

A HISTORY OF THE PHENOMENON OF THE MARAS OF EL SALVADOR, 1971-1992

Vogel Vladimir Castillo, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Roberto Calderón, Major Professor
Sandra Mendiola-García, Committee Member
J. Todd Moyer, Committee Member
Richard B. McCaslin, Chair of the Department
of History
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse
Graduate School

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This thesis grounds its examination of the *maras* of El Salvador in the historical past (1971-1992) rather than the present, which constitutes a departure from current scholarship on the subject. This thesis revises our current understanding of the emergence and development of maras in El Salvador through the recovery, insertion and examination of key local events, conditions, and historical actors of the 1970s and 1980s. From signifying friendship and camaraderie prior to the late 1980s, the maras increasingly became the target of public concern and Salvadoran security forces over the course of the 1980. By the late 1980s the maras increasingly became associated with criminal activity in Salvadoran society and popular culture. To document these changed conditions, this thesis relies extensively on previously untapped and ignored primary sources: newspapers and oral history interviews.

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CHAPTER I

THE PHENOMENON OF THE MARAS OF EL SALVADOR

The academic study of the Central American *maras* and *pandillas* was born with the publication of two works in 1988. In Guatemala labor historian Deborah Levenson led a team of social science investigators in an examination of the *pandillas juveniles* of the capital city of Guatemala known as maras. It was published simultaneously in English and Spanish.¹ In the same year in nearby Nicaragua Jeannette Palacios published a three-page article on the Nicaraguan “pandillas” in *Psicología en Nicaragua*.² The following year El Salvador joined the emergent literature with Karla Hania de Valera’s four-page “case study” on the “proliferation of the juvenile groups with criminal tendencies known popularly as ‘MARAS.’”³ Leticia Salmón closes the list of pioneering works in 1993 with her brief discussion on Honduras’ *pandillas* in her *La violencia en Honduras, 1980-1993*.⁴

A quarter century later the gangs of Central American are a subject of international interest, study, and concern. However, the twenty-five years of scholarship has remained focused on contemporary questions and concerns. What social, economic, political, and cultural factors motivate youths to join a gang? What effects have States policies had on the Central American gang phenomenon? What role does civil society have in gang development? These and other contemporary minded questions dominate our understanding of the gangs of the

¹ Deborah Levenson, *Por sí mismo: Un estudio preliminar de las “Maras” en la ciudad de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Inforpress, 1988); On their own:

² Jeannette Palacios, “Pandillas juveniles caacterización [sic] del problema,” *Psicología en Nicaragua* no.2 (1988).

³ Hanania de Varela, Karla. “El fenómeno de las Maras en El Salvador,” in Hanania, Karla de Varela, *La familia salvadoreña, análisis antropológico-social* (Documento de Trabajo No. 5. San Salvador: Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES), 1989)

⁴ Leticia Salmón, *La violencia en Honduras, 1980-1993* (Tegucigalpa: Centro de Documentacionn de Honduras, 1993).

Central American region. Missing from the current scholarship is a historically grounded examination on the Central American gang phenomenon. Departing from the current scholarship this thesis grounds its examination of the *maras* of El Salvador in the historical past (1971-1992) rather than the present. To document these changed conditions, this thesis relies extensively on previously untapped and ignored primary sources: newspapers and oral history interviews.

What follows is a brief review of the literature relevant to El Salvador's *mara* phenomenon. I have arbitrarily divided the literature into two camps: Salvadoran and non-Salvadoran. The former includes Salvadoran-born and non-Salvadoran researchers who have carried out extensive fieldwork research in El Salvador, either as independent scholars or working with a government or non-governmental organization. Everything else falls under the rubric of non-Salvadoran literature.⁵

Salvadoran Literature, 1989-2014

Published in October 1989 Hanania de Varela's "El fenomeno de las maras en El Salvador" inaugurated the professional study of the *maras* of El Salvador. This four-page "case study" was appended to a larger anthropological study on the Salvadoran family unit. The study concluded more than a decade of violent civil war had weakened the traditional Salvadoran family. One effect was the increase in the number of homes in which only one parent was present in a child's life, which, according to Hanania de Varela, had led to the formation and

⁵ For an earlier historiographical treatment on the methodologies used by the first generation of Salvadoran researchers see, "Portillo, Nelson. "Estudios sobre pandillas juveniles en El Salvador y Centroamérica: Una revisión de su dimensión participativa." *Apuntes de Psicología* 21, no.3 (2003): 475-493.

“proliferación de grupo juveniles con tendencia a delinquir llamados popularmente ‘MARAS.’”⁶

The study is a synthesis of data collected by sociology undergraduate students from the Universidad José Matías Delgado. It is unclear whether the study was for thesis research or if the students were working for or with Varela. This study provides our first and only published objective observation on the maras of El Salvador of the 1980s. Although little in page count, de Varela’s work contains invaluable ethnographic, demographic, social, and economic data that is not available elsewhere. However subsequent researchers have either ignored or been ignorant of this work. It is mentioned in the existing literature no more than a handful of times. Its contents have yet to be evaluated or consulted.⁷

Between 1991 and 1996 four bachelor’s theses were conducted on the maras by university students working in the fields of psychology and sociology. The aim of these undergraduate studies was to obtain objective data on their research subjects, analyze it, and determine what social, economic, and cultural variables motivated youths to join a mara. Of the four works Sandra Argueta et al. was published in 1992 in the Universidad Centroamericana’s (UCA) *Revista de Psicología de El Salvador* in a condensed form.⁸

⁶ Karla Hanania de Varela, “El fenómeno de las Maras en El Salvador.” “proliferation of juvenile groups prone to engage in crime popularly called MARAS.”

⁷ For works in which de Varela’s study is mentioned see: Argueta, Sandra Guadalupe Rosales et al. “Diagnóstico sobre los grupos llamados ‘maras’ en San Salvador. Factores Psicosociales que Prevalen en Los Jóvenes que Los Integran,” (bachelor’s thesis: Universidad Centroamericana, 1991); Nelson Portillo, “Estudios sobre pandillas juveniles en El Salvador y Centroamérica: Una revisión de su dimensión participativa,” *Apuntes de Psicología*.

⁸ Sandra Guadalupe Rosales Argueta et al. “Diagnóstico Sobre Los Grupos Llamados ‘Maras’ en San Salvador,”; Magaña Quiñonez, Alba Luz and Susana Ester Ayala Linares. “La expresión agresiva y violenta de los grupos juveniles denominados maras en los tugurios del municipio de San Marcos, 1980-1991 (bachelor thesis, Universidad Nueva San Salvador, San Salvador, 1993; Montenegro Quintanilla, José Simón, “La delincuencia juvenil y las maras en El Salvador, 1992-1994 (bachelor thesis, Universidad de El Salvador, San Salvador, 1994); Molina López, Norma. Nuevos Problemas Sociales en El Salvador. (bachelor thesis, Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 1996.

The first professionally designed social science research studies were initiated in the mid-1990s. In 1996 la UCA's Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública carried out the first systematic and representative study of the gang members of the San Salvadoran Metropolitan Area. Active gang members, who were trained by UCA staff, carried out the survey work in their neighborhoods and collected a total of 1025 completed questionnaires from active gang members. *Estudios Centroamericanos* published the results in 1996. The study was later expanded in order to collect more data on women gang members. This expanded version was published in 1998 as *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del Gran San Salvador. Más allá de la vida loca*.⁹ At about the same time Smutt and Miranda had begun their more localized investigation of the gangs of San Bartolo, a working-class community from the municipality of Ilopango. The findings from this research were published in their 1998 *El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador*.¹⁰ Carlos Guillermo Ramos' edited *América Central en los noventa: Problemas de juventud* is the third work published in 1998. The volume includes three articles specifically on the gangs of El Salvador. Smutt and Miranda contribute a condensed version of the earlier mentioned work.¹¹ Carlos Guillermo Ramos' takes a broad look at the decade of the 1990s and finds a youth population struggling to incorporate itself in the new post-war

⁹ Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP). "Solidaridad y Violencia: Los Jovenes Pandilleros en el Gran San Salvador," *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)*, 52, No. 585-586, (Julio-Agosto 1997): 695-710; José Miguel Cruz and Nelson Portillo, *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas de San Salvador: Más allá de la vida loca*. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1998).

¹⁰ Smutt, Marcela and Jenny Lissette E. Miranda, *El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador* (San Salvador: El Salvador, UNICEF, FLASCO, 1998).

¹¹ For a third publication based on the same study see their Marcela Smutt and Jenny Lissette E. Mirana, "El Mundo de las Pandillas." *Tendencias* 67 (1997-98): 23-25.

landscape. Perhaps the most interesting and unique of the three included articles is Savenije and Lodewijk's examination of the rationality of the use of violence by gang members.¹²

Rounding out the first generation of Salvadoran works is the 1999 published *Jóvenes sedientos de amor*. Unlike the above works *Jóvenes sedientos de amor* was not a rigorous social science investigation. Rather it is a monograph containing brief life histories of teenagers and young adults from the municipality of Ilobasco who belonged to local gangs or not. The monograph grew out of a local initiative to draw youths away from the streets and into a youth centered artisan workshop. This work gives one of the few opportunities to hear youths speak for themselves talk about their experience within the gang.¹³

The first generation of Salvadoran writing was dominated by social science research. Studies were designed for the collection and analysis of empirical data from which informed policy recommendations could be formulated. Questionnaires, participant observation, formal and informal individual and group interviews were all used in the collection of data. Active gang members were enlisted as co-researchers and co-analysts in two studies. These works provided us the first objective look at who the gang members were and what social, economic, political, and cultural factors explained their decision to join a gang.

Since Hanania de Varela's "four page case study" was published a quarter century ago little has changed in the literature in terms of research design, approach or focus. Social scientists from the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology continue to dominate the

¹² Wim Savenije and Hein F.M. Lodewijks "Aspecto expresivos e instrumentales salvadoreñas: una investigación de campo," in *América Central en los noventa: Problemas de Juventud*. San Salvador: FLACSO Programa El Salvador, 1998.

¹³ Movimiento de Jóvenes Encuentristas, *Jóvenes sedientos de amor: Voces de Ilobasco* (El Salvador: JME, Impresos Gráficos, 1999).

study of the Salvadoran maras. More recently journalists and criminologists have taken an interest in the subject. However, the focus of these works remains rooted in present concerns. What occurred in the past is of little relevance to contemporary researchers and investigators, who are concerned with understanding the maras as they are in the present. However, the absence of a historically informed understanding of the maras has led to the creation of a very popular narrative in which the appearance and development of maras in El Salvador was largely due to outside influences.

Made in the U.S.A

A key argument of this thesis is that the focus on the present has distorted our understanding of the historical development of the Salvadoran mara phenomenon. This is illustrated by a popular narrative in which the emergence of the maras in El Salvador is traced to the mass migration of Salvadorans to the United States from the late 1970s through the 1980s as a result of political violence and economic dislocation. Salvadorans scattered across the United States, but a substantial number settled in Southern California, especially around the Los Angeles region. There a small but significant number of Salvadorans joined existing L.A. street gangs, like the 18th street, or formed one of their own, la mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, the most recognized. In the 1990s, with the end of the Salvadoran civil war and the intensification of the U.S. government's war against crime, federal officials deported thousands of undocumented Salvadoran immigrants back to their country of origin, a portion of which had ties to L.A. street gangs. According to the Made in the U.S.A. narrative, repatriated Salvadorans introduced their Los Angeles street gang culture to the youth's of El Salvador's poorest neighborhoods, who soon adopted two of the foreign gang identities: la mara Salvatrucha and

the 18th Street. By the end of the decade la mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street were the two largest and dominant gangs in the country.¹⁴

There is little doubt of the profound and indelible impact the arrival and adoption of a foreign gang culture had on the development of the Salvadoran mara phenomenon. The fact that the presently two largest and most notorious gangs in the country were formed on the streets of Los Angeles speaks volume. However, a major weakness with the Made in the U.S.A. narrative is the absence of any meaningful discussion on the role played by local conditions, events, and social actors. Deported Salvadorans did not find a tabula rasa upon which to transfer their American made street gang identities and culture. This thesis demonstrates that years before La mara Salvatrucha or La Dieciocho (as the 18th Street was now called) became household names in the country, juvenile gangs, or “maras,” were already in existence and had their own locally formed youth-gang subculture, the roots of which can be traced to as early as the 1970s. During the 1970s different types of publicly and street oriented groups formed, existed, and dissipated. These earlier “maras” co-existed and interacted with one another, establishing customs and traditions subsequent generations would adopt and adapt for their own purposes. But these maras aroused little public or law enforcement concern. Over the course of the 1980s this changed as the image of the maras had been linked with crime violence, drugs, and other socially unacceptable practices and behaviors. By the end of the 1980s the local maras of El Salvador had become a growing issue of public and law enforcement concern.

¹⁴ See Campo-Flores, Arian. “The Most Dangerous Gang in America.” *Newsweek*, March 28, 2005: 23-25. (*Foreign Affairs* 2005) How the Street Gangs took Central America;

This earlier and local component of the Salvadoran mara phenomenon has received little attention in the literature. Save for Karla Hania de Valera, the first generation of Salvadoran researchers made little mention on the earlier maras or the local conditions from which they emerged. More recently two authors have offered their observations. Both Cruz and Savenije's interest in this earlier period relates to each author's respective model for gang development and evolution. Both agree the Salvadoran mara phenomenon has passed through three key evolutionary stages. Here we are concerned only with the first stage. Both authors acknowledge gangs, or "maras," existed in El Salvador before the mass arrival of repatriated Salvadorans with ties to U.S. gangs. But they tell us little about what these maras were like. Or what they did? Or how they were perceived by the general public? Savenije tells us only that the members of these "*pandillas locales tradicionales*" (traditional local gangs) "passed most of their time together," enjoyed one another's company, and "maintained a rivalry with other gangs." Cruz gives a similar description of these maras of the 1980s, adding that earlier studies showed local "street gangs were already considered to be causing a serious problem...."¹⁵ Both go on trace the first stage in development to the contact between local Salvadoran maras and the Made in U.S.A. Salvadoran gang members in the early 1990s, which resulted in the abandonment of the Salvadoran local gang culture in favor of the U.S. style. For both this process of transculturation is the first stage of evolution for the maras. Although both correctly identify this critical event in the mara phenomenon's development, neither provides a substantive discussion on the local Salvadoran maras. Moreover their observations and

¹⁵ José Miguel Cruz. "Central American Maras: From Youth Street Gangs to Transnational Protection Rackets." *Global Crime* 11, no. 4 (2010): 384; Wim Savenije, *Marras y barras: pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica* (San Salvador: FLACSO-Programa El Salvador, 2009), 105.

descriptions of these earlier maras are based on little, if any, supporting evidence. Drawing from contemporary Salvadoran newspapers and oral history interviews the following these shows a much more serious public concern on these groups than either author suggests.

This following thesis is organized into four chapters. Chapters II and III are intended as an introduction to the word mara and as a corrective to the lack of scholarly interest in the term. Although mara is presently considered a term for transnational criminal gangs, the word has not always had this meaning in Salvadoran popular speech. Decades before acquired this popular use mara meant a “group of friends.” Understanding the shift in meaning will lead us to a closer approximation of when and how the maras were converted into pariahs of the state. To this end Chapter II offers a historical examination of the origin of the word mara. Chapter III is a historical examination of Salvadoran use of the word mara.

CHAPTER II

FACT, FICTION AND THE FABRICATION OF THE MARABUNTA ANTS

Our present understanding of the origin of the word *mara* is framed around three core premises. The first premise asserts *mara* is derived from the word *marabunta*, the name of a particular species of New World ant. The second premise deals with the derivation of *mara* from *marabunta*. Premise two asserts Guatemalans and Salvadorans incorporated the term *marabunta* into their respective popular vocabularies following the debut of the 1954 Hollywood film *The Naked Jungle*, in which a South American jungle plantation owner battles a horde of “marabunta ants” that consume everything in their path. Drawing from this image of a multitude of destructive ants, *marabunta* was refashioned as a popular referent meaning a “large crowd of people or things.” The third premise states the term *mara*, meaning a “group of friends,” was later derived from *marabunta*. These three premises form the standard etymological account, which I have termed the *mara/marabunta* theory.¹

¹ The following works all contain elements of this theory: Lorena Cuerno, “El lado oscuro de la calle: El caso extremo de las maras,” *Revista de Estudios Sobre Juventud* 4, no. 10 (January-March 2000): 63n1; J. Merino, “Las maras en Guatemala,” in ERIC, IDESO, IDES and UDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica* (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001), 112; Carlos Alberto Elbert, “La violencia social en América Latina a través del caso centroamericano de las bandas juveniles maras,” *Revista CENIPEC* 23 (January-December 2004), 14; Manfred Liebel, “Pandillas juveniles en Centroamérica o la difícil búsqueda de justicia en una sociedad violenta,” *Desacatos* 14 (Spring-Summer, 2004): 92n10; Jorge Nowalski Rowinski, *Seguridad humana y medios de vida sostenibles en Centroamérica: El caso de las maras* (Costa Rica: La Segura y Asociados Editores, 2005), 19n7; Juan Carlos Gutiérrez Narváez, *Ruta transnacional: A San Salvador por Los Ángeles: Espacios de interacción juvenil en un contexto migratorio* (México: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, 2007), 18; Marco Lara Klahr, *Hoy te toca la muerte: El imperio de las maras visto desde dentro* (México: Planeta, 2006), 98; Frederic Faux, *Les maras, gangs d'enfants: Violences urbaines en Amérique centrale* (Paris: Autrement 2006), 141; Alberto Martín Álvarez, Ana Fernández Zubieta and Karla Villarreal Sotelo, “Difusión transnacional de identidades juveniles en la expansión de las maras centroamericanas,” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 30 (2007): 104; José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, “La mara es mi familia,” in *Las maras: Identidades juveniles al límite* (México, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa, 2007), 34-104; Benjamín Zamudio Hermida, *La verdad de la Mara Salvatrucha* (México: N.P., 2007), 23; Dennis Rogers, “Pandillas y maras: Protagonistas y chivos expiatorios,” in *Broderes descubidos y vagos alucinados: Una década con las pandillas nicaragüenses 1997-2007*, José Luis Rocha and Dennis Rogers, eds., (Managua: Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) Managua, 2008), 174; Laura Etcharren, *Esperando las maras: Estado embrionario en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 2009) 60; Hugo Ángeles Cruz, “Las bandas maras

This chapter is a critical evaluation of the mara/marabunta theory, a set of three premises form the standard etymological account for the word mara. Although widely accepted the mara/marabunta theory has been uncritically accepted. Upon closer scrutiny the first premise of the theory reveals is threaded with elements of fact and fiction. AlthoThis chapter It is divided into three sections. Section I is a more elaborate discussion of the historiography of the mara/marabunta theory. I will underscore commonalities and differences. In the case of El Salvador I argue the mara/marabunta theory is a form of culturally derived false knowledge. Finally, I point out premise one contains elements of fact and fiction. Section II and III is a socially constructed false fact fabricated from elements of fact and fiction.

