repurposing of working-class narratives. In Rethinking Class, Fiona Devine argues that middle-class audiences form their own identity through a resentment of the working-class. She explains that one critical feature of resentment discourse is rooted in its dependence on simulation, and as a result “the middle-class comes to ‘know’ its inner-city other through an imposed system of infinitely repeatable substitutions and proxies: census tracts, crime statistics, tabloid newspapers and television programmes” (Devine 65). Thus, while Always Running and Mi Vida Loca importantly inserted a Latino presence among the rising gangster culture through a shift in the historical trajectory from the ‘black ghetto body’ to the ‘violent Latino body,’ these stories also became a part of a larger pattern for middle-class consumption that was ultimately popularized through a process of
othering. These narratives gave rise to the complex and often contradictory history of the conceptualization of the Latino gangster in literature, film, and journalism.

My contention here is that gang-based Latino narratives, beginning with what emerged in the early 1990s until today, have popularized and strengthened in-group membership of the Mara Salvatrucha. The stories that confront, expose, and highlight Latino gang-subjectivity are almost always “out-group” interpretations that morph through time into the essentialized identity of all Latino gangs. This chapter will therefore attempt to tackle the paradox that arises between generalized “Latino gangs” and the specific Mara Salvatrucha. If these multiple forms are connected in any way, it would be through the overtly sensationalized Latino criminal.

Racial politics of representation will therefore inform this chapter, but they are also not my main focus. “Latino criminal” has morphed through contemporary history into a generalized gang affiliated body, which then translates into the equally problematic “authentic” criminal body. In her introduction to an anthology of contemporary Latino media, Arlene Dávila explores the reasons that certain “inequalities are sustained and reproduced” and thus widen a gap for a more diverse form of latinidad to access the mainstream and “Latino” oriented mediascapes (Dávila 9). While Latinos in the media are rare, they are generally cast in acting parts as the criminal, and these criminals are quite often associated with gang membership. These mediascapes also contribute to a process of othering by intentionally gearing these stories to both the mainstream and productions made specifically for Latinx consumption. But in both forms, the Latino body is generally reproduced as a criminal. Furthermore, the current academic conversation of Latino media “revolves around issues of representations and stereotypes,” and while these discussions are important, “this approach does not provide us with the entire story of
what’s happening with Latinos in the media” (11). Dávila’s work to broaden the conversation of Latinos in the media beyond a criminal body helps research, popular rhetoric, and mainstream media outlets interrogate our current understanding of diversity. However, I believe we should first look more closely into the “neutral themes and formats” that are easily exported and consumed globally in order to intervene in which “countries, regions, actors, writers, and workers get to access these transnationalized media markets and who are shut out” (Dávila 9).

This chapter will weave through a number of mediums that depict the Latino gangster in order to highlight the formulaic pattern in the overall rhetoric surrounding criminal subjectivity, and the murky differences between the Latino gangster and the MS-13 that result from these aestheticizations. By discussing fiction alongside journalistic outlets, I recognize what Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues in The Power in the Story. In his chapter, “Silencing the Past,” he writes of the “inherent ambivalence” of history itself, and that fictional stories are important because they provide a voice for those that do not have a say in their history (2). Thus, I will look to fiction to discuss the controversial topic of gangs because I concur that the socio-historical process of gang formation and our knowledge of that process cannot be separated from fiction because historical narrative is already “one fiction among others” (6). Furthermore, in her analysis of gang memoirs, Josephine Metcalf explains that memoirs are multifaceted, and there is therefore “a need to address the social alongside the cultural, in the aesthetics alongside the commercial” (11). By looking at a number of different sources, my hope is that I reflect the social, cultural, aesthetic, and commercial aspects that work together to form the ways in which MS-13 identity comes to be formed.
This understanding therefore comes from an array of differing, oftentimes contentious, modes that formulate the gang as a Los Angeles-based group that differs from its African American and Korean counterparts through a rhetoric of “savage” violence that is unlike any other gang-related crime that plagues the inner-city. Within these mixed modes of representation, the MS-13 comes to embrace its unique nationalistic form that is neither Salvadoran nor American, but a transparent subjectivity that is based on a threat to the upward economic mobility of the middle-class. However, this transparent subjectivity is entirely paradoxical. The profit-based narratives I highlight here both confuse and sensationalize the Latino body between multiple cultures, kinships, languages, and nationalities. As a result, this chapter will admittedly reflect a tension—the narratives I point out feature Mexican gang members, Salvadoran gang members, and sometimes even more vague Chicano gang members; the languages of my sources weave between English, Spanish, Spanglish, and French; the characters and people are Los Angeles-based, but twist between multiple locations of the globe. Form then follows content, as the narratives also play between fiction and reality. As a result, a hybrid space opens for the Mara Salvatrucha to enter into mainstream view by perpetuating the rhetoric of fear. This space is entirely contradictory, though, because it provides a rhetorical space for the gang to exert a presence amid popular American culture.

Fiction and reality are nearly impossible to distinguish in Mi Vida Loca, and this hybrid space comes to dominate the film and allow the MS-13 to enter mainstream view, even when the film is ironically about Mexican American gangs. Although the director, Allison Anders, worked to create a narrative about gang life without any positive or negative bias towards the characters, such a well-intentioned effort was perhaps the film’s main failure. According to a review from
The New York Times the film ended up “strangely flat.” Caryn James, the reviewer, explains it has “the feel and work that wants to be part documentary and part drama, and has trouble mixing the two elements” (New York Times). In the end, it’s hard to disagree with James’ comment. The film opens with a number of shots around Echo Park, and the first narrator we encounter, Mona, tells us “the white people leave out a lot of stuff” about the history of Echo Park (Anders 00:02:20). Mona, also nicknamed “Sad Girl,” continues to tell viewers that when she first moved to the United States from Mexico, she could not read the signs because they were all in English. As we are shown an image of graffiti, Mona tells us a lot has changed since then, and the opening of the film highlights a tension in language as Mona’s story is told in English, the stores we see are a mix between Spanish and English, and the graffiti that covers these stores are distanced from this language binary. The result is, well, flat. We then see a necklace that dangles from her neck that says, “Mona.” The next shot is of her fingers as someone tattoos the letters “Sad Girl” on each finger. Mona is quite literally defined by unnatural tattoos and necklaces, and the film importantly sets up a contradictory space between competing identity formations as embodied by the characters, languages, the locations of the narrative, and the film itself.

The beginning of Anders’ film sets a paradoxical pattern that will be consistently repeated as gangs are depicted throughout history. First, Mona is neither hero nor villain, and she is not quite an anti-hero either. By pointing this out, I hope to bring to this conversation the question as to why and where exactly Latino gang members begin to get vilified. Second, it reflects what Dávila calls the “continued dominance” of Mexican and Mexican American media (3). This is in no way a negative, but will become important as the (Central American) MS-13 comes to the forefront of popular discourse, and gets hybridized in media interpretations by these
Chicano predecessors. Thirdly, and perhaps most important to this conversation, is the fact that this fictional and artistic rendition of Latino gangs in Los Angeles was received not as an artistic endeavor, but as a way the middle-class could understand a group identity that had historically been exiled from the mainstream view.

While Anders was in no way affiliated with gang membership, many of the actors she cast for the film were women living in the Echo Park neighborhood who played themselves in the film. Because Mi Vida Loca juggled between real and fictional characters, it created a divide that led film critic Roger Ebert to define the film as “romanticize[d]...so that the events of a few square blocks represent the whole world, and one of the consolations of dying young is supposed to be that your home girls will never forget you.” Ebert’s comment demonstrates the difficulty of defining the genre of Mi Vida Loca. Tension arises when “a few square blocks” come to represent the space of gang habitation, and violence thus becomes entirely and wrongfully dependent on location. If this were indeed a fictive film, why then couldn’t Anders romanticize the characters? If this were a documentary, then why does Anders romanticize the violent story of gang membership? The gangsters portrayed in the film were therefore unthreatening—while viewers spoke of this film as though the characters were real (and sometimes they were), they then understood the characters through the lens of the small inner-city space they inhabited, and were therefore contained and unthreatening to the middle-class, predominantly white suburbs. Beverley Skeggs would relate the film to a larger pattern in which aspects of working-class culture “can be assigned a particular exchange-value...So the association of criminality and danger can be re-valued as glamorous, rather than threatening” (Skeggs 98). Narratives of Latino gangs in the 1990s were thus unthreatening for viewers, and heavily consumed despite the
flatness that ironically arrived from these hybrid characters, places, languages, and forms. When the MS-13 would later invade the suburbs, the rhetoric would dramatically shift from this containment to the inner-city to a full-fledged threat to the safer suburbs.

