Order and Insecurity under the Mara:

Violence, Coping, and Community in Guatemala City

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Abstract

Drawing on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in a poor and notorious neighbourhood, this dissertation examines how evolving dynamics of urban violence have affected life in a Guatemala City gang territory.

The maras of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—the gangs that help give these countries some of the world's highest homicide rates—have changed dramatically in their group cultures and criminal economies since they appeared in the 1990s. I trace what I call the mara's predatory turn: the elaboration of an extortion economy, which has had far-reaching consequences for the relationship between gang cliques and their barrios. This transformation has re-shaped the experience of chronic insecurity in the communities that maras operate from: inhabitants report that it is now less manageable, less predictable, and more frightening. They speak of a heightening of danger in their lives brought about by the decline of certain local norms and mechanisms that had previously moderated gang violence and bolstered community resilience.

Local narratives of insecurity and decline illuminate when, how, and why violence disrupts and disorders social life. What many informants emphasized was not a cataclysmic appearance of violence in their lives, but rather a catastrophic breakdown in the mechanisms that had controlled it. In this distressing context, residents struggle to minimize their insecurity and to reclaim or create forms of order. I examine two principal ways that they seek to do so: by working to maintain a moral order based on narratives about the neighbourhood and its values or 'codes', and by looking to external providers of order in the state and its security forces.

Exploring the complex relationships and interactions between inhabitants, gang members, and state forces in this barrio, I contribute to academic debates about local and state responses to insecurity in Latin America and propose modifications to prevailing models of state and criminal 'governance' in marginal urban communities.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

The landscape is a jumble of *barrios* and *barrancos*—neighbourhoods and gorges. Informal settlements pack themselves into and around the planned *colonias* and onto the precarious slopes of deep ravines. A few kilometres from Guatemala City's central plaza, the neighbourhood that I call Colonia El Romero spills down a steep hillside from the road that leads out of the capital towards the semi-rural commuter towns that were agricultural villages not long ago, through the cowboy country of the searing hot eastern plain, before ending at the sleepy jungles and smuggler ports of the Atlantic coast.

But El Romero has its back to all that, a densely-inhabited concrete peninsula jutting out into the *barrancos* that surround it on three sides. One road goes into the barrio, another comes out, and a pair of smaller streets joins these two at the middle and bottom of the narrow community. Beyond this navigable skeleton, houses crowd a labyrinth of alleys and staircases that confound visitors, not that they get many these days. Although El Romero's physical geography is confusing, no one has any doubt about where it sits in the imaginative maps of Guatemalans. 'It's for sure,' one resident says, 'we're in a red zone.' 'In theory,' says another, 'El Romero is the reddest zone there is.'

These 'red zones'—the hot spots of violence, criminality, and gang activity identified in the capital's poor sectors and peripheral municipalities—are the statistical and discursive epicentres of Guatemala's famous crisis of urban insecurity. Their notorious names appear daily in headlines screaming out the latest incidents and emergencies to afflict a city that feels itself besieged by gangsters, extortionists, and a host of other threats. The 'maras'—the gangs that contribute a great deal to this danger and fear—have changed dramatically since their appearance in the 1990s in ways that have transformed the experience of insecurity in the territories. A young woman told me that since coming to the capital from her native village, she felt as if she was living 'inside a multitude of violences' in a country that was,

that autumn, officially recording eighteen murders each day. In an El Romero schoolyard, watching children and passing instant coffee, a mother deemed violence to be 'a great monster that has now awoken' in their neighbourhood, their city, their country.

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork in El Romero, this dissertation examines how evolving dynamics of urban violence have affected life in a gang-dominated Guatemala City neighbourhood, how people there understand and respond to the gang and its changing impact on their community, and how they have sought to maintain and reclaim forms of order amid insecurity. This chapter introduces the study's empirical context and the thematic and theoretical concerns that run throughout. I sketch key features of my research community before turning to the sites, forms, and perpetrators of contemporary insecurity in Guatemala, positioning my own research within the growing literature on urban violence and street gangs in Central America. Certain terms and concepts—violence and insecurity, order and disorder, unpredictability and control, local codes and state power—are at the heart of the story that emerges from the barrio's recent history. The complex and shifting relationships between these is a discussion that carries through each chapter, and that I begin here. I conclude with a discussion of my research process.

I. **Urban Insecurity in Central America**

i. The Barrio

An ethnographic focus on insecurity in El Romero allows me to address several empirical gaps and theoretical weaknesses of the literature on urban violence in Central America, as I discuss in subsequent sections. With its high rates of violence, urban geography, powerful gang, and status as one of the capital's most notorious red zones, Colonia El Romero condenses many of contemporary Guatemala's most acute anxieties in one compact neighbourhood. It sits in zone 18, the largest and arguably most violent of Guatemala City's 22 zones; in 2012, this one zone accounted for over 20 per cent of all homicides in the capital

region (Mendoza and Méndez 2013: 2). Founded in 1979, the community's origins lie in national reconstruction efforts following a massive 1976 earthquake. The first inhabitants came from devastated slums in the city centre to what was then a sparsely-inhabited periphery. But El Romero grew rapidly, and from the early 1990s, residents sought to release mounting population pressure by building informal settlements called *asentamientos*. Today, the neighbourhood's inhabitants—perhaps 20,000 in total—inhabit the original planned community (or *colonia*) as well as fourteen *asentamientos pegados* that have occupied every open space within and around it.[1] However, this growth has recently reversed, as many have abandoned the community due to violence, extortion, and fear. In some sectors of the neighbourhood, over one third of the houses now sit empty.

The threats causing so many to flee come from the members and collaborators of the mara clique that claims El Romero as its territory. The two dominant Central American maras—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Mara Dieciocho (M-18, also Barrio-18 and, in Guatemala, the Pandilla de la Calle-18)—first appeared here in the early 1990s.[2] Originating in Los Angeles, these gangs spread to Guatemala's poor urban neighbourhoods through migration and imitation. Cliques adopting mara names, symbols, and styles proliferated

[1] Several terms are used of neighbourhoods in Guatemala City. *Colonia* is the most common and refers to a primarily residential district that is, to some degree, planned or recognized by municipal or government authorities. It appears in the names of poor, working-class, middle-class, and relatively wealthy neighbourhoods. Gated communities may also be called *residenciales*. An *asentamiento* is an informal urban settlement formed by a land invasion. They begin as illegal settlements, though a number have been regularized over the years. *Asientamientos pegados* are areas of informal occupation within or bordering other neighbourhoods and are frequently considered part of these *colonias*. The word *barrio* is used more generically, almost always to refer to a poor neighbourhood, without distinction between those that are technically *colonias* or *asentamientos* (or, like Colonia El Romero, contain both).

[2] Two Spanish words for 'gang' appear throughout. 'Pandilla', roughly equivalent to 'gang', is used throughout Latin America of anything from street bands to highly organised criminal structures. 'Mara' refers specifically to the gangs–especially the MS-13 and M-18–that have become an important regional phenomenon in Central America, Mexico, and parts of the US in the last twenty years. My informants generally used the terms interchangeably, as they did 'marero' and 'pandillero' of gang members. I do not italicize these terms because they have become very common in English-language writing on Central American gangs.

around the city, mixing this imported gang culture with existing traditions of neighbourhood-based pandillas.

By 2000, the cultures and criminal economies of these gangs were undergoing notable shifts, and the level of violence they caused rose sharply. From 2002, control of El Romero was settled through what locals call the 'War of the Maras.' It was eventually won by an M-18 clique that remains the only gang in the neighbourhood today, maintaining control through surveillance, force, and tactics of terror. The reigning clique operates a criminal economy centred on the extortion of households, stores, markets, services, and transportation in their territory. Although El Romero has always been seen as a poor and disreputable place, it is its notoriety as a mara stronghold that has cemented its reputation as 'the reddest zone there is.'

I use the term 'red zone' of El Romero advisedly but with qualms, given the stigma it carries. The label is central to the neighbourhood's identity, in the sense of 'acts of naming and recognition: how people view themselves and how they view (and are viewed by) others' (Pine 2008: 3). The term has become a crucial interface through which residents relate to the broader world. The particular use of the term *zona roja* in Guatemala has its origins in the country's long internal conflict, when military maps coloured areas of guerrilla control red. Red zone thus came to mean the place where the enemy resides and holds sway. In the postwar, as the locus of threat was transferred from the subversive to the delinquent, the red zones moved accordingly. Whatever protests or caveats they attach to it, most inhabitants of El Romero use this label of their surroundings. So while I take issue with what the phrase represents in terms of the exclusion and stereotypes that make residents' lives harder, it would be difficult to do without a term so consistently invoked to describe the barrio by insiders and outsiders alike, and one that additionally allows me to emphasize the parallels between El Romero and other communities in similar circumstances. It is not a label to employ uncritically, but it is one that permits me to ask important questions. What does it

mean for people to belong to a red zone? How does the term affect life in these places, shaping rather than just naming insecure environments?

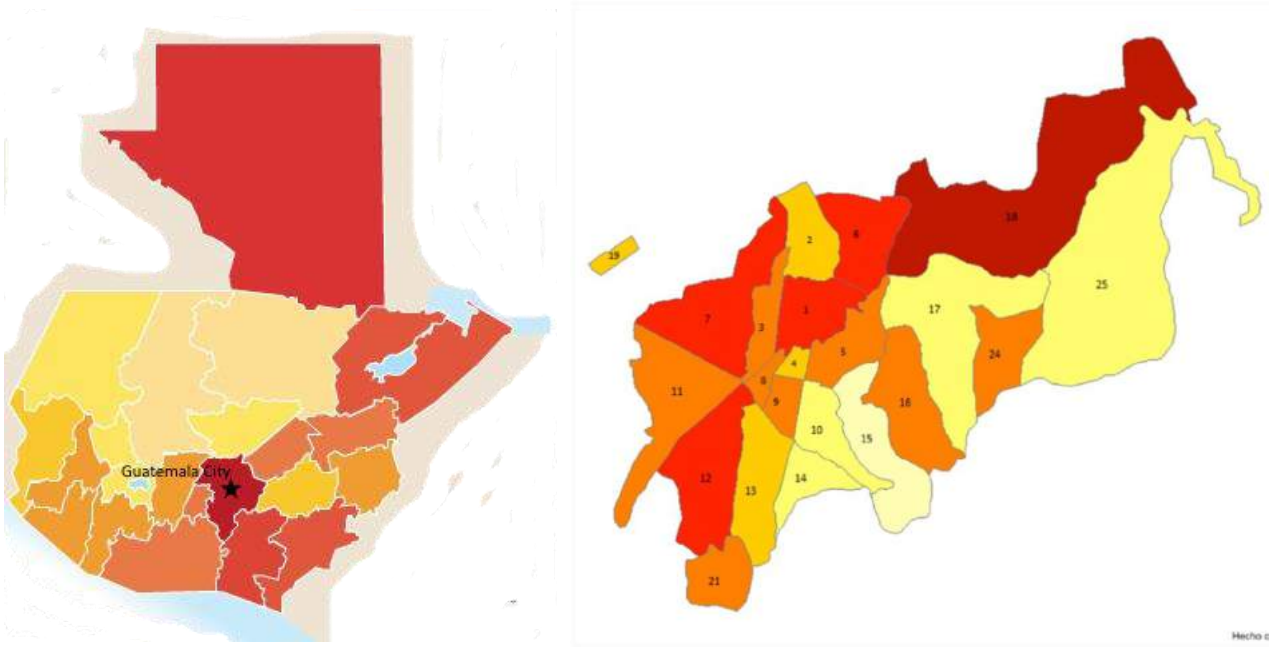


Figure 1. The new 'red zones': maps showing the distribution of the homicide rate across Guatemala's 22 departments (left, 'Van más de tres mil muertes en Guatemala' 2011), and number of homicides recorded in Guatemala City's 22 zones, with El Romero's zone 18 in dark red in the northeast (right, García Aldana 2012)

ii. The Violence

Guatemala and its Central American neighbours have all seen a 'general evolution in the geography of their violence from the country to the city over the past thirty years' (Rodgers 2009: 955). Guatemala's new urban red zones began to attract attention as the country's long internal conflict limped to its end. The 36-year counter-insurgency war that began in 1960 pitted a militarized state against a string of guerrilla foes culminating in the URNG coalition (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*). The conflict caused over 200,000 deaths and massive population displacements, primarily in the indigenous Maya regions of northern and western Guatemala. During the early 1980s, the military regime conducted genocidal campaigns against indigenous populations. In contrast to the extermination of entire communities carried out in the rural highlands, the conflict in the capital was characterized much more by 'clandestine state terrorism,' which led to the disappearance of thousands of

political opponents, union activists, students, and other real and suspected dissidents (Figueroa Ibarra 2013: 155).[3] Years of negotiations ended with the 1996 Accords for a Firm and Lasting Peace. Though an occasion of tremendous optimism for many, the accords soon became, in the words of one satirical cartoon, '*La paz firmado pero no firme*': the peace that is signed but unsteady, unstable, insecure (Filóchofo, in Nelson 2009: 39).

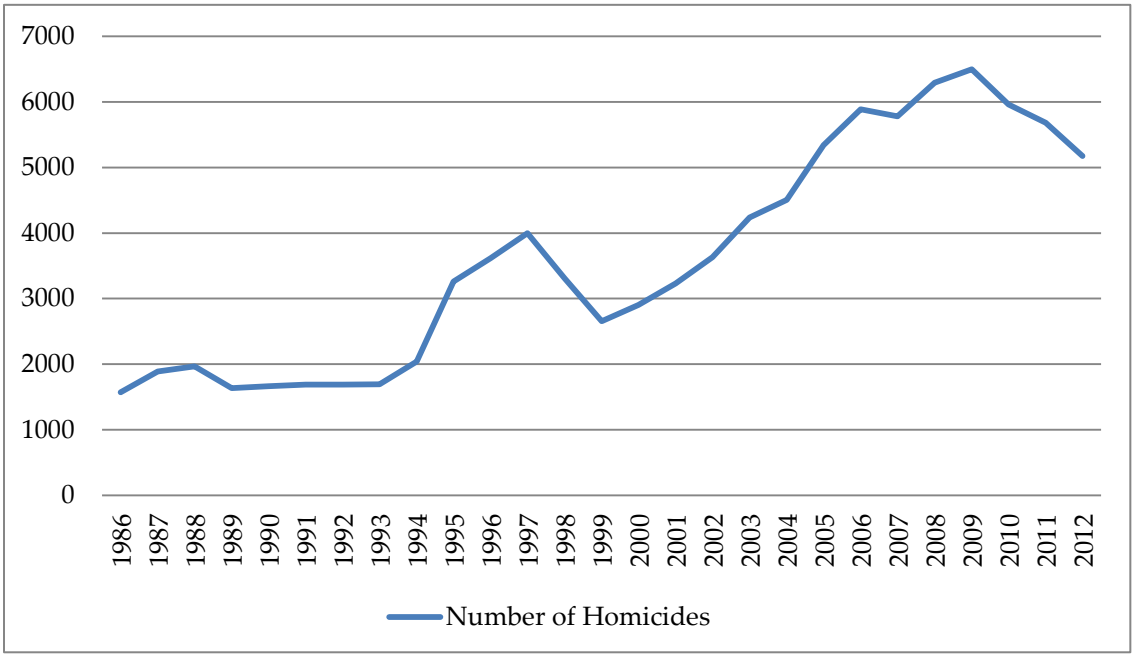
As an army captain serving in El Romero admitted, 'things really turned more violent *after* the signing of the peace.' By 1999, except for those rural indigenous communities that had seen the very worst of the conflict era's massacres, Guatemalans 'reported that they suffered more violence than they had during the years of the war' (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 41). Their sense of growing jeopardy was borne out by the statistics. The homicide rate more than doubled from 1999 to 2006 (OCAVI 2008), continued to rise until at least 2010, and remains stubbornly high despite recent (highly contested) signs of improvement (UNODC 2013; Baires Quezada 2014). [4]

This is not a uniquely Guatemalan problem. Comaroff and Comaroff (2006: 2) note that late-twentieth century political and economic (neo)liberalization have seemingly everywhere coincided with a 'deregulation of monopolies over the means of legitimate force, of moral orders, of the protection of persons and property. And an unravelling of the fabric of law and order.' This dissertation is concerned with the individual and communal consequences of the particular form this unravelling has taken in Guatemala, and with the coping mechanisms that arise in its wake.

[3] Figueroa Ibarra (2013) provides a concise overview of the phases of the conflict and state repression between 1960 and 1996. See Schirmer (1998) on the military's counter-insurgency campaigns and strategy; Jonas (2000) on the peace process; Weld (2014) on state terror in Guatemala City.

[4] Homicide statistics invariably raise the considerable problem of the (un)reliability of these numbers. An employee of the Human Rights Ombudsman's office claimed that homicides in the capital were occurring at a rate double the official figures in the spring of 2013. Guatemala City police informally told Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit (2011:11) that 'only certain violent deaths, such as those of labourers, and not others, such as those of gang members, tend to be included in official tallies.'

Figure 2. Homicides in Guatemala, 1986-2012 (data from UNODC 2013, Mendoza 2011).



A recent UNDP Human Development report found that Latin America is the only region in the world where rates of lethal violence have risen since 2000, where people are more, rather than less, likely to die violently than fifteen years ago (PNUD 2013: 41, 45). Central America's Northern Triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras joins Venezuela and Colombia with the highest incidence of violence, and within each of these countries the major cities are the deadliest places (PNUD 2013: 46-47). In Guatemala City, the murder rate soars to 109/100,000, eleven times higher than the World Health Organization's standard for when homicides reach 'crisis' point (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 11). Danger also varies greatly within cities. In the first half of 2012, the zone made up of Guatemala City's wealthiest neighbourhoods recorded not a single homicide. El Romero's zone 18 registered far more murders than any other (García Aldana 2012).

Officially, 55,353 Guatemalans were murdered between 2002 and 2012 (UNODC 2013). Violence in staggering quantity has become one of the defining characteristics of Guatemala City and urban Central America generally in most public discourses. But striking as such numbers are, they capture only part of the story. My research suggests that grasping the

changing and intensifying *quality* of violence is at least as important as tallying the sheer quantity of violent incidents. We hear a great deal about how, when, where, and in what numbers people die from violence in Guatemala City. We know much less about how they live with it. It is this under-examined aspect of urban insecurity that I seek to address.

Rotker (2002: 8) criticizes the tendency to employ numbers as 'the first resource for communicating the experience of excessive social violence' in Latin America. Feldman (2003: 70) takes issue with the 'actuarial logic' that dominates our intellectual, moral, and political engagements with violence, resulting in it being represented primarily, if not exclusively, through 'the quantification of suffering and pain.' This structure of thinking leaves substantial gaps in our understanding of what is most important about violence to the people living through it. In the Northern Triangle, it has led to the fetish of the homicide rate which, by synecdoche, has become the insecurity crisis, has become everything holding these nations back. Reducing homicides to more acceptable—more 'normal'—levels has become *the* way a Central American administration proves its competence and worthiness to govern to audiences at home and abroad.

Nearly every security intervention by the state has homicide reduction at its heart, but the murder rate is not what residents of Guatemala City's most high-risk barrios seem to find most problematic. In El Romero, people typically say they are far more distressed by novel forms of non-lethal insecurity—notably extortion—and by deaths that occur outside of rules they could previously use to predict when, why, and to whom violence happened. The story of what violence is doing to residents of Guatemala City today is as much about heightened feelings of unpredictability and betrayed expectations of safety as it is about counting up bodies.