Mara/marabunta Theory

The three key premises of the mara/marabunta theory were documented as early as 1976 in an article entitled “Breve estudio sobre el léxico del ‘caló’ en Guatemala.” Of the more than two hundred words identified and defined in Luis Luján Muñoz’s article is the word mara,

Salvatruchas en la región fronteriza del Soconusco, Chiapas,” in *La frontera sur: Reflexiones sobre el Soconusco, Chiapas y sus problemas ambientales, poblacionales y productivos*, eds., José E. Sánchez and Ramón Jarquín (Tapachula: Ecosur, 2004), 144; Robert Brennenman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 30; Luz E. Nagle, “Criminal Gangs in Latin America: The Next Great Threat to Regional Security and Stability?” *Texas Hispanic Journal of Law and Policy* 14, no. 7 (2008): 9; Tom Díaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 23, 24. For others who suggest marabunta ants are found in the Central American region, see: Maria del Mar Cerdas R., “La verdad sobre la mara,” *Medicina, Vida y Salud* (April 2006), 13; Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 268n3; Sarah Garland, *Gangs in Garden City: How Immigration, Segregation, and Youth Violence are Changing America’s Suburbs* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 60; Alejandro José María Palma and Joseph Rico, “Pandillas transnacionales: seguridad a través de las fronteras,” *Si Somos Americanos. Revista de Estudios Transfronterizos* 21, no. 1 (2011): 109; Thomas Bruneau, introduction to *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2; Carlos B. Cordova, *The Salvadoran Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 131; Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, “Adscripciones juveniles y violencias transnacionales: Cholos y maras,” in *Las maras: Identidades juveniles al limite* (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa, 2007), 128-129 ft 5. See also his “Etnografías de violencia y muerte: La Mara Salvatrucha y el Barrio 18,” *Iztapalapa: Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades* 31, no. 69 (July-December 2010): 89; Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, “Violencia simbólica y significación de los cuerpos: Tatuajes en jóvenes,” *Revistas Temas Sociológicos*, no. 11 (2006): 71n2.

which, according to the author, had been derived from the term *marabunta*, a term taken from a 1960s movie about “giant ants that attack populations and destroy everything they encounter as they march through the Amazon jungle.” Guatemalan audiences reworked this image of the marauding ants into a new meaning for *marabunta*: a “large group of people [that are] in some measure destructive.” Some time later *mara*, meaning “[e]l pueblo, la gente, la muchachada,” was derived from *marabunta*. He associated use of the term with the “younger generation” (*la juventud*).²

In the Central American *mara* literature the *mara/marabunta* theory first appeared in Deborah Levenson’s 1988 pioneering study *Por su mismo: Un estudio preliminar de las “maras” en la ciudad de Guatemala*. Drawing on oral testimonies Levenson argues the derivation of *mara* from *marabunta* occurred in September 1985 following popular protests in Guatemala City against government proposed increases to public transportation. Both informants, one a member of a local *mara* and the other an official with the Guatemalan National Police, recalled the news media and law enforcement called the throng of protestors as “la marabunta.” Explained Calixto, a member of la mara Plaza Vivar: “*Se recuerde usted que decían los chavos de prensa y de la tira ‘allí viene la marabunta!’*” (Do you remember when the guys from the press and the cops cried ‘here come la marabunta’). Calixto also mentioned how he and his group of friends, who had participated in the protests, had adopted their group name afterwards. The term *mara*, he explained, had been taken from *marabunta* and Plaza Vivar was the name of the commercial center the group had been hanging out at for years, he explained. According to

² Luís Luján Muñoz, “Breve estudio sobre el léxico del ‘caló’ en Guatemala,” *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia* 49 (1976), 143-144, 152. This article was reprinted in Luís Luján Muñoz, *Breve estudio sobre el léxico del “caló” en Guatemala* (Guatemala: Serviprensa Centroamericana, 1980).

Carlos Rafael Soto, the Chief of Public Relations of the Guatemalan National Police, the term marabunta had been taken from the name of a 1960s Brazilian movie called *Marabunta*, which was about “red ants from Brazil.”³

Before continuing let us pause to discuss some of the similarities and differences between the two accounts as well as their weaknesses. Both accounts contain the three core premises. Also note that while Levenson does not provide a definition for *marabunta*, her example of its popular usage does conform to Luján Muñoz’s definition of a decade earlier. Both also place the movie’s appearance in Guatemala in the 1960s. There are two differences. The first deals with the geographical location of the “marabunta ants.” Luján Muñoz locates them in the Amazon jungle, while Levenson’s places them specifically in Brazil. A more glaring difference is Levenson’s mistaken claim that *mara* was derived from *marabunta* in 1986; Luján Muñoz shows this occurred at least a decade earlier. They both also say it is a 1960s movie, when in fact it was released in 1954.

There are repeated references of the mara/marabunta theory within the literature. A difference in opinion related to the “marabunta ants” geographical location keeps the literature from being unanimous. One camp claims they are indigenous to Central American, while another to somewhere in South America. Both are incorrect. Marabunta ants are science fiction. But belief in them is not. Otherwise when Ana Aran wrote in her influential “How the Street Gangs Took Central America” “marabuntas” were a “deadly species of local ant” she was

³ Deborah Levenson, *Por si mismo: Un estudio preliminar de las “maras” en la ciudad de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Inforpress Centroamericana, Cuadernos de Investigación No. 4), 11. See also Deborah Levenson, *Adios Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 57.

deliberately disseminating false information. Or was she misinformed?⁴ Similarly, Thomas Bruneau, in his introduction to the recently published *Maras: Gang Violence and Security Challenges in Central America*, describes a marabunta as “a fierce tenacious type of Central American ant.”⁵ Digging deeper these two authors have found the scientific classification of “marabunta ants”: *Eciton burchelli*, which they describe as a large and highly aggressive New World army ant common to Central America.”⁶

Most advocates of the mara/marabunta theory trace “marabunta ants” to South America. Three different geographical locations are generally given. Many follow Luján Muñoz by suggesting “marabunta ants” are “the name given to the Amazonia soldier ants that destroy everything in their path in the rainforest.”⁷ Others follow Levenson and find “marabunta ants” are indigenous to Brazil. According to a Mexican researcher marabunta are “giants ants” found in “Africa and Brazil that destroy everything in their path.”⁸

In the case of El Salvador the mara/marabunta theory is a culturally derived form of knowledge. The Salvadoran press alluded to one of the core premises of the theory as early as 1992 in an article published by the now defunct daily *La Noticia*. Entitled “Mara: Uncontrollable

⁴ Ana Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 3 (May-June 2005): 99.

⁵ Thomas Bruneau, “Introduction,” *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2; Al Valdez, “The Origins of Southern California Gangs,” in *Maras: Security Challenges*.

⁶ Luz E. Nagle, “Criminal Gangs in Latin America: The Next Great Threat to Regional Security and Stability?” *Texas Hispanic Journal of Law and Policy* 14, no. 7 (2008): 9; see also Tom Díaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 23, 24. For other examples, see: Maria del María Cerdas R., “La verdad sobre la mara,” *Medicina, Vida y Salud* (April 2006), 13; Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 268n3. Sarah Garland, *Gangs in Garden City: How Immigration, Segregation, and Youth Violence are Changing America’s Suburbs* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 60; Alejandro José María Palma and Joseph Rico, “Pandillas transnacionales: seguridad a través de las fronteras,” *Si Somos Americanos. Revista de Estudios Transfronterizos* 21, no. 1 (2011): 109;

⁷ Carlos B. Córdova, *The Salvadoran Americans*, 131; see also José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, “La mara es mi familia,” in *Las maras: Identidades juveniles al límite*, 34; Carlos Alberto Elbert, “La violencia social en América Latina a través del caso centroamericano de las bandas juveniles maras,” 14;

⁸ Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, “Violencia simbólica y significación de los cuerpos: Tatuajes en jóvenes,” 71n2. See also,

Phenomenon,” the term *mara*, which in the article refers to criminally inclined juvenile gangs, is said to have possibly been “derived from *marabunta*,” the name of “a type of ant from Brazil that...constitutes a terribly destructive entity. The author makes no mention of when the derivation of *mara* took place.⁹ Three years later in an article entitled “Mara viene de marabunta,” *El Diario Co-Latino* asserted *mara* had been derived from the word *marabunta*, the name of a “very aggressive” and “large” (*enorme*) type of ant found in the jungles of the Amazon. This term had been taken from a “1960s Hollywood film.”¹⁰ Just recently *La Prensa Gráfica* informed its readership that *mara* had been derived from the word *marabunta*, the name of the “devouring ant of the Amazon.”¹¹

Salvadoran researchers and investigators first alluded to the *mara*/*marabunta* theory in 1995 with two works, one by a professional psychologist and the other by an undergraduate student. Although neither provides supporting evidence for their claim, one author does give some indication of the source of this information. Francisco Andrés Escobar writes: “According to how they taught us in school, ‘*mara*’ is an apocope...of the word *marabunta*...the name of very aggressive ants...[that] when they attack, nothing is spared.”¹² Three years later in their *El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador*, Smutt and Miranda noted in passing of a “belief held by some” that *mara* had been derived from “*marabunta*...the name of the massive migration of

⁹ “Maras: Un fenómeno incontrolable,” *La Noticia*, May 23, 1992 in Recopilación de artículos sobre las maras en El Salvador (Biblioteca “Dr. Alfonso Rochac).

¹⁰ “Mara viene de marabunta,” *Diario Co-Latino*, May 29, 1995.

¹¹ Las pandillas centroamericanas, una mafia con mil cabezas,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, September 10, 2010. For other examples see, “ ‘Las Maras’: De la agitación en las aulas al terror en las calles,” *El Diario De Hoy*, September 15, 1993, 8; “Made in the USA: El terror de las maras,” *El Mundo*, February 1, 2003; Carlos Balaguer, “La triste marabunta humana,” *El Diario de Hoy*, September 4, 2003; “Pandillas de la región infiltradas en México,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 12, 2004; “Maras: Flagelo de EE.UU.,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 17, 2004; Jorge Ávalos, “La palabra mara,” *Vértice*, February 5, 2006.

¹² Francisco Andrés Escobar, “Por mi madre vivo y por mi barrio muero: Una aproximación al fenómeno de las maras,” *Estudios Centroamericanos* 51, no. 570 (1996): 334; Norma Molina López, “Nuevos problemas sociales en El Salvador,” (Bachelor thesis: Universidad de Centroamericana, San Salvador, 1996), 72.

legionary ants that devour everything they find in their path....”¹³ Although my reading of this passage is that the authors are only noting that some investigators subscribe to this belief and that they are not necessarily endorsing it, others have interpreted otherwise.¹⁴ Other Salvadoran investigators similarly accept the core set of beliefs that make up the mara/marabunta theory.¹⁵

Thus, it should be of no surprise to find belief in the mara/marabunta theory among the general Salvadoran population. In several-recorded oral history interviews, and countless more informal conversations, most, if not all, of my interlocutors gave the three premises of the mara/marabunta theory. “The etymology that I know of that word,” explained then fifty-four year old Herbert Vaquerano, “is of a gigantic (*gigantesca*) ant that exists in the Amazon called marabunta. Apocopated it becomes mara.... But these ants are terrible...they devour everything [and] anything.”¹⁶ Sixty-three year old Pedro Pramos’ account was very similar, though these marabuntas are Brazilian in origin. “Mara is like an abbreviation or apocopate of the word marabunta...[which] comes from the Portuguese. Marabuntas are a type of ant that move through the jungle, thousands and thousands at a time, that grab live animals or humans and kill them....”¹⁷ Asked of his understanding of the origin of the term, Héctor Gómez replied: “What I remember is a movie about marabunta. [A movie] about a swarm of animals, bees, or ants. I

¹³ Marcela Smutt and Jenny Lissette Miranda, *El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador* (San Salvador, UNICEF – FLACSO-Programa El Salvador, 1998), 25n18.

¹⁴ See for example, Nelson Portillo, “Estudios sobre pandillas juveniles en El Salvador y Centroamérica: una revisión de su dimensión participativa,” *Apuntes de Psicología* 21, no. 3 (2003): 477n1; Sonja Wolf, *Propuesta para la prevención de la violencia juvenil en El Salvador* (San Salvador: FESPAD Ediciones, 2007), 11n1; Chantal Lemire, “The Shadow of Violence: Youth Gangs in El Salvador,” (Master Thesis: Carleton University, 2001),

¹⁵ See for example, Amparo Marroquín Parducci, “Pandillas y prensa en El Salvador,” in *Violence y medios: Propuesta iberamericanos de periodismo policial* (Mexico City: Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia (Insyde), 79.

¹⁶ Herbert Vaquerano, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, July 23, 2012.

¹⁷ Pedro Pramos, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, La Libertad, El Salvador, July 28, 2012.

don't remember what they were, only that they gave an idea about a group that attacked. From that association of a large number of things, I guess, is where we got mara."¹⁸ Others gave similar accounts and descriptions of the "marabunta ants."¹⁹

The preceding discussion has attempted to illustrate the widespread acceptance of the mara/marabunta theory and in the belief of the existence of "marabunta ants." And in the case of El Salvador I attempted to show belief in both is embedded in Salvadoran society and is a form of culturally derived knowledge. However, as the remainder of this chapter will argue such creatures are not part of our "natural world" but inventions of Hollywood cinema that contemporaries believed truly existed. The fabrication of the belief of marabunta ants is detailed below. Let us begin with a historically centered discussion on *The Naked Jungle* and the fabrication of "marabunta ants."

The Invention of "Marabunta Ants"

The movie that spawned the "marabunta ants" is Paramount Picture's 1954 action-adventure romantic drama *The Naked Jungle*, a cinematic adaptation of Carl Stephenson's classic short story "Leiningen Versus the Ants," published by *Esquire Magazine* in 1938. Set in the Brazilian wilderness at the turn of the nineteenth century, "Leiningen Versus the Ants" is an action-adventure tale centered on Charles Leiningen's pyrrhic battle against an army of sentient ants that threaten to destroy the plantation he lords over. The tale begins with the local District Commissioner visiting Leiningen to warn him about an approaching horde of army ants and

¹⁸ Héctor Gómez, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, January 20, 2008.

¹⁹ See, for example, the following interviews:

urge him to flee. "They're not creatures you can fight – they're an elemental – an 'act of God!' Ten miles long, two miles wide – ants, nothing but ants! And every single one of them a fiend from hell; before you can spit three times they'll eat a full-grown buffalo to the bones."

Leiningen scoffs at the commissioner's pleas to retreat; instead he decides to confront and defeat the "ravenous insects" with his "human intelligence," which had already conquered the other "elementals" of the Brazilian wilderness. Yet as Leiningen soon discovers these "flesh-eating" ants prove to be formidable opponents, for they easily defeat Leiningen's defensive measure. After multiple defeats and seeing no other viable option for victory Leiningen decides to dynamite the damn he built to hold back the fury and power of the Rio Negro. His hopes of winning are placed in destroying the dam and unleashing a deluge of water to drown the ants; this will also destroy his plantation. The tale ends with Leiningen unconscious and "laying on his bed," it is unknown if the wounds he has received from his battle with the flesh-eating ants are fatal. He opens his eyes, and asks, "Everything in order?" They're gone," replies his nurse. Leiningen takes a sleeping aid and falls asleep.²⁰

Shortly after its initial publication Stephenson's "Leiningen Versus the Ants" was republished in at least two short story anthologies, one of which was compiled by Alfred Hitchcock.²¹ Stephenson's tale would later spawn several radio adaptations in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the CBS Radio series *Escape*, which aired from 1947 to 1954 and broadcast over 200 radio adventure dramas, aired three radio dramatizations of Stephenson's tale: two in 1948 and a third in 1949. Two radio stars of the period, William Conrad and Gerald Mohr,

²⁰ Carl Stephenson, "Leiningen Versus the Ants," *Esquire* (December, 1938).

²¹ Herbert A. Wise and Phyllis Fraser, *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (New York: Random House, 1944); Alfred Hitchcock, *Alfred Hitchcock's Fireside Book of Suspense* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947).

played the role of Charles Leiningen. All of the radio dramatizations were straightforward adaptations of the original; no significant changes were made.²²

In March 1954 Paramount Pictures released its big screen adaptation of Stephenson's popular tale. For the Hollywood version Charlton Heston, a young and rising Hollywood star, was cast to play Charles Leiningen, while Eleanor Parker, the young and rising Hollywood starlet, played Joanna Leiningen. William Conrad also appeared in the movie as the District Commissioner. But unlike earlier adaptations, Hollywood's take on Stephenson's tale made several changes and modifications to the original. Fearing the original title would "scare" "sensitive ladies" from seeing the movie executives at Paramount changed the title to *The Naked Jungle*.²³ New scenes, characters, and subplots were also added. For example, the character of Joanna Leiningen, whom Charles Leiningen has married through proxy and arrives to the South American jungle to meet her new husband for the first time, is not in the original short story. A third and, for our purposes, more important modification to the original was the decision to replace the generic term ant with the term "marabunta." This substitution, as will be demonstrated below, would have global repercussions.²⁴

Paramount Pictures and theatre owners made every effort to underscore the movie's realness. Paramount Pictures billed *The Naked Jungle* as an action-adventure romantic drama.²⁵ In a two-page ad taken out in the industry trade publication *Boxoffice Magazine* Paramount Pictures described *The Naked Jungle* as a "Man-woman conflict and attraction. The Brazilian

²² "Leiningen Versus the Ants," *Escape*, CBS Radio. Several recordings are available online. See, for example, <http://www.retroist.com/2012/09/30/retro-radio-memories-escape-leiningen-versus-the-ants-1947/> [accessed

²³ Aline Mosby, "1,500 Ants are Playing Leading Roles in Paramount Movie 'The Naked Jungle,'" *Avalanche-Journal*, May 10, 1953, 7.