From the opening scene, Anders further paints a portrait specifically for middle-class consumption. Mona speaks directly to viewers, prefacing her story with the eerie “you can’t believe that a lot of the stories we’re about to tell you had something to do with a truck…” (Anders 00:02:50). This statement assumes that Mona’s story will be unbelievable for viewers, and therefore emphasizes the separation between the viewers of the film and the characters within it. However flat, romanticized, and specifically for middle-class circulation, the film nonetheless provides a rhetorical space which both real and fictional gangs can enter and dilute the differences between the two. We see real scenes of graffiti around Echo Park, and are introduced to real people affiliated with gangs. Furthermore, we begin to see the lack of a singular language between characters. However, the fictionalized narrative that is wholly saturated in profit-making likewise forces the characters to embody certain stereotypes associated with working-class culture, like criminality. In the end, Mi Vida Loca, My Crazy Life created a contradictory space in which real gang members could enter not to tell their story, but rather to be present within the middle-class household.

Mi Vida Loca ends violently. Mona tells us that “women use weapons for love” and that the homegirls “can’t count on the boys” for protection. Her final soliloquy ends with a sense of hope through ownership, telling us, “By the time my daughter grows up, Echo Park will belong to her” (Anders 01:27:45). The final scene then shifts to a young child riding a tricycle outside a corner store (Anders 01:28:26). The father and brother, both tan, slender, and brunette, shop
inside. The little girl outside is overweight, light-skinned, and blonde. Eventually, she’s shot, and the film ends just as it began—at a funeral. Mona is portrayed in a limbo between mother and murderer, but because the ending of this film assumes that the younger generation will die off, viewers may infer that Echo Park will never be hers, which evokes much more a sense of pity than fear. This scene not only illustrates an intensified act of violence that surpasses the mere killings between adult gang members, but by showing a child’s death, the film also begins to hint that the innocent are now the victims. Mona’s understanding of English and Spanish and her fraught subjectivity between maternal and violent open a contradictory space within the narrative. Thus, while their story is being told by an outside source, Latino gangs and their counter-forms of rhetoric are nevertheless present through these contradictory spaces.

Furthermore, the child’s skin tone also reveals that these gang-related crimes affect those with lighter skin-tones, and the criminal body becomes separated between oversimplified binaries like the guilty and innocent, light-skinned, and dark-skinned. This creates a tension not only between races, but within *latinidad* as the violent bodies also become the darker bodies. Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues in her study of Latinos in the media, that when Latinos are represented as non-criminals in popular U.S. media outlets (which is rare), people from Latin America are cast, rather than US Latinos. Based on her study, those from Latin America “tend to come from middle-class backgrounds, are light skinned, and/or are better educated than many Latinos and are therefore perceived as more competent” (Muntaner 112). As a result, the Latin American criminal body becomes attached to dark skin, and *Mi Vida Loca*, although perhaps unintentionally, exemplifies this unfortunate pattern.
But gangs are violent. My interest lies in the specific way in which certain violence is circulated, and the important tension that is formed through history between transparent subjectivity as a violent monster, and the confused disidentified state of these specific characters between identities. The tension I refer to throughout this chapter perhaps seems as though it is attached to multiple meanings that I have yet to clearly define. This is because of the ambiguous process of authenticity these narratives highlight. In her attempt to create as realistic a narrative as possible, the real actors, real places and real languages that are portrayed throughout the film remain in a sort of limbo of representation. On one hand, this story is created and directed by an unaffiliated gang member, who essentially interprets the story of gang membership as her own artistic endeavor. But the ‘authentic’ elements of the film create holes in this process of representation as real graffiti, real tattoos, and real people may be seen within the film. Thus, while gangs do not necessarily tell their story within these narratives, the directors and authors’ emphasis on authenticity opens doors through which gangs may insert their own rhetoric into view.

These ultimately point us to the avenues in which the MS-13 will insert their own counter-rhetoric. As a result, this circular exhibition is consistently functioning in tandem with one another. The circular pattern is illustrated as multiple narratives sensationalize gangs through certain tropes that the MS-13 eventually incorporate into their own form of world-making, thus causing more media sensation. My argument here is based on violence as a concept that is used in discussions about gangs and later ironically utilized by these same gangs. So, while Always Running indeed tells a story of similar violence, this is not to say that such violence is falsified.
In one of the more compelling scenes of the memoir, for example, Rodriguez provides a detailed description of a memory he has killing a rival gang member with a screwdriver. As he walks up to “the beaten driver in the seat whose head was bleeding,” the victim notices “what I held in my hand, and this twisted, swollen face that came at him through the dark” (Rodriguez 111). In his description, Rodriguez reimagines himself as inhuman and interchangeable with the victim, who was already beaten and bloody. The victim was already immobile, and there was no rational reason for Rodriguez to continue in the violent act, but the story does not stop there. As he “plunged the screwdriver into flesh and bone and the sky screamed,” we see an important pattern of savage violence come to the forefront of the narrative (111). His weapon is primitive. Without modern weapon forms, like a pistol, Rodriguez embodies a paradoxical gang member whose twisted face uses everyday objects to murder. Likewise, Rodriguez must also dehumanize his enemies so that he may comprehend the actions of his past. For example, as Rodriguez looks at Clavo, another gang member, he describes a violent scene by first noting the “face shot full of pellets” (58). Clavo’s face transforms into something far from individual subjectivity. He again poetically charges this scene of violence with statements like “his eye dripping into the dirt” (58). Both Rodriguez himself and his enemies are therefore far from human, which suggests that the spreading of violence is beyond what any reader of the book may understand.

His tale is ultimately difficult to trust, as Rodriguez blacks out from this violent act and falls into a hallucinatory, metaphoric memory that steers the narrative away from strictly documentation. This is common in memoirs, and in his preface, Rodriguez even admits that his accounts are not completely factual. He tells us, “I’ve changed the names and synthesized events
and circumstances in keeping with the integrity of a literary, dramatic work, as an artist does” (11). Extreme violence, which surpasses the violence surrounding African American gangs becomes uncanny to the point that the author must justify the action with metaphor because there are no words. As a result, the memoir becomes both truthful and fictional, and it is through this hybrid form that both Latinos and gangs may be present within these popular forms.

Stories of violence must be told in order to create what sells as an authentic Latino gang member, and Rodriguez evolves this pattern by also including the violence committed against him. In her analysis of Always Running, Metcalf elaborates that descriptions of violence are “included to rationalize and explain the behavior of the narrators. Violence is viewed through the lens of a war in which the system is the enemy, and as warranted because the lens of war make combat temporarily acceptable” (Metcalf 68). Rodriguez highlights this point when he explains, “this isn’t a gang, it’s an army” (Rodriguez 112). In the afterword, he elaborates that “the immigration authorities terrorized Mexican and Central American immigrants” and as a result, the Pico-Union community was “under a virtual state of siege” (249). His words are fully saturated within the discourse of war, and Latino gang subjectivity becomes a battleground for territory and recognition, as though it represented its own nationality.

Because Rodriguez is looking back on his life as an outsider to the gang to which he once belonged, he differs from Mona in important ways. His past clearly discomforts him, and he thus “engages the reader emotionally and establishes narrative acceptability on grounds of his responsibility for his actions” (Metcalf 84). To justify his own violence, Rodriguez therefore must feel guilt and shame for his past life, and he humanizes himself with a certain pathos. Readers connect to him, even if they know nothing of the inner-city.
Together, the faulty memory, confused genre, and extreme violence formulate enigmatic elements that are in constant friction with one another, situating the Latino gang member in a confused state: in Rodriguez’s case, he transforms into a prize-winning author. However, in order for him to enter dominant discourses through a traditional form of rhetoric like a memoir, he must also disassociate himself with the gang in order to enter these circles of discourses. Rodriguez never fully enters these circles, but his story is instead processed and circulated as a depiction of gang life in Los Angeles. He forever becomes commercialized specifically for sales towards “at-risk” youth. The narrative arc of violence thus “relies on conversion” and provides readers with the journey “from violent young gangbanger, to punishment, on to political enlightenment and the renunciation of violence” (Metcalf 5). From this pattern of gang memoirs, I ultimately argue that those that blatantly refuse to convert from gang subjectivity and renunciate violence, like many in the MS-13, are forever kept from traditional narrative forms and thus dominant discourses. In order to be recognized, then, the MS-13 is thus forced to find new avenues of discourse.