Several important ethnographic contributions examine contemporary insecurity in Central America's cities, covering individual, community, and state responses to crime and violence, as well as the narratives that explain (and sometimes reproduce) insecurity. In

Managua's marginal barrios, Rodgers (2009: 953) found urban insecurity 'starkly reflected in the social practices and discourses of local inhabitants.' Pine (2008) describes how poor urban Hondurans incorporate their experiences of violence into their personal and political subjectivities. Rising urban crime in El Salvador after the end of its internal conflict in 1992 spurred Moodie's (2010: 3) investigation of how insecurity produced 'new postwar social imaginaries' for residents of its capital. Also in San Salvador, Hume (2009) examines the everyday politics of violence and fear and the shattering consequences for community solidarity, as residents of high-risk urban neighbourhoods retreat distrustfully from one another.

Each of these studies touches on the close and complex relationship between the perpetrators and victims of violence in marginal communities, although Hume (2009) and Pine (2008) pay relatively more attention to intimate and domestic violence than to the dynamics of violence and power between gangs and their territories. This relationship and the changes to it were, however, what many of my informants emphasized in their accounts of insecurity. Rodgers (for instance, 2007, 2009) describes the changing criminal actors and economies of a Managua barrio over his two decades of fieldwork there, providing vital material for comparison on this point. But the very different gang cultures that prevail in Nicaragua (where the maras have never made in-roads) and in Guatemala have significant consequences for the relationship between criminal and community, and thus for the experience of chronic insecurity in each setting.

In the case of Guatemala in general, Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit (2011: 4) point out that 'very little is known ethnographically about the capital city' as foreign researchers have typically viewed the mostly *ladino* (mixed race) urban centre as less anthropologically rich or relevant than the country's large and diverse Maya population. Moser and McIlwaine (2001, 2004) employed some participant-observation techniques in poor urban communities around the country, but their data was drawn primarily from focus groups. Their

'participatory urban appraisal' methodology was intended to pioneer 'the quantification of community perceptions of different kinds of violence' for use in policy settings (Moser and McIlwaine 2004: 10). That objective of scaling up empirical data from marginal communities for use at higher levels of abstraction and application is, however worthy, very different from my own of studying in detail the place and work of violence within the social world of one community. Nevertheless, their attention to how accounts and priorities differ between groups within a community reveals the complexity of views on, and experiences of, insecurity in Guatemala's most vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Ethnographic and oral history methods have recently been used to research urban violence in Guatemala City through its gangs (Fontes 2015; Levenson 2013). These studies follow gang members through neighbourhoods, prisons, and public discourses to explain how the capital's gangs evolved to become so much more violent and more vilified than the street bands that preceded them. I aim to complement and further this new empirical work by asking about the changing nature of the maras and of urban violence from the perspective of the communities in which they operate and on whom they depend for their power and their profits.

iii. The Gangs

Street gangs are frequently represented as a dire threat to Northern Triangle nations, with some going so far as to call them a 'mutated form of urban insurgency' (Manwaring 2005: 2). As the geography of violence moved from countryside to city, poor urban men took the place of poor rural men at the heart of discourses of fear, danger, decline, and control. Marroquín Parducci (2007: 76, 82-83) argues that public discourses describing young pandilleros in the language of war, sickness, garbage, and bestiality have made them into 'the best explanation for the ills that afflict the Central American region.'

Several writers have noted how urban criminals and gangsters have supplanted rural subversives in justifying repression in the name of national security for a number of Latin American states (see Rodgers 2009; Goldstein 2007; Marroquín Parducci 2007). With the end of Central America's internal conflicts in the 1990s, the phantasm of the subversive force in the hinterlands was no longer a viable enemy against which to unite a nation's 'decent' citizens. Since 'the continuous production of pathology is an important technique of power' (Das and Poole 2004: 27), urban gangs and violence provided a convenient substitute to use in fomenting moral panics and raising tolerance for extensions of state power and restrictions on citizens.

Without wishing to deny the validity of critiques of how maras and the poor young people who compose them can be manipulated to suit the discursive and political ends of the powerful, I am much more concerned here with what these gangs mean for, and to, the impoverished communities that they arise from and, lately, dominate with increasing brutality. Here the gang members are powerful, and I aim to examine not how power is exercised on or through the mara, but how the mara's power plays out in its territory. What is it like to live with and live under these gangs?

The gang members that Central American publics and politicians so dread and demonize are complicated, often contradictory, figures. Pine (2008: 43) encountered Honduran mareros 'who looked and acted like boys but saw themselves and were feared as men.' This two-faced social being and behaviour is consonant with my own experience of the self-presentation and reception of mara members in Guatemala City. There is a difficult balance to strike between describing the very real logic and rationality of the mara's brutal violence and its complex criminal economy, and acknowledging that the majority of these terrifying gangsters are boys. They generally reveal themselves to be angry, hurt, and frightened; vulnerable boys with big guns in a dangerous city. My informants frequently

grappled with this doubleness in the mara and its members, and my account struggles with it too.

This conflict between fearing the violence and recognizing the vulnerability of gang members, and the discomfort it occasioned for my informants, is representative of a larger theme. Throughout this dissertation, I portray people struggling to make sense of violence and disorder. Labels, categories, and condemnation attached to gangs and their members are key building blocks for the moral narratives from which systems of (intellectual) order emerge in disorderly social environments. This need to impose order on disruption by separating out categories of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders has been described elsewhere, although typically of better-off social classes (see Caldeira 2000; Moodie 2010). What my informants repeatedly spoke to was the necessity, but also the difficulty, if not impossibility, of maintaining this kind moral assurance while in such close proximity to violence and its perpetrators.

Residents of Guatemala City, and its red zones most of all, have (re)shaped their habits, hopes, and fears around the forms and practitioners of violence that have become increasingly common and powerful in their neighbourhoods over the past twenty years. Almost all in-depth research on Central American gangs describes either earlier stages of the maras' development or different gang cultures and differently-structured criminal economies than those presently operating in Guatemala City's red zones. Fontes (2015) and Levenson (2013) trace changing Guatemalan gang cultures through their members, but little is known about what the latest phase of this evolution has meant for their communities.

El Romero's trajectory contrasts with much of the existing literature on how gangs and other organized criminal actors operate in, and relate to, their territories. Such groups have often been depicted as substitute state actors, taking on roles that other, more licit authorities have abdicated. Criminal groups are expected to take on 'some of the *positive* functions of government' within the sectors they control (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 34), to seek 'at

least a degree of legitimacy' within their territories (Hagedorn 2007b: 310). But this is not how barrio residents describe the role of the mara in their neighbourhood, particularly since the development of their extortion economy. That predatory turn within the last decade is, I argue, absolutely central to understanding how violence and insecurity took on the form they have today.

The structure of criminal economies—their commodity chains, revenue streams, modes and relations of production and consumption—is vitally important to the experience of insecurity for those living where they operate. Extortion and drug-trafficking, for instance, create different relationships between criminals and communities, different sorts of corruption and collusion, and different kinds and levels of violence within criminal territories. This observation may seem intuitively obvious, but it has received little empirical attention.

Arias (2010a) does propose a version of this argument looking at 'market flows' of illegal resources, notably cocaine, through Latin America. He suggests that the organization of local violent actors will depend on 'the place of the country in the international division of illegal labour,' with significant rural disorder in major coca-producing nations, high levels of urban violence in transhipment countries, and much less violence in the consuming countries (2010a: 123-24). This model does accurately predict the geographic distribution of violence in the transhipment countries of Central America, but it is too broad. Focusing on the international structuring of criminal commodity chains cannot, for instance, explain the differences between rates and kinds of violence in Guatemala City and Managua, in San Pedro Sula and San José, Costa Rica, not to mention between different criminal-controlled neighbourhoods in Guatemala City itself. Illegal actors and armed groups—particularly ones that share the maras' relatively diffuse clique-based structure—establish and enforce their authority at the level of the local. It is at this level that the logic, communicative intent, and consequences of their violence are the most readily intelligible.

II. Insecurity and Local Dis/Order

i. Speaking about Insecurity

This study explores both the nature of crime and violence in a poor community—what is done and how, by who, to whom, and with what consequences—and the perception of insecurity, that is, how it is explained by those exposed to it. It is about the experience of insecurity in this neighbourhood, but just as much about how it is understood and spoken about, and how people use categories like 'insecurity' and 'violence' to think and talk about their social worlds.

Both 'violence' and 'insecurity' feature in the language employed by residents of high-risk communities to describe and understand their environment. These terms frequently appear together in the following chapters, as they did in my informants' accounts and conversations, but they are not, of course, synonymous. I use insecurity as a somewhat broader and more subjective category of social experience than violence, one that often includes violence and fear of it, but also a range of crimes and harms that affect one's feelings of personal safety without involving the direct bodily violation that 'violence' most often calls to mind. In this, I draw on Goldstein's (2012: 4) definition of insecurity in urban Bolivia as being about occupying 'a habitus of fear and uncertainty that is at once social, psychological, and material.' '*Inseguridad*' appears constantly in everyday talk in Guatemala City, and it is a category, a range of related concepts and complaints, very much at the heart of how society, politics, and daily life are being experienced and explained.

In many parts of Latin America, insecurity has become a kind of 'ethical vernacular' through which people 'frame their discourses of deficit, arguing among themselves about what it is that stands between them and the good life' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 55). Residents of marginal urban communities in Bolivia use insecurity and security to identify what they lack and to formulate demands on the state (Goldstein 2007). In rural Guatemala,

Godoy's (2006: 111) informants used 'crime' and 'insecurity' to tell her about a 'diffuse lack of control and autonomy.' Insecurity, crime, violence, and danger can also be used by poor residents of US cities to describe 'assaults on order and morality, and threats to self-respect and one's sense of belonging in the community' (Merry 1981: 12). As this range of ethnographic findings suggests, insecurity is quite a capacious and flexible category of both social experience and social discourse. Much of this dissertation is taken up with exploring what insecurity is, what it means, and what the concept is used to say in Colonia El Romero.

Talking about insecurity in the barrio often calls up accounts of change for the worse in the neighbourhood, of intensifying violence, of declining security, of disintegrating resilience. These frequently made reference to '*códigos de barrio*' (neighbourhood codes) or to 'old codes,' 'other codes,' said to have organized relationships and expectations within the community, within the gang, and between the community and local gang cliques. Fluid and often implicit rules, habits, and assumptions that made violence feel more predictable and risk more manageable, these codes appear regularly in explanations of how and why things have worsened for this neighbourhood and others like it. Narratives about barrio codes and their decline were closely intertwined with how El Romero residents perceived and explained insecurity, violence, and their effects on their lives.

Residents apply the phrase '*códigos de barrio*' to several interrelated but distinct sets of norms, expectations, and values. It can refer to the rules once supposedly observed by local gangs, which included taboos on victimizing neighbourhood residents and encouraged gang members to 'protect' the barrio's space and reputation. This code both limited the mara's use of violence within El Romero and helped residents to predict where, when, and why violence might erupt. Somewhat more broadly, '*códigos de barrio*' also refers to the guidelines according to which residents would 'move themselves,' as my friend Cadejo liked to say, through the barrio's social and physical landscape. Combining norms of discretion and respect with the cultivation of a cool head for moments of danger, this version of the code

helped residents to navigate a complex and sometimes threatening milieu. Taken together, knowledge of how one was expected to behave in interactions with others and what other residents, including gang members, were and were not likely to do, provided people in El Romero with 'a set of cognitive maps' for negotiating danger (Merry 1981: 12). In a US housing project, Merry (1981: 13) found that shared local knowledge of this sort enabled fairly reliable 'assessment of personal risk' for residents, as well as 'more general understandings about who and what is dangerous' that made people feel safer and more in control. When people in El Romero talk about the rise of insecurity and decline of local codes, they are often complaining about a loss of predictability, the destabilization of that sense of understanding and control.

As well as practical and predictive tools, however, '*códigos de barrio*' also refers to standards of ethical behaviour shared by community residents—ways not only of guiding one's actions, but also of evaluating the behaviour and character of oneself and others. When the code of the barrio is used in this sense, people are typically evoking norms of local solidarity, self-help, and reciprocal aid. Several people, in explaining the origins of these expectations and standards, pointed to the foundation and early settlement of Colonia el Romero. Poor earthquake refugees pioneering on an urban frontier, the first inhabitants had to cooperate, pool resources, and trade favours in order to build their homes, establish local infrastructure, and maintain their families and households. The barrio codes seen in this light uphold Ellickson's (1991: 167) general hypothesis regarding informal norms that, because it is mutually advantageous, 'members of tight social groups will informally encourage each other to engage in cooperative behaviour.' The expectations of their code buffered barrio residents from some of the worst precarity engendered by their social and economic marginality. They also became part of local definitions of what it is or was to be a decent person, family, neighbour, and community.

The *códigos de barrio* are not straightforward history, but rather a set of discourses on the past, on change, and on decline. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the norms and rules attributed to the various inflections of the barrio codes ever effectively shaped or constrained local behaviour. But they are clearly seen to be important for understanding and explaining insecurity in the present. As described in the following chapters, the mara's increasing violence and predation within its territory are said to have extinguished these codes as both reliable predictors of how things will go in the neighbourhood and as standards of behaviour that can be safely enacted. Nevertheless, barrio residents do still refer to the old codes in articulating accounts of 'the way the world ought to be, whether or not anyone actually behaves that way' (Pirie 2013: 130). Several chapters examine the various facets and claims of these codes and the descriptive, predictive, evaluative, and aspirational work they did and are doing for residents of El Romero.

ii. Sources of Order and Disorder

As residents tell it, including through their nostalgic laments for the 'old codes', the story of insecurity in the barrio is as much about disorder as it is about violence. Disorder is, explicitly or implicitly, almost always a part of ethnographic depictions of violence. These have often emphasized the ways in which violence undermines many of the assumptions that organize everyday social practices and relationships. Violence seems to disable or impede 'access to established contexts and trusted categories' and to make the 'maps and charts that guided people in their relation to the ordinary' disappear (Das and Kleinman 2000: 8).

Such destabilization is very much a part of what my informants identified as wrong and distressing. But it is important not to overlook the ways in which violence can 'relate to both order and disorder in a given social context' (Whitehead 2007: 46; see also Pirie 2013: 28-30). The reflexive pairing of violence and disorder, of order and social, political, or interpersonal

'peace' is one that I wish to question and complicate. Barrio residents do speak of both violence and disorder in describing their circumstances, but the connections between those terms were neither automatic nor uncontested. Through their accounts both of how insecurity has changed over time and how it has changed their community, it becomes apparent that what has happened is more complex than simply more violence leading to more disorder causing more distress. It is necessary to unpack and disaggregate the category of violence, to look at what particular practices, patterns, and perpetrators of violence do to, and say about, a host of local relationships and expectations.

The story of both violence and disorder in El Romero is also incomplete without acknowledging the efforts that people there put towards reclaiming a measure of order and control in this challenging environment. In her ethnography of Medellín youth's encounters with violence, Riaño-Alcalá (2006: 14) stresses that 'independent of the "spread", "extent", "regularity" or "intensity" of violence, human beings make sense out of experiences that can be profoundly dehumanizing.' Emphasizing efforts to reclaim and maintain social order in volatile and disorderly landscapes may help to fill a gap in anthropological accounts of violence, which have too often tended to foreground graphic depictions of dislocation and disorientation at the expense of the enormous energies people put towards building liveable worlds in circumstances of grave insecurity (von Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007: 14).

The means by which El Romero's inhabitants seek to do so, the obstacles they encounter, and the results of their efforts, are among the major topics of this dissertation. I examine two principal ways that barrio residents look for and work towards order. I have already mentioned narratives surrounding neighbourhood codes, which people can deploy in the construction of moral order. Since the mara's domination of the neighbourhood has become more violent and exploitative, El Romero's inhabitants have also increasingly turned to external providers of order in the state. As will become apparent, residents look to community and state for very different kinds of order and security.

Insecurity is reshaping local views of, and relationships with, public institutions, security forces, and state authorities. At the midpoint of my fieldwork, El Romero was placed under the indefinite military occupation of a new urban security task force, which was generally welcomed by inhabitants. With as many soldiers as gang members asserting authority and exercising coercive power in the community, it became both practically and intellectually impossible to avoid what the barrio's red zone status means for the relationship between its residents and the state and its forces of order. *Mano dura* (strong/firm hand) law and order policies have had a tremendous impact on state approaches to crime and security issues across Latin America in recent years. Frequently popular and rarely effective, heavy-handed interventions by public security forces tend to focus on poor urban neighbourhoods as the hosts and vectors of crime and violence. El Romero's experience of military occupation in the name of urban security illuminates how *mano dura* politics play out in the communities that they target, and the part they play in people's efforts to find order in insecurity, in this case from external forces.

iii. Social Fields and Spheres of Control

It is not especially surprising that people in El Romero should look to the Guatemalan state for certain kinds of order and to narratives about their community and its traditions for others. It is one of the elementary insights of legal anthropology that every human group has certain 'control mechanisms which have little to do with governmental organization, and which certainly do not depend for their effectiveness upon the kind of coercive force which state organs may bring to bear' (Roberts 1979: 115). By no means do people require laws and legal institutions to identify behaviours that call for reward and punishment, to enter into relationships that alter their duties and rights with regards to one another, or to administer sanctions or incentives.

Although more likely to focus on aspects of the legal systems, formal institutions, and regulatory apparatus typical of modern states, the interdisciplinary socio-legal literature also engages with the 'broader issues of order in society' (Roberts 1979: 115). Because 'law-and-society scholars have appreciated that informal controls always supplement, and often supplant, the legal system,' the interplay between, and respective spheres of influence of, legal and informal order have been important topics of inquiry (Ellickson 1991: 148-49).[5] Ellickson (1991: 123) defines the central question for his own classic socio-legal work, *Order without Law*, as being to discover 'in what social contexts and with what content informal norms emerge to help people achieve order without law.' Conversely, this dissertation examines under what circumstances informal norms can fail people, and how they may come to feel a need for the state and its law to achieve order in their lives. Strathern (1985) influentially criticized what she saw as a tradition in legal anthropology of unquestioningly accepting a Hobbesian model of human nature, which assumes that people need (and desire) to have order imposed on them by some organized force outside themselves. Strathern may be right to object to the assumption that all social groups require a Leviathan. But the fact remains that in certain contexts—including El Romero's—people *do* want external force to project itself into their lives for the sake of ordering. We should try to understand when and why this comes about.

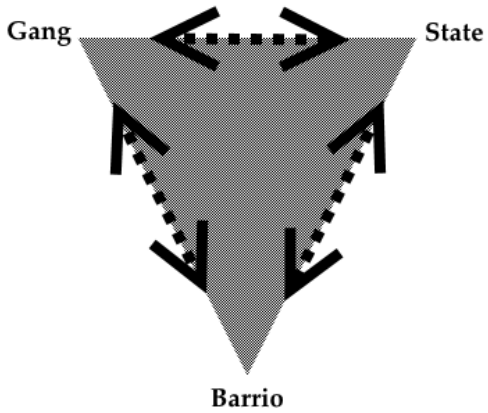
The existence of multiple spheres of normative influence and claim within societies is obvious and uncontroversial.[6] Far more interesting is how these different normative orders

[5] Legal theorists and legal anthropologists have devised many means for distinguishing laws from social rules. These attempts often turn on some aspect of the sanction that attends transgression of a rule: the form this sanction takes, the mode in which it is administered, or the kinds of pressure rule-breaking attracts (Tamanaha 1993: 200). The long-running debate over the definition of law is tangential to my concerns, as the *códigos de barrio* belong firmly within the category of informal norms, and are not meaningfully 'legal' in any way.

[6] An extensive interdisciplinary literature examines the existence of multiple normative orders and the factors influencing when and why people use social norms rather than laws. See, for instance, Goodale (1998) on theoretical debates in legal pluralism; von Benda-Beckman (1981) on 'forum shopping' in dispute resolution; Ostrom (1990) on management of common resources in the absence of legal regulation; and Moore (2002) on the process by which legal regulation penetrates the arrangements of social spheres.

interact, compete, conflict with, or even annihilate one another. It is to this line of inquiry that ethnographic study of El Romero contributes. In this neighbourhood, the residents, the gang, and the state seek various kinds of order and control by various strategies and to various ends. The dynamics of insecurity in El Romero that I describe can be visualized as the outcome of fluctuating relationships within and between the points of a triangle anchored by the gang, the state, and the barrio.