²⁴ *The Naked Jungle*, directed by Byron Haskin (Hollywood: Paramount Home Entertainment Pictures, 2004), DVD.

²⁵ "You can depend on Paramount," *Variety*, November 25, 1953, 14.

jungle in tropically lush Technicolor. A star team to bring the heart of its love story to the boiling point. And then a spectacular climax, devised by Producer George Pal, out-thrilling anything in 'Destination Moon,' 'When Worlds Collide' or 'The War of the Worlds.' Using *realism* [emphasis in original], not fantasy, Pal's depiction of the menacing Marabunta is an unforgettable miracle of entertainment!"²⁶ Theatre owners similarly played up the movie's action-adventure and romantic drama aspects as well as underscoring the realness of the movie and its exotic antagonists. One common advertisement for the film depicts a disheveled Heston tightly embracing a distressed Parker, whom Heston is about to kiss.²⁷ Surrounding the two are indeterminate blocks of black, which represent the dreaded *marabunta*. The following caption appears below the two:

There were only two things on earth for him to conquer...with his bare hands, Leiningen had carved an empire from the South American jungle...but now he had to tame the two most powerful forces nature ever threw at him: The MARABUNTA – a living horror twenty miles long and two miles wide – and the fiery New Orleans woman, he'd purchased for a bride!²⁸

A review of contemporary newspapers from around the United States shows further show movie theatre owners billed the movie to attract attention. For example, *The Cedar Rapids Tribune* noted: "Reports have it that this strange sounding name [marabunta] is the term used for a strange natural phenomenon of the tropics that occurs in the South American

²⁶ "From Paramount in March...", *Boxoffice Magazine*, February 20, 1954.

²⁷ "Advertisement," *Variety*, January 6, 1954, 23.

²⁸ See *New York Times*, April 2 1954, 22. For other contemporary mentions of *The Naked Jungle* see, "Naked Jungle in Newspapers," (<http://eleanor-parker.blogspot.com/2012/08/naked-jungle-in-newspapers.html>) [accessed

wilderness.”²⁹ Another reviewer described the marabunta as “the silent scourge that annihilates everything in its path.” It is the “ghastliest force ever known to man,” and it a “real thing.”³⁰ Still another said the marabunta was “known to the natives of South America as the most destructive force on the face of the earth.” It went on to claim that capturing these “crawling agents of the devil” required a camera crew to fly to a small island of Panama, “where colonies of these terrifying insects are to be found.”³¹ One last example emphasized that what made the *marabunta* so “terrifying is that it’s a real thing. It is no marauder from Mars or figment of the fiction writer’s imagination. It is very definitely real.” No doubt other newspapers from around the country similarly published accounts that portrayed the marabunta as being “very definitely [a] real” thing.³²

Movie critics generally gave *The Naked Jungle* favorable reviews. Industry trade magazine *Variety* described the movie as a “tried-and-found-true romantic drama formula... that mixes in jungle adventure with a science fiction touch.” Parker is touted as being “particularly good,” while Heston “hit his stride about the halfway mark after his character becomes more human and understandable to the ticket-buyer.”³³ Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* was unimpressed with George Pal’s “tricked-up climax,” calling them “no better (and no worse)” than other “cataclysms devised.” However, he was moved by the romantic drama between Heston and Parker, which he found particularly enjoyable and worth the price

²⁹ “Jungle Mystery and Guerrilla War Co-Featured at Paramount,” *The Cedar Rapids Tribune* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), April 15, 1954, 2.

³⁰ “‘Naked Jungle’ to Play July 1 and 2 at Shapiro,” *The Daily News* (Huntingdon and Mount Union, Pennsylvania) June 28, 1954, 6.

³¹ “Pre-Production, Planning Went into ‘Jungle,’ ” *The Rocky Mount Telegram* (Rocky Mount, North Carolina), June 20, 1954, 4B.

³² “Amusement: What Press Agents Say About Coming Attractions,” *Sentinel* (Fitchburg, Massachusetts), May 5, 1954, 4.

³³ “Film Review: The Naked Jungle,” *Variety*, February 17, 1954, 6.

of admission.³⁴ An Australian critic, who was a fan of Stephenson's original, called the addition of Parker's character as "romantic nonsense," lamenting the ants had not been brought out "soon enough!"³⁵

However, not all contemporary viewers were deceived into believing in the existence of "marabunta ants." Two months after *The Naked Jungle* was released, the American Museum of Natural History published a review of movie in its official publication, *Natural History*, a magazine geared toward a general readership. The movie review appeared in its regularly featured column "The Screen," where experts from the fields of "nature, geography, and exploration" offered "[a]uthentic comments on [contemporary] films." John C. Pallister of the museum's Department of Entomology commented how the jungle of the film "looks more like the Florida everglades than a [South American] Rio Negro landscape." The film's portrayal of the indigenous people, observed Dr. Harry Tschopik, the Assistant Curator of Ethnology, "bears no resemblance to that of any Indians on the face of the globe." Two experts on animal behavior noted the way "the ants are made to operate in this film...are a purely fantastic menace, which has no counterpart in nature...they could not strip the plants as shown in the film." Since the movie was intended for amusement and not edification, the article pronounced *The Naked Jungle* as "thoroughly entertaining," in spite of problems with authenticity.³⁶

Released on 3 March 1954 *The Naked Jungle* would go on to become one of Paramount Pictures biggest draws of the year. It spawned its own radio dramatization in July, when the Lux Radio Theater broadcast a radio version of the movie in which Charlton Heston reprised his role

³⁴ Bosley Crowther, "Three Films Arrive; 'Naked Jungle' Opens At the Mayfair Globe Shows Western of Civil War Time," *New York Times*, April 3, 1954.

³⁵ "Ants Stop Film Feud," *The Argus*, October 18, 1954, 4.

³⁶ "The Screen," *Natural History*, May 1954, 237. See also "New Films," *Newsweek*, March 29, 1954.

as Leiningen and Donna Reed played Joanna Leiningen.³⁷ In January 1955 *Variety* listed *The Naked Jungle* as the 26th highest grossing movie of the year with \$2,250,000 in box office sales in the United States and Canada.³⁸

The immediate success of *The Naked Jungle* no doubt convinced Paramount executives to invest the necessary capital to adapt, promote, and distribute the movie internationally. The movie was playing in London theatres as early as June 1954. By the end of the year European audiences in Zurich, Berlin, France, and elsewhere were watching Heston battle the “marabunta ants.” As early as October Australia audiences were screening *The Naked Jungle*. By January 1955 moviegoers in Madrid would be treated to the movie under a Spanish adapted title *Cuando Ruge la Marabunta*. In Mexico City the movie had raked in an estimated \$60,125.00 as of March 1955.³⁹

Proponents of the mara/marabunta theory have argued *The Naked Jungle* also debuted in El Salvador and Guatemala. A range of dates have been suggested. Some have given the 1960s as its first appearance in both countries. Others have suggested the 1970s; still others have traced its initial debut to the 1980s. All are incorrect.⁴⁰ *The Naked Jungle* made its debut in El Salvador almost one year to the day from its original U.S. release. *El Diario de Hoy* revealed the Sunday before its debut that “Paramount’s super spectacular” *Marabunta* was to premier

³⁷ For a recording of this broadcast see, <http://ia600202.us.archive.org/6/items/Lux19/Lux-540607-49m08s-885hrt-NakedJungle-CHestonDReed.mp3> [accessed

³⁸ “Pictures: 1954 Boxoffice Champs,” *Variety*, January 5, 1955, 59.

³⁹ “International: Wet Whitsuntide Ups London Film Biz; ‘Heron’ Lofty 17G, ‘Guitar’ Hep \$8,500; ‘Phantom’ 10G, lucky’ 11G, 2d,” *Variety*, June 16, 1954, 13; “Chatter: Zurich,” *Variety*, September 1, 1954, 86; “Chatter: Berlin,” *Variety*, October 27, 1954, 24; “Guía del Espectador en Madrid,” *La Vanguardia Española*, January 22, 1955, 7; Ants Stop Film Feud,” *The Argus (Australia)*, October 18, 1954, 4; “Cantinflas’ Lone 1954 Pic Tops Mex Grosses,” *Variety*, March 16, 1955, 12.

⁴⁰ Luís Luján Muñoz, “Breve estudio sobre el léxico del ‘caló’ en Guatemala,” 144; Levenson, “*Por si mismos*,” 11; “Mara viene de marabunta,” *Diario Co-Latino*, May 29, 1995; Jorge Ávalos, “La palabra mara,” *Vértice*, February 5, 2006; Sonja Wolf, “The Politics of Gang Control: NGO Advocacy in Post-War El Salvador,” (PhD dissertation: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2008), 370.

on 3 March 1955 at 6:30 p.m. at el Cine Apolo, a one-screen theatre located in the heart of the San Salvadoran capital. Cost for an adult admission was 1.60 colones; a child's ticket was priced at a 1.20 colones.⁴¹

Salvadoran newspaper advertisements described *Marabunta* in much the same way as their North American counterparts. On opening day the movie was described as an “[a]wesome spectacle filmed in the impenetrable jungles of the Amazon.” Days later another advertisement urged audiences to come “Watch the most spectacular movie filmed to date...Terror! Death! Excitement (*emoción*)! This movie has everything. You will feel the blood in your veins freeze as you watch *Marabunta*.” Another asked, “What is marabunta? What is behind the panic that this single word causes for the natives?”⁴²

The monetary success of *Marabunta* is not clear. I have yet to locate box office grossing for either El Salvador or Guatemala. Nor have I located any evidence to measure the popularity of the film. However, proponents of the mara/marabunta theory argue the Hollywood movie was tremendously popular in both El Salvador and Guatemala, causing the adoption and popularization of the term marabunta in both countries. Save for one person, who identified Heston and Parker as the stars and recalled scenes from the movie, I have been unable to locate anyone else with a similar recall. In fact none of those I interviewed could recall having seen the movie; however, they were sure that it had been screened and from it the term *marabunta* had been introduced into El Salvador. An interview given to the *Ft. Lauderdale News*

⁴¹ “Semanal del 28 de febrero al 5 de marzo de 1955,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 27, 1955.

⁴² “Los grandes estrenos de hoy jueves 3 de marzo de 1955,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 3, 1955, 16; See also *El Diario de Hoy*, March 4, 1955, 24.

in 1970 given by Eleanor Parker explained that *The Naked Jungle* had been “very popular in Europe and South America. I still get letters addressed to the ‘Marabunta Lady,’ ” she said.⁴³

Mara/marabunta Theory Evaluated

Let us now take a closer look at the first premise of the mara/marabunta theory. According to this premise mara is derived from the word marabunta, the name of a particular species of New World ant. But as I have argued “marabunta ants” are not part of our natural world. Yet the belief in their existence is not only widespread, but global. For example, several Spanish language dictionaries include entries for the term *marabunta*. Among them is the prestigious Real Academia Española, which listed the term for the first time in its 1992 edition as the name of the “población masiva de ciertas hormigas migratorias, que devoran a su paso todo lo comestible que encuentran.”⁴⁴ Moreover, if we take a close look at the origin of the proponents of the mara/marabunta theory we see they are researchers and investigators from Argentina, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. And in the case of El Salvador it has been shown to be a form of culturally derived knowledge.

In spite of the references to the existence of “marabunta ants” by these works, I have been unable to find any scientific documentation to corroborate such claims. While by no means exhaustive no documentation of their existence was found in any of the electronic databases available through the University of North Texas library system. Nor have I located evidence of their existence within any peer reviewed scientific or natural science published journal. The earliest reference to “marabunta ants” appears two years after the release of *The*

⁴³ Doug McClelland, *Eleanor Parker: Women of a Thousand Faces* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 81.

⁴⁴ *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, (21st ed; 1992); See also, Paul Verdevoye, *Léxico argentino-español-francés. Lexique argentin-espagnol-français* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones y Repertorios Lexicológicos, 1992), 152;

Naked Jungle. In *Man Alone! Adventures in the Jungles of British Guiana and Brazil* Victor George Charles Norwood's, an English author and traveler, writes:

In Brazil the invasion of such ant plagues is called the *Marabunta* (the name given, in British Guiana, to a particularly vicious breed of wasp), and among the plantation workers and balata breeders the dreaded word conjures up a feeling of terror, for in the wake of the marabunta comes ruin and disaster, contamination and often – death. I had read grim tales of the awesome marabunta, how the incredible living carpets often exceeded several miles across, and many more in extent.⁴⁵

A close reading of Norwood's "marabunta ants" reveals them to be identical to those depicted in *The Naked Jungle*. For example, the claim that the "dreaded word [marabunta] conjures up a feeling of terror" for locals was used in promotional material for the movie in both the United States and El Salvador; it also mirrors a scene from the movie. The allusion to "marabunta ants" as being "incredible living carpets exceed[ing] several miles across, and many more in extent" is also taken from the movie. These similarities between Norwood's account and *The Naked Jungle* suggest the English author derived his description of the "marabunta ants" from the 1954 Hollywood movie.

Following Norwood's publication there begin to appear references to "marabunta ants" in popular treatments, works of fiction, and other printed sources.⁴⁶ Some of these examples

⁴⁵ Victor George Charles Norwood, *Man Alone! Adventures in the Jungles of British Guiana* (London: T.V. Boardman, 1956), 112.

⁴⁶ See for example, Dolores Medio, *Lo que vamos a pie* 1963, 71; José L. Quilez, *Los Waicas o mil años atrás* (), 199; Luis Antonio de Vega, *Viaje por la cocina española* (Madrid: Salvat Editores, 1969), 65.

include popular usage of marabunta as a collective noun.⁴⁷ However, all of these examples appeared after *The Naked Jungle* was released in 1954.

In a 1984 oral history interview, Byron Haskin, the director of *The Naked Jungle*, acknowledged that he had “coined” the term *marabunta* for the soldier ants of his movie.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the term had sprouted from Haskin’s own creative genius or if it had been borrowed from some other context. Two authors of American film have similarly credited Haskin with coining the term; however neither indicated the provenance of the term *marabunta*.⁴⁹

My own research suggests Haskin borrowed *marabunta* from the British Guianese local name for wasp. As early as 1837 the term *marabunta* was recorded in an issue of *The Analyst: A Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature, Natural History, and the Fine Arts*. The brief article in which the term appeared was a list of recent acquisitions made by a subscriber to the journal, perhaps a museum or amateur entomological society. Among their acquisitions was a “marabunta’s nest – the common hornet, wasp, etc.”⁵⁰ Unfortunately the provenance of the “marabunta’s nest” is not mentioned. However, other contemporary sources suggest it may have been derived from the British West Indies. Two accounts, for example, mention an insect called “Mary Bunter,” which one author describes as a “wasp” and the other as a “Guiana Wasp.” Both accounts similarly comment on the mary bunter’s sting, with one describing it as

⁴⁷ See for example, Luis Marañón, *Centroamérica, paso a paso* (Madrid: Editorial Prensa Española, 1968), 83; Harco Tecglan, “La marabunta, o de la ceca a la meca,” *Hermano Lobo* 4, no. 184 (November 1975): 9; Julio Cáceres, *Malas y peores palabras: Diccionario del argot caraqueño* (Caracas: Ediciones Nueva Cádiz, 1974), 38.

⁴⁸ Byron Haskin and Joe Adamson, *Byron Haskin* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 222.

⁴⁹ Doug McClelland, *Eleanor Parker: Women of a Thousand Faces* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 81; Dennis Fischer, *Science Fiction Film Directors: 1895-1998* (Jefferson: McFarland, 200), 289.

⁵⁰ William Holl and Edward Mamatt, eds., “Proceedings of Societies,” *The Analyst: A Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature, Natural History, and the Fine Arts* 7 (1837): 94.

“painful, so much so, that very often they will draw blood from each sting, leaving a troublesome wound.”⁵¹ Other variations on the term *marabunta* are found in several other works published between the 1830s and 1850s. For example, one author mentions “a small wasp” found in Barbados called the “*marabunting*.”⁵² Two other works mention a *marabunter*, which is described by one author as “a villainous species of wasp.”⁵³ Between the 1860s and 1890s no less than eleven works mention the *marabunta*, which is variously likened to a wasp, hornet, bee, or Jack Spaniard.⁵⁴ George W. Bennett’s *An Illustrated History of British Guiana* provides a description of the *marabunta* common to most other works.

The marabunta or Guiana wasp is not so large as those found in England, but its sting is much more painful. It requires the traveller to be cautious, as he wends his way through the forest and creek. Some make their nests pendent from branches; others have them fixed to the underside of a leaf. Now, in passing on, if you happen to disturb one of these, they sally forth and punish you severely. The largest kind is blue; it brings blood where its sting occurs, and causes pain and inflammation enough to create a fever. The Indians make a fire under the nest, and after killing, or driving away the old ones, they roast the young grubs in the combs and eat them. I tried them by way of desert after dinner, but my stomach was offended at their intrusion; probably it was more the idea than the taste that caused the stomach to rebel.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Thomas Staunton St. Clair, *A Soldier’s Recollections of the West Indies and America* (London: R. Bentley, 1834), 270; Robert Montgomery Martin, *History of the West Indies Vol. 2* (London: Whittaker and Co., 1837), 107.