Because Always Running fell into an in-between space of memoir and fiction, the authenticity of his story was put in constant question by 22 publishing houses before finally getting signed through Curbstone. Furthermore, Rodriguez’s story was framed as a “Chicano gang memoir,” which further intensifies the confused state of Latinidad under the context of gangs. But if anything, Rodriguez’s memoir is embedded with the larger politics of class and status in the inner-city. In his preface, he explains that “criminality in this country is a class issue” and his membership in the Latin Kings was part of a larger “social stratum which includes welfare mothers, housing project residents, immigrant families, the homeless and unemployed.
This book is part of their story” (Rodriguez 10). Rodriguez is then not solely a gang member, nor does his book attest to his individual story, but instead situates himself (and his story) as part of a collective working-class subjectivity. His memoir helped bring transgressive working-class subjectivities into existence by uptaking commercialized forms of violence. This identity would follow him, and he explains that his class status “was a jacket I could try to take off, but they kept putting it back on.” If the whole world took part in making his identity as a thug, he then asks, “So why not be proud? Why not be an outlaw? Why not make it our own?” (84).

Ultimately, Rodriguez struggled with taking ownership of his own subjectivity and becoming an agent in the process of his identity making. His working-class subjectivity became a racialized category that Rodriguez could never escape. When he realized this, he queered this sense of ownership by accepting its unchangeability and using the stereotypes as an outlaw in excess. This trope of ownership is essential to gang narratives, and Rodriguez elucidates it via his violent past, or even reflectively through his narrative. The Latin Kings then took on a historical significance, as he tells us “it was something to belong to—something that was ours” (Rodriguez 41). By owning this collective subjectivity, he manages to diverge from Beverley Skeggs’ criticism about dominant narratives, which become the defining form of subaltern identity. Skeggs explains that dominant narratives portray “a way of transferring all economic responsibility onto the individual, rather than the system (of exchange) that produces models of market as a neutral system and the individual as a self, responsible for its own value” (Skeggs 33). Rodriguez’s lack of individual subjectivity as “self” opens an avenue for readers to look at the working-class conditions of the inner-city rather than look to the overall system as neutral, both racially and economically.
Indeed, the specific depictions of violence from both *Always Running* and *Mi Vida Loca* are so cruel that such crime seems illusory. But by justifying the need of violence for survival, the original Latino gangster narratives of the 1990s were not as threatening to the middle-class as they have become today. Importantly, the historical moment in which these narratives emerged created a gang identity that was Latino/Chicano rather than rooted in any specific national boundaries. And for the most part, the pattern of indeterminate nationality and surreal violence would continue on throughout contemporary history, constantly struggling between hero and villain, between different languages, and agents in their own identity making. But in 2003, these multiple tensions that arose from Latino gang conceptualization intensified. Amid the Shenandoah River, a fisherman discovered the body of seventeen-year-old Brenda Paz. This would set off a media frenzy that would put the Mara Salvatrucha on popular radar, and drastically shift the commercialization and consumption of gangs.

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Brenda “Smiley” Paz was an immigrant from Honduras, who spent most of her childhood in Los Angeles. She joined the MS-13 in her early teen years, and when she discovered she was pregnant at the age of sixteen, she reportedly decided to become an informant in hopes of finding a better life for her child. During this time, Paz provided a number of Mara secrets to the police and told names of leaders and important cliques that would lead to more than half a dozen private investigations. She was then placed in the Witness Protection Program, which unfortunately did not “properly handle the undisciplined teen” (Associated Press). When the Mara Salvatrucha discovered she had been a traitor, no place was safe for her. As a result, she was taken to multiple locations throughout the United States, and eventually Paz ended up in
Alexandria, Virginia, where she connected to different MS-13 members and assumed that she would never be discovered as a traitor. With government funds, Paz bought alcohol and drugs, and had sex for money while hosting a number of parties at her residence for gang members. Eventually, word traveled to Virginia that she had been an informant, and Paz was killed by her friends.

The media obsession over the specific way Paz died is critical here. She did not just die—she was stabbed multiple times by a machete, while pregnant. While the criminalization of the Latino body was evolving from the 1990s, the weapon seemed to be devolving: beginning with the AK-47 during the Civil War, to Rodríguez’s vivid memory with a screwdriver, and finally ending with a machete. There was no other way to describe her murder beyond a “savage” and “brutal” affair (Washington Post). Her death further signified the growth of the MS within America. They were no longer contained to the inner-city, but had now expanded to the nation’s capital, in one of the richest suburbs of the United States and home to a number of government officials. This was no violent crime that was vaguely “gang-related.” Now, the MS-13 was wholly responsible for the murder of Brenda Paz, and the rhetoric transitioned from sweeping identifications of ‘Latino gang’ to the more specified Mara Salvatrucha. The problem was that there was no way to define the Mara Salvatrucha--Paz was Honduran; this was not a Salvadoran problem anymore. It happened in Virginia; it was not an inner-city problem anymore, either. Brenda Paz’s subjectivity thus mirrored the narrative forms in which she appeared. Her identity was split between a soon-to-be mother working towards an American Dream, and an irresponsible thug that put herself in a dangerous situation while also thriving on the American
tax dollar. This would also subsequently sensationalize the Latino criminal body into a singular violent subject--the gangster.

Paz’s story was eventually told through a variety of distribution systems and helped “to generate ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ about the other; to identify and contain social problems; or sometimes just fill the air/soundwaves” (Skeggs 97). While situated by popular media as an illusive gang, out-sourced forms of representation then became the ‘authentic’ form of what would come to be known in popular discourse as the Latino gang crisis. But there was an obvious tension between the transparent MS identity, and the complete inability of defining it under transparent forms. This story connected the MS-13 to issues of representation through a larger process of othering that is criticized in both Latino and Working Class Studies. Only now, the violence was unforgivable, and even worse, it was spreading. As a result, rhetoric reverted back to what had been solidified in the films and literature of the 1990s. The Mara Salvatrucha was just like what we see in Always Running and Mi Vida Loca, only more violent.

In his study of gangs in the media, sociologist Martin Jankowski explains that specific scenes of gang violence “Are included not simply because they depict life in poor, working-class communities but because they provide one of the ingredients for creating a ‘good’ news story--action” (293). Brenda Paz’s story adhered to a recipe for large-scale consumption by the middle class through a narrative of violent action. The interest journalists took in Paz’s murder was skewed so that the violent acts could “later be capitalized on by developing presentations such as feature articles, segments in TV magazine shows, and documentaries to provide more understanding of an event reported in limited fashion in the daily news” (Jankowski 289). True to the general pattern Jankowski highlights what began as a local news story then burst into a
national spotlight because the savage violence would then promote more public interest through different outlets. However, this fear-based rhetoric ironically worked to solidify a presence of the Mara Salvatrucha in mainstream America. It opened the doors by proving to production and publication companies that “gangs must provide enough interest” by middle-class audiences “to merit a specific amount of space and time” on airwaves (286). This fact then led to the idea that “the more violent the crime, the more likely it is to be included in the nightly news” (286). These dominant presentations of the MS-13 then created a contradictory space for members of the gang to enter and be seen, and furthermore demonstrated that to enter the popular rhetoric, extreme, sellable violence was a necessity.

The narratives that exploited violence then exploded with Paz’s story. 60 Minutes did a report on the MS-13, National Geographic came out with a documentary entitled The World’s Most Dangerous Gang and National Public Radio (NPR) came out with numerous stories of the court settlement to come. These multiple forms all revolved around Paz’s death, put the Mara Salvatrucha at the forefront of American television and radio for the public interest it elicited, and did so all within the same year.