Figure 3. A highly simplified diagram of the complex dynamics between social spheres affecting security and insecurity in El Romero.



This is hardly an exhaustive list of the entities that influence urban insecurity in Central America.[7] But these were the sites of the tensions, negotiations, and conflicts that I found to be by far the most relevant for understanding its shape and effects in El Romero. Of course, each point of this tripartite schema also represents a complex and heterogeneous social unit. The gang is composed of individuals who come to it for a variety of reasons, with different aims inside it and social ties beyond it. The state as a singular 'thing' is in fact better understood as the assortment of institutions and agents partaking of and deploying the resources and power that the modern 'state-system' has accumulated for itself (Abrams 1988: 75-76). And the barrio contains thousands of people with diverse goals for their lives

[7] One might also speak of evangelical and Catholic churches, charitable groups, non-governmental organizations, and schools among others. I deal with these in greater detail in Chapter 2, but show there that the intensifying predation of the gang and perception of El Romero as a dangerous and uncontrollable territory has led many civil society groups to pull out of the neighbourhood. The institutional make-up of the barrio is thus simpler than it once was.

and plans for achieving them. It is therefore important not to lose sight of conflicting accounts and competing agendas within the neighbourhood, gang, and state respectively.

The basic point is that shifting relationships, priorities, and strategies within any one of these three spheres, or between any two, will often affect the others in important and sometimes unforeseen ways. Sometimes there is a direct relationship, as when developments in the gang's criminal economy change how gang members relate to their barrios. Sometimes the relationship is indirect: for example, state gang suppression initiatives also affect El Romero's inhabitants and their relationship with both the mara and the state.

I do not aim at a complete analysis of all of this triangle's corners and edges. It is intended as a simplified image of the background conditions shaping the expression and experience of urban insecurity here—a template not for a thesis but for a much broader research agenda. The current work concentrates on the neighbourhood and on how its inhabitants relate to the mara and the state. However, though it is not my primary focus here, one implication of the triangular schema I propose is that the barrio must be taken into account to understand local gang-state dynamics. As I discuss in the final chapter with reference to the military occupation of El Romero, explaining the territorial logics of coercive forces—the interests and agendas they brought to this specific place—is essential for grasping how and why gangsters and soldiers shared space and control in the barrio as they did. The barrio can only be understood with reference to the gang and the state. But equally, I argue, the gang and the state must be examined with reference to the barrio, to the space in which they are operating and seeking power or profit. Centred firmly on and in the barrio, I examine this evolving bundle of relationships and its implications for local insecurity.

Moore's (1973) influential concept of the 'semi-autonomous social field' helps to capture the multidimensional dynamics observed in El Romero. Departing from the observation that, in any given social context in complex modern societies, the 'operative "rules of the

game" include some laws and some other quite effective norms and practices,' Moore (1973: 742-43) proposes the notion of 'semi-autonomy' to explain how legal, illegal, and non-legal rules coexist and interact. The semi-autonomous social field is distinct, but permeable: it 'has rule-making capacities, and the means to induce or coerce compliance; but it is simultaneously set in a larger social matrix which can, and does, affect and invade it' (1973: 720).

Residents use ideas about the community to articulate standards for how people *ought* to behave. But whatever moral force the community's shared space and history have, the capacity to compel or induce people to comply with any rules of behaviour is very weak, if it exists at all. Many of the terms of the codes of the barrio were never expressed as explicit rules in the first place, taking instead the form of diffuse norms and expectations. However, in his closely related concept of a 'social sphere', Galligan (2007: 106) suggests that rules alone 'are an unduly narrow basis for describing the normative environment,' which also includes less specific 'values and standards, dispositions and orientations.' The barrio can be seen as a distinct, semi-autonomous normative environment on these somewhat broader terms, albeit one lacking in (or having lost) what Galligan (2007: 103) calls 'density': 'the relative power of social spheres in influencing their members.' The density of a social sphere is roughly analogous to the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a social field; both these measures convey a given social setting's degree of openness or resistance to external influence and regulation.

Moore (1973: 743) argued for the importance of empirical socio-legal research into 'areas of autonomy and modes of self-regulation,' as well as the ways in which such social fields connect in complex societies. El Romero's story contributes to such inquiry, but I wish to emphasize questions of change and dynamism within and between social fields. The goal is to show how these areas of autonomy can change in size and scope, how modes of self-regulation alter and break down, how the balance shifts between internal ordering and

external influence, and how points of connection between social spheres change in position and importance. The decline of the barrio's codes under gang predation and the increasing eagerness for intensive state intervention can be understood in terms of the flux of power between social fields and their ability to organize the social and moral world of El Romero's inhabitants.

III. Methods: Researching Insecurity in the Barrio

Between October 2011 and May 2013, I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala City, focusing on Colonia El Romero after spending time visiting organizations in high-risk communities around the capital and its periphery. Meetings and interviews in other red zones around Guatemala City, at this stage and throughout my fieldwork, provided useful material on the development of gangs and insecurity elsewhere in the capital. I chose to make El Romero my primary research site because serendipitous contacts made early on provided several distinct avenues into the neighbourhood, permitting me to become acquainted with a broad range of residents through different networks of relationships.

Rafa and Cadejo, El Romero natives who befriended me on a bus, invited me to their theatre performances at the local middle school and Catholic Church, where the school director and the parish priest subsequently welcomed me to attend further activities. Around the same time, a Guatemalan sociologist introduced me to Pastor Gerardo, the leader of one of El Romero's largest Pentecostal churches, who facilitated meetings with numerous members of his congregation, including ex-gang members. Tagging along with the school director to a meeting of a network of neighbourhood organizations, I met three further key informants: Arturo, who grew up in El Romero and was then working in violence prevention programmes with local young people, Mono, the charismatic leader of a

group of teenage activists, and Doña Ana, the president of the Neighbourhood Committee (*Comité Único de Barrio*) of one of El Romero's *asentamientos*.

All these names recur frequently throughout the following chapters, and nearly everyone else who appears is someone I met through one of these people or local institutions.[8] Rafa and Cadejo were well-positioned to help me negotiate a potentially high-risk research site. Now in their thirties, both were involved with El Romero's earliest mara cliques in the 1990s, going on to become street performers and advocates for their community and its young people. Both moved out of the neighbourhood, but their families, friendships, and projects in El Romero keep them in constant contact with the barrio they still regard as home. This research would have been impossible without their willingness to vouch for me, look out for me, and patiently teach me how to navigate the neighbourhood's physical and social milieu.

Neither the experience nor the results of my fieldwork would have been the same without Doña Ana. The mother of nine children, she declared me adopted as her tenth. Like Rafa and Cadejo, Doña Ana is well-known and well-liked in El Romero. Ana and her family provided me with safety, support, and many of my contacts in the neighbourhood. Her home became my home in El Romero, where I spent many hours every week chatting over coffee, eating fresh tortillas, writing up notes, spending time with my new sisters, holding her infant granddaughters while they slept, and meeting the neighbours who were always dropping by. Not a few days, I did all of these more or less at once while seated at her kitchen table.

I carried out very open-ended interviews with people in El Romero and several other barrios about violence and insecurity in their communities. However, the great majority of

[8] All names are pseudonyms. I have omitted or disguised more details about those who disclosed particularly sensitive information (for instance, gang associates who shared information about mara operations, or residents who told me details of crimes that were not public knowledge). Others, like Doña Ana and Rafa, I have disguised less, partly because they and their families no longer reside in Guatemala City. Unless otherwise noted, people named or quoted lived in El Romero during my fieldwork.

my ‘data collection’ happened during much less structured interactions—gossiping with Ana’s teenage daughters while basking in the morning sun outside their front door, talking with Mono and his friends while helping them wrangle younger kids through one of their activities, hearing news and rumours traded between neighbours while Doña Ana and I ran errands in the market. This was the sort of business that filled up my days in El Romero and provided much of the material gathered here. I also conducted numerous interviews with representatives of municipal and state institutions, soldiers and officers of El Romero’s military task force, participants in local gangs from the mid-1980s to the present, and inmates of three prisons in or near the capital. These supplemented the accounts of barrio residents that form the core material of this thesis with perspectives from within the state and within the gang.

Figure 4. Doña Ana's home, shortly before Christmas. Author photo, December 2012.

The flexibility and spatial focus of ethnographic methods can provide unparalleled depth of access to the social world of the field site, 'often going into realms of the social not easily discernible within the more formal protocols used by many other disciplines' (Das and Poole 2004: 4). Several recent practitioners argue that this approach is especially suited to research on marginal urban communities with high rates of violence and crime, or at least that other social science methods are unsuitable or unwieldy in these kinds of settings. Bourgois (2003) conducted ethnographic research on the lives of East Harlem's drug dealers and users. He warns that tactics relying on statistics or randomly-sampled surveys will, without a basis of trust, fail to 'access with any degree of accuracy' the real social worlds of people who are justifiably distrustful of mainstream society, and are likely to merely 'collect fabrications' (Bourgois 2003: 12). Hume (2009) encountered significant difficulties attempting to employ focus groups in poor Salvadoran neighbourhoods before abandoning the method. Although she had taken pains to establish rapport with community members, she 'had not envisaged how deep levels of mistrust and fear *among* communities' would hamper their willingness to participate in public discussions of local violence (2009: 85). To wander into Guatemala City red zones to deliver surveys or to call a public meeting to discuss gang violence would similarly be both unproductive and unwise.

Urban ethnography does have its drawbacks, notably the challenge of keeping 'one eye on the total society and the other on the small-scale units that urban ethnographers study' (Suttles 1976: 14). A neighbourhood of 20,000 people is already far from the 'small, face-to-face, acephalous communities' which ethnographic techniques were initially developed to study (Roberts 1979: 25), and its residents are constantly moving about and interacting with a city of three million. The Guatemalan state is, of course, by no means headless: authorities at a social, economic, and political distance from the barrio have a significant impact on daily life there. Moore's (1973) aforementioned description of the semi-autonomous social field provides one way to transform this intractable 'unit of analysis problem' (Merry 1981:

23) from a stumbling block into a subject of inquiry in its own right. This approach emphasizes the interplay between dynamics internal to defined social groups and the broader powers, changes, or norms that influence them (Moore 1973: 743). This study is thus an account of El Romero and of how its residents perceive and inhabit their neighbourhood. But it is also a study of the ways that they experience others' perceptions of them and their barrio, and of the projections of forces like the Guatemalan state and transnational gang cultures into local life.

The violence and insecurity that are such central subjects for this research entailed both methodological and ethical troubles. Researching violence in violent places can require a good deal of compromise on classic aspects of participant observation-based ethnography. Researchers in fields in which both they and their informants face significant, frequent, and often unpredictable danger are liable to find themselves in situations 'where the customary approaches, methods, and ethics of anthropological fieldwork are at times insufficient, irrelevant, inapplicable, imprudent, or simply naïve' (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 209). Living among the study population, visually documenting the setting, recording conversations and interviews, and even keeping full field notes may all prove ill-advised or impossible (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 212-213). My ability to move and question freely in El Romero was always constrained by the insecurity of the environment. Coupled with the lack of reliable statistics or official figures about this part of Guatemala City, this meant I was not able to triangulate my own observations and my informants' accounts and assertions against more independently verifiable facts as often as I would have wished.

I lived in a middle-class residential neighbourhood forty minutes by bus from the barrio. I was not willing to accept the level of risk that I would have incurred for myself or for any family that hosted me had I moved into the neighbourhood. On certain matters—taking buses around the city's red zones, walking around the barrio alone, visiting the neighbourhood after dark, interviewing 'ex'-gang members whose retirement was

rumoured to be feigned—I pushed the boundaries of what my friends thought I could or should do. But I also avoided speaking with people against whom I received what I considered to be strong and credible warnings and sometimes avoided El Romero for short periods if Rafa or Ana warned told me to stay away because of an especially volatile situation or some implied threat against me.

I deferred to them on these matters in part to keep myself safe, but more importantly because I made it a priority not to expose my informants to more risk or suspicion from the gang than they had already taken on by publically associating themselves with me. I tried hard not to behave more imprudently or indiscreetly than necessary. Ultimately, I depended on the judgement of those who knew the barrio and could read its moods so much better than myself. They were far better positioned to protect me than I was them, a situation which challenges the power relationship implicit in research ethics guidelines 'in which the anthropologist is assumed to be able to control or at least mediate or negotiate danger away from those with whom he or she is working' (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 214). The reliance of researchers in dangerous fields on the protection and savvy of local interlocutors alters somewhat the nature of informed consent, given that participants may have a fuller picture of the risks the research poses to them than does the researcher. I approached it more as an ongoing conversation, especially with my key informants, discussing my plans with them as they evolved and taking their advice and warnings very seriously.

As the above suggests, violence and danger can intensify the influence of gatekeepers on data collection. Because of the high-risk nature of the research site and residents' wariness of strangers and of careless talk, I had to rely largely on a 'snowballing' method of pursuing new informants and information. Most people I encountered in El Romero associated me with either Ana's household or Rafa and Cadejo's group of friends before meeting me. Their ability to place me in the barrio through my relationships with these men and this family certainly increased the willingness of many residents to speak with me, to welcome me into

their homes, and to discuss potentially sensitive topics. However, people who disliked or distrusted them may also have extended those feelings to me, and they also warned me away from pursuing relationships with people they disapproved of.

I do not claim that the networks I developed in El Romero yielded a representative sample of its population. A number of those I came to know well were far more active in the neighbourhood than the average resident, and thus perhaps more likely to be attached to the vision of community solidarity conveyed in talk of the *códigos de barrio*. They were less resigned to their barrio's situation than many others I encountered and more willing to be openly critical of those they blamed for it. Conversations with a wide and diverse range of inhabitants demonstrated that their views and values were broadly (though by no means universally) shared. However, it is worth emphasizing that Ana, Cadejo, Rafa, Arturo, and Mono were prepared to test the limits of the mara's domination in ways the vast majority of their neighbours would not. One way they did so was by publically linking themselves to me during my time in El Romero.

Particularly during the second half of my fieldwork, with El Romero hosting soldiers as well as gangsters, I had to navigate my status as a conspicuous outsider very carefully. I kept open interactions with both clique members and military personnel to a minimum, as being seen to develop relationships with one would have caused problems with the other—and either could easily have made it impossible for me to be in the barrio. It would also have risked the trust of my informants and their evaluation of my judgement, character, and intentions. All interviews with military personnel, municipal and state officials, and those with recent or current gang ties were arranged as privately as possible and were conducted elsewhere in the city.

As is the case for every researcher, what I was able to do, see, and hear in the field was shaped by my own identity and by the identities that my interlocutors ascribed to me. Being a young foreign woman in El Romero enhanced my access to private and domestic spaces

and gave me some latitude to move around public spaces claimed by armed men in both the gang and the military.[9] But I was vulnerable to forms of violence, intimidation, and disrespect that a male researcher would not have been to the same extent. I was subject to constant sexual remarks and overtures from men which ranged from innocently flirtatious to openly threatening. Sexual aggression often served to stake a claim to dominance and power (over me specifically, over women in general, and perhaps especially relative to other men). My assessment of what my gender meant in this field is one reason why this study suffers from thin data on the perspectives and experiences of violent men, especially current gang members. I did not see how I could pursue relationships with them that would be close and trusting enough to yield information worth the risk.[10]

However, in other ways these same dynamics of machismo and misogyny worked to my advantage. I was taken less seriously and seen as unthreatening. My real and perceived vulnerability, as well as the novelty I represented, were crucial to the clique's tolerance of me. Strange men in their barrio are a category of person for whom local gang members and the incarcerated leaders they report to have a stock response: suspicion and overt hostility. An unknown young foreign woman was not a kind of person they seemed to know how to respond to. By walking around their territory alone and unprotected, I apparently signalled to their satisfaction my acceptance that it was in their power to harm me or exclude me from their territory if they chose. Because I did not attempt to involve them directly in my research, I did not give the neighbourhood's current gang members reason to suspect I was unduly interested in or opposed to their activities. Most mara members greeted my presence with a sort of bemused and wary indifference.

[9] The contributors to Huggins and Glebeek (2009) examine various aspects of the experience of women researchers in high-risk filed sites. Several mention this same effect of their dual status as female and foreign facilitating their access to both public (male) and private (female) spaces.

[10] See Fontes (2015) for a focus on male gang members and male-dominated spaces.

Furthermore, many residents were extraordinarily concerned with my vulnerability as a young woman in their neighbourhood. They were anxious to help me minimize it and generous with their efforts to protect me.[11] This not only had the practical boon of increasing my security, but also helped me to learn a great deal about how red zone inhabitants perceive, evaluate, and manage danger. As both a young woman in need of protection and a high-status outsider (Ana like to introduce me as 'my daughter from a famous university over there'), I made an ideal audience for discourses and demonstrations of decency and respectability. People often used their interactions with me to assert their understanding of themselves as honest, hardworking, poor but worthy, more sinned-against than sinning. For the neighbourhood's activists and leaders, their hospitality to me, and indeed my very ability to conduct research in the barrio, allowed them to contest some of the more vicious stereotypes that they felt adhered to them as a red zone. To ex-gang members, especially those who had been 'born again', I represented an opportunity to perform their rehabilitation and redemption, to claim their new identities as good men by treating me with a respect and care that contrasted sharply with their descriptions of their past treatment of women (see Presser 2009). Being a young woman researching violence did not so much constrain as shape my research process and its outcomes. People's perceptions of and reactions to my identity gave me insight into how they conceive of insecurity, how families and individuals cope with it, and the moral vision they call on in seeking a measure of order amid it.

Chapter Outline

Attending to this community's experience as the gang's techniques of predation evolved and local mechanisms of coping and control deteriorated contributes to our knowledge of the

[11] This was likely compounded by their tendency to perceive me as significantly younger than my actual age. Many people initially thought I was about eighteen and often continued to treat me in some ways as they would a girl of that age.

nature and consequences of urban insecurity in important ways. Chapter 2 traces the history of El Romero and its place in Guatemala City's space and imagination, with the aim of describing how the capital's 'red zones' have taken shape as particular geographic, social, and discursive spaces. I then examine the development of Guatemala's gangs over the last 30 years, with a particular focus on the mara's changing patterns of violence and profit-seeking within its territories. Chapter 4 returns to the evolution of El Romero's gangs and their relationship with the neighbourhood. I detail the impact of the mara's predatory turn on local life and the narratives about barrio codes that residents use to describe insecurity and its effects. In Chapter 5, I outline the strategies that residents use to evaluate risk, negotiate insecurity, and seek out order within the neighbourhood, while Chapter 6 looks at the particular challenges and options that local young people encounter both within the gang and outside of it. The final ethnographic chapter examines the military occupation of El Romero, exploring what it did to and said about relationships between the state, the gang, and the barrio.

Chapter 2
Red Zone City

The overall mood is one of tension and insecurity, with the faint odour of something smouldering that shouldn't be burning.
– David Unger, of Guatemala City[1]

Introduction

Boarding the crowded bus during morning rush hour on a route that had been bombed twice that year in disputes over extortion payments, the itinerant preacher opened his bible. On-the-road sermons are a daily occurrence for users of Guatemala's signature red 'chicken buses'—decommissioned North American school buses refitted for public transit.[2] He thumbed through to his chosen verse and read: 'What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me' (Job 3:25 NIV).