⁵² Andrew Halliday, *The West Indies: The Natural and Physical World of the Windward and Leeward Colonies: With Some Account of the Moral, Social, and Political Condition of Their Inhabitants, Immediately Before and After the Abolition of Negro Slavery* (London: J.W. Parker, 1837), 68.

⁵³ “Letter from a Lady in Berbice to a Friend in England,” *The Juvenile Missionary Magazine* 2 (February 1845): 43; Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), 174.

⁵⁴ Edward Cust, *Annals of the Wars of the Nineteenth Century Vol. I 1800-1806* (London: John Murray, 1862), 114; W.H. Brett, *The Indian Tribes of Guiana: Their Conditions and Habits* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1868), 18; C. Barrington Brown, *Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana* (London: Edward Stanford, 1876), 253; Henry Bleby, *Romance Without Fiction: Or, Sketches from the Portfolio of an Old Missionary* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 508; J. W. Boddam-Whetham, *Roraima and British Guiana: With a Glance at Bemuda, the West Indies, and the Spanish Main* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1879), 150; W.H. Brett, *Mission Work Among the Indian Tribes in the Forest of Guiana* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Henry, 1881), 179; Ignatius Scoles, *Sketches of African and Indian Life in British Guiana* (Demerara: “Argosy” Press, 1885), 13, 14; William Agnew Paton, *Down the Islands: A Voyage to the Caribbees* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 143; J. J. Quelch, “Our Birds of Prey,” *Timehri: The Journal of The Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society of British Guiana* 6 (1892), 180; “Reports of the Meeting of the Society,” *Timehri: The Journal of The Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society of British Guiana* 21 (1897), 381; Kirke, *Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana* (London: Sampson Low, Marston Company, 1898), 76, 351.

⁵⁵ George W. Bennett, *An Illustrated History of British Guiana* (George Town, Demerara: Richardson and Co., 1866), 154. For a work of fiction see Thomas Wallace Knox, *The boy travellers in South America...*

In the 1870s a short-lived African-Guianese newspaper that circulated in Jamestown was called *Marabunta*, which a contemporary described as a “satirical paper.”⁵⁶ In 1911 *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* included the following entry for *marabunta*: “In British Guiana and the West Indies, a common name for various species of bees and wasp.”⁵⁷ This use of the term is found repeatedly over the course of the century in popular treatments, scholarly works, and government documents related to British Guiana.⁵⁸ There are also extensive examples of *marabunta* being used as a term for wasp in the United States as far back as the mid-19th century and again in the early 20th century.⁵⁹

The evidence provided clearly refutes any claim that Haskin invented the term *marabunta*. Rather it seems he borrowed the term from the British Guianese term for wasp. Haskin or someone working under his direction may have come across this term during background research on the South American continent. Perhaps lacking Spanish or Portuguese language skills, Haskin or someone working under his direction came across *marabunta* as they perused literature on the only English-speaking country of the South American continent.

Unfortunately Haskin passed away not long after his oral history, leaving us only to

⁵⁶ For works that mention the *Marabunta* newspaper, see H.V.P. Bronkhurst, *The Colony of British Guyana and its Labouring Population* (London: T. Woolmer, 1883), 40; Robert Frederick Green, ed., *The British Chess Magazine* 13, (January 1893), 34; Nigel David Westmaas, “A Mirror of Social and Political Ferment: The Newspaper Press of Guyana: 1839-1899,” (PhD dissertation: Binghamton University, 2006), 122, 175, 98, 125.

⁵⁷ *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia: A Work of Universal Reference in all Departments of Knowledge, With a New Atlas of the World*, s.v. “Marabunta.”

⁵⁸ See for example, Eugene (accent) André, *A Naturalist in the Guianas* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1904), 220, 221; Angelo Heilprin, “Impressions of a Naturalist in British Guiana,” *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 38, no. 9 (1906): 552; H.A. Ballou, “Notes on Certain Cotton Pests,” *West Indian Bulletin: The Journal of the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies* 13 (1913): 36; G.E. Bodkin, “Notes on Some British Guiana Hymenoptera (Exclusive of the Formicidae),” *Transactions of The Royal Entomological Society of London* 65 (1918): 306; James Williams, “The Warau Indians of Guiana and Vocabulary of Their Language,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 21, no. 1, (1929): 201.

⁵⁹ “need source”

speculate on the matter. However, the impact of the decision to substitute the generic term ant for the more exotic sounding marabunta can be investigated and measured. As was shown about the term marabunta is defined in several Spanish -anguage dictionaries as an actual living species of New World ant. Moreover, if we take into consideration the geographical origin of the authors supporting the mara/marabunta theory – Argentina, Canada, El Salvador, England, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Spain, and the United States – we see the belief in the existence of “marabunta ants” as being global. Yet, as this chapter has argued, such creatures under that name are not part of our natural world. They were works of fiction that were brought to life through the magic and influence of Hollywood cinema on the human imagination. Haskin and Pall as well as executives at Paramount Pictures made every effort to emphasize the “realism” of *The Naked Jungle*. Their efforts worked as audiences left the movie with the impression that “marabunta ants” were actual creatures found in the South American continent. Moreover, the movie also spawned a new meaning for the term based on the imagery of the horde of destructive “marabunta ants.”

Following the release of *The Naked Jungle* in 1954 Spanish speakers from around the globe incorporated the term marabunta into their popular speech. Yet the subsequent derivation of mara from marabunta was a uniquely Central American phenomenon, an important detail generally ignored, dismissed, or not know.

CHAPTER III

SALVADORAN HISTORICAL USAGE OF THE WORD MARA, 1960-1988

Of the nearly two-dozen Spanish-speaking countries around the world the word mara as a referent for “*pandilla*” is confined to the three Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.¹ In the case of Salvadoran popular speech mara has not always been synonymous with “gang,” “pandilla,” “banda,” or whatever other analogous term has been used to make this foreign word mara intelligible. As far back as the 1960s, the word mara was a popular term that meant a “group of friends” or “group of people.” This original sense of the word connoted camaraderie, warmth, and affection. But over time and through generational adoption and adaption the word mara acquired new meanings and forms of popular use. By the end of the 1980s mara was fast becoming the popular term for “juvenile gang,” a term loaded with such negative connotations as “crime, violence, and drugs.” The shift in meaning from “group of friends” to “juvenile gang” is the focus of this chapter. In doing so we will be able to better pinpoint when public concern on maras as “juvenile gangs” first began to surface. What this has meant to Salvadorans will also be explored.

It is not known when mara first entered Salvadoran popular speech. No serious investigation into this question has been attempted. Yet we know from the mara/marabunta theory that mara was derived from marabunta following the debut of *The Naked Jungle* in El Salvador in March 1955. If correct March 1955 is logically the earliest mara could have been derived from marabunta. But when did this apocoptation occur? To determine the answer to this question one could consult traditional sources where and when available. One could peruse

¹ In some South American regions the word mara is the name of a type of rodent.

the works of the Salvadoran men and women of letters – Argueta, Dalton, López Vallecillos, Espino, Galindo, Salarrué, to name but a few. A review of popular and governmental journals or magazines could prove fruitful. Contemporary newspapers are a third promising source. The term may also be buried in a government archive in the form of an informal letter, memorandum, or message sent from one colleague to another, where use of this colloquial term would have been acceptable. These and perhaps other traditional written sources could yield insights into when *mara* first surfaced in Salvadoran popular speech. But to identify, locate and review the available contemporary sources requires a tremendous investment of time and patience.

In lieu of traditional documentary sources I have therefore turned to the lived experiences and memories of Salvadorans. Ten oral history interviews were recorded with Salvadorans born between 1948 and 1954. Of the ten, eight were born and raised in the capital of San Salvador or in the neighboring town of Santa Tecla, which lies about 14.5 kilometers to the west of the capital. Of the remaining two informants, one was born in the far northeastern Department of Morazán, but raised in the eastern city of San Miguel; the other was born in Ateos, a *cantón* (rural hamlet) located approximately 29 kilometers west of San Salvador. By the mid-1960s, however, both individuals were living in San Salvador or Santa Tecla. Everyone included in this cohort traced their earliest memory of familiarity and use of *mara* to when they were children and teenagers growing up in the 1960s.

The 1960s

“La palabra *mara* nosotros la ocupamos siempre en el concepto de agrupación de gente,” said then sixty-one-year-old Mauricio Vásquez after I had asked him whether the term

had always been used to designate pandillas. He added: “Pero, los fines son distintos, vea”² He went on to tell me about how when he was a “cipote” (kid), between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, his primary social group consisted of around ten neighborhood friends of about the same age. In grade school Mauricio and his little friends would rush home from school and rapidly change into their play clothes, before running off to a nearby creek where they would spend the rest of the afternoon being little kids. As the boys grew older their interests changed from “hunting lizards” to chasing young girls from around their neighborhood. To meet girls the teenage boys started attending neighborhood dances, carnivals and church functions. “Ey mara hay fiesta. ¿Vamos a ir? ¿Cómo vamos a ir? De traje.” This group of friends, Mauricio told me, was his “mara,” or “la mara.”³

Mauricio’s contemporaries were also familiar with mara as children and young teenagers growing up in the sixties. Born in the capital of San Salvador in 1949, but raised in Santa Tecla, Baltazar Martínez y Martínez explained mara did not always mean “criminal gang.” Rather, fifty years ago, when he was a “cipote,” mara was a term of endearment he and his friends often used in reference to a close circle of friends, often those from their neighborhood or from school. “¿Qué tal con la mara, vos?” ¿Decirle la mara tal cosa?” La mara was the “group of friends,” he explained.”⁴ Pedro Buendía, who was born in 1951 and grew up in Santa Tecla, remembered in his youth (*época de joven*) mara meant a “group of friends.” “Para no

² Mauricio Vásquez, Interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 9, 2011. “We always used the word mara in the concept of a group of people. But the ends are different, you know?”

³ Mauricio Vásquez, Interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 9, 2011. “Hey guys (mara) there’s a party. Are we going to go? How are we going to go [dressed]? In suits.”

⁴ Baltazar Martínez y Martínez, interview by Ramón Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, September 18, 2012.

*mencionar todos los nombres de todos que andábamos juntos se denominaba mara.”*⁵ He went on to say: “En ese momento, pues, los mismos padres de familia nunca la condenaron [el uso de la palabra] ni dijeron que era una reunión fuera del normal, no. No. Fue una cosa hasta cierto punto – una calificativo de amistad, vea.”⁶ Born in 1953 Roberto Cabrera also acknowledged mara had no association with “violence...nor with trafficking of arms, or drugs” when he was a “cipote.” For Cabrera and his friends mara meant a “group of friends.”⁷

Both interviewees who arrived to San Salvador and Santa Tecla in the mid-1960s were unfamiliar with the word mara upon their arrival. Born in 1948 Pedro Pramos relocated to Santa Tecla in 1965 at the age of fifteen to attend secondary school at the Instituto Técnico Industrial (ITI), one of the largest high schools of San Salvador. Once settled in his new neighborhood and attending his new school, Pramos heard neighborhood kids and his classmates using the word mara, which he came to understand meant a “group of friends.” Pramos said mara was not a term he or his friends from rural Ateos had grown up with. He picked it up only after relocating to Santa Tecla.⁸ Héctor Gómez, who was born in 1956, had a similar experience. In 1967 Gómez moved to San Salvador to live with family members in order to attend secondary school, also at the ITI. Like Pedro Pramos, Héctor and his friends from back home were unfamiliar with the term. But in San Salvador it was a “popular expression used by everybody,” he explained.

[N]osotros los usábamos como te digo yo de manera muy popular, vea. Nosotros, por ejemplo, entre los grupos, entre los compañeros de clase, por ejemplo. “Ey no’mbre vos ándate con tu

⁵ Pedro Buendía, interview by Ramón Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, September 22, 2012. “At that time, well, parents never condemned [the use of the word]; nor did they say that the group was outside the norm, no. No. It was up to a point – a qualifier for friendship.”

⁶ Pedro Buendía, interview by Ramón Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, September 22, 2012. “So as not to have to mention all of the names of everyone that was together, the group was called la mara.”

⁷ Roberto Cabrera, interview by Ramón Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, September 16, 2012.

⁸ Pedro Pramos, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, February 15, 2011.

mara. Irte con tu grupo.” He stressed *mara* had no association with “*pandilla*.” This began only when the “*maras*” of today, like “*la Salvatrucha* and *la Dieciocho*,” emerged in the 1990s following the end of the civil war in 1992.⁹

Of the ten interviewees, only Pramos and Gómez provided such a precise approximation of when they first encountered the term *mara*. Unfamiliar with the word upon their arrival, both Pramos and Gómez quickly picked up on the term from its daily use by their new set of peers. No doubt both soon incorporated *mara* into their popular speech, perhaps because of their daily exposure to it but also because of the all too human desire and necessity to be accepted by one’s peers. As Pramos ruminated on the question of his earliest use of the term he arrived at the conclusion *mara* must have originated in the San Salvadoran region, since neither he nor his friends from rural Ateos were familiar with the term. Gómez arrived at a similar conclusion. Although speculative, the fact that most, if not all, movie theatres were probably located in the more urbanized regions of the country, like San Salvador and Santa Tecla, then it stands to reasonably assume that individuals residing in these areas would have had the greatest opportunity to see *The Naked Jungle* and be exposed to the movie’s promotional material promoting *Marabunta*.

The oral evidence presented above is much too small to make any definitive claim. Yet they do provide data we can analyze and from which we can advance a few tentative claims. Since it is reasonable to assume use of the term was not confined to only my informants and their friends, *mara* must have been very popular among youths from the San Salvadoran and Santa Tecla region. Recall both Pramos and Gómez were exposed to the term only after

⁹ Héctor Gómez, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 9, 2011.

relocating to Santa Tecla and San Salvador, respectively. Both also attended the same secondary school, where they heard their peers use the term. Pramos experienced this first in 1965 and Gómez again two years later. Gómez was correct when he said mara was a “popular expression used by everybody.” But was it?

Four of my interviewees were asked if they could recall if mara was a term their parents or another adult figure used. Buendía said his parents arrived to the Santa Tecla region in the 1940s from outlying rural areas and were most likely not familiar with the term. “Eran unas personas bien sencillas. No creo que ellos hayan tenido esa vocabulario de decir mara. Se aprende en el transcurso de los colegios o en las reuniones que los jóvenes teníamos.”¹⁰ The remaining three similarly affirmed mara was not part of the popular speech of their parents or adult figures.

1970s

The subsequent generation of Salvadorans also adopted and incorporated mara into their popular speech, changing nothing in its meaning. Former Chief of the Policía Nacional Civil (Civil National Police) and 2009 presidential candidate for the conservative Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, Rodrigo Ávila commented in a 1999 article on how the term mara was not associated with criminal and violent gangs when he was growing up in the 1970s. Born in 1964, Ávila attended high school at el Liceo Salvadoreño, one of the most prestigious schools in the country. “*Siendo yo del Liceo Salvadoreño rivalizábamos con la mara del García o la del Don Bosco, sobretodo antes y después de los partidos de basket ball. Para los cipotes la mara no*

¹⁰ Pedro Buendía, interview by Ramón Castillo, Santa Tecla, El Salvador, September 22, 2012.

era más que el grupo, los cheros, o la pandilla infantil.”¹¹ Jorge Ávalos, who also grew up in the 1970s, has written the following: “[mara] era sinónimo de amistad. Hablar de ‘la mara’ o de ‘mi mara’ era hablar del círculo de amistades al que pertenecíamos y con el cual nos identificábamos. La palabra no tenía el sentido excluyente que tiene ahora. Hablar de maras, hoy en día, es hablar de crimen organizado, de grupos marginales, de violencia brutal.”¹²

Another interviewee who drew from their childhood experience from the seventies is Jaime Martínez Ventura, then the Director of the Academia Nacional de Seguridad Pública (ANSP), who recalled:

Quienes andamos entre los cuarenta, cincuenta o más años de edad, sabemos perfectamente que la palabra mara, en nuestra juventud no era un concepto peyorativo, mucho menos una etiqueta criminal.

Mara era nuestro grupo de amigos, del vecindario, del pueblo, del colegio, del equipo de fútbol, de la iglesia, del trabajo, etc. En ese sentido, todos, en algún momento fuimos parte de una mara.¹³

A final example in which we hear recorded contemporary use of mara is in a 1970s song written by the Santa Tecla rock group Los Juniors. “*La Tepelcua*” is a tongue in cheek version of a popular folk belief about *la tepelcua*, a small snake found in rural El Salvador, which, according to adherents of the belief, enters through an exposed anus as he or she defecates outdoors. *La tepelcua* makes its way through the small intestine, causing intense pain and

¹¹ Rodrigo Ávila, “Maras: El virus del nuevo siglo,” in *Centuria: Los hechos y personajes del siglo XX en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Huff-Daugherty Graphics, 1999), 141.

¹² Jorge Ávalos, “La palabra ‘mara,’ ” *Vértices*, February 5, 2006. “[Mara] was synonymous with friendship. To talk about ‘la mara’ or ‘my mara’ was to talk about the circle of friends we belonged to and with which we identified. The word did not have the exclusionary sense it has today. To talk about maras today is to talk about organized crime, marginal groups, brutal violence.”