Paz’s story was told in a form that morphed between genres. Investigative journalist, Samuel Logan, for instance, created a fictionalized account of Paz’s death in his book This is for the Mara Salvatrucha. But as we see in his book review by The Washington Times, despite Logan’s “colorful prose,” John Weisman sarcastically notes that Logan managed to incorporate “a new technique in journalism” through his uncanny ability “to get inside the heads of dead people and tell you what the are thinking as they are being murdered” (Weisman). Because no source notes were provided with his strange novel, the book lingered between journalism and
fiction, and the gaps between transparent genres of gang depiction thus opened further, creating a hybrid space in which the Mara Salvatrucha was now at the forefront.

The multiple forms of mara identity made it impossible for media outlets to define, and the authentic criminal body morphed along with it. Mara Nation came to represent an intangible identity whose contradictory factors created a formulaic pattern of Latino, savagely violent, and poor. But this vague understanding came to represent all gangs, Latino or not, creating a space for the MS-13 to enter popular discourses surrounding gangs, as they always seemed to “fit” within the fluid understanding of inner-city gangs.

Because Paz was affiliated with this intangible identity, her linkage to working-class subjectivity comes with complicated repercussions. She embodies multiple classed, national, and cultural forms, and my exploration of the rhetoric that surrounds her under a working-class lens exposes the over-simplified binary surrounding working-class subjectivity between the “deserving and undeserving poor” (Skeggs 88). Much of the ‘undeserving’ poor are undeserving precisely because they remain “[trapped] in a culture of dependency,” and Paz’s use of government funds for her own living expenses places her as yet another example of this pattern (88). The rhetoric surrounding Paz also subjected her to a personhood with no “potential to enterprise, but one that only constitutes a burden; its own culture is held responsible for the lack of value” (88). Rejected from Honduras, the United States, and the Mara Salvatrucha, Brenda Paz was indeed the value-less, use-less subject that Skeggs criticizes, and yet media outlets could only blame it on the MS-13, which ironically could not be defined.

Even nationally syndicated conservative blogger Michelle Malkin contributed to the obsession around Paz’s death:
Earlier this summer, a spate of knifing attacks involving reputed MS-13 gangsters took place at a nearby Target store. Yes, Target -- where the only fights that shoppers should have to worry about are the tug-of-war spats between soccer moms battling over Sonia Kashuk makeup bags on sale in Aisle 2. (Townhall)

Malkin illustrates what would become of the Mara Salvatrucha and the dominant rhetoric that formulated the group as such. While Brenda Paz, her nationality, and story became undefinable through multiple media outlets, the dominant rhetoric that sprouted about the Mara Salvatrucha from her story revolved around a fear of infiltration to the middle-class. The gang was now where they had never been before--in a Target, shockingly coexisting with soccer moms and Sonia Kushik bags. Paz’s murder brought on an attack of anti-immigration discourse throughout the country, essentialized all gang identity under multiple latinidades, and was utilized as a scapegoat for all migratory experience.

In August of 2006, the fictional film Quinceañera then returned the conversation of Latino gangs to Los Angeles. Directed by Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer, the film centered on the virginal Magdalena, who miraculously gets pregnant while planning her Quinceañera. The film won a number of awards, including the Sundance “Grand Jury Prize” and “Audience Award”. The languages transition between Spanish and English and a combination of the two. A side story also occurs within the narrative of Carlos, Magdalena’s cousin, who is rejected from the family because of both his gang affiliation and homosexuality. All of these stories take place within the larger context of the gentrification of the Echo Park neighborhood as a middle-class, gay couple moves next to the rejected family members. Because the story of Quinceañera revolves around a Mexican American family, it highlights the tension that had built
from the early 1990s until today between the Mexican dominated Latino media landscape, and the multifaceted Latino gangs that become essentialized under a singular nationality, language, and culture. I choose to focus here on Carlos, who struggles between doing what is right for his family and his proneness to violence, drugs, and sexual deviance. Like the characters I have pointed to thus far, Carlos is placed in an in-between state within the narrative and breaks the traditional boundaries between good and bad guy.

When Gary and James move to a house in Echo Park, they invite their new neighbor, Carlos, to a housewarming party. Carlos agrees, and Gary watches the “super hot Cholo” through the window as he walks away. This scene begins to reflect how the Latino gangster body becomes exoticized specifically for middle-class enjoyment (00:19:00). When Carlos later arrives to the party, no one speaks to him, and he drinks and smokes until he is the only remaining person at the house. As Carlos shakes his head with half closed eyes and says, “I am so fucked up,” James and Gary look at one another, and begin to lift his shirt and rub his tattoos (00:24:20). The scene is rather predatory. Carlos is objectified because of his tattoos, and the cross-class desire functions as a larger symbol for the formulaic pattern circulated for middle-class consumption. Later, as the men invite friends over for a dinner party, someone strikes up a conversation while casually passing food around the table. He tells everyone, “There was this cute little Latin boy at my gym today. I mean, oh my god. Totally little cholo. Shaved head, tattoos, his butt was like, oh my god,” and everyone giggles as James responds, “you should meet Carlos!” (00:57:28). This scene then suggests that the exoticization of his “cholo” identity, which is both distinctly Latino and gang affiliated, goes well beyond the couple, and Carlos
becomes a commodity that can be passed around by the middle-class gay men to fulfill their own racialized desires.

This instance further illustrates that the middle-class men possess a special authority to define what elements comprise a cholo: for them, it’s khaki pants, tattoos, and a shaved head. Carlos’s *cholodad* therefore becomes essentialized under a very specific aesthetic. Carlos’ lack of agency clashes with complete agency: while identity is imposed upon him, he also chooses to look a certain way and adhere to a working-class aesthetic that is developed by middle-class groups. While everyone in the film imposes a sort of identity on him, Carlos’ khaki pants, tattoos, and shaved head illustrate his individualized act of identity making that is complicated as he comes to embody a collective identity whose style is both exoticized and abhorred throughout the film. But, as a working man, Carlos’s job at the local carwash also complicates gang identity as he transitions between a *cholo* and a good citizen with a good job. Whenever we do see Carlos working, which is rare, the camera importantly focuses on his hands and the physicality of the labor. But his tattoos always peek through his garments, and his gang identity morphs into his working-class identity (00:38:00). While his uniform strips him of the khaki pants and his shaved head morphs into the busy Los Angeles streets, his attachment to his unspecified gang splits his identity into two, and it becomes difficult to decide whether Carlos is working towards economic mobility. His constant shifting within the film exemplifies the tension between the split of subjectivities by muddling multiple forms of labor (or lack thereof).

When Carlos is introduced into the film during another Quinceañera, viewers are only shown the “216” on his neck. The camera follows the mysterious tattooed man, and we watch the hand reach out and steal flowers from a street vendor before running away (00:06:00). The film
ultimately ends the same way: Carlos overhears Gary telling his partner that he does not have any emotional attachment to Carlos. This is heartbreaking, and Carlos runs away, where we again are shown only his tattoos (01:02:00). Throughout the entirety of the film, then, Carlos’s cholo identity as defined by the white middle-class males is emphasized by his tattoos. While Carlos may embody an essentialized Latino criminal for Gary and his partner, I argue that it is ironically this very representation that the MS-13 will readapt as their own. That is, if popular forms choose to only focus on mara identity through *cholodad* and tattoos, then the MS-13 will, in a sense, queer this very form by utilizing these sensationalized representations in excess.

Although Carlos is doubly othered, not only as a cholo but also as a member of the working-class, he importantly manages to weave through, among, and even enter into larger groups of which he is constantly rejected. But this movement is in constant flux.

We also see the same thing occur in terms of graffiti. Towards the beginning of the film, Hernán, Magdalena’s boyfriend, bends down and chisels his name into a bench while Magdalena sits next to him near Echo Park. When the camera shifts, viewers see the back of the bench covered in graffiti, making Hernán’s act of name-making feel rather insignificant and small (00:16:10). If we consider for a moment that these are real shots around the Echo Park neighborhood, the film thus creates the hybrid space necessary for gangs. Although *Quinceañera* undoubtedly reestablishes stereotypical portrayals of the Latino criminal body, it more importantly creates a space in which gangs can enter the popular view by placing tattoos, graffiti, and the Latino criminal body in plain sight while the story ironically works to reproach these forms. While gang members are unable to tell their story throughout the film, their counter forms of discourse become the key element to the shifting fictional places, people, and narrative forms.
because they remain the only stable force within the fluid structure of the film. Placed within a narrative that empowers Latino and working-class subjectivity, the film thus creates pathways by developing the stereotypes for gang members to later utilize in their own form of world-making.