As a young man with gang tattoos visible on his hands and wrists squeezed past him to get off the bus, the preacher launched into a sermon bemoaning the omnipresence of fear in urban life. 'People fear walking in the street, they fear getting on a bus. They are afraid to carry money, afraid to wear jewellery. They are afraid to open a little business because they'll be charged that so-called tax. Look!' he urged us, holding up copies of the *Prensa Libre* and *Nuestro Diario*, the country's two highest-circulation newspapers. One front page fretted 'The Violence Continues'; the other warned 'The Deaths Never Stop'. 'We've all lost someone to the violence,' he went on. 'Everyone is afraid. Everywhere.' He touched a nerve with his audience. Concluding with the usual appeal for donations to fund his ministry, he received easily the best return I ever witnessed for such a performance. From the burgeoning security industry to the *mano dura* politicians to the roving street preachers, fear is as profitable as it is pervasive.

[1] From 'The City and the Writer: In Guatemala City with David Unger' (Handal 2014).

[2] These privately-operated buses continue to provide the bulk of the city's mass transit, now supplemented by the more modern and secure *Transmetro* and *Transurbano* routes, operated by the Municipality and the Ministry of Governance respectively.

The preacher that morning had played on and played up the notion, which has become a popular trope in both academic and media representations, that 'living in a Latin American city today is a terror-filled experience' (Balán 2002: 5). The point can easily be overstated, but it is undeniable that tense anxiety often dominates the atmosphere of everyday life in Guatemala City. In urban centres across Latin America, fear of crime and violence 'has made its way into both the cityscape and people's subjectivities in profound ways' (Veloso 2010: 254). It transforms urban habits and geographies, giving rise to novel or intensified 'practices of insecurity' that affect how urban residents relate to each other, to public authorities, and to the space of the city around them (Rotker 2002: 13). The impact of insecurity on Guatemala City is certainly not limited to its most high-risk districts. Insecurity is not only restructuring its spatial layout, but also shaping the dynamics of privilege and exclusion that do as much as any physical conduits or barriers to direct patterns of habitation, movement, and opportunity in the city.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce Colonia El Romero in greater detail, tracing the barrio's nearly forty-year history and its place in the broader spatial, social, and institutional landscape of Guatemala City. Life in El Romero is characterized by multiple forms of exclusion and marginalization. These are essential to understanding the barrio and its people generally and certainly to their experiences of insecurity and violence. But to say that a person or group is 'excluded' only makes sense in terms of what they are left or kept out of; to describe a place or population as 'marginal' is necessarily a statement on their position relative to those more 'centrally' located in geographic, social, economic, or political terms (see Ferguson 1999: 238; Auyero 2000: 99). Thus, in addition to describing Colonia El Romero itself, this chapter is also concerned with the dynamics of exclusion and marginality that shape the relationship between its residents and the wider city and society. As an infamous 'red zone', that relationship is defined, to a significant extent, by feelings, ideas, and discourses about insecurity, which is why this chapter opens with a preacher's

testament to the power of fear over daily life and deals with how Guatemalans beyond the red zones have been perceiving and reacting to urban insecurity.

I. Insecurity and Urban Living

i. Disaster City

The rising sense of insecurity and diminishing sense of control that runs through the ethnographic account I present of El Romero are by no means confined to this particularly vulnerable community. Throughout the capital, it is very common to encounter expressions of nostalgia, a sense that things have somehow become terribly unhinged. One well-dressed lady who struck up a conversation in the Central Market lamented my misfortune at having landed there in these bad days. 'Guatemala was such a *lovely* country thirty years ago,' she assured me. Several months later, the ex-dictator José Efraín Rios Montt was on trial for crimes of genocide taking place thirty years before our chat.

The perception of social disorder that many Guatemala City residents complain of is not helped by the capital's physical disorderliness. Its development has been both precipitous and largely unplanned, with little official intervention in this process at either the municipal or national level until very recently (Levenson 2011: 35). For almost forty years, the city has been 'expanding itself at an accelerated rhythm, chaotically and without control' (AVANCSO 2003: 96). It is not even clear just how much it has grown. The National Institute of Statistics (INE) estimated the urban population of the Department of Guatemala at just under 2.8 million in 2012 (2013: 13). However, a decade earlier, the Municipality of Guatemala already put the population of the metropolitan region at 3.5 million, 900,000 more than INE claimed the whole department contained at the time (AVANCSO 2003: 110).[3]

[3] Significant discrepancies plague virtually all demographic and socio-economic indicators for Guatemala City. In 2001, for instance, different sources held that 11.7% of the Department of Guatemala's inhabitants were poor, or that 60-70% of metropolitan region (the vast majority of the department's population) was poor (AVANCSO 2003: 125).

Guatemala is a city 'born from disaster' (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 4). The Valle de la Ermita, at the southern end of Guatemala's central highlands, was chosen as the site for a new colonial capital in 1776, after a series of earthquakes destroyed the previous administrative centre. It has continued to grow from and around disasters, the most dramatic being a massive earthquake in 1976. Between 23,000 and 30,000 people died, and by some estimates as many as 500,000 were rendered homeless in Guatemala City alone—roughly half its population at the time (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 6; Weld 2014: 124; AVANCSO 2003: 114).

The resulting housing crisis in the capital was compounded by a surge of migrants displaced from the rural highlands, where the majority of deaths had occurred and whole communities were flattened. They came to the city in the earthquake's aftermath hoping to find both shelter and work as the capital rebuilt itself. They found little of either, however, and new arrivals and longstanding urban residents alike built *asentamientos* (informal settlements) from 'whatever materials they could scavenge in whatever spaces were available. Squatting meant that Guatemala City would mushroom in a disorganized way—without infrastructure, without planning, without permits' (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 6).

The 1976 disaster struck during, and further accelerated, a period of tremendous but improvisatory growth in the city as its population nearly doubled between 1973 and 1987 (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 6). The capital's first *asentamientos* had been built during the reformist interlude of the 1944-54 'Guatemalan Spring' (AVANCSO 2003: 108). These occupied the slopes of *barrancos* surrounding the city's central zones, and became larger, denser, and more numerous as the pace of urbanization accelerated in subsequent decades.

Figure 5. The *barranco* between zone 3 and zone 7 of Guatemala City contains some of the capital's oldest *asentamientos* (left), and one of its newest, occupied in August 2012 (right). Author photos, February 2013.

Rapid and disorganized urban settlement did not end with the earthquake. The country's civil war began in 1960 with a failed coup by leftist military officers, and had passed through several phases of armed conflict and political repression by the late 1970s, concentrated in eastern Guatemala and the urban centres. After 1978, the war escalated drastically. Generals Romeo Lucas García (1978-82) and Efraín Rios Montt (1982-83) presided over what were by far the conflict's deadliest years. Guerrilla activity was now based in the largely indigenous regions of western and northern Guatemala, and the state employed brutal scorched-earth tactics against Mayan communities as a cornerstone of its counter-insurgency strategy. Hundreds of thousands were displaced both internally and internationally.

It is impossible to determine how many refugees came to Guatemala City in this period, given that most of them sought safety through anonymity. Estimates range from 45,000 displaced by violence to the capital over the 36-year course of the conflict to 45,000 arriving

in just the most intense period of state violence from 1981-83 (Bastos and Camus 1997: 17; AVANCSO 2003: 117). Those who arrived in this period settled and expanded the urban frontiers. One study found that 87 per cent of families displaced by violence to the capital region settled on the periphery, defined as five zones on the edges of the city's official limits (including El Romero's zone 18) and several adjoining municipalities that were rapidly being absorbed by its growth (Bastos and Camus 1997: 63-64). The colonization of this periphery combined informal *asentamiento*-building with the more formal development of new middle- and working-class neighbourhoods. Expansion of both kinds proceeded rapidly: between just 1988 and 2000, more new 'urban floor' was added to Guatemala City than had been in the previous 212 years since its foundation in 1776 (AVANCSO 2003: 128).

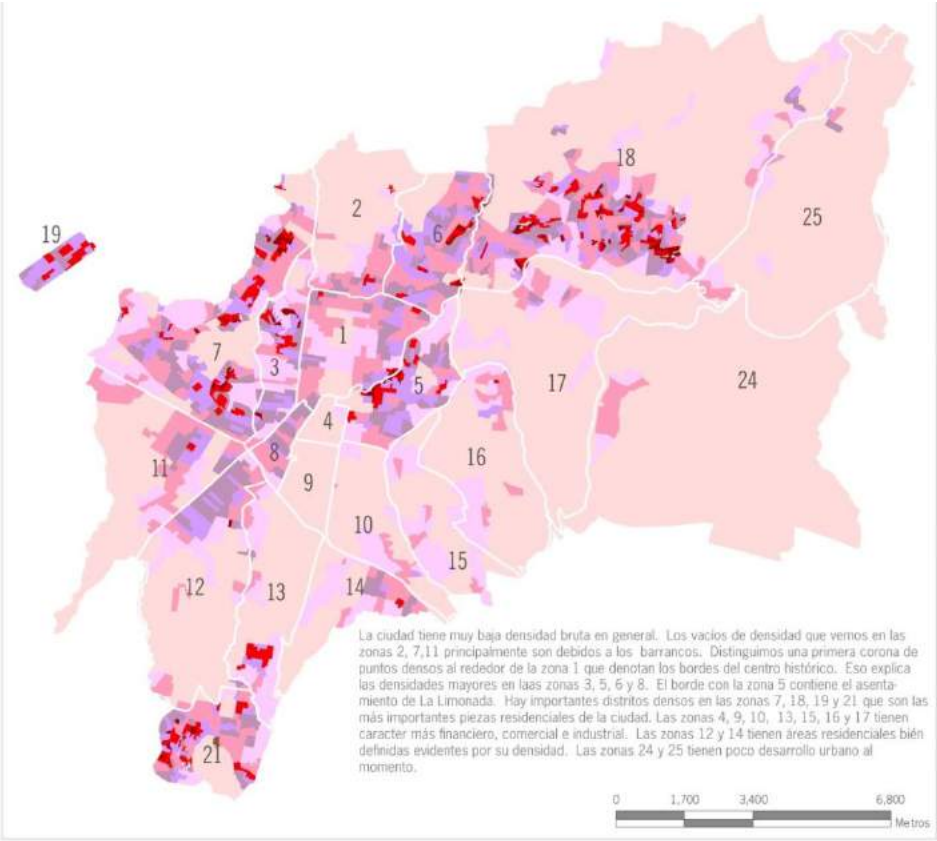


Figure 6. Guatemala City's 2009 population density. Zones 18, 19, and 21 had almost no urban settlement at the end of the 1970s. Source: Municipalidad de Guatemala (2009).

ii. Garrison City

In addition to several decades of informal settlement, another equally unplanned trend, originating at the opposite end of the class spectrum, has recently re-organized Guatemala

City's physical and social layout. As *colonias* whose residents can afford to do so have thrown up walls, gates, and armed guards around themselves, movement through urban space has been interrupted, restricted, and redirected. Guatemala City's private security boom has also made it an increasingly rare experience to enter an upper-, middle-, or working-class residential neighbourhood, an office, shop, or restaurant without passing at least one armed guard, most often displaying the ubiquitous long-barrelled shotgun.

These developments are part of a much broader regional trend that, from the late 1990s, came to be identified as 'a new Latin American model of public security,' typified by varying degrees of militarization, informalization, and privatization of security services (Kincaid 2000: 52). What might be termed the 'securitization' of Guatemala City has combined privatization—the development of a market where those 'with the necessary resources can purchase the degree of security they desire'—with a great deal of informality in security practices that are 'unauthorized or unregulated by the state' (Kincaid 2000: 52-53).[4] In 2006, legally registered private security agencies had 28,000 employees, but a further 60,000 armed guards worked for unauthorized security providers (Dickins 2011: 104). Other estimates place the number of private security guards in Guatemala—a large majority of whom are employed in the capital region—in the range of 120,000 to 150,000, with 75-85 per cent working informally (Casey and Cházaro 2005: 12; ICG 2010: 16; Dickins 2011: 104).

A great many of these guards work in the *barrios cerrados* (closed neighbourhoods) that have proliferated around the capital, especially in the last five to ten years. There are somewhat more formal gated communities in Guatemala City's wealthier districts, but most of the working- and middle-class neighbourhoods that have been walled off, locked up, and shut in have done so, if not quite illegally, then unofficially, extra-legally. Local neighbourhood committees have carved out parcels of the city, taking the initiative to fence themselves in, build *garritas* (guard posts) at any access points, hire private guards, and

[4] See Chapter 7 for the militarization of public security by the Guatemalan state.

impose a security levy on residents. In nearly every case, authorities have permitted and tacitly legitimized these enclaves post-facto.

Though acquaintances and strangers frequently expressed shock and concern upon learning that I worked in a barrio under the control and surveillance of a gang clique, there is in fact almost nothing more usual in the course of daily life than having to pass muster with armed men defending private interests in order to access some slice of the city. It is not even always clear who established such borders in the first place, and points of control may change hands fairly smoothly over time. In one zone 18 neighbourhood, I found police manning gates that rival gangs had installed to mark the no man's land between their territories and collect tolls from those entering them. While uniformed men had replaced mara members a few months prior to my visit, the change hadn't meant all that much to residents, as they continued to collect 'donations' in return for their security services.

Similarly ambiguous are the concrete barriers that block off El Gallito in zone 3, which has been called 'Guatemala City's most notorious barrio' (Goldman 2007: 202). Only one entry point remains, and it is under the close observation of local narco-traffickers. But no one I spoke to when I visited there—not the young residents, not the church pastor, not the outreach workers who helped me clear that border—felt they could say for sure whether the roadblocks were originally put up by the drug runners to stave off outside interference or by the authorities to prevent people from accidentally straying into a violent territory they could not control. Were they put there to keep out the state's order or to fence in the barrio's disorder? In either case, El Gallito's barriers are typically taken, especially by outsiders, as a clear indication of just how lawless and dangerous it is. The middle-class *colonias* that have built gates, walls, and *garritas* with an armed presence on a much grander scale are, however illegally or unofficially, merely taking prudent steps to retreat from the insecurity of an unruly city.

Comparable retreats have been taking place across the region, to the extent that it has seemed to some that 'the Latin American city has reached a new phase of its development, characterized by the intensification of socio-spatial segregation' (Borsdorf 2012: 324).[5] A growing literature examines how Latin American responses to insecurity have contributed to the fragmentation of urban space. Perhaps most influentially, Caldeira (2000: 19) argues that in São Paulo the fear of violence and criminality, circulated through a set of discourses she calls the 'talk of crime', 'organize the urban landscape and public space.' Insecurity shapes a built environment that reproduces 'segregation and intolerance' (Caldeira 2000: 130). Those with the resources to do so withdraw to privatized enclaves within the city, contributing to the 'abandonment and lawlessness of public spaces' in the unsecured sectors left behind (Caldeira 2000: 39; Caldeira and Holston 1999: 964).

This socio-spatial segregation has been achieved to different degrees and by different strategies in Latin American cities. In Guatemala City and Central America's other mid-sized cities, with their much smaller elite groups, self-contained fortified enclaves like those in São Paulo and other megacities are not nearly as viable. Rodgers (2004) describes the formation of 'fortified networks' in Managua, by which elites 'disembedded' themselves from the city, forming a secure 'system' of privately-protected spaces stretching across Managua. The fortified network minimizes contact between elites and uncontrolled public spaces without demanding the concentration of resources and services that urban enclaves require (Rodgers 2004: 120). Like São Paulo and Managua, Guatemala City has been characterized by very 'marked territorial selectivity of investment in urban space' (AVANCSO 2003: 125). It has not, however, seen the elite-oriented urban projects that enabled the formation of Managua's 'fortified network' on the same scale (Rodgers 2004). This relative inability to fully 'disembed' from the city and its perceived dangers means that

[5] Trends of spatial enclosure and privatization are certainly not confined to Latin America. What appears distinct about the movement in the region is the extent to which the 'central justification' for 'fortified enclaves…is the fear of violent crime' (Caldeira 2000: 119). Low's (2003) study of US gated communities identified a whole range of motivations, among which security featured but did not necessarily dominate.

segregation 'is more of an ideology than a lived reality in Guatemala City' (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 3).

Despite massive investment in purchasing security through isolation from the 'dangerous' sectors of both the city and the population, there thus remains a degree of 'compulsory closeness' (Veloso 2010). With reference to the relationship between Rio de Janeiro's 'formal' city and its favelas, Veloso develops the concept of 'compulsory closeness' to describe cities in which the privileged and the 'criminal' poor share urban space to some extent. She argues that this situation 'reinforces symbolic separation *precisely because* physical separation is neither significant nor possible' (2010: 260-61). In Guatemala City, social practices of distinction and denigration that bolster symbolic separation target notorious neighbourhoods and their residents in many ways, as described below. The 'red zone' label is itself one crucial symbolic distinction that has very concrete consequences for those marked out as belonging to the enemy territories embedded within the city.

iii. Exclusion from the City

If crime is a 'human pathology' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 54), then Guatemala City's red zones are seen to be the disease's hosts and vectors. Like ghettos throughout history, the red zones house 'those segments of urban society deemed disreputable, derelict, and dangerous' (Wacquant 2001: 107). But they are also the inheritors of a particular legacy arising from polarized images of the Guatemalan nation during the state's counter-insurgency war. The red zone was, and remains, the domain of the enemy inside.[6] The 'metonymic equivalence' between El Romero's residents and criminality is a crucial aspect of their experience of both insecurity and of social and economic marginalization (Veloso 2010: 258-59).

[6] Rodgers (2009) and Goldstein (2007) describe the shift in the construction of internal enemies in Latin America from political subversives to urban criminals

'El Romero is an emblematic place,' I was told by Arturo, an NGO employee who grew up in the barrio. Many others, both residents and outsiders, in interviews and informal conversations, mentioned that it is supposed to be the zone's, the capital's, or the country's worst, most violent, or most infamous neighbourhood: 'the reddest zone there is.' Almost since its foundation, the barrio's reputation as a space of poverty, crime, and violence has generated a great deal of stigma against its residents. Padre Martín, El Romero's Catholic priest, complains that 'the society as a whole shuts its doors to these people, marks them out for coming from the Colonia.'

Residents of adjacent neighbourhoods—which are themselves very poor—have lately come to fear the disorder and violence they associate with El Romero so much that they have literally tried to wall off their borders with it, preventing the passage of its residents through their spheres of greater respectability. 'They want to close up that exit,' Doña Juana explained of the *colonia* that abuts El Romero's northern corner. 'They're building a wall, a barrier. So as not to involve themselves in all this.' The wooded *mirador* at the top of the neighbourhood across the main road, where barrio families used to go to picnic, let their children play, or watch fireworks launched from the city centre, now lies beyond another gate through which they are not permitted to pass.

People who look like 'barrio types'—especially adolescent and younger adult males—are not welcome most anywhere they can easily be kept out of. 'People look at us as if we had some contagious disease,' one woman complained. Arriving to visit me for dinner one evening, Cadejo and his younger brother were refused entry at the *garrita* until I came down to insist that I had, in fact, invited them. '*Así dice, Seño*—If you say so, Miss,' the guard responded. But before letting us pass, he asked me to promise that I would keep them inside the house. He wasn't paid to let people like them wander the *colonia*'s streets or loiter in its park. Cadejo, in return, asked me to promise him that my account of El Romero would include how their movements around the city are policed, controlled, and restricted by

prejudice. 'The sad thing is,' he added, 'that it's people like us, from barrios like ours' who make up the private security workforce that enforces their exclusion from the city. For those on both sides of such interactions, 'everyday life in the city is becoming a daily management of barriers and suspicion, marked by a succession of little rituals of identification and humiliation' (Caldeira 2000: 129).

Fear also places virtual borders around El Romero. Very few taxis will accept fares to the barrio, there is no mail service, and almost no delivery trucks will brave the neighbourhood to stock its few remaining businesses. Until the government-run *Transurbano* route opened in 2011, with armed guards on every bus and at every stop, there had been no public transit within the neighbourhood for several years, because bus drivers rerouted their circuits to avoid it. 'From other *colonias*, no one enters,' a mother told me at a school function. At a church service, another woman said that 'if they do come, they come scared.' All this exacts psychological toll. 'We're marginalized,' Doña Ana said. 'They won't accept us. It lowers the morale, it really does—with what disgust they look at you.'