¹³ Jaime Martínez Ventura, “¿Estamos a tiempo para solucionar el fenómeno de las pandillas,” *Diario Co-Latino*, September 16, 2009. “Those of us who are in their forties, fifties, and older, know perfectly well that the word mara, in our youth, was not a pejorative concept, much less a criminal label.” “Mara was our group of friends, from the neighborhood, from town, from school, from the soccer team, from church, from work, etc. In that sense, all of us, at some point were part of a mara.”

death. The remedy to extricate the tepelcua is to sit with the exposed anus over a bowl of milk, whose scent will attract the snake.¹⁴ The following excerpt from “*La Tepelcua*” contains the use of mara:

La tepelcua se le escapó / la genta hoy está cambiando
Tengan cuidado que es peligrosa/ por ahí ha de estar vigiando
Cuidado la mara/ tengan cuidado/ cuidado cuidado, la tepelcua¹⁵

The testimonial and recorded evidence presented shows again unanimous consensus among this generation that mara meant a “group of friends” in the 1970s. Salvadoran researchers studying the maras in the 1990s also alluded to this. In 1992 Argueta et al. noted that in the 1970s mara “referred to small groups of youths.” A youth, they added, could belong to various maras: “at school, in the neighborhood, a sport team, etc.”¹⁶ Smutt and Miranda made a similar observation in 1998: “not too long ago mara was used to designate a group of friends with some point of coincidence: the neighborhood, the school, the church, etc.” But today the word “has a pejorative connotation that is almost exclusively used to refer to groups of youths organized and linked with violent and criminal acts.”¹⁷

Yet we should be careful not to accept this one-dimensional picture as representative of all the maras that formed and existed in the 1970s. As Chapter IV will detail, the image of maras as being little more than neighborhood, school, or church “groups of friends” does not capture

¹⁴ “Los ataques de la tepelcua y la casampulga,” *El Diario de Hoy*, August 19, 2003.

¹⁵ “La Tepelcua,” An audio of this song can be found in You Tube. See for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FapdfRB_dMo [accessed March 27, 2014].

¹⁶ Argueta Rosales, Sandra Guadalupe et al., “Diagnostico sobre los grupos llamados ‘maras’ en San Salvador. Factores psicosociales que prevalecen en los jóvenes que los integran,” (Bachelor’s thesis, Universidad Centroamérica, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1991), 68.

¹⁷ Marcela Smutt and Jenny E. Lissette Miranda, “*El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador* (San Salvador: FLACSO-Programa El Salvador, 1998), 25.

or reflect the lived experiences of all Salvadorans and the “maras” to which they belonged. There were important differences and similarities that will be discussed in the following chapter.

1980-1999

The general public continued to use and understand mara as meaning a “group of friends” for most of the 1980s. Two recorded uses of the term in this decade show no change in its meaning.¹⁸ However, the first evidence of a shift in the term’s meaning can be detected as early as 1986 in three-newspaper articles in which a “banda de asaltantes” (band of assailants) was found operating in two communities of the municipality of Soyapango. The aim here is not to detail the facts contained within the set of newspaper articles, but to focus on the terms used to describe the “band of assailants.” In March two of the articles were published. In one of the articles the “band of assailants” was called “Los Jade,” while the other newspaper identified them as “El Jade.” Both articles and the third drew on the same descriptive terms to depict what kind of group la Mara Jade was: “Banda, delincuentes [criminals], ladrones [thieves], and asaltantes [assailants]” were all used multiple times in each account.¹⁹ In May 1986, *La Prensa Gráfica* identified the group as a “banda de delincuentes juveniles” (band of juvenile criminals). A few lines later they were labeled a “pandilla, que se autodenomina ‘Mara Jade’” (gang, that calls itself ‘Mara Jade’).

¹⁸ Francisco Metzi, *Por los caminos de Chalatenango: Con la salud en la mochila* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1988), 98, 240; Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Sistema grupo y poder: Psicología social desde Centroamérica* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1989), 222-223.

¹⁹ “Capturan banda ‘El Jade’ que dismantelaba escuelas,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 26, 1986, 4, 11; “Cae banda de asaltantes de la Colonia Amateque,” *El Mundo*, March 26, 1986; “Banda de delincuentes amenaza Ciudad Credisa,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 10, 1986, 4, 35.

The last line – “pandilla, que se autodenomina ‘Mara Jade’” – clearly signals to its intended audiences of what kind of group la mara Jade was. It was a “pandilla,” or “gang.” It further shows mara was not yet understood to mean “juvenile gang.” Otherwise the line, “pandilla, que se autodenomina ‘Mara Jade,’” would not have been necessary, since its use would have superfluous and redundant, perhaps even confusing. But since mara was still widely understood to mean a “group of friends,” this early public discussion required newspapers to make clear to their audiences what exactly la mara Jade was. Salvadoran newspapers would continue this practice through the 1980s and into the early 1990s.

Let us continue with our exploration of how and what words the Salvadoran press used to describe and inform their readers of what the “maras” were. Here I want to focus on showing how the public discourse on the emergence of the maras shows the term’s gradual acquisition of the label “juvenile gang.” In July 1988, *El Mundo* reported on la Policía de Hacienda’s (Treasury Police) ongoing raids against the “*delincuentes juveniles* that make up the *bandas* calling themselves ‘maras.’”²⁰ *El Diario de Hoy* used similar language in November 1988 when they reported the Policía de Hacienda’s campaign against “*las bandas de delincuentes juveniles*, known as ‘maras.’” Salvadoran newspapers used this latter phrase time and again to describe the maras in 1988.²¹ In 1989 the same terms and phrases were also used. For example, *El Diario de Hoy* used a variation of the phrase in January 1989 when it reported the capture of “[f]ive members of the *bandas de delincuentes*...commonly known as ‘maras.’”²² Days earlier *El Diario de Hoy* announced la Policía de Hacienda contained information on the areas of

²⁰ “Caen en redada de PH miembros de bandas de delincuentes juveniles,” *El Mundo*, July 13, 1988.

²¹ See for example, “‘Maras’ aterrorizan a habitantes de Soyapango,” *El Diario de Hoy*, October 30, 1988, 3, 11; “P.H. combatirá con rigor a las ‘Maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, November 8, 1988, 2, 61; “Policía insta a denunciar a los miembros de ‘maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 15, 1988, 2, 55.

²² “Cinco miembros de ‘maras’ captura P.H. en redadas,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 22, 89

operation “for the members of the *bandas de delincuentes juveniles* known as ‘maras’”²³ In a special report on the maras *La Noticia* defined “las maras” as “una denominación que reciben distintos grupos de jóvenes que...se han convertido en delincuentes armados...”²⁴

From this selective, though highly representative, sample we see Salvadoran newspapers drawing on the same terms and phrases to describe clearly what type of group a mara was. It is within reason to assume the general reading public included a wide range of Salvadorans, who grew up in the sixties and seventies and who did not recognize the association of the word mara with “crime, delinquency, or juvenile gang.” This was a far cry from their understanding and use of the term. Many were probably left baffled to how a positive term of friendship from their childhood was now associated with criminally involved groups of youths now called “maras.”

We can see evidence of this just a few years after the public appearance of “las maras” in a two-page exposé on “las maras estudiantiles” (student gangs). In the piece the author recalled that “Hasta mediados de los ochenta, hablar de la ‘mara’ (apócope de ‘marabunta’) o la ‘broza’ era referirse a los grupos informales de amigos de barrio o de estudiantes.” “Ahora las ‘maras’ son grupos delincuenciales organizados, formados por vagos o estudiantes adolescentes y provistos desde objetos contundentes hasta puñales y armas de fuego, que

²³ “Delincuentes manipulan las ‘maras,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 14, 1989. For similar usage of the phrase or variations of it in 1989 see, “Capturan a 20 miembros de ‘maras’ en Col. 22 de abril,” *El Diario De Hoy* Mar 4, 1989; “‘Maras’ siguen hostigando en colonias de Soyapango,” *El Diario de Hoy*, April 12, 1989; “Maras causan pánico en Barrio de San Jacinto,” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 23, 1989; “PH tiene informes de 18 bandas de delincuentes,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 18, 1989.

²⁴ “Reportaje sobre las maras,” *La Noticia*, February 2, 1989, 6-7. “Up to the mid-eighties, to talk about the ‘mara’ (apocopate of marabunta) or la ‘broza’ was to refer to the informal groups of friends from the neighborhood or from students. Now the ‘maras’ are organized criminal groups, formed by ‘vagos’ [bums] or adolescent children and armed with blunt objects to daggers and guns, who quarrel among themselves or fiercely attack what is in their path in broad daylight.”

riñen entre sí o atacan ferozmente lo que está a su paso, a plena luz del día.”²⁵ The author makes a clear distinction between what the term meant to him just a few years ago and its present association with “organized criminal groups” that “attack fiercely whatever is in their path.” The last quote is a direct allusion to one of the stock characteristics of the “marabunta ants.” Many more Salvadorans equally did not recognize the maras of 1993 with those they once belonged to.

Not everyone seems to have had personal familiarity with the term mara before the public appearance of “las maras.” This is indicated by a 1991 discussion of the word mara within *La Noticia*’s regularly published column “Diccionario Popular Salvadoreña.” The widespread concern generated by “las llamada maras,” or what the author described as “pandillas de muchachos que con su actitud violenta y criminalidad mantienen asustados a los pobladores de ciertas zonas de la ciudad” prompted the following explanation of the term:

En lo que se refiere al uso de la palabra mara...se trata de otra de las muy raras palabras del ‘caló,’ ‘argot,’ o caliche de los drogadictos, para las cuales MARAS es el nombre que se le aplica a un grupo de muchachos adictos, aunque todos sabemos que MARA es ahora el nombre común a cualquiera pandilla de vagos, sean o no drogadictos....²⁶

This discussion reveals what many Salvadoran thought of the maras. But it also shows the term was not familiar to all Salvadorans. His description of the term was based on the contemporary and developing issue of the juvenile gangs called maras. The author identifies it as “slang” common to “drug addicts.” But this is an interpretation based on the term’s recent popularization into “juvenile gang.” Unlike the above author who recalled just a few years ago

²⁵ *El Diario De Hoy*, September 15, 1993.

²⁶ “Diccionario Popular Salvadoreño,” *La Noticia*, October 16, 1991. “In regards to the use of the word mara...this is another of the very strange slang words common to drug addicts, for whom MARAS is the word name they use for a group of addicted youths, although we know that MARA is today the common term for any gang of vagos, whether or not they are drug addicts.”

mara meant a “group of friends,” the author of the “Diccionario Popular Salvadoreños” does not appear to have had previous familiarity with the term. Licenciado César Edgardo Penate, an alleged expert on the maras, revealed his previous unfamiliarity with the term in a 1990 interview. Discussing the origin of the term he said: “no se puede definir el origen de la palabra ‘mara’ sino mas que relacionaría con el ‘caliche’ de jóvenes drogadictos y vagos en el país, si se puede observar que la mara está conformada por un grupo de personas unidas por un mismo fin delincuencial.”²⁷ Perhaps more important than his personal unfamiliarity with earlier uses of the term is who he describes as belonging to these “maras.” They are drug addicts, lazy youths who have formed groups for the sole purpose of committing crimes.

In 1989 Doña Amalia de Mármol submitted an article to *La Noticia* after having an encounter with a group of youths she considered to be a mara. Her title illustrates both the attachment of crime to the meaning of mara and what the word had become for some: “Delincuencia con nombre pequeño: ‘Mara’ ” (“Crime with a Little Name: ‘Mara’ ”).²⁸ Mara had become a four-letter word. In 1995 *El Diario Latino* published a short article titled, “Mara viene de Marabunta.” In it the article captured a now dominant view of what a mara was and what it now meant: “este término ha tomado connotaciones indeseables, en la actualidad, es sinónimo de pandillas de jóvenes delincuentes, de extracción social muy baja, adictos al cemento industrial, marihuana y otros enervantes de fácil acceso y bajo precio. En otras palabras, ‘maras’ significa ‘lumpen.’”²⁹

²⁷ “Los miembros de las maras son malos estudiantes, locos, mentirosos, drogadictos, asesinos, pero intligentes,” *El Mundo*, July 25, 90

²⁸ “Delincuencia con nombre pequeño: ‘Mara,’ ” *La Noticia*, January 31, 1989.

²⁹ “Mara viene de marabunta,” *Diario Latino*, May 29, 1995.

In the span of about three decades maras was popularized from meaning a “group of friends” into “juvenile gangs.” The public transformation of the term took place over the course of the 1980s, particularly in the last few years as “juvenile gangs” known as maras became a public and law enforcement concern. Gone were the socially accepted “maras” of the 1970s and early 1980s. By the end of the 1990s mara had become the popular referent for “juvenile gangs.” During this decade journalists, researchers, law enforcement grappled with the term’s popularization. For these Salvadorans, who grew up in the sixties and seventies and who were now young adults, the concept of mara as being analogous to “juvenile gang” was foreign to them, as was described earlier in the chapter and in the preceding chapters.

The chief of the Civil National Police, Rodrigo Ávila, probably expressed opinions held by many others, when he penned the article cited earlier, in which he recalled what mara meant when he was growing up in the late 1970s. Nearly twenty years later, however, the conceptualization of the term had changed. Ávila recognized this. The title of his article also reveals just how much the meaning of the term had changed in Salvadoran society: “Las maras, El Nuevo virus del Siglo” (The maras, The New Virus of the Century).³⁰

³⁰ Rodrigo Ávila, “Las maras: El virus del nuevo siglo,” in *Centuria: Los hechos y personajes del siglo XX en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Huff-Daugherty Graphics, 1999), 141.

CHAPTER IV

FROM 'LA MARA' TO 'MARAS,' 1971-1986

In this chapter we turn our focus to a discussion and exploration of the different types of “maras” alluded to above that formed, existed, and, in most cases, disintegrated during the period in question. Unlike the generalized picture drawn of the maras in the previous chapter, the lived experiences of the maras discussed in this chapter show these socially constructed groups to have been more diverse and dynamic and engaged in similar and different behaviors and activities. .

La mara del Pañuelo

During the 1968 presidential election Coronel Fidel Sánchez Hernández pledged that if elected he would continue the reforms and modernization of the Salvadoran system of public education initiated by the previous administration. As president, now General Sánchez Hernández's kept true to his campaign pledge and passed in his second year of office la Reforma Educativa de 1968, one of his administrations signature pieces of legislation. The main elements of the 1968 Education Reform included educational television, teacher training, administrative changes, school supervision, expansion of enrollment through construction of new schools, diversified high schools, new cultural policies, and curriculum changes. In their recent study of the educational reforms and their role in the intensification of civil unrest Lindo-Fuentes and Ching called la 1968 Education Reform the “most sweeping overhaul of Salvadoran public education, since or before.”¹

¹ Héctor Lindo-Fuentes and Erik Ching, *Modernizing Minds in El Salvador: Education Reform and the Cold War, 1960-1980* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 158, 3.

Minister of Education Walter Béneke was a leading figure in the implementation of the reforms. A former ambassador to Japan and a published playwright, Béneke took an interest to the new cultural policies. To this end he supported the establishment of an arts high school (Bachillerato en Artes) and approved the construction of a student-centered recreation center, which was built on the south side of the capital between *las colonias* (neighborhoods) Minerva and Nicaragua. Inaugurated in 1971 el Círculo Estudiantil had an Olympic size pool and several smaller ones, where students received swimming lessons, played water sports, and trained for swimming competitions. There also were dormitories for secondary-aged students who had been awarded state scholarships to study in the capital and classrooms in which students received martial arts training in karate, judo and taekwondo. National and international collegiate events were held at Círculo Estudiantil throughout the decade. A youth who could provide documentation of their matriculation in a state recognized school could enjoy the myriad activities offered at the recreation center for around three colones a year, a taken amount that most could afford.²

Youths from around the greater San Salvadoran region flocked to el Círculo Estudiantil. The myriad of youth-centered activities and the low cost for a membership attracted youths from the municipalities of Soyapango, Santa Tecla, Ciudad Delgado, San Marcos and as far as Mejicanos and Apopa. The daily interaction between youths involved in similar activities created and nurtured new friendships, which were strengthened over time. Such a thing happened to Ernesto, who was fifteen when el Círculo opened. He played water polo, took

² The following discussion and description of el Círculo Estudiantil is based on the following sources. "Complejo recreativo," *El Diario de Hoy*, January 29, 2002; Mario E. Cabrera, *Piruetas* (Bloomington: Palibrio, 2012); Ernesto, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo; "Flaco," interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo; "Barrio Dieciocho 3," interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo; "Guillermo," interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo; Héctor Lindo-Fuentes and Erik Ching, *Modernizing Minds in El Salvador: Education Reform and the Cold War, 1960-1980*, 171-174.

karate lessons, competed in swimming competitions, and later was a lifeguard for la Cruz Roja (Red Cross). About a year after the recreation center opened Ernesto, like many others, was regularly hanging out at the nearby Parque Minerva, after or before practice; students, however, referred to the park as El Pañuelo, the name taken from a bronze cast sculpture shaped in the form of a folded handkerchief, or pañuelo, that still stands in the center of the park. “De repente en setena-dos le empezamos a llamar [al grupo] El Pañuelo porque todos nos reuníamos allí,” Ernesto recalled. “Y ya no éramos diez, ya no éramos quince, sino que llegamos hacer hasta más de 500, entre hembras y varones.”³ Ernesto’s estimation is probably inflated – though not by too much according to several informants.