Finally, Cary Fukunaga’s 2009 film *Sin Nombre* connects multiple forms of Latino gang subjectivity through *fiction* and opens the rhetorical space for the *real* MS-13 to enter. The stories and histories throughout *Sin Nombre* violently collide and interweave with one another. The film manages to cross a number of physical and metaphorical borders and broaden the generalized terms of migration through its depiction of a fleeing gang member and a young woman, both traveling by train to the U.S./Mexico border. The characters throughout the film not only cross each other’s paths, but also transition and shift in their own development alongside their changing environments. One of the protagonists, Willy, changes from a violent member of the MS-13 to a sensitive individual that both protects the other character, Sayra, and mourns the loss of his lover, Martha Marlen. This is not necessarily a transformation in characterization, but rather the film highlights the idea that Willy had always been an unstable embodiment of multiple identities, lingering between safety and danger. Sayra comes from seemingly another working-class world, but their encounter through movement and migration further complicates this notion of bothness. They are from separate worlds, but they live in the same place. They can traverse through their respective dangers, but they eventually collide with the inevitable violence that follows them beyond and between countries.

Within one of the first scenes that depict gang life in Honduras, we watch a young child, Benito, taken in by Willy and indoctrinated into the MS-13. The men count slowly as he is
kicked, punched, and shoved in order to be initiated as a member (4:40). When the scene ends, Benito is helped from the ground and smiles with blood dripping from his face. Laughing, the men decide to call him “Smiley.” From this scene forth, the child is never again called “Benito,” but has rather taken on his new identity as Smiley. By changing names, Smiley illuminates how the group confuses the individual in order to strengthen as a group. Not only does Benito lose his namesake in order to enter into the world of the Mara Salvatrucha, but Fukunaga further demonstrates that such loss of identity comes at a moment of brutality. As Smiley, his identity is split; he is no longer visible as an individual (Benito), but is rather visible as part of a larger group.

However painful this scene may be for viewers, Benito plays a role in which he is indeed eager to be accepted into the gang. Coming from a dilapidated house along the railroad tracks, his class status magnetizes him to the group of men, who not only offer a familial net of brothers, but also provide food, water and shelter for the child. Benito’s ties to violence are thus entirely based on his socioeconomic level— he actively chooses this life, and understands the violence and dangers that will arise once he becomes an active gang member.

There is an eeriness associated with the idea of being “found” throughout the film. As gang members, both Smiley and Willy (or “Caspar”) exude a hyper-visible identity within their small towns. While they are not visible as an individual, they are indeed visible as part of a structure towards power. This hyper-visibility— particularly through tattooing— allows the gangs to claim a mobile territory as they are forced to traverse through different physical spaces. But in Sin Nombre, tattooing is an inconsistent trope. For Smiley, his lack of tattoos places him in great danger when he encounters another clique. Without any proof of his affiliation of the gang.
Smiley nearly dies before convincing the others that he is an ally (55:53). The tattoo, in this sense, would have easily protected the young child. However, Willy’s facial tattoo has the opposite effect as it stamps his body and targets him as the enemy to both the gang he escapes and small towns he escapes to. As a result, Willy decides to scratch off the tattoo with his own fingernails (1:15:00). Although Fukunaga does not spend much time on this scene, he provides viewers with a complex character who lingers between imprisonment and mobility; despite Willy’s constant movement, he cannot progress in the narrative and is trapped in a symbolic gang life that he cannot simply scratch off.

Perhaps the most important part of the film for sake of this argument is when Fukunaga highlights the utopic but equally paradoxical space of the gang’s house. In the beginning, before Willy is a traitor to the group, he takes Smiley on a short journey through the house. We briefly find men helping women with dinner, and another man ironing clothes while discussing different cliques outside of their own (11:48). As men help one another with domestic duties throughout the house, they break free from hetero-masculine performance in order to create a domesticated environment. However, as Willy proceeds to walk through the house, he then enters a room of hyper-masculine performativity. One man sits as a woman dances over him, and another woman sits by their side uncomfortably with her arms crossed over her chest (12:10). Willy implies homophobia when he proceeds to tell Smiley of the hemorrhoids another man has as they continue to walk through the house. “He can’t sit down,” he explains to Smiley, “because he’s bleeding from the ass” (12:23). Within the house, the gang therefore breaks away from translucent masculine identity. It is a place for men to perform as they wish, whether that be normative or non-hetero normative. However, this space of freedom is fleeting and confined.
The photographer of *Sin Nombre*, Adriano Goldman, utilized a 35mm camera, which was a risky move in the growing digital age of filmmaking. Doing so added a grainy texture to the film unlike the High Definition quality that had become a common practice (Ebert). This focused on the characters, rather than the constantly shifting places which guided the narrative arc and connected the characters. While the film is in no way conflicted between genres like *Mi Vida Loca*, the film expands the concepts that began in the early 90s by creating a falsified aura of ‘authenticity.’

Latinos in contemporary media have historically been “more likely to play blue collar criminals, involving theft of goods and cash, kidnapping, the manufacture and sale of illegal drugs” and of these criminals, “the highest grossing films from 2010 to 2012 all were gang-affiliated” (Negrón-Muntaner 107). These statistics point my argument to a number of conclusions. First, while the criminal body is complex, the Latino criminal body is consistently associated with gangs, and it is therefore essential that we explore the conceptualization of these gangs. But doing so is a tricky task, as these narratives illustrate a tension from the in-between state of characters, locations, languages, and forms. When we then look to narratives that have combined the terms of Latino and gang-affiliation, what comes out of literature, film, and journalism are distinct patterns of sellable violence that is based on a rhetoric of fear that such violence will spread into middle-class neighborhoods. These patterns wrongly formulate transparent Latino gang identity as something with a clear place of origin, language, and culture, all of which work together to wreak havoc on those working towards upward economic mobility.

In the end, narratives that attempt to write of gang identificatory practices, which are few and far between, then create patterns of contradictory elements through this hybridity. By these
'hybrid forms,' I mean that popular narratives work to depict stable, translucent identities while the people, places, languages and forms cannot fit within a singular definition. A tension inevitably then arises, which opens gaps within these narratives for the Mara Salvatrucha to become recognized within a larger rhetorical system of which they have historically remained on the margin. Both fictionalized characters and real people are portrayed to linger between the villain and the victim, and while these narratives speak on behalf of the MS-13, they equally dictate the performances, looks, and subjectivity by which members may enter the mainstream view through their own form of rhetoric. Savage violence is what ultimately weaves these multiple languages and cultures together while simultaneously working to sensationalize what has become of the Latino gangster today. As a result, MS-13 members repurpose this very form, by taking this dominant discourse and utilizing it to the extreme.

In terms of location, dominant narratives put an emphasis on the Echo park neighborhood of Los Angeles. When the MS-13 then expands to a global phenomenon, rhetoric surrounding location also transitions, emphasizing that the gang is infiltrating the American suburbs. This pattern also crosses national borders, and is repeated in media outlets throughout Central America as gangs begin to infiltrate into the middle-class neighborhoods throughout El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras. While Elana Zilberg thus recognizes Los Angeles is “a crucial space of conjunctions and disjunction between local, national, and global spheres of action and experience,” I argue that the discourses that focus solely on Los Angeles help the MS-13 to spread beyond California (776). Furthermore, disjunctions range far beyond gangs and come to define many groups of working-class people that are equally trying to forge a space in the world where they are always on the margin. The more media exposure that works in the
process of othering, the more these forms paradoxically produce “another form of advertising for the gangs...media exposure is also viewed by gangs as a means to get a message across to other gangs” (Jankowski 306). It is this incredibly ironic structure that will point to the counter-discourses in the following chapter.
In the previous chapter, I oriented the reader to the popularized, middle-class conceptualization of “Latin American gangs.” This chapter will take a different route through an in-depth analysis of National Geographic’s 2006 documentary, *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, and the lyrics of Salvadoran rapper Condéman. The focus of my analysis here will work to answer the following: how might the MS-13 “make” themselves? And how might these forms challenge classed notions of identity? I particularly explore applications of the slippery term ‘working-class visibility’ to a community on the margins. My close reading of these forms is perhaps uncommon in that “street gang research has traditionally been carried out by sociologists, anthropologists, and criminologists.” (Maxon 179). I must clarify, then, that this is not an ethnographic body of research, but a call to value multiple forms of gang analysis through a close interpretation of this heavily edited film, and raw, “authentic” music.