Residents are keenly aware of the media's role in spreading the fear and disdain they elicit. 'Every day they come out with stories of violence,' Padre Martín said, 'of more deaths in zone 18, more deaths in El Romero.' The director of the barrio's public middle school, whose family hates him working there because of what they see in the news, criticized sensationalist reporting for making out that 99 per cent of the people there are either mareros or corpses. A conversation between Rafa and an acquaintance encountered on the street also turned to how news coverage gives the impression that they are '90 per cent thieves, a *colonia* of corpses.' The language and imagery employed was so similar because both were implicitly referencing the same television news report on El Romero's domination by the mara, run under the title '*Colonia fantasma*' in early 2012. More than a dozen informants mentioned the story in the weeks following its broadcast, complaining that 'they made it seem like there aren't even people here anymore, as if we aren't humans still living

here.' The inhabitants of Guatemala City's most high-risk neighbourhoods have been reduced to 'objects and agents of violence' (Camus 2011: 49). Public representations of El Romero as one of the 'reddest' of the red zones flatten the complexity of life there, leaving a neighbourhood of ghosts and gangsters.

Rodgers (2005) notes that analyses of urban segregation in Latin America have dealt almost exclusively with 'the fortified enclaves and networks of the elites' and rarely approach the issue from the direction of their 'inevitable flipside in the form of concomitant "zones of exclusion"' (2005: 2). As Rodgers implies, privilege and exclusion—in urban space or in socio-economic terms—are not discrete but deeply interrelated positions. The same forces of expansion, segregation, and emergency (both natural and human) that have given Guatemala City its current shape and atmosphere have influenced Colonia El Romero throughout its history. But the city and social world that its residents inhabit have always been those of a 'zone of exclusion.'

II. Pioneers to Exiles: History of El Romero

Colonia El Romero is—by the count of the district's deputy mayor—one of 260 distinct communities in zone 18, one of the four zones that make up Guatemala City's northeastern sector (Mauricio Soto, interview, 5 March 2013).[7] None of the four had significant urban settlement before the 1976 earthquake, and though zones 17, 18, 24, and 25 make up a large part of Guatemala City's physical area, all but zone 18 remain relatively sparsely populated. They are separated from the central districts by a wide and deep *barranco*. On its far side, buses fan out towards the scores of barrios in these unevenly occupied zones and to the rapidly-growing peripheral settlements beyond them. The bus for El Romero climbs steadily

[7] This estimate strikes me as being very high. I strongly suspect it counts *asentamientos pegados* ('glued' or 'stuck to') as separate communites, in which case Colonia El Romero is actually 15 of the 260. While some of Guatemala City's oldest or largest *asentamientos* are generally considered freestanding settlements, an *asentamiento pegado* is formed by the occupation of land inside or on the boundaries of a formal (though always poor) *colonia* and is seen as part of that neighbourhood. Though they are distinguished from the original planned settlement (the *colonia* proper), residents of the neighbourhood and outsiders alike speak of its *asentamientos* as part of Colonia El Romero.

upwards, struggles (often quite desperately) up a very steep stretch of the street, and shortly after drops any passengers for the barrio at the side of the main road before continuing on towards the furthest edges of the city.

The Colonia's two access roads meet the main boulevard 150 metres apart before slanting away from each other down El Romero's sharp incline. These are unanimously known not by their official names (blandly numbered, as virtually all streets in Guatemala City are), but as the *entrada* (entrance) and *salida* (exit). As both carry two-way traffic, the reason for this is not immediately apparent, but they do indicate the direction in which buses have always circulated. Meeting at the bottom of the Colonia, these two roads form a two-kilometre loop through the neighbourhood. By foot, the largest circuit that can be traced around the outer edge of the barrio is a little over three kilometres.

This perimeter contains a very densely-inhabited neighbourhood, both in the physical distribution of homes and within the homes themselves. It is likely that over 20,000 people live here.[8] El Romero is overwhelmingly *ladino* with a small minority of indigenous Maya and a handful of afro-indigenous Garífuna families.[9] The local population is also undoubtedly young, as is Guatemala's overall. According to several community organizers and municipal employees, 70 per cent or more of neighbourhood residents are 'youth' (a somewhat vague category, most often meaning under 25).[10]

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[8] Population estimates given to me by officials and community organizers varied from 14,000 to 34,000. The rapid growth, subsequent outmigration, and extent of informal habitation in this sector make outdated official figures far from reliable. 20,000 is the approximate figure used by municipal authorities to estimate service delivery needs for the *colonia* and its *asentamientos*.

[9] *Ladino* means of mixed European and indigenous descent, but has always had cultural as well as racial connotations. Historically, Guatemalans whose native language is Spanish and those who live in urban areas have tended to be identified as *ladino*. The visible indigenous presence in the capital has increased markedly over the last 30 years, however. By the 1990s, 20% of Guatemala City's residents identified as indigenous, though some studies suggest indigenous people have settled in relatively discrete concentrations, such that they remain a small minority in many sectors (Thomas, O'Neill and Offit 2011: 7; Bastos and Camus 1997).

[10] INE (2015) currently estimates that 60.5% of the population is 24 or younger. 65% of Guatemalans were under 25 at the time of the 2005 partial census (Tobar 2007: 29).

i. Foundation and Early Settlement

El Romero is one of the many legacies in Guatemala City of the 1976 earthquake. Most of the *palomares*—rickety wooden tenements—that housed the urban poor at the time were destroyed in the disaster, which provoked major urban resettlement movements, both official and unofficial. The government sought to relocate the displaced to new settlements on the edges of the capital, offering subsidies for lots and housing materials.[11] Those left out of these programmes or too desperate to wait out the slow grinding of bureaucratic levers occupied and built up many of the capital's older *asentamientos* that filled *barranco* slopes in the central zones as government-planned *colonias* sprouted on the periphery.

Colonia El Romero was founded as part of this reconstruction effort in 1979, one of the first parcels of urbanization in a semi-rural periphery that has since become the capital's most densely populated zone. 'We are all exiles of the earthquake,' said Héctor, who was a small child when his family came among the first group to settle what he remembers as 'a plantation, a desert.' Two other children of the barrio's early years remember a neighbourhood at the very edge of the city, surrounded by 'pure scrub.' Some residents feel that the government took advantage of the earthquake to clear them, inconvenient and unattractively poor, from the centre in order to leave it to a more 'respectable sort of people.' Cadejo, born two years after his family arrived in the barrio's first days, described the reasoning behind its location in this way: '*Saquémolos pa'fuera*—let's get them out of here. Let them see how they do for themselves out there.'

El Romero's first occupants were drawn out of the centre to this sparsely-inhabited fringe by the promise of a *terreno propio*: a plot of land that they could own, build their own homes on with the aid of government subsidies, and escape from the pressure and instability of the rental market. Mixing donated, pre-fabricated building supplies and found

[11] The *Programa de Reconstrucción Nacional* sponsored planning and basic infrastructure for these *colonias*; housing subsidies were administered by the *Banco Nacional de la Vivienda* (BANVI).

materials, the first residents improvised housing for their families, hoping to improve their dwellings over time. Sub-standard as many of these first homes were, Don Beto, a resident from the very beginning, points out that the important thing for those who had come to live there was that 'they knew that it was their own.' The security and perceived dignity of home ownership—of the *terreno propio*, the *casa propia*—has continued to attract and motivate residents over the decades. One woman who arrived in 1996 explains that 'it's been difficult; it cost us to get the house in order. Part of it is still *lámina*. But before we were renting. The good thing is that here it's ours.'[12]

Figure 7. An alley in one of El Romero's oldest sectors (left). A boy collects stones at the edge of a barranco near the bottom of El Romero (right). Author photos, October and December 2012.

El Romero's early years coincided with the most intense period of Guatemala's civil war from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s. The conflict is not, however, a major point of reference for residents when they speak about their community's history. With the exception

[12] *Lámina* is the metal sheeting used in the construction of houses and *champas* (a common word for a shack or sub-standard dwelling) by those unable to afford sturdier building materials.

of men like Rafa, Cadejo, Wuicho, and Arturo, who were all politicized through the influence of liberation theology and experienced abuse from military personnel as teenagers in the conflict's later years, no one mentioned the war unprompted. When asked about it directly, most waved off the suggestion that it had anything to do with life in El Romero.

As Weld (2014: 132) points out, extra-judicial killings were occurring in especially high numbers in the capital in the late-1970s and early-1980s, but they 'were committed quietly, hardly marking the cityscape.' In contrast to the highland campaigns that annihilated entire indigenous communities, the war waged by the state in Guatemala City centred on 'a surgical, targeted repression against specific sectors of civil society and popular movements' (Weld 2014: 11). At least retrospectively, barrio residents by and large identify their mistreatment by the state as always having been about their poverty, not their politics.

As a result, when peace finally came in 1996, it did not necessarily change much in terms of daily life there. Young men no longer feared forced military recruitment, but still faced arbitrary arrests and beatings, only the joint military-police patrols that doled them out were renamed. The curfew that residents kept to to avoid trouble with the authorities was soon enough replaced by a curfew which they imposed on themselves to avoid trouble from increasingly violent gangs. Perhaps the only person who ever spoke as though the Peace Accords had mattered to him was Don Justo, but his was quite a unique case.

As a twenty year-old soldier, Don Justo was at the war's start in 1960, the day a group of junior military officers staged a failed coup against the government of General Ydigoras Fuentes (1958-63). As a 56 year-old waiter, he was also present for its official end, serving at the ceremony at which the Peace Accords were signed. Today, an elderly janitor in El Romero trying to keep his grandchildren in school, he remembers that December afternoon in the National Palace as the proudest and most significant moment of his life, and carries the I.D. badge he was issued for the ceremony with him at all times. But even he dismisses

the possibility that the accord he witnessed meant or changed anything in concrete terms for people like him. In the end, 'it's just paper, isn't it, Miss?'

Violence—as El Romero's residents experience it—is not about war and peace. The terms of their predicament have never been so clear-cut. Though it may be easier to adopt there, this attitude is not confined to the city. One of Godoy's rural indigenous informants complained that "what we're living is horrible. But it sometimes seems like the foreigners are so interested in the violence that went before, like they don't notice we're getting killed here today" (2006: 28). By no means do I wish to suggest that Guatemala's enormously bloody marathon of state violence has not left deep marks on the country, including its capital. But this period does not, for barrio residents, illuminate their present situation of insecurity and precarity.

ii. Growth and Invasion

In the first fifteen years after its foundation, El Romero's population grew very rapidly. As new arrivals from other zones and rural areas combined with the many children born to the families that settled in these early years, El Romero, Cadejo explained, quite simply 'over-populated itself.' Deputy Mayor Mauricio Soto similarly referred to zone 18's exponential growth in those years as 'a migration that was almost uncontrollable' (Interview, 5 March 2013).

From the early 1990s, participating in a process occurring throughout the capital region at the time, El Romero residents and new arrivals began occupying and building *asentamientos*. Doña Ana, whose family moved from a rented room in the planned *colonia* to a lot in the first *asentamiento*, explained that people invaded and occupied 'the lands that were supposedly unusable, but, out of necessity...' She trailed off with a shrug. Before they managed to build a cement-block home on their lot, her family's *lámina* shack was twice washed away during bad rains, a disaster faced by many families living on the steep and

unstable slopes where *asentamientos* sprouted up. Despite continuous, if uneven, efforts by government agencies to work towards the stabilization, legalization, or relocation of these terrains and their residents, a quarter or more of the capital's population still resides in such 'precarious settlements' (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 6).

The first land invasion within El Romero took place in January 1993, followed by a dozen more in the next ten years. The occupations began with the most visible green areas at the top of its slope and proceeded downwards, with *asentamientos pegados* eventually filling in every open space around and within the intended settlement. These vary considerably in size (there is not even definitive agreement on whether there are in fact nine, twelve, or fourteen), but range up to groups of hundreds of lots parcelled out on El Romero's borders and slopes.

In the *asentamientos*, basic services were unavailable at first, then obtained illegally and shared between neighbours. At sixteen, Sonia took part in El Romero's first land invasion, and still lives in the *asentamiento* with her husband and four children. She recalls having to buy water from private purveyors to begin with, but says they then decided as a community to lay pipes and plug themselves into the municipal service. When they finally gained official permission for municipal water access, 'we'd already been stealing it for a good while.' Basic infrastructure including drainage systems, paving for alleyways, and public lighting still lags behind the official *colonia*. Water shortages and electricity cuts remain common, and family budgets often strain under the pressure of having to purchase these municipal services from unauthorized private vendors who charge up to sixteen times more than the official rate (AVANCSO 2003). Within El Romero, *asentamiento* residents are seen to 'live a reality *even worse*' than the official settlement: they are generally poorer, have worse labour opportunities and conditions, and are more likely to have homes still built out of *lámina* or boards than the cement block constructions that dominate the older sectors.

Several of the older *asentamientos* have been largely formalized in recent years, giving residents legal title to their lots. This is an ongoing process in many parts of the barrio and often a very high priority for those who have yet to secure their *escrituras*. Alhough the worry of eviction and displacement has faded over the years, legal title or standing in one's home is needed to claim many government subsidies and benefits. But, like achieving a 'proper' house, it is also of psychological and social importance, an ambition for the sake of dignity and respectability.

Figure 8. Staircase leading into one of El Romero's asentamientos. Author photo, February 2012.

To some in El Romero, the *asentamientos* arose inevitably from residents' need to claim space for their expanding families. Perhaps more commonly, though, the occupation of the informal settlements is seen as a hostile invasion of community space by outsiders. 'God knows where they all came from!' exclaimed the head of the Catholic parish committee. She came to El Romero in its first year, when she says it was green and pleasant, but 'then they

invaded everything, they didn't leave us even a scrap.' The *asentamientos* filled up El Romero not only with excess people, but also people of the wrong sort. A soldier who grew up there remembers that in his childhood, 'the *colonia* was one of poor people. And then came the *asentamientos* to surround all the green spaces. And who were they? More poor people! Even poorer people!'

As well as appropriating the Colonia's physical resources, some blame the *asentamientos* for the first straining of the community's social fabric, for starting the process that culminated in the great unravelling of the last decade. Cadejo, though he disapproves of the tendency to 'throw on them the responsibility for the community's problems,' does allow that the *asentamientos*' occupation marked a change for the worse. He sees the 1976 earthquake and its aftermath as the key experience that shaped the community's ethos in its early years and gave form to its first *códigos de barrio*. He and Arturo both agree that the ´shared reality´ of the disaster and, just as importantly, enduring the three years that elapsed between it and El Romero´s foundation, created a sort of pragmatic solidarity that prevailed in the new neighbourhood when they were children. They say the code of the barrio back then meant simply '*hacemos huevos entre nosotros*'—we get by through helping each other out. The common experience of catastrophe and survival formed what Cadejo calls the '*petate*' of El Romero, the woven mat in which the component palm fibers are much stronger than they are when separated. But the children of the *colonia*'s children, not to mention the younger migrants arriving later, 'didn't live that same reality' and so didn't share the attitudes or expectations of those who had. As the population boomed, the capacity to transmit the original communal and community-oriented values to each new arrival was overwhelmed and, he says, they lost any 'mechanism to absorb or channel these new phenomena'.

Residents of the original planned *colonia* often shift responsibility for their neighbourhood's troubles and infamy onto the inhabitants of the *asentamientos*. 'Delinquency itself comes out of there,' a young mother told me. An older woman said that

'delinquency starts from there.' 'They brought all this,' Maritza assured me, 'they brought that bad seed.' One of the larger *asentamientos* is particularly singled out as a source of problems and pandilleros, often described as an impenetrable haven and stronghold of the gang, a 'gross cave' that other residents avoid if they possibly can. Declaring that 'before, we didn't have these problems,' it is common to associate the occupation of the barrio's informal settlements with the appearance of problematic forms of insecurity, and to blame them for the stigma to which the entire neighbourhood is subject.

These repeated assertions that the informal settlements are where delinquency comes in, where it comes from, help to demonstrate the complexity of local practices of distinction and differentiation among residents. Within one marginal community, many fractures and faults are in evidence in the perpetual negotiation of the line between 'we' the worthy, the respectable poor, and 'they' the unworthy, unruly, and troublesome. As will become apparent in the chapters that follow, the subtle and complicated process of distinguishing friend from foe is a daily practice in a community living with, victimized by, and often involved in predatory violence from within its own borders.

iii. Exile and Abandonment

The rapid and sustained population growth that so marked the spatial and social transformation of El Romero during its first decades has recently started to reverse. Outmigration due to extortion and threats or in the wake of violence against household members began on a large scale around 2009, for reasons detailed in the next chapter. Population flight has left its marks in El Romero's physical landscape, and affects the feel of neighbourhood space for many residents. Commenting on the impact of insecurity on her community, Sonia says that 'you never stop being shocked by all the abandoned houses.' In some of the hardest-hit sectors of El Romero, up to one third of the homes sit empty. In Ana's *asentamiento*, considered one of the safer sectors of the neighbourhood, 40 of the 340

lots, or 12 per cent of the homes, have been abandoned. At the end of 2011, the Catholic Church conducted an informal survey of the parish, and Padre Martín estimated that there has been as much as a 20 to 30 per cent drop in the barrio's population.

Padre Martín recalls that when he took over the parish in 2010, two or three families were leaving El Romero each day, escorted out at dawn by a handful of soldiers who would bring a truck to take away whatever refugees the morning produced and a few of their possessions. When families leave, their homes are almost always left empty. A very few are able to rent them out to families desperate enough to move into such a notorious barrio, or to pay caretakers to look after the properties in the hope that they might be able to come back one day. But most just go. To rural areas if they have extended family that can take them in, or back to the instability and economic pressure of renting elsewhere in the city.

Figure 9. Two men build a second-storey room on a house in El Romero, with a view towards an industrial development across the *barranco*. Author photo, January 2013.

Shut-up houses and empty alleys feature prominently in descriptions of the community today, often contrasted with memories of welcoming, open homes and bustling streets Sometimes it is personal attachment that makes these ruins painful to see—memorials to violence or fear that drove away family members and friends. But for many others, abandoned homes are particularly evocative because of what they represent for themselves, their neighbours, and their community. Homes, in El Romero, are tangible evidence of security, dignity, and achievement. This was clearly the case for Doña Ana. 'This is no *champa* anymore,' she would often say, looking around the house she had saved and borrowed for over fifteen years until she felt she had a suitable home for her nine children. 'Now it's a house.' La Carmencita has worked on her home even longer. Now a great-grandmother, she purchased one of the first lots in El Romero when she was suddenly widowed. Beginning in 1979 with tarps and *lámina*, she saved as she could to buy a few cement blocks at a time, a bit of sand for mortar here and there. By 2012, she had a two-storey home where four generations of her family lived. That autumn, she was saving to pave the floor, which was still of packed dirt on the ground level.

The shells of houses are so expressive of tragedy because the idea of a home is so charged with pride and desire. One man described to me the house he had built over seventeen years, and in which four of his five children had been born: 'a beautiful house! All blocks, with a second level. Windows, and a lovely floor.' His was one of the empty ones, though. The gang had offered his teenage son the choice between joining up and execution. So the family left their beautiful house with its lovely floors for two rented rooms in a distant suburb. These artefacts of personal and collective loss were cited by many residents as the saddest thing about El Romero these days. The impact of insecurity on urban environments is most often phrased in terms of elite enclosure and withdrawal (Rodgers 2005: 2). But in the red zones, too, the texture of urban space is distinctly altered by violence. It is not walled off, but hollowed out.