The social group to which Ernesto belonged and helped form was initially comprised of student aged youths, all of whom used the facilities of el Círculo Estudiantil. “We were rockeros,” explained Ernesto. “We listened to Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Grand Funk.” Every day the park teemed with “students,” who spent their time with their *novias* (girlfriends); some smoking pot; others drinking alcohol; still others just hanging out and passing the day in idle conversation. In the mid- and late-1970s la mara del Pañuelo hosted “fiestas” at the park, which they funded and promoted themselves. Black lights and strobe lights were strung around trees and other freestanding objects. A record player and small sound system was placed on one side of the park. Ernesto said they only played “música rock” (rock music). These were large parties attended by people from all over the greater San Salvadoran region. When they were not hosting a party la mara del Pañuelo attended local and distant bailes, carnavales, fiestas or

³ Ernesto, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 15, 2013. “Suddenly in seventy-two we started to call [the group] El Pañuelo because we all gathered there,” recalled Ernesto. “And we were no longer just ten, we were no longer fifteen, but we got up to more than 500, among boys and girls.”

other public events. “We went to parties everywhere and didn’t have any problems,” Ernesto recalled.” In fact, “when we arrived people from the area would unite with us because they knew who we were and what our business was about.” Their “business” was to have fun, listen to rock music, drink alcohol, consume drugs, hang out with their novias, or find a girl to hang out with at the party. “We were a mara pacifica. Peace, love, you know.” The group as a whole did not go out looking for trouble or trying to start a fight; however, he did acknowledge there were always some within the group who were more aggressive than others. But as a rule, “we didn’t start trouble.” But neither did they back down from fights.⁴

Ernesto explained things began to change for the group around 1975. By that time Ernesto and other founding members of la mara del Pañuelo had finished or dropped out of high school, providing more free time to socialize at El Pañuelo with the younger crowd of students, who had increased the total number of this social group. But the growth of la mara and its popularity generated problems with a group of neighborhood residents from las colonias Málaga and Santa Anita. As Ernesto explained, a rivalry developed between his mara and la mara de la Málaga over the issue of women. Apparently a number of women from las colonias Málaga and Santa Anita preferred to socialize at and with the men from El Pañuelo than with the men from their own neighborhood, who took this as an affront to their masculinity. At parties, this friction, coupled with alcohol or some other narcotic, provoked a physical confrontation between members of the two maras. Most confrontations were one on one fistsfight, though on several occasions multiple members of both maras did fight one

⁴ Ernesto, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 25, 2013.

another in a group brawl. Ernesto mentioned a few altercations with another neighborhood group of residents from La Colonia Harrison.⁵

La mara del Pañuelo endured into the early 1980s before la mara disintegrated. The disintegration of la mara started in the closing years of the 1970s. Age and changing tastes and new responsibilities were one set of factors. Many of the early founders of the group were now in their early and mid-twenties. Some of them were now studying at the National University, while others were working fulltime. A few had become politically active, having joined the different popular organizations that formed from the intensification of civil unrest. Still a few others had joined nascent urban guerrilla cells, which did not go unnoticed by the security forces, which placed El Pañuelo and those who congregated there under surveillance. Several of Ernesto close friends were “disappeared,” presumably by the security forces. The group’s scrutiny caused many to quit hanging out at the park. Some chose to migrate to the United States because of their political involvement. Ernesto stayed in El Salvador and continued to hang out with a small core group, though only sporadically since the increased State scrutiny on publicly visible groups made it much too dangerous for them to socialize as they did before. By the early 1980 only a handful of core members were left. With new familial responsibilities and now in his late twenties Ernesto married the mother of his children in 1982. La mara del Pañuelo disintegrated at around this time.

La Morazán

⁵ Ernesto, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, March 25, 2013; see also Guillermo, interview with Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, January 14, 2014.

A group of neighborhood kids from la Colonia Morazán formed their own mara around 1975. Located along the eastbound side of el Bulevar del Ejército on the outskirts of San Salvador, La Colonia Morazán was a marginal neighborhood in which homes were constructed from carton, laminate, wattle and daub [bahareque], mud, or whatever other semi-durable material was at hand. *“Y pues allí nos empezábamos a reunir unos locos [de] unas colonias de por allí,”* explained Flaco who was about twelve or thirteen when La Morazán first formed. Included in the La Morazán were boys and girls of similar age who were drawn from la Colonia Morazán and other surrounding neighborhoods. Generally no more than fifteen or twenty youths hung out together at one time, though the entire mara got together to go to a party as many as sixty or so could meet up. Los Morazanes, as they sometimes called themselves, had different “esquinas” (street corners) at which they hung out for hours on hours, perhaps listening to music, gossiping about what they were going to do on the weekend, or simply observing the goings of the day. They may have also been high on marijuana, though they would have smoked the pot in a more secluded area when they were younger. They sometimes purchased their pot from the older guys they knew from la Colonia Málaga, the same individuals Ernesto and his group rivaled with. Flaco said they did not have any problems with la mara de la Málaga. Someone in the group once spray-painted MZ and their name along a neighborhood wall, Flaco said. It was thus that Los Morazanes acquired their third group name, La MZ (Eme Zeta).⁶

La MZ’s activities were centered on diversion. “La cuestión era andar en fiestas,” recalled Flaco. On most weekends Los Morazanes attended local dances, carnivals, or other

⁶ “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 2013; “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, December 26, 2013.

public events. If there was a “party” at el Pañuelo most of Los Morazanes would be in attendance. Sometimes they travelled as far as Mejicanos and San Marcos in search of a good time, or “fiesta.” On multiple occasions they finagled their way into weddings, *fiestas Rosas*, wakes (*velorios*), or some other private party or event by feigning to be a friend or family member of an invited guest. Having gained entry, they enjoyed the free food and drinks and the opportunity to meet and dance with young girls. Sometimes they left with plates of food and stole bottles of wine or alcohol, or some other item of little monetary value. Flaco laughed when he recounted this memory, explaining the theft of items was generally not done out of criminal intent, but more out of immature juvenile behavior, almost like a game. The stolen goods were seen as “trophies.”⁷ “Fumar marihuana, oír música, y estar con la bicha allí, más que todo, pues,” was what Ernesto and his mara did.

Physical confrontations made up a small part of La Morazan’s activities. Much like Ernestp had mentioned, girls were cited as the primary cause for male physical violence. “La rivalidad que se había, por lo general, porque ha veces llegábamos primero nosotros a la fiestas [y] por que unas de las chamas se acerco a nosotros,” a fight could be generated. Flaco specifically mentioned several episodes of violence between his mara and another one called La Gallo (“Rooster). He described la Gallo as “*pleitistas*,” or “troublemakers.” They seemed to be always “looking for a *bronco* (fight). The fight rules were the same Ernesto had given. Although everyone knew the basic ground rules – no one jumps in, no weapons, and only one person at a time – the members from the two *maras* always made sure to go over them. “Por lo general, eran dos tres contra dos tres. Pero cuando estaba la mayoría no, se decía, ‘No, va vos y vos, uno

⁷ “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 12, 2013; “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, December, 26 2013.

y uno. Uno y uno. Si a darse con todo, ganaba uno, ganaba el otro. Y cuando mucho decía, ‘Va ahora me toca a mi porque ya le diste a este. Ahora va.’” Flaco could not think of a time when a fight erupted between his entire mara and that of another. He also mentioned a few instances in which some from his group had fought with members of el Pañuelo.⁸ “

Although the above description of La Morazán contains characteristics shared by la maras del Pañuelo, there were differences between the two social groups. One difference was related to the geographical location around which they formed their collective identity. La mara del Pañuelo, for example, congregated and hung out at a public park youths discovered after they began attending el Circulo Estudiantil. Few, if any, of those from El Pañuelo lived in or around the neighbourhood in which they gathered. The people who belonged to la mara del Pañuelo came from all over the greater San Salvadoran region. In contrast La Morazán’s primary space of socialization *was* the neighborhood they lived in or nearby; several, however, lived in different neighborhoods of the San Salvadoran capitol. The collective identity chosen by each mara indicates one difference geographical location had. Whereas El Pañuelo took their name from the park around which they gathered, La Morazán adopted the name of the neighborhood most of its members resided in, suggesting a much more intimate connection with their space of socialization. Moreover, Flaco acknowledged they considered la Colonia Morazán their territory. Although they never prevented people from entering, they did protect their “territory” from people they believed had “mal intención” (bad intent). On several occasions la Morazán chased and physically confront such people.⁹

⁸ “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 13, 2013.

⁹ “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 12, 2013; “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, December 26, 2013.

Like other neighborhood-oriented groups of the 1970s La Morazán eventually disintegrated. But it is not clear when or why. Flaco departed from the group in 1979. He had been forcefully picked up and taken for a second time to el Cuartel Zapote by Salvadoran troops. At seventeen he was legally obligated to serve in the Salvadoran military, which at the time was already engaged in skirmishes with several leftist guerrilla groups. Let go after pressure from family, Flaco knew the next time there would be no escaping. With little money he left on foot for the United States with a friend who had family in Los Angeles. With a small map the two left with little on a difficult journey that took several months and many setbacks; but they finally reached their destination. After a few months Flaco had a falling-out with his host family, which led him to leave and settle in the west Los Angeles area. Sleeping in parks, rooftops, and on the streets Flaco one day met some “vatos” who were members of the Los Angeles street gang called King Kobras. He joined the group in a matter of months¹⁰

La Chancleta

Of all the maras to have existed in the 1970s la mara Chancleta is the most remembered by my informants. According to Ernesto he first noticed La Chancleta hanging around el Pañuelo around 1978-1979. By that time Ernesto and his mara were no longer gathering at the park for the reasons discussed earlier. Flaco also recalled seeing La Chancleta hang out at El Pañuelo. But they also move around el Barrio San Jacinto, he said. Ernesto, Flaco, and others all described La Chancleta in negative terms and suggested they were involved in crime. Ernesto called La Chancleta “*pegeros* (glue sniffers) and “criminals” and they were considered dangerous because they carried firearms, knives, and other weapons. Flaco said La Chancleta

¹⁰ “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 12, 2013.

was probably the most “dangerous” mara of that time, again because of their reputation for crime and violence. A resident of El Barrio San Jacinto, who was born in 1959 and lived there until 1978, before leaving for the United States, remembered la mara Chancleta numbered as many as fifty members, all of whom were considered “dangerous criminals.”¹¹ A decade later La Chancleta was still in existence and now considered by authorities as a dangerous gang.¹²

Maras of Santa Ana

These types of groups or maras were not exclusive to the greater San Salvadoran region. Santa Ana is the second largest and most populated urban city of the country, located about 64 kilometers west of San Salvador. “All of the neighborhoods of Santa Ana were plagued [*infestado*] with maras,” explained Carlos Ernesto Mojica “Lin,” the reputed leader of el barrio Dieciocho, in a 2012 recorded interview in Cojutepeque Prison. Lin said maras were found in the neighborhoods of San Miguelito, Santa Barba and El Colón, each of which identified themselves by the name of their respective neighborhood; thus there was la mara de San Miguelito, la mara de Santa Barba, and la mara del Colón, etc. These neighborhoods teemed with drugs, prostitutes, violence, crime, and other social vices, according to Lin said. They fought with *aspirómetros* (bicycle hand brakes whose long and dangling cables would have a bronze ball attached to their ends) or wooden sticks with nails (*palos con clavos*).

The use of the word violence and crime to describe these types of groups stands out from the other maras already discussed. Why might this be? Perhaps Santa Ana’s maras were

¹¹ Ernesto, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, March 25, 2013; “Flaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 12, 2013. “Tío,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 12, 2012; “Sovaco,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 21, 2012.

¹² The following newspaper articles discuss la mara Chancleta: “Mara ‘Chancleta’ atemoriza a vecinos Col. Santa Marta,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 30, 1989; “Pandillas juveniles grave problema para la sociedad,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 12, 1988; “Banda asaltantes consigna la GN al juzgado 3º de paz,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 11, 1989.

much prone to violence because of specific local factors not found in other neighborhoods. Or perhaps Lin was drawing from later periods in El Salvador's mara history, when these groups were indeed involved in such use of violence, to illustrate the larger point of our conversation, namely detailing the different types of lived experiences gang members have. Both interpretations are in need of further investigation. Lin also mentioned towards the end of the 1970s another mara, calling itself la mara Gruesa, emerged around la Colonia Santa Isabel.¹³

Maras of the Greater San Salvadoran Region, 1980-1986

Maras did not disappear in the 1980s. In fact there is reason to believe the formation of such groups may have increased. One mara emerged in El Barrio Lourdes of San Salvador by about this time. A resident of el Barrio Lourdes from the early 1970s described the neighborhood as such: "En las esquinas, a media mañana, se juntaban grupos de adolescentes despreocupados a conversar, leer periódicos, oír música y fumar marihuana." It was not uncommon to see a thief being chased out of the neighborhood by "Moscavado, un ladronzuelo que cuidadba que nadie del barrio fuera asaltado."¹⁴ In the early 1980s a new generation of young teenagers and young adults considered themselves la mara del Barrio Lourdes. "La mara del Barrio Lourdes eran locos," said Eddy Boy (1964), a former resident of the neighborhood and associate of the neighborhood mara. La mara del Barrio Lourdes "controlled" an area on the east side of San Salvador known as el Terminal del Oriente, a bus depot that borders with the adjacent municipality of Soyapango. "Éramos rockeros, todo peludo. Nos gustaba la musica rock" he said. Eddie Boy departed from la mara in 1982, when

¹³ Carlos Ernesto Mojica Lechuga, interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, Cojutepeque, El Salvador, March 13, 2013.

¹⁴ Marvin Galeas, "Barrio Lourdes," *El Diario de Hoy*, January 22, 2004, 20.

he, like many other youths, left El Salvador for the United States after being forcefully recruited into the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Eddie Boy arrived to Los Angeles and within a few months had joined a local street gang, the 18th Street.¹⁵

Undergraduate students conducting bachelor thesis research in 1997 discovered two maras had formed in the municipality of Ilopango by the mid-1980s. Remembered by residents as “las maras viejas” (the old maras) La Vaquero and La Tractor were located in two adjacent neighborhoods, La Tisca and La Alasca, respectively. According to residents both maras had been formed by neighborhood youths. Both maras socialized only among themselves, they organized sporting events, smoked marijuana, and attended public events such as area carnivals and dances. A rivalry existed between the two, one that was serious enough to require older members to accompany younger members to public events to ensure their safety. Although the source of the hostility was not stated, the near proximity of the two neighborhoods probably had some influence. And although residents acknowledged fights erupted between the two, the violence was never serious or prolonged.¹⁶

La mara Jade

Sometime in the early 1980s youths from Soyapango followed the now familiar and established tradition of forming a neighborhood-oriented group, or “mara,” which they called La Jade. Psychology students from la Universidad Centroamericana have suggested “students, unemployed residents, and vagos” formed La Jade in 1983. However, Sobrino, who was interviewed in 1992 and who claimed to be an original member of la Jade, gave a slightly

¹⁵ “Eddie Boy,” interview by Vogel Vladimir Castillo, Cojutepeque, El Salvador, March 13, 2013.

¹⁶ Marta Alicia Escobar Rosa and Juan Milagro Martínez, “Desarrollo de la mara Salvatrucha en la Colonia ‘Alaska’ de San Bartolo, Ilopango, 1995-1996,” (Bachelor thesis: Universidad Luterana Salvadoreña, 1997) 26-27.

different version, explaining that longtime friends from the neighborhoods of Ciudad Credisa and La Colonia Amatepec formed la mara in the early eighties when he and the others were still kids.¹⁷ The impetus for forming their mara was the appearance of other neighborhood based groups, or “maras.” Not wanting “to be left behind,” Sobrino and his friends formed their own mara, which they called La Jade, which “Easterners considered sacred.” La mara Jade maintained a rivalry or competed (*hacerle la competencia*) with other groups, though Sobrino did not offer any details on the rivalries themselves. But in all likelihood they were probably consistent with the rivalries discussed throughout this chapter. However what ultimately “had started as a game was transformed little by little into something more serious....”¹⁸

The first signs of this change appeared in 1986, when residents of las colonias Amatepec and Ciudad Credisa identified a “banda” known as “El Jade” to local authorities and law enforcement. Resident had linked this “banda” to a string of home invasions and local break-ins of a school and several businesses. “Los delitos que cometía la citada banda había llegado a tal grado que mantenían en zozobra a los vecinos del lugar sin que ninguna autoridad interviniera,” reported *El Diario de Hoy*. The area in which la Jade regularly congregated was the scene of repeated “disturbances,” according to residents, who believed it was there la “la banda de asaltantes” consumed drugs and planned their criminal activities. After months of repeated pleas from neighborhood on 6 March 1986 la Policial de Hacienda reported it had arrested five members of the “banda de delincuentes” after an “exhaustive investigation.” Two months later residents reached out to *La Prensa Gráfica* in hopes they would publish their plea to authorities

¹⁷ Maras: Un fenómeno incontrolable,” *La Noticia*, May 23, 1992; “Norma Elizabeth Molina López, “Nuevos problemas sociales en El Salvador,” (Bachelor’s thesis: San Salvador, Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas, 1996.), 62.

¹⁸ “Maras: Un fenómeno incontrolable,” *La Noticia*, May 23, 1992.

for “urgent police action” to “eradicate the serious threat” posed by the “banda de delinquentes juveniles” known as “la mara Jade.” Residents, including the young, were being “stalked, robbed and physically assaulted” by members of La Jade, who residents considered “drug addicts.” Residents no longer felt “safe” to walk around the neighborhood, “day or night.”¹⁹ Residents expressed their concerns on what [t]his gang, which calls itself ‘la mara Jade,’ would do in the future. Their fears later proved prescient.²⁰

La mara Jade may be the first publicly recorded discussion on a mara of the 1980s. If so it is our first link to public concern on a mara because of its involvement in crime. Resident no longer accepted and tolerated la mara. Although media coverage on la Jade described them strictly as criminally oriented, this picture does not capture the entity of the groups. Moreover, if the group had been strictly engaged in crime it does not make much sense for them to have always been hanging out in the same spot. Rather this evidence suggests more that la mara Jade was a street oriented group, who probably had several “esquinas” on which they got high and hang around in. Did their publicly visibility and their anti-social behaviors simply make them more vulnerable?

Based on the evidence present above we can draw a few tentative conclusions.

Neighborhood and publicly oriented groups known as maras date back to the early 1970s. At this early period these mara were first and foremost socially constructed groups formed by

¹⁹ “Capturan banda ‘El Jade’ que desmantelaba escuelas,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 26, 1986, 4, 11; “Cae banda de asaltantes de la Colonia Amateque,” *El Mundo*, March 26, 1986; “Banda de delinquentes amenaza Ciudad Credisa,” *Prensa Gráfica*, May 10, 1986, 4, 35. See also, “Ladrones desmantelan escuela de Amatepec,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 4, 1985, 10, 38; “Banda de ladrones saquea Escuela Colonia Amatepec,” *El Mundo*, February 2, 1985, 3.