Graffiti, rap, and tattoos are all forms that allow MS members to enter popular discourses, mainstream media, and the profit-based marketplace while simultaneously evading normalized labor and identity practices. Ralph Cintrón argues, “rhetorical analysis need not be about famous speeches and/or the written word. Indeed, it need not be about the discursive at all, and should also include the non-discursive and the performative” (6). By focusing on the body and space as a form of argument simultaneously working in and against the popular narrative, we may develop new ways to both enter street gang research, and work towards explaining why these transgressions are necessary in the larger formulation of working-class representative politics.
It is important to note that those forms of rhetoric that I consider traditional (books/music/radio/art/film) are not the kinds of rhetoric produced and marketed by gang members. The primary sources I rely on are therefore about gangs, rather than composed by gangs. In *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, Lisa Ling begins and ends the narration with Brenda Paz. Her story then leads her between Los Angeles and San Salvador, while making it clear that the gang is also in France and Wisconsin (yes, Wisconsin). While Lisa Ling narrates the film’s specific point in time and space, the counter forms of rhetoric also signify a very different narration of the two and therefore, I believe, qualify themselves as (counter)narratives. Through a close reading (or dare I say, counter-reading?) of *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, we may find how the corporeal and spatial elements of gang discourses engage with both working and middle-class audiences and traverse between multiple media platforms and rhetorical forms. Likewise, Condéman’s song “De la calle soy” is virtually unknown within larger conversations of Latin American music. While his music is unrecognized within this discourse, it has indeed become a sort of anthem for the gang, and thus, El Salvador has banned his music all together. A close reading of this particular song will illustrate how Condéman enters popular discourses and threatens economic mobility through working-class aesthetics and subject matter that refuses to assimilate to the mainstream.

Working-class aesthetics is a complex subject that places this chapter in conversation with multiple forms of scholarship. Nadine Hubbs, for instance, in *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*, explains that the “middle class is the knowledge class and the adjudicating class, possessing the power not only to classify and label the social other but also to declare which acts and utterances count as political and which are mere whining or venting of that illegitimate
affect, resentment” (60). She explores country music through the lens of working class studies, and argues that a power dynamic exists in who may determine what aesthetic may be considered legitimate within the larger American culture. In this transaction, working-class aesthetics are shoved off to the side. Lisa Ling’s fascination with tattoos and graffiti illustrates this power dynamic, as her awe elucidates an Other and further demonstrates that these two forms of discourse are immediately processed as an illegitimate politic within the film.

Together, graffiti, rap, and tattoos are all forms that do not merely play between high and low art, but remain excluded from larger discussions of aestheticism because the people associated with the forms transgress any coherent class or social position. Indeed, this combines the notion of class and taste, which for John Cook, remain inseparable because an “exercise in taste is constantly drawing and redrawing the boundaries between and within classes. It is a continuous and sublimated form of class struggle” (Cook 100). By refusing to recognize these forms as their own aesthetic that implements its own counter-rhetoric, the boundaries of normalized identity patterns which academics criticize are merely solidified within this system.

Furthermore, I define these forms as ekphrastic because I view tattoos, graffiti, and rap as an art form. However, it is a queered art form that negotiates the boundaries of dominant narratives producing imposed forms of identity. That is, if dominant forms of discourse surrounding the MS-13 merely highlight tattoos and graffiti, then the members that are defined through these terms ironically utilize this rhetoric in excess to make and exert a queered form of identity.
Writing on the Wall
Graffiti and Tattoos in *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*

Towards the beginning of her documentary, Lisa Ling tells viewers that the Mara Salvatrucha is an incredibly illusive enterprise. Considering the secrecy as a backdrop to her understanding of gang identification, she proceeds to tell us that one active member of the gang agreed to share his innermost secrets for the sake of the film. Whether he refused to disclose his real name or not, Ling tells viewers, “we’ll call him...Jester” (10:27). From the beginning, then, Jester is defined for larger audiences by a dominant form of discourse via the film. Ling names, defines, and speaks on behalf of “Jester.” As the scene proceeds, Jester allows Ling into his car as he drives around Los Angeles. He tells her that everything she sees on the street belongs to the MS, and she then clarifies by noting, “any business working here must pay MS a protection fee” (15:42). As Ling narrates the drive in a dubbed-over voice, Jester’s words from his personalized tour are lost from the narrative, and viewers are left with only the graffiti that he points to alongside Ling’s narration.

The “protection fee,” or *la renta*, is a counteractive tax implemented across borders by both the MS-13 and Calle 18. If in a *mara* territory, vendors must pay the affiliated clique a certain amount to sell products within that space. These products range anywhere from clothing to illegal drugs, and the more profit a business makes, the more they must pay off the gang. Even as Jester’s voice becomes lost behind the voice over, the graffiti depicted within the narrative tells a larger story of the state of neoliberal capitalism that street gangs both manage to work with and against simultaneously. In terms of this film, the dominant form overpowers Jester through Ling’s narration, but her fascination with the gang allows for the MS to ‘speak’ within
the film even when their literal voices disappear. Graffiti functions as that voice, showing a rhetoric rather than explicitly telling viewers that while they may disappear within the dominant discourse, they certainly find ownership of the streets, which the dominant discourse then focuses on.

Jester takes Ling--and by default, viewers--on a journey through Los Angeles by means of tagging (17:50). While he points to certain marks that indicate his clique’s taxing territory, there is a clear tension between the anonymity which Ling insists is associated with the MS-13, and the graffiti transparently foreclosing ownership of the specific space. When the scene shifts to the blurred face of another gang member in the act of tagging, Ling tells viewers that “many marks are erased as soon as they go up” (17:53). These ephemeral markings indeed mirror the MS-13’s complicated process of negotiating between entering and rejecting the hyper-capitalist structure, but they more clearly demarcate a space of business for mareros. Through graffiti, the gang manages to both enter the popular discourse of the film, and exemplify a strong standing within the current economics surrounding the Los Angeles cityscape. The tags are perhaps erased as quickly as they come to exist, but the marks manage to tell a different story of an aggressive form of ownership within the Capitalist marketplace which working-class Latinos cannot enter.

The tags we see in this scene coincide with Chaz Bojorquez’s study of graffiti throughout Los Angeles, He explains that tagging (also called placas) “are pledges of allegiance to their neighborhood. Placas encourage gang strength, create an aura of exclusivity, and are always painted in black letters” (6). True to form with black lettering, we see a number of placas throughout Jester’s silenced journey, and they tell the story for him even while his voice is replaced within the narrative. However, we also see a number of placas from the rival gang.
Calle 18, illustrating the complicated form of economics adopted by the street gangs for profit. This turf competition therefore comes to replicate the competition of market access.

In terms of class rhetoric, graffiti interestingly follows similar patterns to corporate industries. Bojorquez elaborates that graffiti format “is based on an ancient formula that demand[s] a headline, body copy, and a logo. These three major building blocks of corporate and public advertising can also describe the type layout from ancient Sumerian clay tablets to The Constitution of the United States and the modern layout of The Los Angeles Times” (6). The mimicry of public advertising and popular American forms of media illustrates--quite literally--the visibility of the gang’s presence under the same light of these popularized forms. Moreover, it allows Jester’s clique to solidify a time and place within the Los Angeles cityscape. Bojorquez explains that “In cholo writing only one person writes for the whole gang and you tag only within your own territory. In New York graffiti, the emphasis is on being more of an individual and not about ethnic identity, where ‘getting up’ all-city or all-state with your tag is more important than the group.” This allows the gang to brand itself within the narrative of the film as both Latino and as a powerful economic enterprise, while encapsulating a space for this transgressive community. Like much of Chicanidad and more broadly, Latinidad, the word ‘cholo’ signifies a complex history with classed roots. Although the term in English dates back to the early 1900s, “in modern usage in the United States, the term cholo usually indicates a person of Mexican, Central American or Indio descent, who is associated with a particular Southwestern culture” (Chastanet 50). The ethnicity behind the term is therefore difficult to differentiate between latinidades, and points to a larger form of disidentification, which I will elaborate on in the coming pages. To continue, “the word has historically been used along the borderland as a
derogatory term for lower class Mexican migrants, and in the rest of Latin America to mean an acculturating Indian or peasant” (50). Cholo writing is therefore also heavily saturated in classed politics. Its act of drawing different letterforms can be deemed “a practice to which identity and questions of origin are essential.” (51). As we see throughout the film, graffiti mixes the higher forms of middle-class representation by means of format, while also distinguishing itself as distinctly Latino and working-class.