III. Economy, Institutions, and State in El Romero

In introducing this chapter, I described the relationship between Colonia El Romero's residents and the city and society around them as one characterized by dynamics of exclusion. These leave them out and isolated in various ways, but by no means imply any absence of connection between the barrio and the outside world. Broader economic and institutional forces are very much a part of local life, as explored in the following sections. I employ the idea of marginality to emphasize the limits that El Romero's residents run up against in the course of their daily lives, and also to identify the nature of the connections and relationships than between the barrio and those broader spheres and dynamics.

i. Economic Strategies in the Exclusion Zone

El Romero is in a sector of the capital deeply marked by poverty, but far from uniformly poor. In the same years that the infamy of its more marginal sectors was growing, something of a capital boom was getting underway in this corner of the city. In a rare bit of good press, a November 2012 newspaper article touted the investment brought in by six shopping centres opened along zone 18's highway in the last several years. The usual mentions of deaths and extortion gave way for one day to celebration of the zone's 'commercial explosion', with its brand-new Wal-Mart, fast food outlets, and multi-screen cinema, and its status as the capital's fastest-growing housing market (Valdez 2012). But for residents of the sector's red zones, the flow of investment capital into commercial and residential developments is more likely to push aside than trickle down, creating more parcels of urban space in which residents of El Romero are unwelcome.

The fear that the neighbourhood and its residents elicit in the Guatemalan public at large has important and concrete ramifications for their access to education and employment, and thus for their capacity to improve the material circumstances of their lives. 'Infamy closes many doors,' a local teacher told me, repeating an assertion I heard in endless variations.

Many families have at least one story of a child being turned away from a school outside the neighbourhood because people who come from where they come from are simply more trouble than they're worth. This is a significant obstacle, as the public schooling available in or near El Romero ends after the ninth grade. When residents go looking for employment, the same barriers present themselves, particularly acutely for young men. 'The Colonia is a red zone, which means there is no work,' a pastor said, arguing that this lack of alternatives pushed many young men towards the criminal economy of the gangs. Residents' addresses (compounded by their low rate of formal employment) make obtaining loans nearly impossible. Some encounter hurdles opening bank accounts due to the suspicion that inhabitants may be involved in extortion enterprises. The economic consequences of their notoriety came up constantly, both when inhabitants explained their community's situation to me and in informal everyday talk between neighbours.

Residents of El Romero typically view the space around them as one of very limited opportunity—if not in absolute terms, at least insofar as their access to it is concerned. Households, as a result, tend to combine multiple strategies and income streams in their efforts to make ends meet. Doña Ana, for instance, commutes as many as three hours each day through zone 18's congested streets and barrios to work for four hours. When I follow her to work, we set off along the *barranco* path from the bottom of the *colonia*. We pick our way through the scrub and garbage that lie past the last *asentamientos*, over waters running grey with sewage at the bottom of the ravine. 'Do you see what I go through?' Ana asks. 'Every day, just to save one bus fare.' Having crossed the *barranco*, we head past the *maquilas* (factories) and *bodegas* (warehouses) that sprawl along wide streets. These establishments—where pharmaceuticals, foodstuffs, cheap clothing, and plastics are produced and stored—employ many barrio residents at some point in their lives. Beyond them, we come out onto another of the sector's main roads to catch the first of two buses that take us to Ana's

afternoon job as a cleaner and caretaker at a public middle school in another of the district's red zones.

During my fieldwork, the monthly cost of the *canasta básica*—the necessities to feed the average Guatemalan family of 5.3 people—rose from Q2,397 to Q2,772 (INE 2015).[13] Over this same period, Ana's monthly salary was Q1,750 while at least seven people lived in her home, and as many as fifteen ate there regularly. Though it falls far short of providing for her large family, she keeps the job because it took luck and favours from carefully-cultivated political connections to get it and gives her other advantages. It leaves her morning free to look after her younger children and usually some of her seven grandchildren, as well as to take care of her responsibilities as president of her *asentamiento*'s Neighbourhood Committee (CUB—*Comité Único de Barrio*). Most vitally, it is formal employment. As an employee of the Ministry of Education, she was approved for the bank loan she needed to build her house, which she is unstintingly proud of, even though the stress of the debt makes her physically ill. Ana works to make up the shortfall through informal domestic labour and savvy management of the government benefits and charitable sponsorships she can access for herself and her children. Her older children contribute sporadically from their own informal labour, and when he is part of the household, her husband buys occasional meals for the family.

This sort of patchwork of economic strategies is common in a barrio that has always mixed activities in the formal, informal, and illegal sectors of the economy. Work begins early, with most teenagers expected to start contributing to the family's income at the latest after graduating from the *ciclo básico*, the intermediate education stage which ends after the ninth year of schooling. Many families are headed by single mothers who, though they often express fear that their absence leaves their children vulnerable to negative influences and the dangers of the street, have no choice but to work outside the home. In two-parent

[13] During my fieldwork, the exchange rate was roughly 12 *quetzales* (GTQ) to one British Pound, or Q8 to one US Dollar.

households, economic necessity generally requires women to spend at least some time engaged in formal or, more commonly, informal labour outside of the home. With only two exceptions, every woman I met in El Romero worked at least part-time or sometimes.

Formal employment is a relative rarity, as in Guatemala as a whole. In 2013, 70.4 per cent of working Guatemalans laboured in conditions of 'informality' (INE 2015). In El Romero, women have greater access to certain kinds of 'feminine' jobs requiring fairly little formal education, such as retail, service, and secretarial work. They also tend to be somewhat less bound by the taint of violence that adheres to El Romero than are their male neighbours. A much greater portion of local economic activity takes place in the informal sector. Typical occupations here include market vending and domestic labour for women, sometimes regular and sometimes sporadic as the household requires it or opportunity permits it. Men often work as drivers or assistants on buses, taxi or *tuk-tuk* (moto-taxi) drivers, and in unskilled manual labour. The chief source of income for men who have some training in a trade are '*semi-empleos*', for instance, as freelance builders or carpenters.

As in poor communities across Central America, informal labour abroad has an important place in the economic life of barrio families. Poor Guatemalans migrate *al Norte* by the tens of thousands, through Mexico towards the United States. From places like El Romero, they almost inevitably do so undocumented. Many of them, however, are unsuccessful in their attempts to either get or stay there. In 2011, 30,855 Guatemalans were deported from the US, and a further 31,427 from Mexico (López 2012). In 2013, Ana's husband was in the latter category. That spring, having saved a few hundred *quetzales* from odd jobs as a builder, Jairo went to look for steadier and more lucrative construction jobs in northern Mexico. As well as supplementing Jairo's savings with cash of her own, Doña Ana spent a month's salary to pay a relative who claimed some experience as a *coyote* to take her husband north.

Having exhausted their short-term resources, Ana and the children struggled for food after Jairo left. But several weeks later, he was back, deported from Mexico and left in a remote location just over the border. Ana scrambled for more money she didn't have, cobbled together from small loans from friends, to buy gas for her son-in-law to go get him. Jairo's feet were bloody and swollen for weeks afterwards, and he was badly shaken by the trip. It had been weeks of snakes and biting insects, of hunger and thirst and almost no sleep. The worst part, he said, was riding on the top of trains as they made their way north through Mexico. The roofs were packed dangerously full with men making the same journey. Sometimes one fell, and they would see him crushed by the train on the rails. 'I thought,' Jairo said, 'that was just something they put in the movies, so that we wouldn't do it.' The story most commonly heard about Central Americans migrating to the US is about *remesas*, the remittances sent to thousands of households that float large portions of national economies—close to 30 per cent of the gross internal product, in Guatemala's case (Nelson 2009: 222-23). However, migration is a dangerous gamble as an economic strategy, posing substantial financial risks to families, in addition to the very real risks to the lives of those attempting the journey.

Crime has also been an important source of income in the neighbourhood since its formation, although the activities here have changed in important ways over the last 30 years, as outlined in much greater detail in the next chapter. The criminal economy has undeniably grown in size and profitability, particularly in the last decade. Entire multi-generation families may live off the income generated by one or two mara members in the kin group, with other family members often providing assistance. Arturo, who came to El Romero as a boy in the 1980s, once remarked that, while in that decade every family had someone sending back remittances from the US, so today you can count on pretty much every family having someone contributing to the collective resource pool through criminal activity.

ii. Local Institutions and Insecurity

These days, Arturo told me, 'the decision of whether or not an organization can work in El Romero is one that's taken at the level of the criminal organization.' Several of these decisions have gone against local institutions in the years since the Mara-18 established its control, and its residents are not the only ones who have felt the need to abandon the neighbourhood.

For instance, in 2008, the same year the M-18's last rivals in the barrio were eliminated, the *Instituto Básico* (middle school) was forced to shut. The director at the time—courageously, but naïvely, his successor told me—asked the police to intervene against a gang member who had been causing trouble and hinting at threats. He was severely beaten and very nearly executed on school grounds along with several other employees. The gang demanded a crushingly high 'tax' from the school for each teacher and student, and made it clear that the principal and several teachers were no longer welcome in El Romero. The remainder of the school year was cancelled, and the Jesuit organization that runs the institute only narrowly decided against closing it. When it re-opened the following year, fear and uncertainty had led to a sharp drop-off in enrolment, though with few other options available, attendance levels were approaching normal four years on.

Extortion demands also targeted the Catholic Church. Under the influence of an Italian priest, who inclined strongly towards liberation theology throughout his more than twenty-year tenure, the parish had been a hub of activity for youth and local activism. Many who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s credit this priest with their political education and induction into community organizing. He excelled at attracting donations from European churches and charities that were put towards materials to improve residents' housing, paving alleyways and staircases, and installing drainage and sewage systems in the *asentamientos*.

However, in 2008, this talent for fundraising forced him out of the community he had helped to build. In what a number of informants recall as a turning point in the rise of

unchecked predation by the gang, the mara clique demanded Q50,000, threatening to kill both the priest and the local family that helped him to manage these funds. For as long as anyone born there could remember, he had been a pillar of community life in El Romero. But, refusing to pay, both priest and family left the barrio for exile in Italy.

In recent years, important local, national, and international NGOs have reduced their presence in El Romero or withdrawn entirely. In some cases, this has been due to the short horizons of many non-profit programmes and the shifting priorities of funding organizations. In others, though, institutions with long histories in the community have cut back or pulled out due to either actual extortion demands from the gang or their anticipated eventuality. A Guatemalan charity with large headquarters in the community that had co-ordinated sponsorship programs for local children left, Sonia told me, 'because of the extortions.' Another charity's compound retains only the community pharmacy out of the host of services once run from there. Yet another NGO, which was founded in El Romero before expanding its programs nationally, has drastically reduced its activities here. Its local credibility collapsed in 2012 after an employee was arrested, accused of involvement with extortion. The Red Cross chose not to continue funding a violence prevention program for local adolescents. 'It's that they don't want to anymore,' an employee told me. According to her, the disaster-relief organization was 'looking for places that are a little less dangerous.' These retreats have left many in the neighbourhood cynical about charitable interventions. Mono says young people like him 'don't believe in them. They all just come and offer this and that, and then they go. What did they leave behind except for those fancy buildings?'

El Romero's evangelical churches seem to have fared better than other community institutions in terms of avoiding extortion demands, but have not avoided entanglement with the local insecurity. Protestant denominations—particularly Pentecostalism among the

urban poor—have grown rapidly in Guatemala over the last thirty years.[14] By the count of one local pastor, there are perhaps 32 Christian communities of some kind in El Romero, although almost all of these are tiny household churches serving only a handful of worshippers.[15] There are three major evangelical churches, all of them Pentecostal. It is likely that, as at the national level, a small majority or large plurality of residents are still at least nominally Catholic, but the evangelical congregations attract more active participation than the Catholic parish. Pastor Gerardo, who leads one of the three large evangelical churches estimated his congregation at 300, which by itself easily exceeds the weekly attendance at Sunday Mass.

Much more than the Catholic parish, the evangelical churches have actively involved themselves with some of the protagonists of local violence. Evangelical churches typically provide the safest and most accessible way for mara members to become ex-mara members (see Brenneman 2011). El Romero's evangelical churches have supported the transition of a number of young men out of the violent criminal economy. But this willingness to take on and take in born-again gangsters has generated distrust among some in the broader community.

Doña Juana, a member of the Catholic parish committee, said of one congregation that 'the majority of them are those delinquents who walk around with Bibles. They make out that they've changed, but they stay involved.' Maritza, a young mother and Catholic Sunday school teacher, was even more damning in her suspicions of the barrio's evangelical churches, accusing them of knowingly letting gang members use their churches 'as refuges,

[14] In 2006, 34% of Guatemalans identified as Protestant and 48% as Catholic; 8 out of 10 Protestants in Guatemala belong to Pentecostal or other charismatic churches (Pew Forum 2006: 79-80). Garrard-Burnett (1998) traces the social history of evangelical Christianity in Guatemala, focusing on the disruption of traditional mechanisms of social order during the civil war as a major factor in accelerating conversion.

[15] Guatemalans typically use the term *cristiano/a* (Christian) of any non-Catholic Christian individual or group. *Evangélico/a* is generally used interchangeably with this term due to the large majority of charismatic Pentecostals and other evangelical movements among Guatemalan Protestants. O'Neill (2010) provides an anthropological account of the neo-Pentecostal movement in post-war Guatemala City.

as their disguise, for their money laundering.' For others the quibble is a more basic moral one, given the brutal acts of violence many of these young men are known to have committed. Several years ago, Wuicho barely survived a savage beating by gang members, left for dead in a *barranco*. He wondered of the pastors who absolve people like them: 'How do you just wipe away what they've done? We don't get clean so easy.'

Insecurity and violence, as well as the fear and distrust that accompanies them, have weakened the local institutional network that provided some resources—economic and social—to residents of a precarious barrio. This damage is part of the complex process, explored in later chapters, by which community resilience has lessened as gang predation has intensified.

iii. The State at the Margin

Across social classes, Guatemalans have in recent years come to 'imagine their relationship to the state and capital city through the lenses of urban violence and danger' (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 2011: 14). El Romero is no exception to this, but here those lenses have a particular tint due to the neighbourhood's 'red zone' status. This label, its consequences, and the realities that lie behind it shape residents' experience and expectations of the state. They also influence the nature of the state's presence in the barrio: state agencies and authorities are in constant contact with the neighbourhood and its residents, but not necessarily in ways that augment their security or well-being (see also Goldstein 2012: 6, 32).

'Of the government,' Ana said, 'only the army and the police come here.' Its security forces are the face of the state that residents of El Romero encounter most frequently in their daily lives, but not necessarily in ways that augment their security. Wuicho describes a case of familiarity breeding contempt for public authorities, saying that 'as a kid, you start out believing that they're good for something. But through interacting with them, you see that they are neither authorities, nor are they public.'

The National Civilian Police (PNC) is widely disliked and distrusted. Surveys have found that as few as 10 per cent of Guatemalans report trusting the police, a number which is likely still smaller in places like El Romero where residents regularly experience police brutality and corruption first hand (Sanford 2008: 111). Most residents spoke of the police as, at best, irrelevant to their security. 'The police don't exist,' Ángela told me in the schoolyard one day. 'They're there. But they don't exist.' 21 year-old Wendi said the police 'have a big presence' but 'only look at their noses.' People generally reported that, at most, as public security became more visible or made a show of force, crime and violence became 'more hidden' without really decreasing. As Hume (2009) found in a poor San Salvador community, to turn to the law for protection or redress is seen as an exercise in futility for all concerned. One of her informants described reporting a crime as being "like me going to the sea and throwing salt in. The sea accepts it because it is there. The water accepts it because it is salty" (2009: 149).

More dangerously, though, allegations of police corruption and collusion with gangs are also widespread. The belief that police pass information on to the clique was the most common reason that people gave for why they would not report crimes. 'To make a complaint equals them knowing,' a young man said. 'If I call the police,' another told me, 'that same cop will tell them "this person is complaining about you."' People claim neighbours and friends have come home to find copies of their police reports slid under their door.

Current and former mara members I spoke with all maintain that there is some level of police complicity in gang activities. Kevin, a recent defector from the barrio's M-18 clique, confirmed that denunciations were passed on to them. 'If they tell the police, it's worse for them,' he said. Another ex-member of the same M-18 clique reported that most of their guns came from the police: 'for so much money, they'd give us so many weapons.' Police, at least, did not appear to take sides in gang rivalries. A member of the MS-13 before its elimination

in El Romero said they, too, bought their guns from the police, who also warned his clique of upcoming raids so that the weapons could be hidden. When a nearby M-18 clique planned to kill someone, they had a phone number to call and say 'we've got a job', and the police would make themselves scarce from the neighbourhood for a while.

The more sympathetic barrio residents believe that fear rather than avarice is at the root of such corruption. 'They're scared of the pandilla too,' a young woman said. 'The authorities,' Pastor Gerardo explained, 'are at once involved and threatened. They cooperate, or they die.' Whatever their motivation or however small the numbers of corrupt officers, police are not seen to be a resource or provide recourse for barrio residents.

In contrast to the PNC, the military are seen to be less corrupt and more disciplined, both potentially more effective and more frightening.[16] 'Now, the soldiers are scary,' one teenager said. His friend agreed that they 'are on another level.' They concurred that they were not corrupt like the police, nor did they believe they assisted the gang. But they seemed to them somehow more threatening, perhaps because they were less embedded in the local networks of violence and menace that these boys were more familiar with. Though such distinctions are often made, residents are just as likely to collapse the police and the military when discussing the enforcement (or, more commonly, lack thereof) of law and order by the state. Over much of its history, including during the civil war, El Romero has seen the army appear in tandem with the police, such that anecdotes about abuses of power or failures of control past and present often conflate the two.[17]

[16] The relationship between the armed forces and this community is discussed at length in Chapter 7.

[17] Weld (2014) describes the instrumental role of the old Policía Nacional (dissolved at the war's end and replaced by the PNC) in carrying out state violence in the capital during the conflict. Figueroa Ibarra (2013: 158) writes of a 'division of labour in the repressive tasks' of the Guatemalan state: the police were more active in perpetrating state violence in Guatemala City compared to military dominance of rural counterinsurgency operations.

Figure 10. A military patrol makes its way through a crowd assembled on the *entrada* road to receive a share of a large donation of fish. Author photo, October 2012.

El Romero residents, like those of other peripheral urban communities, feel themselves to be 'simultaneously oppressed and ignored' by the state (Goldstein 2012: 83). The language of abandonment appears frequently when residents speak of their relationship with the state and its various organs. But the red zone is not beyond the reach of the state; it is an area where the state is very selectively—and typically repressively—present. To a certain extent, the relationship between El Romero and the Guatemalan state can be understood through writings from political anthropology on the territories and populations at the margins of Latin American states. These margins are typically situated at a geographic, social, and economic remove (and in Latin America, frequently across a racial boundary) from centres

of power. They lie beyond the zones of 'unquestioned state control and legitimacy' (Das and Poole 2004: 8).

El Romero can hardly be said to be physically distant from the core of the Guatemalan state, as little more than an hour's brisk walk takes one from there to the Central Plaza, the National Palace, and the Guatemalan Congress. That they are so patently not at the spatial margins sometimes seemed to aggravate the sense of being unjustly marginalized for barrio residents. On several occasions, Doña Ana insisted that they were not really, or not properly, marginal in the barrio, despite being marginalized by poverty and reputation. 'The government is so close, but *so close*. And it does not see,' she told me of residents' suffering. Another time, she protested that

> in El Romero, cardboard houses still exist. Here—how many kilometres from the [presidential] palace? We are in the vicinity of a palace, of the head *head* honcho and there are still cardboard houses? This is unjust. And I believe that in other cities, in other countries, this doesn't happen. Maybe in the…the really far away. But like here? No.