²⁰ For subsequent newspapers in which la mara Jade is discussed, see: “Delinquentes manipulan las ‘maras,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 14, 1989, 4, 25; “Policía convoca a padres de integrantes de ‘mara,” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 14, 1988, 2, 9.

student age youths around fourteen and fifteen years old They formed around common likes. The informants all mentioned sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Moreover, it seems reasonable to conclude these types of maras were not uncommon in the greater San Salvadoran region or in Santa Ana. The description of these maras also challenges the benign image drawn in the previous chapter of the maras of the 1970s. El Pañuelo, La Morazán, La Chancleta, La Gallo, and many others were much more than just simple “group of friends.” They were publicly oriented street groups, some of which, like La Chancleta, appear to have been criminally oriented. How the general public viewed these groups is also not known. But it seems they did not generate any real public discussion or concern. This would change in the following decade.

CHAPTER V

CRIME, JUVENILES, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MARAS, 1985-1992

For much of the 1980s maras had gone virtually unnoticed by law enforcement, the media, and the general public. This all changed in the last few years of the decade. Gone was the image of the 1960s and 70s of the maras as socially tolerated neighborhood and street-oriented based social groups. The image of what a mara was was now linked to crime, violence, and drugs over. A mara was now considered a “juvenile gang.” The transformation of maras from “group of friends” to a juvenile gang was both real and an exaggeration. Not all maras were criminally oriented, despite the fact the Salvadoran media and law enforcement painted them so. The State directed its power and violence against the mara, which they considered anti-social groups, whose activities, presence, and respective memberships were no longer accepted. A fundamental transformation occurred, one which made belonging to a mara a far more dangerous proposition than had been true in the previous two to three decades

This chapter traces and describes the emergence and development of the maras into a public issue of concern. To do so, we must first place the maras within the much larger national dialogue on the rise of crime and the deterioration of public security. Both issues are generally understood as post-civil war phenomena. The following discussion shows public concerns on crime and public security go back to as early as the mid-1980s¹ The maras were a small but more visible symptom of the loss of public security.

¹ See for example, Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, Encuesta sobre la Ley de emergencia y opiniones sobre la delincuencia: consulta de opinión pública de mayo de 1996. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas", 1996. Ellen Moodie, *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy* (University of Pennsylvania, 2012).

Crime in the San Salvadoran Metropolitan Area (Área Metropolitana de San Salvador, AMSS)

Salvadoran newspapers observed a quantitative and qualitative shift in crime patterns as early as 1985. In a December article for *El Diario de Hoy* Pedro Rodríguez decried that well-organized “bandas de ladrones” operated across the country. Since the security forces had proven ineffective in halting the precipitous decline in public security, Rodríguez demanded immediate action from the national government to put an end to the chaos and terror being sown by “la delincuencia” (crime).² *La Prensa Gráfica* used equally alarmist and forceful language when it discussed crime in a January 1986 editorial. The amassed body of crime related stories generated by their newspaper and that of their competitors was described as “amazing” (*impresionante*). The government was exhorted to adopt “extraordinary actions” for use in a “specially designed program” of “crime repression.” Only such an approach would restore “the peace and safety the citizenry had not too long ago enjoyed.”³ Undoubtedly influenced by the increase in public anxiety President José Napoleón Duarte publicly addressed the issue in April, assuring Salvadorans that his government was committed to “halting the crime wave in our country.” To this end he explained the security forces had received training in “professionalism,” which had improved their criminal investigation skills. President Duarte did not elaborate on other methods or plans being considered.⁴

² “Alarmante aumento de la criminalidad en el país,” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 25, 1985.

³ “Impresionante crecimiento de la delincuencia,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 27, 1986.

⁴ “Duarte dispuesto a frenar delincuencia,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 1, 1986, 3, 50. For other examples of crime related concerns, see: “Altos ocurren con frecuencia,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 23, 1986; “Grave ola de robos y asaltos en la capital,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 8, 1987, 2, 9; “Alarma ola de asaltos y robos en la capital,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 10, 1987, 3, 23; “Alarman en ciudad los asaltos y robos,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 17, 1987, 5, 32; “Algo más sobre delincuencia y vigilancia,” *Diario Latino*, March 24, 1988; “Exigen batida contra los ladrones en la capital,” *El Diario de Hoy*, October 30, 1988, 3, 7; “Combatamos la delincuencia,” *El Mundo*, September 30, 1988; “Cifra alarmante de robos de automóviles y asaltos,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, August 23, 1988, 2, 21; “Es urgente prevenir la creciente delincuencia,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 1, 1988, 4, 29; “Va en aumento la ola de los

Between 1986 and 1992 Salvadoran newspapers generated a voluminous body of crime related news. The Area Metropolitana de San Salvador (Metropolitan Area of San Salvador, AMSS), a geographical region that includes the capital of San Salvador and eleven surrounding municipalities, contributed the lion's share.⁵ Crime came in many shapes and forms: armed assaults on public streets, inside busses, and in and around residential and commercial neighborhoods were among the most reported. Car theft and home invasions and commercial break-ins were frequently mentioned as well. Armed and dangerous "bands of thieves" were frequently mentioned as a concern.

Criminal activity was reported throughout the AMSS, though certain areas and municipalities generated more than others. The historical center of San Salvador was one area in which crime was always a concern. With thousands of Salvadorans passing through the area daily as they made their way to work and home again, criminals had a large pool of potential victims to choose from. According to newspapers, criminals targeted the most vulnerable: women, elderly, and the young. El Barrio San Jacinto, which was a few blocks south of the capital, experienced break-ins, street muggings, armed assaults, and even homicide.⁶ Several municipalities of the AMSS generated their fair share of crime news. To the east of the capital in the municipalities of Soyapango⁷ and Ilopango⁸ residents repeatedly urged authorities to

asaltos," *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 10, 1988, 2, 56; "Aumentan los asaltos en colonias," *El Diario de Hoy*, June 6, 1988, 11, 43.

⁵ The twelve municipalities are San Salvador, Soyapango, Mejicanos, Apopa, Santa Tecla, Delgado, Ilopango, Tonacatepeque, San Martín, Cuscatancingo, San Marcos, Ayutuxtepeque, Antiguo Cuscatlán, and Nejapa.

⁶ "Asaltantes matan a joven que intentaba defenderse," *Diario Latino*, January 24, 1986; "Banda de marihuaneros en colonia Santa Marta," *El Diario de Hoy*, April 6, 1988; "Saquean viviendas de colonia Santa Marta," *El Diario de Hoy*, August 19, 1988; "Alarma en la colonia Santa Marta por continuos asaltos," *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 15, 1989, 3, 35.

⁷ See for example, "Alarmante ola de asaltos y robos en zonas de Soyapango," *El Mundo...*; "Banda ladrones opera en colonia de Soyapango," *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 5, 1987, 2, 27; "Piden vigilancia policial en colonias de

increase the police presence in each zone, where “criminally organized bandas” operated within impunity. The same concerns were expressed in the northern municipalities of Mejicanos and Cuscatancingo.⁹ As we will see below, maras were first detected in many of these same regions. But was it because of actual involvement in crime? Or perceived involvement? Or Both?

Based on the available evidence it is impossible to determine to what extent crime rates rose in El Salvador during the 1980s, if they indeed did. However, the Departamento de Investigación Criminológica de la Fiscalía General (Attorney General’s Department of Criminal Investigations) twice furnished Salvadoran newspapers with crime related statistics. According to the first set of data, a total of 76,527 “criminals” were arrested between 1975 and 1982, of which 30,960 were for “crime against property” and 14,607 for “delitos contra la libertad.” Included in the statistics was another 30,742 persons killed or injured in automobile accidents. It is not clear whether this last figure was included in the 76,527 total. If so it inflates the actual number of arrested criminals. The three sets of numbers also they do not add up to 76,527, falling short by 218. Finally the information does not indicate whether the figures are national totals or a regional total.¹⁰ When compared to the figures the Attorney General’s Department

Soyapango,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 12, 1988; “Capturan banda acusada de asaltos, robos, y homicidios,” February 15, 1988, 10.

⁸ See for example, “Ola de maleantes ha invadido la col. Santa Lucía,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 24, 1986, 2, 52; “Matan a tiros en colonia Santa Lucía a Sr. Arévalo,” *El Mundo*, April 5, 1986; “Ola delictiva en Ilopango,” *El Mundo*, August 26, 1986; “Urge zona de policía en col. Santa Lucía,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 28, 1987; “Capturan banda ladrones,” *Diario Latino*, November 23, 1988; “Alarmante es la ola de robos en varias colonias,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 18, 88, 3, 19.

⁹ “Banda de asaltantes,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 27, 1985, 25; “En Mejicanos: Batida de drogadictos, violadores y ladrones,” *El Diario de Hoy*, May 10, 1986; “Guardia captura banda de asaltantes en Mejicanos,” *Diario Latino*, September 24, 87; “Alarma por robos en Col. Zacamil,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 22, 1987; “Policía desbarata banda de asaltantes en San Marcos,” *Diario Latino*, April 7, 1988; “Se quejan del aumento de asaltos en Cuscatancingo,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 27, 1988, 3, 9.

¹⁰ “76,527 delincuentes entre 1975 y 1982,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 24, 1985, 4, 34.

of Criminal Investigations made available in 1988 they show a nearly four times increase in the number of arrests. According to this second set of data from 1988 the three Salvadoran security forces made a total of 302,231 arrests between 1980 and 1987, a substantial increase when compared to the 1985 figures. The largest numbers of arrests were those organized in bands [*bandas*] or gangs [*pandillas*], and drug addicts.¹¹ Again it is not clear whether these numbers are national or regionally specific. Moreover the numbers may be inflated with politically motivated arrests. Finally in 1988 the Department of Investigations for the National Police informed the media it had case files on more than 40,000 “burglars, thieves, car thieves, and drug addicts” that operated just within the San Salvadoran region. There was still another 5,000 more criminals not yet apprehended or known to the National Police. An unnamed retired military person claimed that since 1980 the rapid increase in “violence, theft, rape and terrorism” produced by the leftist rebels no longer allowed authorities sufficient time to maintain crime statistics. With an estimated “30 and 40 assaults” being reported daily, law enforcement was unable to investigate every report.¹²

Concerns about crime continued into the 1990s. Within the first two years of the decade the security forces devised and implemented several plans and operations to combat the rising tide of “la delincuencia” and restore public security. In early 1990, for example, la Guardia Nacional announced the initiation of a nationwide campaign dubbed “Plan de Operaciones Antisociales,” which consisted of “raids” intended to sweep the streets clean of “common criminals and terrorists,” the last term a euphemism for the leftist opposition. The strategy had

¹¹ “302 mil 231 capturados por diferentes delitos en 7 años,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 23, 1988, 3, 24.

¹² “Más de 40 mil ladrones fichados en la capital,” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 11, 1988, 10, 33; “DIN tiene 40 mil ladrones fichados en sus archivos,” *Diario Latino*, July 11, 1988.

led to the arrest of “numerous criminals, among these were members of las maras ‘Magia Negra’ and ‘Morazán.’”¹³ La Policía Nacional adopted a similar strategy. In one weekend more than 123 criminals were arrested, which included “ladrones, huele-pegas (glue-sniffers), drug addicts, vagos, assailants, and minors.” Some of those arrested were members of las maras “Morazán,” “Escorpión, and “No se Dice.”¹⁴ In May 91 Guardia Nacional units received instructions to intensify their “campaigns against antisocials and criminals.”¹⁵ In late 1991 the Vice-minister of Public security announced a nationwide plan called Operación Confianza,” a strategy that launched the security forces and other auxiliary forces into high crime areas. The intent of the plan was to stop the frequent armed assaults occurring on the streets, in shopping centers, and inside public transportation.¹⁶

the Salvadoran security forces had been engaged in a war against crime since at least the mid-1980s. Each year citizens the demands for the State to restore public security grew louder and louder as the issue of “la delincuencia” mushroomed into a national issue. Although the security forces and the State devised and implemented different military style campaigns, crime continued unabated. Within this national crime narrative the maras would emerge and become enemies of the State.

¹³ “Director GN anuncia plan de operativos,” *Diario Latino*, March 17, 1990.

¹⁴ “P.N. captura 123 delincuentes en redadas de fin de semana,” *El Diario de Hoy*, September 25, 1990, 2, 39; PN captura 70 antisociales,” *La Noticia*, September 25, 1990.

¹⁵ “Guardia opera contra delincuencia,” *El Mundo*, March 12, 1991, 2.

¹⁶ “Explican objetivos de operación “Confianza,” *Diario Latino*, October 7, 1991; “3 cuerpos de seguridad inician la ‘Operación Confianza’ desde Apopa,” *El Diario de Hoy*, October 7, 1991; “Consignan a capturados en Operación Confianza,” *El Mundo*, November 1, 1991.

Juveniles, Crime, and Maras of the San Salvadoran Metropolitan Area, 1988-1989

Juvenile and minors were linked to the rise of crime from the very start. As early as 1985 *El Diario de Hoy* noted a “surge” in juvenile involvement in crime.¹⁷ In April 1986 *El Dario de Hoy* reported minors, which according to Juvenile Criminal Code were then considered those sixteen and under, formed “a large percentage of those found in custody in the capital and surrounding areas.” Inattentive parents, the negative influence of adults, the violence generated by the civil war, and the failure of the education system to instill students with a sense of civic duty were all listed as factors in the increase in youth criminal activity. Others had been pushed towards crime because of the lack of employment opportunities and lack of age appropriate spaces (parks, soccer fields) for youths to engage in age appropriate activities. Instead brothels, bars, and drug dealers were found in their neighborhoods and communities.¹⁸ The public system of education was cited in another media account as having failed to inculcate students with civic virtue and a sense of morality, the result of which was the formation of wayward youth susceptible to the pernicious influence of adult criminals.¹⁹ The regular publication of the names and photos of minors arrested prompted the vice-minister of the Justice Department to issue a warning to the media to stop the practice, since the Juvenile Criminal Code prohibited it.²⁰

But it would not be until 1988 that the Salvadoran media again discussed a mara from the San Salvadoran region. In April, *El Diario de Hoy* reported Cuscatancingo National Police had

¹⁷ See for example, “Recuerdan a jueces no enviar menores a cárcel,” *El Diario de Hoy*, June 30, 1985, 3; “Surge alarmante ola de delincuencia de menores,” *El Diario de Hoy*, September 28, 1985, 4; “Delincuencia juvenil se incrementa en el país,” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 13, 1985.

¹⁸ “Aumenta delincuencia de jóvenes y menores,” *El Diario de Hoy*, April 2, 1986.

¹⁹ “Carencia valores morales provoca violencia juvenil,” *El Diario de Hoy*, May 30, 1986, 2, 45.

²⁰ “Señalan prohibiciones de la Ley de Menores,” *Prensa Gráfica*, May 4, 1986, 3, 9.

captured twelve members of the “banda de vagos y ladrones” known as La Mara Gallo. According to this media account, residents from the municipalities of Mejicanos and Cuscatancingo had “for months” been complaining to authorities about “groups of criminals” operating in their neighborhoods. La mara Gallo was allegedly involved in “all types of crime,” including “muggings, and rape of women.” The group was said to number around 100 “criminals.”²¹ Such had the reputation of La Mara Gallo grown that by the end of the year suspected involvement with this banda juvenile was sufficient enough evidence to make an arrest. This happened to youths in October.”²²

To the north of the San Salvadoran capital in the adjacent municipality of Ciudad Delgado, an estimated 30 individuals, whose ages ranged between 16 and 27, had formed a group called la Magia Negra, which some residents considered a “band of juvenile criminals” (*banda de delincuentes juveniles*). In May La Magia Negra made news when four of its members were arrested for the rape and intended rape of two young girls. According to the account, the two young girls were detained and forcibly taken to a vacant lot by approximately fifteen members of La Magia Negra as the two girls made their way home from a neighborhood event. Fortunately a patrol of the local Civil Defense heard the girls’ screams, which led the Civil Defense to the girls’ location. The Department of Investigation for the National Police promised the capture of the rest of the members of the “terrible banda juvenil.”²³

By mid-year Salvadoran newspapers were sounding the alarm on juvenile gangs. In June *El Diario de Hoy* reported la Policía de Hacienda had launched an “intense operation to destroy

²¹ “Capturan a integrantes de banda ‘La Mara Gallo,” *El Diario de Hoy*, April 12, 1988, 2, 25. For a picture of those captured see: “Capturan banda ‘El Gallo,” *El Diario de Hoy*, April 11, 1988,

²² “Capturan en Mejicanos a miembros de ‘Mara Gallo,” *Diario Latino*, October 10, 1988.

²³ “Capturan a 4 jóvenes de la banda Magia Negra,” *Diario Latino*, May 30, 1988; See also *El Diario de Hoy*, July 4, 1988.

(*desbaratar*) the more than dozen “bandas de delincuentes juveniles” operating in Soyapango, considered by authorities as one of the most affected areas by “las bandas juveniles.” Law enforcement authorities acknowledged they had “investigated” the groups and knew the identities of their members. Included in the article were the names of thirteen of these “pandillas juveniles Mara El Chorro, Mara Grand Fonk, Banda del Gallo, Mara 100, Mara Maquina, and Mara Jade.²⁴

El Diario de Hoy declared on 9 July “Peligrosas pandillas operan en la capital” (Dangerous gangs operate in the capital). Numerous gangs operated across the capital, especially in the northern, eastern, and southern portions. These “*pandillas de delincuentes*” dedicated themselves to “theft, armed assault, sexual assaults against young girls, automobile theft, and destruction of private property.” Again law enforcement authorities knew the names and areas of operation for several of these “pandillas.” For example, La Chancleta circulated in the heart of the San Salvadoran capital and in el Barrio San Jacinto, located blocks away from the historical center.²⁵ Back in April residents of this neighborhood complained to authorities of the existence of a criminally oriented “banda de marihuaneros and drunks.” Days before the 9 July article members of la Chancleta had reportedly forced their way into a junior high school and began vandalizing and destroying school property. A sixteen-year old youth was injured by the “pandilleros” (gang members) as they retreated. In their escape they reportedly robbed and

²⁴ “P.H. persigue pandillas juveniles en Soyapango,” *El Diario de Hoy*, June 6, 1988, 10, 45.