The tags we see throughout the film heighten a sense of place for both Jester and his affiliated gang, even as the film fails to recognize the complicated history of the MS in terms of migration. Popular discourse surrounding U.S. Latin American gangs is based within the politics of movement, place, and homeland, and the tags are therefore significant in that they not only situate the gang within the capitalist marketplace, but also establish a physical space amid complicated forms of movement. It is a form of reinforcing a presence amid multiple racial identities and places.

Calle 18 had existed since 1959, and the MS had existed since the early 1980s, but “the real fighting,” as Zilberg elaborates, “did not begin until 1985, when a homeboy was shot and killed by a rival gang. After that, the MS went to war with the Crazy Riders, another gang in the MacArthur Park area” (28). As the gangs grew in numbers and power through the influx of refugees, the Los Angeles riots brought a strange twist to the formation of “place” for both the MS and Calle 18. Refugees living in the Pico Union neighborhood during the Rodney King verdict were generally considered “innocent victims” within the larger racial conflict, “but it is the figure of the Latino as looter that dominate[d] local media coverage” (Zilberg 31). Nearly 7,000 Latinos were incarcerated during this time. From the early 90s, then, we may better see
how the dominant forms of media in popular culture muddle the subjectivity between Latino and gangster, vilifying the refugees, as both US policy and popular media understand refugees and gang members within the same context. Ironically, mass incarceration only solidified the gang’s power. In essence, prison functioned as an unorthodox form of schooling for refugees to take their skills in artillery and translate them to basic street-level criminality.

The return to history I provide here is important in its relationship to a larger form of disidentificatory politics. Gang graffiti adopts this survival strategy in terms of spatial identity. Despite the constant deportation of MS members between varying spaces, graffiti significantly ensures identification as it marks a specific place and time for a specific person. While the MS members depicted throughout the film break from normative citizenship, the lack of coherent space in gang subjectivity allows them to negotiate between these boundaries. They both enter the narrative, but do so through an abject form of discourse. Crucial as a survival strategy, Muñoz emphasizes that “Disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance with the flux of discourse and power. It understands that counter-discourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse” (Muñoz 19). The graffiti represented within the film therefore negotiates ideological formulations of identification. Tags adapt, in a very Muñozian sense, by shifting the power of visibility within the narrative. Viewers may not see the actual gang members, but they certainly see a form of their discourse.

When Ling proceeds to travel to El Salvador, we again witness this confused, disidentified sense of place. As with Los Angeles, we see the same tagging process pan out in San Salvador. This particular time, we are shown a sort of gravesite through graffiti. Ling
explains, “MS has their own way of honoring the dead--and true to form, it’s illegal” (31:00). Here, the graffiti gets a chance to ‘speak’ within the film. We see a site of graves with specific nicknames of people, the cities they inhabited, their turf within these cities, and the clique associated. Whether in Los Angeles or San Salvador, graffiti plays a prominent role in the depiction of the MS-13. In this act of discourse, “a group name on a wall makes it immortal. The image remains, even as the carnage between gangs continues” (Chastanet 51). The gravesites we are shown in the film create an immortal identity for the gang members through the aesthetic form, and are important in that despite the blurred faces and dubbed voices, their form of rhetoric marks a place within the larger scope of the film.

In the end, Lisa Ling tells us “gangs are expanding at an alarming rate” (41:55). As the camera then shows multiple spaces covered in graffiti, the images exhibit abject ownership of a marketplace while simultaneously becoming the form to represent MS identity. If we understand gangs through graffiti, then their uptake of the aesthetic form is a reformulation of their imposed form of identity. The notion of a transparent self is complicated in the larger context of Working Class Studies. Beverley Skeggs, in Class, Self & Culture, connects the transparent self to the act of story making as she explains that to tell a story, you must have a visible, singular selfhood. Excessive tattoos take individuality away from this imagined self, particularly when they cover the face and body in order to formulate representative forms of gang identity. When the self refuses to be interpellated within normalized social structures, MS members are formulated to lose the self in order to inherit the all-encompassing mara identity, but they interestingly do so at their own will. Skeggs continues: “The process of telling the stories of the subaltern has been institutionalized in anthropology and sociology as a mechanism by which the self of the writer or
researcher is known. So those excluded from selfhood, personhood, individuality, become the object--often objectified--by those who have access to the subject positions of researcher/writer” (Skeggs 127). We see this clearly played out in *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, where the narrator subject position is the access point for the generalized narrative of gang subjectivity. While in El Salvador, for instance, Ling takes us to the heart of a police raid. The camera shifts between a few of the seventeen men wanted for murder, each with his hand raised, and his head pointed toward the ground (33:53). When the police proceed to arrest the men, the camera pivots and focuses on one member in particular. In this scene, viewers do not see the faces of those arrested but rather are provided with shots of their bare backs. The camera then pivots from a man being arrested, and all viewers see are the MS tattoos across his back (34:13).

In *World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, scenes such as this allow tattoos to come to the forefront of the narrative, and yet another tension arises between the film narration and the other story told by these tattoos. As Ling tells us “tattoos here don’t just tell you that someone’s in MS. They tell a gangster’s biography,” one must wonder why the director chose to blur the faces of these specific people (34:35). On a large scale, the incorporation of gang subjectivity into popular media has complicated broader notions of Latino identity. In “Central American Diasporas,” Arturo Arias directly connects this lack of transparent identity directly to tattoos by means of ethnicity, language, and culture. “In the case of gangs, needless to say, their tattoos operate as physical markers,” he explains, “a space where bodies are their own signs, portraying a symbolic writing that, while it mimics the infliction of trauma, is also a representation of enforced silence. Their tattoos problematize the state’s very claim of normalization” (Arias 183). I argue that this form--tattoos--functions as yet another queered form of working-class visibility.
If the dominant narrative identifies gangs through these forms, the MS members within the film, then, utilize this to their advantage in order to be made visible even through their blurry faces. It is, again, the symbol of a silenced narrative through an incredibly “loud” practice.

Tattoos thus create a narrative of the self and provide a mobilized space for gang members to tell their personal narratives. Skeggs elaborates on the difficulty of working-class subjects to produce the traditional narrative form. She explains that the struggle to shape personhood has a long and dispersed history intricately tied up with relations of classification, namely *who could be a self*. The self that could be *told* also had to be *seen* in order to be *known* fully. The struggle around representation became a significant arena in which different technologies (such as the printing press, art and, eventually, TV and the Internet), enable different forms of narration and visuality. (Skeggs 121)

If we understand the “Self” as a classist idea within a larger history of working-class representative politics, graffiti works to subvert the notion of that self. Surely, they lose the form of individualized, western “Self” through bodily tattoos that affiliate the body with their gang membership. But this is a complicated aesthetic practice, as it also allows a literal walking presence of MS identity through middle-class America.

When Ling ventures to the prison, where just days prior she was threatened to be kidnapped, we meet Duke. Originally from Hollywood, his location in a prison in San Salvador attests to his disidentified state between place and culture. As he lifts his shirt to show off his numerous tattoos, Ling asks him the significance behind certain scars and marks on his body. After a few questions, she points to his wounds, unable to differentiate the tattoos from the bullet
and stab wounds across his stomach (39:50). The muddled differentiation between scar and tattoo allows Duke to enter the narrative and tell his story. In her book, *Tattoos and Desire*, Karin Beeler defines tattoos as “visible scars on the body” that “may represent what cannot be grasped or achieved. In this sense, they are fitting representations of desire which embeds elements of resistance, since that which is desired is by definition unattainable” (Beeler 39). Like Beeler, I consider the tattoos we witness throughout the film as signifiers of resistance. Not only do they resist the master narrative, but they also tell their autobiographical stories in conjunction with Ling’s interpretation of their story.