Residing so near the centre of the city and of government, Doña Ana felt sure that the state could and should see them and their struggles, and by implication could and should redress their grievances, ameliorate their situation. That it chose not to added insult to injury, deepening the wrong of both their infamy and their insecurity. The director of the Colonia's public primary school complained of the same radical neglect, saying that it's 'like they forget these places exist, that there are human beings living here.' For this reason, Rafa asked me to call the book I would write about El Romero *Los invisibles*. Without being on the literal margins of the state, as one of the country's more infamous red zones, El Romero and its residents share in what Poole (2004: 38) identifies as the discursive and subjective position of marginality, which shapes their expectations about security and the state in important ways.

But El Romero isn't entirely invisible to the state. Dominant institutions in fact 'contribute powerfully to organizing the social space of the ghetto in particular and particularly destabilizing ways' (Wacquant 2007: 41). The forms in which the state is present in El Romero—mixing repression, corruption, and neglect—highlight once again the relationship of exclusion that characterizes residents' experience of city, society, and state. They describe themselves as abandoned, invisible, and left out, but also hypervisible—situated at the heart of public anxieties as carriers of violence, stigma, and culpability.

IV. Conclusion

Insecurity in Latin American cities has changed the shape and relations of urban space. Creating privatized enclaves and privileged networks between them, 'those on the "inside" of the enclaves no longer relate to notions of spatial cohabitation with those on the "outside", but rather to an ideal of separation between them' (Rodgers 2005: 1). In describing El Romero as a 'red zone', I wish to emphasize that the marginalization its residents experience is about much more than merely spatial or socio-economic exclusion. In this city of garrisons and borders—both literal and symbolic—they nearly always find themselves on the outside, on the wrong side. But the red zones are, more than anything, 'imagined territories' within the city to which anxieties, insecurities, and responsibility are fixed (Martín-Barbero 2001: 127).

As residents tell it, the history of El Romero begins in disaster and ends in crisis. The geographic, demographic, and socio-economic profile of the neighbourhood places it right at the heart of Guatemala's 'cartographies of fear'—the maps of menace and control, of guilt and innocence (Rey 2005: 30). The place and its people are young, urban, and poor, which in Guatemala City, as across the region, is more often than not parsed as dangerous, criminal, and disorderly.

The realities and discourses that shape El Romero and the lives of its inhabitants are characterized for many by exclusion and abandonment, constraints and rejection. Barrio residents negotiate these obstacles through creative and strategic management of the skills and resources that they are able to mobilize. Their lives and practices must be understood 'as the product of their active engagement with the external and internal social forces that crosscut and mould their world' (Wacquant 2007: 41). It is a tension at the core of the community's experience that its residents proclaim themselves to be in the midst of catastrophe and undoing while they get on in varied and inventive ways with the business of daily life.

According to residents' accounts, the tools they used to navigate their circumstances once included norms and standards of behaviour that encouraged an ethic of local solidarity and reciprocity, which increased security and stability for inhabitants of the neighbourhood. As this form of local order is seen to have broken down under the pressures of insecurity, the problem of their marginality and the limits it imposes on their access to resources and support beyond the barrio has become a more pressing concern for people in El Romero.

This chapter has portrayed how insecurity influences the relationship between El Romero and those outside. But when residents name the dangers and difficulties they find most threatening, their source almost always lies within the community rather than beyond its borders. The same urban dynamics of spatial and socioeconomic exclusion described here have been transforming street gangs in cities around the world (Hagedorn 2007a: 6; Sassen 2007: 112). The next chapter turns to the evolution of the group cultures and criminal economies of Guatemala City's gangs, before returning in subsequent chapters to the impact of this trajectory on the residents of Colonia El Romero, their experience of their neighbourhood, and their relationship with the world beyond it.

Chapter 3
Becoming Maras: Evolving Gangs in Guatemala City

Introduction

'Every day there is something worse than the day before,' Ingrid said. A middle-aged teacher in Guatemala City, she shook her head over a newspaper story reporting the discovery of a seven month-old infant's mutilated corpse—claimed to be the first case of a dismembered baby. She explained the escalation of urban violence as she saw it: when it became too usual for young men to be killing each other in the streets, they started to kill bus drivers to make their impact.[1] But, she said, eventually that became too everyday, left people too unfazed, so they took to dismembering women. And now, to make sure people know how far they will go, they've started butchering children. She never specified who 'they' were. She didn't need to. She meant the maras, the pandillas—street gangs that draw their members from and base their territories in poor urban neighbourhoods like El Romero. The article speculated that gang members decapitated and displayed the infant as 'a way to horrify' local residents who had recently complained to authorities about extortion charges being imposed on them (Lara 2011).

Terror and profit frequently merge like this in the repertoire of violence that typifies Guatemala City's maras today. The senselessly grotesque blends with the coolly rational operation of criminal enterprise. The scale and forms of both their criminal economies and their violence have changed dramatically since their appearance in the region, such that it is abundantly clear that 'the Central American gangs of today are not the mildly delinquent street gangs of a generation ago' (Brenneman 2011: 14). One Guatemalan sociologist wondered if it wasn't a mistake to even keep calling them 'maras', whether that had become

[1] Bus drivers and their assistants are frequently killed as a result of extortion disputes between gangs and the bus drivers or owners. In 2014, over 400 people were killed in attacks on public transit in Guatemala (Rivera 2015).

a 'euphemism' that no longer conveyed the reality of these gangs (Leslie Lemus, personal communication, February 2014). Drawing on secondary literature on Central American gangs and accounts of my own informants who grew up in and with Guatemala City's gangs over the past thirty years, this chapter describes the evolution of Guatemalan maras. I explore the changing nature of their group cultures and criminal economies to understand how this trajectory—and particularly the predatory turn of the last decade—has affected their relationship with their territories and its impact on residents' lives.

i. Evolving Gangs

Given the prominent role that violent non-state groups play in many parts of Latin America, Arias (2010b: 253) warns that comprehending the region requires grasping the 'trajectories of these organizations, of the paths that they take from inception, and of the types of strategies and activities they impose on those living in the region.' This is certainly true of El Romero, where the mara has come to define and dominate many aspects of neighbourhood life.

Reviewing the literature on gangs, Sánchez-Jankowski (2003: 192) flags up a common worry: that the very word 'gang', itself, is often used in a way that 'classifies under one heading groups that are not sociologically the same.' Typically, the concern raised here is over an alleged category confusion that leads to the comparison of unlike actors under like names, folding together everything from bands of unruly youth to international criminal syndicates into one unhelpfully generous assemblage. But in Central America's maras we have an example of groups that have evolved through such categories, in a way that begs to be analyzed diachronically. The focus on isolating the 'true' gang risks obscuring the 'fundamentally evolutionary nature of urban gangs' and the reality that they frequently show themselves to be 'highly volatile social forms' (Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 6-7). In Guatemala City, today's gang is a sociologically distinct beast from yesterday's, which itself already looked quite different from the day-before-yesterday's.

Defining gangs quite capaciously as 'alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions,' Hagedorn is among the relatively few to advance a typology of gangs that emphasizes dynamism and organizational change (2008: 31; see also Rodgers and Hazen 2014). He distinguishes between 'interstitial' gangs, the 'unsupervised peer groups' that make up the majority of urban gangs around the world, and those that make the transition to 'institutionalized' gangs (Hagedorn 2007b: 310). The latter are those that survive changes in leadership due to death or incarceration, sustain complex membership structures with varied roles, adapt to changing circumstances and pressures, develop distinct organizational outlooks or sub-cultures, and meet some of the social, economic, or security needs of their base communities (Hagedorn 2008: 9-10). At the outset of their third decade, Guatemalan maras, which have demonstrated all of these qualities save the last, can be seen as 'institutionalizing' gangs. They are embarked upon an unfinished (and potentially never to be finished) process of institutionalization which, as this chapter explores, has seen predation trump protection and economic motives take over from group identity.

ii. Expanding Gangs

Maras are almost always described as 'transnational' gangs. What is meant by this label varies a good deal, however, and the nature and degree of this transnationalism is highly contested. At the least controversial level, they can be said to be transnational simply by virtue of their geographic range. Most active in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, maras are also present in parts of Mexico and the US. How many there are in any of these places is far from clear.

Some report that Guatemalan authorities believe 'about 8000 pandilleros operate in the country' in 200 separate cliques, while others 'estimate that there are now up to 8000 maras in Guatemala' ('Forma de operar de maras sale a luz' 2012; McDermott 2013). Though a

higher tally puts Guatemala's total at 19,000-22,000 MS-13 and M-18 members, this would still make for very threadbare cliques were the figure anywhere near 8000 (Montenegro 2013).This same uncertainty over their dimensions recurs in every context in which they operate. Honduran maras may have 12,000 members or they might have 40,000 (Montenegro 2013; 'Pandillas piden perdón' 2013). Though Salvadoran maras have also been estimated to have 20,000 members, the country's Ministry of Justice has claimed there are 60,000 members and 470,262 'persons linked to maras' (Montenegro 2013; 'Aumenta número de maras en El Salvador' 2013). According to these last figures, fully 8.4 per cent of the Salvadoran population is now made up of maras and those in league with them.

The characterization of maras as transnational typically implies more than that they are present in multiple states. It evokes not just their range, but something particular about the sort of groups they are and the threat they represent as they have 'evolved to become powerful criminal groups with the capacity of setting extensive extortion networks across the region' (Cruz 2014: 123). Security specialists fret over 'the changing nature of Mara groups from disparate associations of streets gangs affiliated to the same franchise, to increasingly organized transnational criminal syndicates' (McDermott 2013). In October 2012, the US Treasury Department added the Mara Salvatrucha to its list of major international criminal organizations. This decision is predicated on the assertion that ties between cells of the gang in the US and in Central America are sufficiently close that financial sanctions on the MS-13 in the US will negatively affect the capacity of Central American cliques to perpetrate crimes.

The extent of international—and, indeed, intra-national—co-operation between cliques of the same mara may have been exaggerated. Though they are united by a shared gang culture and broad patterns of behaviour, there are important national differences between the maras, as well as between the historical and political contexts they operate in, which influence the forms both maras and responses to them have taken in each country. One

example has been the willingness of gang leaders to negotiate truces between rival maras in return for concessions regarding prison conditions.

In March 2012, a truce was brokered in El Salvador between the MS-13 and the M-18 that the government claimed reduced the country's homicide rate by 52 per cent ('Pandillas en tregua entregan armas' 2013).[2] In May 2013, Honduran maras agreed on a 'Declaration of Principles' towards negotiating a similar truce ('Pandillas de Honduras firman tregua cero crímenes' 2013). However, Lobo (the Wolf), alleged leader of the Mara-18 in Guatemala, utterly rejected the notion of sitting down with an MS-13 member to talk peace (Martínez and Sanz 2012). He dismissed the idea of transnational integration of gang structures or operations: 'Here in Guatemala, the thing is different from in El Salvador. Us, we run the gang different and they run it different...There is there and here is here' (Martínez and Sanz 2012).

Against the image of maras as 'transnational supergangs' is the view that they represent merely a transnational gang culture, whose unity is limited to 'a federated nature more imagined and symbolic' (Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 3). The transnationality of both the MS-13 and the M-18 appears to be something much less than that of a centrally-coordinated syndicate, but also more than a diffuse affiliation to a shared origin story and set of symbols. In the same interview in which he clearly distinguished between the M-18 in Guatemala and El Salvador, Lobo also spoke of sending representatives from local cliques to observe the other country's truce process (Martínez and Sanz 2012). Some degree of contact and collaboration clearly exists, though it is easy to overstate the extent and importance of their 'cross-border savvy' (Brenneman 2011: 31).

Mara cliques may be thought of as sharing in a 'trademark' and the 'reputational resources' that come with it, as Gambetta (1993: 153, 245) describes Sicily's mafia families.

[2]The truce broke down in early 2014, and homicides returned to pre-truce levels by June of that year, although there was talk in January 2015 of restoring the armistice (Gagne 2015; 'The Broken-Truce Theory' 2015).

Brenneman (2011: 32-33, 47) has likewise characterized Central American maras as employing a sort of 'franchise' model that gives cliques access to branding, income-generating strategies, and certain pooled resources, including weapons. The degree of coordination between cliques appears to have grown over time, at least in Guatemala, as the leadership of the strongest cliques of both dominant maras became concentrated in the prison system. Though the general trend has been in the direction of greater centralization, organization, and professionalization, mara cliques continue to display a great deal of variation.

While the local evolution outlined in this chapter shares a great deal, at least in the broad strokes, with patterns observed throughout the region, it remains just that: the trajectory of one neighbourhood and its gangs. It is important not to over-extend claims to the generalizability of this neighbourhood's experience. In addition to their geographic variation, there are also alleged differences between the Mara-18 and the Mara Salvatrucha. A pastor working with MS-13 members in a maximum security prison for nearly a decade emphasizes what he calls 'cultural' differences between the two maras. M-18 members seem 'more crazy, another *rollo*'.[3] They are wilder, more unpredictable, and he balks at the idea of ever working with them. He sees the MS as a more organized gang that thinks a thing through before acting. His impressions were echoed in a *Prensa Libre* report that contrasted the MS-13 as a 'strategic' group that 'uses a mafia methodology' to the M-18 as 'a violent organization with tattooed youth' that 'is characterized by committing violent and very cruel acts' (Lara 2013).

To the extent that these distinctions do reflect actual behaviour, rather than mere stereotypes, they may influence the detailed texture of insecurity for residents of gang territories. However, my visits and interviews in marginal communities around the capital

[3] *Rollo* means a style or a way of life, also a situation or a mess.

and its periphery, under control of cliques of each gang and still disputed between them, convince me that the general arc of the El Romero's story is a common one.

I. Gang Trajectories in Guatemala City

i. Early Youth Bands

The two large Central American maras have dominated the gang panorama of Guatemala City for twenty years, but they did not by any means invent it. Rather, as elsewhere in the Northern Triangle, they appeared among the various pandillas of Central American cities in the early 1990s, growing to prominence by absorbing and, later, eliminating this existing patchwork of neighbourhood gangs.

From at least the 1950s, when Guatemala City began to grow at a rapid pace, urban young people sporadically formed small pandillas in the capital's lower- and working-class neighbourhoods that 'engaged in petty crime and brawled against one another without dominating…neighbourhood life or killing one another' (Levenson 2013: 32). The 1980s saw the appearance of street gangs called 'maras', as well as the first youth gangs to transcend their neighbourhoods and involve subsidiary cliques in different zones of the city.

Although 'mara' is now applied almost exclusively to the MS-13 and M-18, the term predates their appearance in the region. Levenson's (1988) early study of Guatemalan maras traces it to the aftermath of massive protests in response to a rise in bus fares in 1985. The police seem to have used 'mara' first as a derisive name for the young people who swarmed the streets (Merino 2001: 138; Levenson 2013: 57). One officer remembered 'mara' was 'taken from a film from the sixties called *Marabunta*, about red ants in Brazil that was being shown at the time' (Levenson 1988: 9).[4] It was subsequently taken up by members of youth bands

[4] The film referenced is the 1954 film *The Naked Jungle* in which Charlton Heston battles a mythical horde of deadly Amazonian ants called a *marabunta*.

forming around the city to name themselves, evoking an army of small creatures made formidable by their unity.

Most of these new 'maras' were small *pandillas de cuadra*—gangs of the block. But by the late 1980s, two larger pandillas stood out: La FIVE and the Brek-33 (also Mara-33) originated in the city's older popular residential neighbourhoods before expanding. They disputed control of zone 1's *Centro Histórico*—the old and, by the 1980s, quite dilapidated heart of the city. On *Sexta avenida*, leading off the central plaza, each claimed a mall as their base: Capitol for La FIVE and Plaza Vivar for the Brek-33. This rivalry petered out by the early 1990s, but the geography of dispute stayed the same. Plaza Vivar became *anti-brek* or *burgués* (bourgeois) turf in the class-based confrontations that followed. Middle- and upper-class adolescents would gather there to go out looking to fight *brekeros*, who tended to be from lower classes and affiliated with sub-cultures rejected by the *burgueses*.[5]

As the term *brekeros* suggests, these bands were heavily tied to the popular urban youth culture of the time, coinciding as they did with the early years of hip hop and break dancing. The draw to participate in both *brek* and *anti-brek* groups was social and sub-cultural, not primarily economic. They were, though, often involved in robberies, the proceeds of which generally went into collective entertainment funds or to a member fallen on particularly hard times (Levenson 1988: 25). Nevertheless, their involvement in illegal pursuits was very far from the elaborate criminal economies that have since arisen in mara territories around the city, particularly in the last decade.

Highlighting another crucial difference between these first-generation maras and their successors, violence merits only a one-paragraph discussion in Levenson's (1988) early study. Police were already describing them as heavily armed and extremely dangerous, but the 330 mara members who participated in two early surveys were *unanimous* in denying

[5] This account is compiled from the recollections of several informants and corroborated by the scarce literature on the youth gangs of the period that is available. See Merino (2001) and Escobar Urrutia (2005), which has a detailed account of the class-based youth gangs of the early 1990s.

both personal and group involvement in violent crimes, such as homicide, rape, or kidnapping (Levenson 1988: 12, 27). The violence these groups engaged in is almost always described by my own informants as 'more street-level' than that of later gangs: their territorial brawls were a 'more corporal' violence involving fists, knives, and improvised street weapons.

El Romero residents reported that, despite a considerable Brek-33 presence, deaths from gang violence were exceedingly rare in this era and guns in the hands of gang members were virtually unheard of. When young members did die, it was 'more from drugs' than anything else. The other major source of danger for the barrio's young people in these late years of the internal conflict was social cleansing (*limpieza social*), the extrajudicial murder of members of 'undesirable' groups including alleged criminals, street youth, and sex workers.[6] I was told of several particularly deadly episodes of extra-judicial execution in the 1980s and early 1990s targeting local adolescents with the *brekero* 'look'. The key battle line was not between the gangs themselves, but between the young people who took part in them and the authorities who persecuted them. As the rivalry between the next generation of maras intensified, however, the greatest threat to barrio youth in Guatemala City would come not from abuse of substances or authority, but from their peers.

ii. '*Moda de maras*'

Migration and diffusion

The dominant origin story of the next generation of maras claims that in Central America, there 'were neither pandillas nor maras' until the end of the region's internal conflicts, 'when deportations from the United States to the region returned violent groups that had

[6]In Latin America, social cleansing has been carried out by both local vigilantes and, perhaps more often in Central America, by death squads made up of off-duty or retired military and police personnel operating covertly. See, for instance, Sanford (2008) on social cleansing in urban Guatemala; Taussig (2003) for an ethnographic description of the dynamics of social cleansing in a Colombian town.

been formed in those streets' (Hernández 2008: 143). Though it obviously whitewashes the decades-long history of Central American street gangs, the importation thesis recurs in popular explanations of the gang phenomenon as well. An older professional woman told me that 'bands of delinquents from Honduras and El Salvador' invaded Guatemala, bringing with them crime, drugs, prostitution, and violence. A Guatemalan border agent on the Honduran frontier blamed deportees 'converted to depravity' by US gang culture. These accounts represent efforts to externalize the crisis, to locate its roots and causes elsewhere.

The flux of migration and return is indeed central to how this gang culture found its way from north to south. Both the Mara Salvatrucha and the Mara-18 (as the 18th Street Gang) began and continue to operate in the Latino communities of Los Angeles.[7] Because they were rarely able to obtain legal status in the US, Guatemalans and Salvadorans pushed north by political violence in the 1970s and 1980s were vulnerable to what has been termed downward or segmented assimilation (GULC 2007: 30). The young people among them became a core membership group for growing Latino gangs in Southern California. The informal and illegal economies of the street offered undocumented migrants income-generating opportunities that were in some ways more accessible and less risky than seeking formal employment and exposing oneself to discovery and detention (Brenneman 2011: 26). As progressively more punitive immigration legislation in the 1990s made it easier to deport non-status migrants, tens of thousands of young people who had grown up in US barrios amid their gangs were sent to the Northern Triangle.[8] Between 1998 and 2005, the US deported 46,000 convicts and a further 160,000 migrants to Central America, with 90 per cent of them sent to Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras (Rodgers 2009: 956).