²⁵ Peligrosas pandillas operan en la capital,” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 9, 1988, 4, 44.

then shot to death a cobbler.²⁶ The 9 July article also identified as gangs “El Gallo,” which operated around la colonia Universitaria Norte, “Los Cadenas,” and “La No Se Dice.”²⁷

On 12 July *La Prensa Gráfica*'s headline read, “Pandillas juveniles grave problema para la sociedad.” Sub-director of the Policía de Hacienda, Colonel Juan Armando Rodríguez Mendoza acknowledged the situation with juvenile gangs had become serious and that his security force was dealing with the problem. However, Colonel Rodríguez Mendoza warned against a law enforcement only approach. The members of these “juvenile gangs” were young, and often included minors. To rely solely on police force was therefore not recommended. Moreover, to effectively eradicate the anti-social behaviors and activities of the so-called “maras” required a more holistic approach, one in which parents, educators, and religious authorities would educate youths on the serious consequences of their involvement with such groups. If not, he warned, these youths were destined to be serious criminals, like “la Mara Chancleta.”²⁸ Colonel Rodríguez Mendoza's were probably sincere; but he had a duty to uphold. The following day *El Mundo* reported Colonel Rodríguez Mendoza had issued orders to his forces to “intensify” their efforts in controlling “la delincuencia juvenil” (juvenile crime). To this end the strategy called for the continuation of “raids against the delinquent juveniles organized in groups [bandas] calling themselves ‘maras.’”²⁹ In Soyapango la Policía de Hacienda reached out to parents who had

²⁶ “Pandilla asalta escuela destroza y mata a joven,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 5, 1988; “Pandillas juveniles grave problema para la sociedad,” July 12, 1988, 2, 42; “Banda de marihuaneros en colonias Santa Marta,” *El Diario de Hoy*, April 6, 1988.

²⁷ “Peligrosas pandillas operan en la capital,” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 9, 1988, 4, 44.

²⁸ “Pandillas juveniles grave problema para la sociedad,” *Prensa Gráfica* July 12, 1988, 2, 42.

²⁹ “Caen en redada de PH miembros de bandas de delincuentes juveniles,” *El Mundo*, July 13, 1988.

youths involved in the “maras,” urging them of the need to redirect their child’s focus on more positive activities. A failure to do so could ruin their young lives.³⁰

On 13 July the Vice President of the National Assembly, Colonel Ochoa Pérez, responded to the growing public concerns on “juvenile delinquency” with an assessment of and remedy for dealing with the juvenile gangs. A member of the conservative Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, Col. Ochoa Pérez traced youth participation in such groups to the deleterious effects of the civil war upon the Salvadoran youth population. Coupled with an ineffective government, which had allowed the leftist guerrillas and opposition to wreck havoc on society, “anarchy” now ruled supreme. Youths had responded by forming “pandillas juveniles.” He announced, the National Assembly would begin a careful review of the Juvenile Criminal code to determine whether a legislative solution could assist in the combat of youth motivated crime.³¹

The declaration by the press and the acknowledgement by law enforcement officials of a problem with juvenile gangs did little to resolve the issue. Over the following months newspapers continued to report on the capture of and the growing concerns on these juvenile gangs. For example, *El Diario de Hoy* reported in October that the “juvenile gangs popularly known as ‘maras’ ” “terrorized” residents of Soyapango with their daily criminal and delinquent activities. Residents criticized law enforcement’s “soft approach” to dealing with the “maras” and the lack of police presence within their communities. With a population of approximately 150,000 there was no police presence, save for the Municipal Police and the Civil Defense, both said to have been insufficiently manned. Soyapango was rumored to have among the most

³⁰ “Policía convoca a padres de integrantes de ‘Mara,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, July 14, 1988;

³¹ “Revisarán código menores para combatir la delincuencia juvenil,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 13, 1988.

dangerous maras: La Mara Jade, which operated in La Colonia Ciudad Credissa; La Mara I.O.U. “terrorized” residents of La Colonia San José; and there was La Mara Quita-Calzón. One resident advocated for the adoption of “special police measures designed to break up existing *maras* and prevent new gangs from forming.”³²

In November, the newly appointed Director General of the Policía de Hacienda, Col. Héctor Heriberto Hernández, announced his plans to launch a “serious campaign against the juvenile delinquents known as *maras*.” While no specific details were provided, save for his stated desire to provide youths with recreational and employment opportunities, the plan probably consisted of periodic sweeps of public spaces where such groups were known to congregate. A functionary decried the “special privileges” youths enjoyed under the Salvadoran criminal code. He urged parents to take more of an interest in their child’s friends and their activities.³³ By the end of the year Col. Héctor Heriberto Hernández, was urging citizens to identify the members of and all suspicious activity committed by “the bandas de delincuentes” known as “*maras*.” Although he acknowledged the Policía de Hacienda had “intensified its battle against such groups,” only through the cooperation of the citizenry would this “scar” (*lacr*a) be erased from society.³⁴

A few weeks into the New Year la Policía de Hacienda provided the media with their most recent information collected on the maras of the San Salvadoran Metropolitan Area. According to their information the maras were formed by adults, and minors as young as eight were involved. The adults, who had “criminal records, led the maras and

³² “ ‘Maras’ aterrorizan a habitantes de Soyapango,” *El Diario de Hoy*, October 30, 1988, 3, 11.

³³ “P.H. combatirá con rigor a las ‘maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, November 8, 1988; “Policía insta a denunciar a los miembros de ‘maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 15, 1988.

³⁴ “Policía insta a denunciar a los miembros de ‘maras,’ ” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 15, 1988, 2, 55.

were called “Jefes de la mara.” The Jefes de la mara supplied their underlings with “armas de fuego, aspirómetros, punales, piedras, cuchillos, garrotes, cadenas, etc.” These maras had as few as five members, but most ranged around twenty-five. The names of twelve of these maras were provided, among them was the “mara Magia Nega,” “mara Pupusa,” “mara Rollingstone,” “mara Gallo,” “mara El Choro,” and “Chancleta.” Heriberto Hernandez declared “todas estan bajo control.”³⁵ Three of the four major San Salvadoran dailies published the new findings.

At years end, the Salvadoran military was searching for “la pandilla de maleantes denominada Mara Gallo” for their alleged support of the FMLN rebels during their failed November Final Offensive on the capital of San Salvador. The offensive was launched from the working class and poor neighborhoods of surrounding municipalities, like Mejicano where small guerrilla forces had been infiltrating for some time. According to civil and military authorities members from La Mara Gallo temporally joined the FMLN “terrorists.” They reportedly looted and caused disturbances in the area.³⁶ This would not be the last or only mara linked to the FMLN.

Crime, Public Insecurity, and the Maras of Western El Salvador

Much like the San Salvadoran Metropolitan Area Salvadoran crime was a serious concern to residents and law enforcement from the western regions of the country. As early as January 1986 authorities detected a rapid increase in “la delincuencia (crime),” especially by “youths and minors...organized in pandillas,” who were breaking in to homes and businesses. A new “system of surveillance” had just been put into place, which was expected to reduce and

³⁵ “PH dice controla a unas 16 maras de delincuentes,” *Diario Latino*, January 14, 1989; “Delincuentes manipulan las ‘maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 14, 1989; “PH tiene informes de 18 bandas de delincuentes,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 18, 1989, 2, 42.

³⁶ “Buscan a integrantes de la pandilla Mara Gallo,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, November 29, 1989.

eventually eradicate criminal activity.³⁷ In February la Guardia Nacional announced the commencement of a “new program to fight the crime” plaguing Santa Ana and outlying rural areas.³⁸

In June 1987 security forces made locating and dismantling the “banda de delincuentes” known as la mara Gruesa a topic priority. A Salvadoran military spokesperson said la mara Gruesa had for some time been “sowing terror in las colonias San José, Santa Leonor, CEL, Santa Isabel, Las Delicias, Guzmán, El Sálamo, and surrounding areas.” They were responsible for “assaults, robberies, rapes (violaciones), injuries, and other crimes.” Three members of La Mara Gruesa were arrested in this month. The 2nd Infantry Brigade arrested the alleged leader, Noé Jesús Mendoza López. Several days later two more members from the “banda de asaltantes” were captured.³⁹

La mara Gruesa made the headlines on several more occasions. In January 1988 residents of la colonia Santa Isabel attributed the theft of their only public pay phone to la mara Gruesa, which they described as “a banda de ladrones.” Residents from nearby neighborhoods and outlying rural areas also blamed la Gruesa for the numerous “assaults and home break-ins” within their communities. Numbering somewhere between fifty and sixty members, authorities considered la mara Gruesa “dangerous” and a top priority in the fight against crime.⁴⁰ In February the 2nd Infantry Brigade reported the capture of Julio Cesar Pérez Centeno “Paishte,” allegedly the leader of la mara Gruesa and the author countles “assaults, armed robberies, and

³⁷ “Auge de delincuencia detectan autoridades,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 22, 1986.

³⁸ “Plan de persecución de la G.N. a delincuentes,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, February 14, 1986, 27.

³⁹ “2a. Brigada captura a 2 peligrosos delincuentes,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, June 9, 1987; “Cabecilla de la banda La Mara Gruesa capturado,” *Diario Latino*, June 8, 1987; “Acusados de Asaltos,” *El Mundo*, June 15, 1987.

⁴⁰ “Banda de ladrones se roba en colonia el teléfono publico,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 5 1988, 3, 25; “60 criminales en banda de asaltantes,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 11, 1988.

the rape of women.” Authorities gave Paishte an irresistible quid pro quo: provide the names and addresses of his underlying and he would be released into the custody of his family. Was “Paishte” a minor? Regardless he accepted the deal. Residents decried the decision, furious that a known “dangerous criminal” would be released and go unpunished for the liny of crimes committed.⁴¹ In March la mara Gruesa again made news when two members of this “banda de asaltantes” exchanged fire with a brigade from the 2nd Infantry, who had been alerted by residents to their presence and engagement in criminal activity in the area. One of the members of la mara Gruesa was mortally wounded; the other escaped.⁴² Later in the month, members of la mara Gruesa physically attacked the principal of the Escuela “Dr. Salvador Ayala” and threatened to attack the vice-principal as well as students from the school. School officials demanded the Guardia Nacional provide security for students and staff.⁴³ La mara Gruesa’s was mentioned in at least six more crime reports..⁴⁴

Salvadoran newspapers also reported on several other maras. The Policía de Hacienda reported the capture of five members of a “banda de asaltantes” during a “raid” to combat the growing criminal presence of “maras” in the popular neighborhoods of Santa Ana. In May the Policia de Hacienda reported the capture of a “banda de delincuentes” called “la Mara Recia.” According to authorities la Mara Recia was dedicted to burglary, robbery, and murder.⁴⁵ A week

⁴¹ “Capturan jefe de banda llamada la Mara Gruesa,” *Diario Latino*, February 29, 1998; “Buscan a miembros banda de asaltantes,” *Prensa Gráfica*, February 29, 1988.

⁴² “Banda de asaltantes se bate a líos con tropa,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 15, 1988; “Pandillero de ‘Mara Gruesa’ muere frustrarse robo,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 20, 1988.

⁴³ “Piden amparo de cuerpos de seguridad,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 27, 1988, 3, 5.

⁴⁴ See for example, “Persiguen en Santa Ana banda de criminales; dinamitaron 2 postes,” *El Mundo*, April 26, 1988; “Capturan 4 miembros de la banda ‘Mara Gruesa,’” *La Prensa Gráfica*, June 20, 1988, 15; “Guardia Nacional captura banda de 11 violadores en Santa Ana,” *El Mundo*, September 30, 1988 ; “Capturan a miembros de la ‘Mara Gruesa,’” *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 23, 1990.

⁴⁵ “La banda ‘Mara Recia’ capturan en Santa Ana,” May 4, 1989, 2, 39.

later the Guardia Nacional reported the capture of the leaders of the “Mara Guacha,” a “banda de asaltantes” that was comprised of twenty-two members who dedicated themselves to criminal activities.⁴⁶ In June the Salvadoran military announced the capture of several individuals believed to belong to the “mara rata,” a “banda” involved in assaults and thefts across the city of Santa Ana.⁴⁷ Later in the month, in la colonia Rio Zarco residents were denouncing the transformation of local “bandas de marihuaneros” into criminal groups or “Maras” as they were calling themselves. One resident was quoted as saying, “Near the soccer field they meet up everyday, groups of youth that first smoke marijuana or some other drug and then begin to commit assaults and robberies and harass female students...” Residents were requesting police involvement “to combat the juvenile gangs” that had come to ruin the peace and tranquility they once enjoyed.⁴⁸

Salvadoran Maras, 1990-1992

Between 1990 and 1992 the four Salvadoran newspapers together published no less than 200 news stories on the maras. The marked increase of published stories reflected the growing concerns on these groups. It was also accompanied with increased vitriol against these groups. Just weeks into the New Year a patrol of the Infantry First Brigade captured Marta Elena Segovia Morale, an alleged FMLN operative, who acknowledged she had worked with members of “La Mara Gallo” during the Final Offensive of November.⁴⁹ Although in some cases some members of maras were involved with insurgent forces, most maras were probably not. But the media exaggerated these links, instead suggesting the appearance of maras was part of

⁴⁶ “Jefes de banda ‘La Mara Gaucha’ captura la G.N.,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 16, 1988, 33.

⁴⁷ “Capturan acusados de ‘mara rata,’” *Diario Latino*, June 7, 1989.

⁴⁸ “‘Maras’ asaltan en la colonia Rio Zarca,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, June 25, 1989, 19.

⁴⁹ “Terrorista revela nexus de ‘Mara Gallo’ con FMLN,” *El Diario de Hoy*, January 15, 1990, 10, 47.

an FMLN strategy to cause widespread confusion and problems for the security forces. Over the ensuing months, more arrests would follow of members of maras suspected of aiding insurgent forces during the November Final Offensive on the capital of San Salvador.⁵⁰

During the first two years of the 1990s maras began to be discovered in new regions of the country. In May 1990, for example, military troops stationed in the western department of Sonsonate launched a “lighting campaign” against crime in which they netted members of two “bandas de delincuentes: “Mara 18 and Chicos Malos.” Authorities describes the two “bandas” as formed by adolescents who dedicated themselves to creaking “public disorder” and “acts against the law.”⁵¹ In nearby Chalchuapa authorities declared that a “mara of thieves and rapists” were terrorizing residents with their daily criminal activities.⁵²

By the end of the year Jorge Vásquez Corena, the exasperated mayor of Soyapango, solicited the help of the Salvadorans Armed Forces and la Policía de Hacienda in combatting the more than 68 “bandas de maleantes” that operated in his municipality. According to the mayor the members of the “maras” were thieves, who sold and consumed drugs. Several times they had “mortally injured” their victims.⁵³ The call for military help to deal with the maras was repeated time and again by residents and local authorities.

On 16 January 1992 FMLN insurgents and the Salvadoran government ended nearly two decades of political violence with the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords. The cessation

⁵⁰ See for example, “GN captura a mara ‘Magia Negra’ en C. Delgado,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 10, 1990, 4, 15; “Consignado como jefe de Mara ‘La Magia Negra,’” *Diario Latino*, February 17, 1990; “Consignados,” *Diario Latino*, February 21, 1990; “Consignan acusados de pertenecer a guerrilla,” *Diario Latino*, April 23, 1990; “Acusados de terrorismo,” *El Mundo*, February 10, 1990; “Denuncian el grave daño causado por ‘mara gallo,’” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 2, 1990; “Mas consignaciones,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 3, 1990.

⁵¹ “Redada de pandilleros realizan en Sonsonate,” *El Diario de Hoy*, May 6, 1990, 2, 28.

⁵² “Mara aterroriza en Chalchuapa,” *El Mundo*, November 1, 1991.

⁵³ “Alcalde pide colaboración para combatir 68 ‘maras,’” *El Diario de Hoy*, December 16, 1991, 65, 106.

of hostilities sparked nationwide celebrations as Salvadorans enthusiastically braced themselves for a society free from political violence. They were infused with hope for a better tomorrow. But a surge in social crime and violence that followed the signing of the Peace Accords crushed the hopes and dreams of many Salvadorans.

But the issue of crime was not new, however. The previous chapters detailed how crime had been identified as a public and State concern as early as 1986. Juvenile gangs, known as maras,” were linked to the rise in crime. These types of groups were not uncommon in El Salvador in the 1970s. They were found in neighborhoods across the greater San Salvadoran region and in the city of Santa Ana. And from the evidence most of these neighborhood-oriented groups caused little, if any, public concern. However, in the closing few years of the 1980s the image of maras had been transformed into one of criminally oriented juvenile gangs involved in a range of criminal activities.

Drawing from contemporary newspapers Chapter V showed maras had become a public issue of concern by the end of the 1980s. Newspapers clearly indicated the image of the 1970s had changed. Several of the maras mentioned in Chapter IV, La Chancleta, La Gallo, and La Gruesa, were considered among the most dangerous of the new maras of the 1980s. The State and its security apparatus confronted the issue of the maras with violence and repression. They devised and launched military style campaigns in areas in which maras were known to congregate. Although the strategy successfully led to the arrest of members of these maras, it did little, if anything, in resolving the crime issue. The Salvadoran State’s efforts, however, make clear the issue of the maras had reached the highest levels of government.

Finally the preceding chapters demonstrated the maras were part of the Salvadoran landscape years before the introduction and adoption of a U.S. formed gang culture. These local Salvadoran maras had developed their own customs and practices that were in many ways similar to their U.S. counterparts. The similarities between the street oriented cultures facilitated the first contacts between these different, but similar groups. It also made possible the adoption and adaptations of certain elements from the U.S. gang culture to the local mara culture. The impact of this reconfiguration of gang cultures continues to the present day.

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