The disidentified marks between scar and aesthetic may also come to represent that which cannot be achieved by the gang member. This may refer to multiple themes— that of the marketplace, normative citizenship, or cultural practices. But gangs perhaps take this one step further through their complete refusal to enter these normative practices, and tattoos not only disidentify the individual, but as we see with Duke, the tattoos themselves are disidentified marks on the body which ultimately allow Duke to enter the narrative. Beeler sums up this notion as she interprets the tattooed body as capable of crossing boundaries in terms of gender and cultural affiliation. But they also serve as markers and narratives of the self. They may symbolize past desires and may even convey an individual’s current desires; they offer access to narratives of suffering and violence, and in this sense they resemble other scars on the body that also serve as a record of a person’s pain. (Beeler 196)

The labor associated with this form of world-making allows these men to enter the narrative and formulate a personalized story that also connects them to group identity. While we see prison
shots of different men, we are only given a shot of their tattoos (37:18). To refuse individualized subjectivity and embody a collective agency, Beeler notes that gang culture uses “clothing or the tattooed body to signify a spirit of resistance” (Beeler 96). By refusing to assimilate into normative citizenship by way of presentation of the self, the MS-13 invests important labor into their look and simultaneously evades normalized labor practices.

In larger discussions of Central American migration, Arturo Arias notes that the Post-9/11 Era incited certain fears in international terrorism for the Central American-Americans. To be a “visible” working-class Latino, he explains, is to be associated with gang membership and international terrorism. If Central American-Americans lived before on the murky margins of those marginal hyphenated others, now they may have made the world of all Latinos equally murky in the eyes of many mainstream Americans obsessed with terrorism or border issues, and translating their traditional foreign-phobia and racism as “homeland security.” (186)

Tattoos, particularly those accompanied only by blurred faces alongside clearly marked bodies within the film, negotiate a form of media and accommodate phobias of terrorism as gangs embody the form of terror these dominant narratives obsess over.

Condéman’s rap song, “De la calle soy,” embodies this form of terror through the counter rhetoric of a collective subjectivity that is completely hinged on the working-class struggle. The song begins and ends with the sound of gunshots, and violence is thus an essential aspect of the song, as these sounds circulate around the narrative and performance. The chorus provides listeners with the singer’s past and future: he is from the street, and he is going to the street. By
positioning the song between past and future, the historical moment of his lyrics become fluid between multiple temporalities. This is important, as specific markers of identity--like time--become muddled and disidentified. By doing this, Condéman loses his individualized subjectivity to represent a collective past, present, and future.

As the song proceeds, he tells us:

preparense q los perros andan sueltos
es mi billete y llegue por el vuelto,
ando revuelto como de costumbre solo
el q se esconde quiere q lo alumbre con esta cosa
la llamrosa como en los tiempos de Somosa

Comparing people to rabid dogs, no specific reference to the MS-13 is made, and within the song it becomes difficult to discern who exactly the ‘bad guys’ are. His own socioeconomic status is constantly emerging from the background of his narrative as he struggles precisely because someone owes him money. Condéman proceeds to take us on a journey by telling us that the person who owes him this money forces him to search for him, and this present moment is interchangeable with the “times of Somoza.” This again takes us to the chorus, where we are told he is from the street, and he is going to the street, and a circular pattern of history emerges that not only plays between multiple temporalities, but also crosses between nationalities. A proud Salvadoran, Condéman’s performance relates him back to the times of the Nicaraguan dictator,

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Prepare yourselves for the dogs that are unleashed/it’s my money and I’m coming back for the change/I’m twisted out like usual/only the one that hides wants me to find him/with fireguns like the times of Somoza

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Somoza. The collective voice Condéman represents, therefore, exists in a fluid time and space in which (lack of) money and capital keep the story moving forward.

Running from “los azules” (the police), his voice transitions to an even clearer collective subjectivity as he begins to conjugate his verbs under the “we” pronoun. “Somos de la izquierda,” he tells us, but the song is only complicated as the next line reverts to his individualized history as he tells us “yo soy el rey de la selva.” Here, he possesses an ownership of the space he inhabits in El Salvador, becoming the king to a land from which he is exiled politically. A new form of working-class aesthetics thus emerges as gangs connect to this sense of individualized ownership of their inhabited space through a collective voice. Furthermore, Condéman refers to his Salvadoran nationality a number of times throughout the song. Much like the titles of the film and memoir referenced in Chapter One of this thesis, his connection to El Salvador is loco, or crazy. In fact, craziness is a theme that permeates the song--his working-class status and the struggle in obtaining what is owed to him becomes an unbelievable reality that can only be defined through vague terms. When he finally explains that people should run, because what is mine is not yours (“q hullan q la milla [/mía] no es la sulla [/suya]”), he evokes a binary between ‘we’ and ‘them.’ The collective voice takes ownership in the song by subverting the ‘they’ voice and marking it as the other, placing his working-class subjectivity at the center of the narrative.

Thus, the rap, tattoos and graffiti we see throughout this chapter bring about a certain political revolution in their resistance to assimilate within popular discourses. These startling appearances and performances force awareness from the larger culture surrounding the MS-13.

\[\text{b We are leftists}\]

\[\text{c I am the king of the jungle}\]
Listeners and viewers are forced to focus on the identity of the gang, and confront the fact that neoliberal capitalism morphs because of their presence. The response is visceral, and thus produces a fascination that is then executed through popular forms of rhetoric, creating a cycle between the dominant and counter discourses both by and about the Mara Salvatrucha.
CONCLUSION

Just two weeks ago, a representative of the Mara Salvatrucha called for a cease-fire between the Salvadoran government and the gang. He sat next to a representative of their historical rival, Calle 18. Both men covered their faces with black bandanas, sunglasses, and hats. Their anonymous identity kept them safe—in every sense of the word. Obscuring their identities saved the gang members from the government finding and imprisoning them; on the other hand, it also protected them from other violent criminal organizations. But their anonymity had another effect: it allowed them to come into public view. Both men sat briefly with journalists from the Washington Post to publicly emphasize that their working together did not signify a sudden truce between the rival gangs. Rather, they called upon the Salvadoran government to end the heightened state of police raids. When asked what this truce would look like, if successful, they responded bleakly that “a response would be support for communities. A stop to the repression” (Washington Post 2:50).

There are few people who believe there is truth behind this cease-fire. The two Salvadoran gangs have proposed truces between themselves and the government multiple times. Most recently, in 2013 the MS-13 in Honduras agreed to lessen their violence in exchange for fewer police raids, giving a poignant speech about the non-gang related violence that the Honduran people must endure on a daily basis. The truce lasted for three months.

By covering their faces, distorting their voices, and filming in a nondescript area, the Washington Post interview appeals to a certain aesthetic that is reminiscent of the videos from multiple terrorist organizations post-9/11. The identity of the Mara Salvatrucha remains obscure, but even without a face or voice, their identity is importantly at the forefront of popular media,
and these videos are circulated through the globalized spheres of social media. Void of tattoos, names, nationality, or any sort of identity marker, the men embody not an individualized subjectivity, but a collective identity that suffers within a community where there is little to no job support.

These videos mark a singular moment among the complicated steps of a cultural unfolding. The multiple narratives I highlight throughout this thesis function as an archive to convey the limitations of the narratives that desire a realistic, authentic portrayal of Latino gang identity. Tattoos, graffiti, and rap resist these transparent forms of identity, and such narratives prove insufficient in their attempts of authenticity. The work involved in these often contradictory aesthetic forms like the memoir and documentary consists of a circular pattern: the Mara Salvatrucha use anti-gang rhetoric advantageously for their own subject formation, but, more interestingly, they also consistently resist these same forms. The result is a circular pattern in which the MS-13 must enter popular discourses through strict forms of custom, logic, and identity. As the MS-13 enters mainstream view, they then counter these discourses through interesting narratives of resistance. While this thesis may not propose a solution to this often violent pattern, I argue that by focusing on these Working-Class bodies as an equal part of a larger conversation of working-class subjectivity, we may come to better understand liminal subjectivities that sprout from conditions of Neoliberal Capitalism. And as videos, blogs, pictures and voices begin to circulate between countries, languages, and people with immediate responses, the dialectic between counter and dominant discourses is slowly changing the way different subaltern identities may be seen in the modern world.
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