[7]The originally Mexican-American 18th Street Gang splintered off from an older Chicano gang in the 1960s. The Mara Salvatrucha was formed by Salvadoran migrants in the late 1970s.

[8] Several legislative and policy innovations, beginning in the late 1980s, contributed to increasing numbers of deportations from the US in the 1990s. This process culminated in the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act: applied retroactively, it mandated deportation of non-citizens (including permanent residents) sentenced to a year or more in jail. It also permitted the deportation of foreign-born citizens with felony convictions (Zilberg 2004: 761, 767; 2007: 51 n.7; Rodgers 2009: 956).

Much has been made of the exportation of Los Angeles' gang culture though the deportation of convicted MS-13 and 18th Street members, who then went on to found local branches of their North American parent gangs. These 'gang organizers' are said to have 'expanded their network of gang cells' through the Northern Triangle (Brenneman 2011: 27). It is undeniable that the experiences of immigration and deportation that many Central Americans underwent in the 1980s and 1990s, and the cultural flows that went along with them, are essential to any account of how the gangs of Guatemala City evolved. As the M-18 leader Lobo remarked, 'we all know it, that it was because of migration from here to there and from there to here, even a kid knows that' (Martínez and Sanz 2012). However, the rapid spread of the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara Dieciocho among the young men of Guatemala City's poor barrios is as much a matter of cultural diffusion as purposeful expansion of criminal organizations.

In the case of Colonia El Romero, the maras' originators were not enterprising veterans looking to expand their franchise, but boys of ten or fourteen coming back with reports, boasts, and tall tales of the lifestyles they and their families and neighbours had lived up in *el Norte*: 'telling marvels of up there,' Cadejo said. He recalls the return of a classmate who had spent a few years in the US bringing back to their block word of the dress, tattoos, haircuts, slang, and music associated with the maras '*en los Estados Unidos*.' Those 'were the magic words' for the barrio's kids and teenagers, and the trend took off in 1994 with cliques founded on many blocks in the neighbourhood, declaring themselves MS-13 or M-18. Around the city, there was also a process of absorption of old neighbourhood pandillas, many of which voluntarily rebranded themselves.[9] Across the Northern Triangle, the maras grew rapidly, primarily through this sort of assimilation; already by 1996, 84 per cent of gang members in the San Salvador area identified as MS-13 or M-18, and unaffiliated

[9] Though they have since largely disappeared, other US gangs spread to Central America in these years, notably the White Fence, perhaps Los Angeles's oldest Mexican-American gang (Brenneman 2011: 30; Levenson 2013: 40). In Guatemala City, the name often mutated into Wayfens of Wifense.

pandillas were increasingly rare (Cruz 2014: 126). The region's mara cliques were 'essentially formed by local teenagers who had never been in the US,' but who eagerly incorporated themselves into a transnational imagined community (Cruz 2014: 126; Levenson 2013: 10). What resulted was not a wholesale replacement of Central American pandillas by transplanted US gangs, but a 'hybrid gang culture' combining certain imported symbols and practices with existing local traditions of street gangs (Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 4).

The literature on Central American maras tends to overemphasize the extent to which they are a product of the 'forced transnationality' of deportation (Zilberg 2004: 762). Conversely, it has often left underappreciated what could be called an 'aspirational' transnationality. As with their predecessors, a major attraction of the new gang cliques was their affiliation with urban youth sub-cultures and, in particular, their claim to the latest desirable cultural trends from the US. In the early 1990s, young people, Arturo says, 'got themselves involved for questions of identity,' for the looks, signs, and emblems of a particular style of being young.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the imported mara myth of deathless brotherhood and barrio pride binding together young Latino men in a hostile urban landscape resonated with the poor youth of Guatemala City. One particularly prominent artefact of this imaginary is the 1993 film *Blood In, Blood Out*, released in Latin America as *Sangre por sangre*. It follows the exploits of three Chicano cousins in and out of a Mexican-American gang in Southern California's barrios and prisons. It has for years been utterly emblematic for youth in Guatemala City's poorest neighbourhoods and has had a similar impact in other areas of mara influence (for instance, Pine 2008: 44-47). El Romero's first new-style mara clique took its name from the film's Chicano gang, and it was so popular in the mid-1990s that some teenage boys there went so far as to fake Mexican-American accents. Elements of the plot, characters, and, especially, the 'codes' of barrio, gang, and prison life that run through

Sangre por sangre continue to appear, whether through purposeful citation or unconsciously, in the accounts of current and former mara members and other residents of El Romero.

For twenty years, mara members have been 'imitating a poor imitation of imaginary L.A. gang members' (Pine 2008: 47). But that certain symbols, traditions, or expectations originate in fiction does not diminish their potential to become meaningful for the real-world subjects who appropriate them (Gambetta 1993: 129-132). For young Central Americans elaborating a hybrid gang identity, the film offered a source of 'common knowledge' about how gang members look, talk, and behave, enabling the kind of coordination that 'occurs when everyone knows that everyone else knows that *s* means *k* or people like us always do *j*' (Gambetta 2009: 204). *Sangre por sangre* continues to transmit this understanding to new generations of gang members. To this day, the initiation rituals of El Romero's Mara-18 clique include a screening of the film to convey to new recruits what it means to join the pandilla.

Change and continuity in the early mara

There was initially a good deal of continuity between these new mara cliques and the *pandillas de cuadra* that preceded them. As El Romero's first youth gangs in the 1980s had before them, the earliest MS and M-18 cliques founded there retained what Arturo calls a '*rollo* of protecting the barrio.' Predation against residents remained rare, and violence was still largely confined to confrontations between bands of youth with different gang affiliations. Elements of this gang profile seem to have been typical across Central America, both predating and outlasting, for a while, the appearance in Guatemala of new-style maras from the US.

In urban Nicaragua, where there has never been a significant MS-13 or M-18 presence, Rodgers (2007, 2009) found that, at least until the end of the 1990s, pandillas' aggression was very seldom directed inwards against their own community. Instead, violence was mostly restricted to territorial gang warfare, which proceeded according to certain rules of

escalation, and the gang 'protected all those living in their local *barrio*' (Rodgers 2009: 963; 2007: 455). Similarly, in the prevailing gang culture of Guatemala City in the years after the maras began to spread, there were checks on the practice of violence both against a clique's community and even between rival cliques. Murci, a member of the M-18 from 1995, remembers fights between cliques that were broken up when things were seen to be getting out of hand, out of proportion: 'in the old codes, those fights had a limit, man.'

The appearance of the new maras in Guatemala City had begun to redraw the lines used to define identity, loyalty, and hostility for gangs and their members, although this was a gradual process rather than a sudden change. A young person's neighbourhood and their gang affiliation were once synonymous, both expressed by the phrase '*mi barrio*'. The barrio is the neighbourhood is the gang: the gang is the neighbourhood is the barrio. The importation of Los Angeles' gang culture brought with it new 'norms, values, and knowledge about how to behave, about who is the enemy, and about who is a friend' (Cruz 2014: 126). A clique's mara affiliation increasingly supplanted its turf as the focal point of group identity (Cruz 2014: 130-31). Cadejo, involved in an M-18 clique until the mid-90s, saw that the trend was already getting 'really heavy', with gang signs and colours everywhere.[10] The 13 and the 18, imports from a foreign geography, became fetishes for local youth. 'We were fighting for a number that meant nothing to us,' Cadejo remembers. The barrio of gang identity began to diverge from the barrio of neighbourhood belonging. This shift in the dominant meaning of '*mi barrio*' might reveal the first hints of the cliques' unrooting from the physical and social worlds of their neighbourhoods which would facilitate predatory violence against these territories in the next decade.

The early 2000s saw both a significant rise in violence associated with inter-mara enmity and moves away from certain norms attached to these identities. The 18th Street Gang and

[10] Though they are now rarely used in Guatemala City, the early cliques adopted the colours of Californian maras: red for the MS-13, black for the M-18.

the Mara Salvatrucha developed in the gang landscape of 1980s Los Angeles. Though rivals on the streets, both identified as *sureño* gangs, and thus owed loyalty (and tribute) to the prison-run Mexican Mafia (la eMe) and their *Ley del Sur* (Law of the South, also an acronym for Southern United Raza). The SUR mandated prison truces: both maras were composed of Latinos, members of *la raza*, who were thus natural allies when confronted with the racialized gang system of California's penitentiaries (Zilberg 2004: 765).[11] Though originally part of the gang culture transposed to Guatemala, the Sur was always unlikely to survive without a distinct other to coalesce against. It is perhaps more surprising that it lasted as long as it did. In August 2005, the pact was broken by the MS-13 in simultaneous attacks that left 36 dead in prisons across the country, where Salvatrucha and Dieciocho members had, until that point, been held together. One Mara-18 member whose career (and prison terms) straddled both Sur and post-Sur epochs explained the change:

> Inside the prison, it's not about '18' or 'MS' or '*wayfen'* nor are there a bunch of barrios. There's only one barrio inside there and that's the 'Sur', that means 'Southern United Races'. In there, you don't pull up barrios or clicas, there everyone is homies, supposedly…But in there, it all ended in breaking that law, in quotes, that was the Sur. (Medrano Osorio 2008: 170)

Former and incarcerated gang members point to 'when the Sur broke' as a turning point in the escalation of violence between gangs across the country. Several ex-mara informants also linked the abandonment of this prison truce to increasing violence against women and children and the beginning of mutilation and dismemberment, though the causal relationship here is less clear. It is important not to overstate its impact; though 'running the Sur' can mean a ceasefire on the streets as well, in Guatemala it does not seem to have been an effective check on inter-gang violence beyond the prisons. But it represented the broader imported ethos and codes that declined as successive generations of Guatemalan pandilleros made the maras their own. Deportees who helped to spread these gangs in Central America

[11] In addition to implementing the prison truce and encouraging a general ideology of racial solidarity and barrio pride, the eMe forbade drive-by shootings between Latino gangs and prohibited harming an enemy's family, among other norms (Sanz and Martínez 2012).

'did so trying to respect the hierarchical links and codes of "back there"' (Sanz and Martínez 2012). But processes of generational transition and the indigenization of the maras weakened the 'fear and reverence' that these codes and the deportees who transmitted them are supposed to have inspired in Central American youth (Brenneman 2011: 27). The M-18 leader Lobo explains that when 'we were running the Sur, there were a ton of guys from Los Angeles with us, and supposedly we're from there, our gang comes from there, but now that they're not here? Yeah, *fuck you*!' (Martínez and Sanz 2012).

Figure 11. In a maximum-security prison, Lobo (Aldo Dupie Ochoa Mejía) displays his tattoos, watched by guards wearing masks to conceal their identitites from inmates. Photo: Rodrigo Abd (Alemán 2012).

iii. War and Monopoly

A decade after their arrival, the cultures and criminal economies of Guatemala City's maras had begun to change. The level of violence rose sharply as it became increasingly impossible for multiple cliques with clashing affiliations to co-exist in the same neighbourhoods.

Control of El Romero was settled through what is locally called the 'War of the Maras' which began around 2002. The major belligerents at the outset were a clique of the old Brek-

33 gang, two M-18 cliques, an MS-13 clique, and the Wayfens, who were first allied with, and then absorbed by, the MS-13 in the course of the war. Ascendant by 2006, a Mara-18 clique solidified their position in 2008 in a take-over that Arturo describes as 'literally a genocide.' The victorious clique murdered all the young male relatives they could find of their last rivals so as to reduce the possibility of a resurgence of competitors. Informants report there were as many as three to five deaths in El Romero every day while 'the pandillas finished the business of exterminating each other.'

The dominant M-18 clique, one of the barrio's oldest, today claims El Romero, according to one member, 'from the *entrada* to the *salida*.' As their influence grew over the course of the gang war, they won rights to both recruit from and collect extortion quotas in several nearby *colonias*, giving them an effective territory that covers an extensive and populous sector of zone 18. An associate of theirs claims that among the Mara-18, they are the 'strongest clique of the zone, of the capital. Very respected, everything is managed from here.' The clique is a relatively large one, with perhaps as many as 300 to 400 members, and has been described by Guatemalan authorities as 'one of the most active and violent in the country' (Martínez and Sanz 2012).[12]

Criminal economies in mara territory

As mara factions began to settle territorial monopolies in parts of the capital, their profit-generating activities expanded and intensified. The criminal economy helmed by El Romero's clique now centres on what Doña Ana calls 'the fashion of the famous extortion,' though the euphemistic 'rent' or 'tax' are more commonly used. As the characteristic activity of these gangs, extortion is fairly recent. In the four-volume *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica*, published between 2001 and 2006, only the final volume's chapter on

[12] Other informants, however, put the number as low as 80. This range seems to be largely due to whether or not the estimate included barrio pandilleros in prison (who probably outnumber those on the street). There are also different degrees of association within the clique, not all of which are 'full' members, and so membership estimates may vary according to how many of these ranks are counted.

Guatemala uses the word 'extortion' (Hun, Lemus, and Monzón 2006: 166). Some mara cliques in the capital do seem to have been levying 'war taxes' by the late 1990s, first charging delivery trucks coming into their barrios and then transport passing through them (Levenson 2011: 43). El Romero cliques periodically made demands of residents of their parcels to fund weapons for gang conflicts or funeral expenses for slain members. But as a 'war tax', it was a means to ends related to inter-mara rivalries, rather than the systematic long-term exploitation strategy that extortion became after the end of the War of the Maras.

Relative to the paucity of 'legitimate' economic opportunity in and around the red zones, the mara's extortion enterprise is of impressive scope and yield. The buses on the route passing El Romero paid, in the spring of 2012, Q100 per day, roughly ten percent of what they would expect to take in.[13] On this heavily-trafficked route, the mara may collect as much as Q20,000 each day from the buses. This would give the clique a monthly total of Q600,000 (approximately £50,000) from the buses alone, before factoring in the taxis and moto-taxis, the schools and the stores, the households and market stalls. One informant acquainted with the gang's operations said that each of the clique's four highest-ranking members (all incarcerated) receives Q50,000 as his weekly extortion quota, much of which then has to be parcelled out to dependents, collaborators, and as bribes, especially for prison guards. By way of contrast, Doña Ana is paid a monthly salary of Q1750 as a school caretaker, and her daughter earns what the family thought a very good salary of Q2200 as a young army recruit.

Businesses are charged according to the size and profitability of the operation being taxed. In early 2012, the base rate for ambulant vendors and market stalls rose from ten *quetzales* daily to fifteen, though some of those with more customers pay 20 or 30. In stores, daily rates begin around Q50 and, once again, rise according to their perceived earning potential.

[13] Other sources report higher tariffs. One bus driver told Levenson (2013: 87) that 37.5% of what he took in went to 'circulation taxes'.

Though extortion can be collected weekly in amounts of Q75-250 from families known to have a steady income, households are more often required to pay a large lump sum of Q5000-25,000, presented as a one-time charge. Many report, though, that those who pay once will eventually be targeted again, and a number of families have fulfilled an initial demand only to be later forced out of the community when they could or would not pay a second. Mara associates compare their rationale of extortion to the income brackets in a system of progressive taxation: everyone pays 'according to economic level.' Their intelligence as to this level can, however, be imperfect. The sector of the barrio that has the highest density of abandoned homes is at the bottom of the old planned *colonia*. More than other parts of El Romero, the longer duration of residence permitted many families to build up bigger two-level homes out of cement blocks. These are disproportionately targeted for high extortion demands because they appear wealthier than smaller homes or precarious *champas*. Yet many of these families have gone heavily into debt to put these homes together, or have built them slowly over decades and even generations.

Initial demands are often extravagantly high for the resources a family can access, and so 'you have to negotiate,' Chepe tells me, to 'say "Look, I can give this much."' His family received a demand for Q25,000. But from selling off one brother's car and another's motorcycle, amassing their savings, and borrowing from relatives in the US, they were only able to collect Q8000. Through the mediation of an ex-marero brother, they were able to negotiate the final price down to Q15,000, provided they paid it within the week.

Though extortion is at the heart of the local criminal economy, it is not the mara's only profit-making activity. Most notably, they are also responsible for the drug trade through and within the community, retailing marijuana and crack cocaine (*piedra*), from abandoned homes around the barrio. Selling drugs within their territory may in itself be less profitable to mara cliques than assisting in the transit of drugs through their turf. As more and more cocaine has come to pass through Guatemala in the last twenty years on its way to the US,

local prices for its derivatives have been falling. In the late 1980s, the extremely debased crack cocaine available in El Romero cost Q35 (£3) for a *guato*, a fist-sized rock. The same amount can now be obtained for Q10. As Cadejo explains, El Romero is 'not their market. The people here don't have the funds for hard drugs. A gram of cocaine is out of their reach.' It is more important as a 'linking element' in narcotics networks, a transit point where the dominant clique is sub-contracted by narco-trafficking operations to provide temporary storage beyond the reach of authorities until the contraband can be moved on towards other, richer markets.

The pandilleros and their associates also run several apparently legitimate small businesses in the Colonia, though not, primarily, to generate income from them. A small corner store positioned at the top of the *salida* road was taken over by the girlfriends of incarcerated gang members after the original owners were forced out. Authorities believe that businesses like this are used to launder extortion profits ('Manejan negocios con dinero ilegal' 2012), but residents are generally more concerned about surveillance of their activities by these women from the store's strategic location. In the *entrada*, situated quite brazenly in front of the local PNC outpost, is a curb-side stand from which an older woman and her adult daughter sell breads and sandwiches. But the pair do not get their income from these sales; their products are sponsored by the gang so that their stall can serve as an extortion collection point. Similar strategies of positioning associates behind cover businesses were employed on a number of occasions when an increased presence of security forces made using loitering teenage boys for surveillance too conspicuous.

There are a number of similarities in the structure and development of this neighbourhood's criminal economy and those of other mara territories. In another M-18 clique's turf, residents told me that extortion had likewise applied only to delivery trucks at first. It then progressed to local shops and tradespeople, driving a number of these out of business. Extortion of families is still quite new, unevenly applied, and much less common

than in El Romero. It is, however, collected on similar grounds, after 'they investigate to see who has money.' So too in a nearby MS territory: extortion became a regular occurrence from about 2007, first for delivery trucks, then stores, then for *tortillerías* and other more marginal businesses, and finally for private homes (Leslie Lemus, personal communication, February 2014).

Extortion seems to have become increasingly sophisticated and progressively more punitive elsewhere in the Northern Triangle as well. Hume (2009: 105), for instance, records that in San Salvador, '"War tax" on a small scale has evolved into *renta* on a much bigger, and more organised scale.' Mara extortion in Guatemala City followed this same progression from war taxes on outsiders to sustained exploitation of insiders. Initially, extortion targets outsiders who 'trespass' onto mara turf with commercial motives. It only later escalates to habitually targeting insiders, first in their businesses, and finally independently of their economic activity in the community. Though there is a good deal of variation in the range of local activity that generates extortion demands and the intensity of its extraction, this pattern appears consistent.

Violence in mara territory

The repertoire of violence employed by the mara in El Romero evolved and expanded in tandem with its criminal economy. The most important change in this regard is that the majority of the gang's violence is no longer directed at rivals, but turned inwards. El Romero residents report that the use of violence by the maras against them has become more common and more savage. 'When they do something, they really do it ugly,' one young woman reported. Violence and the threat of it are most commonly deployed to enforce the extraction of extortion, punishing defaulters and demonstrating to the whole community what non-compliance means.

The threats of violence that invariably accompany an ultimatum from the mara are tailored to maximize the gang's leverage over their victims. One pastor received the dreaded

'papers under the door.' If he failed to pay, the letter said, 'We will start with your oldest son, then the second, then the third, then your daughter. We know where your son works, we know the girl studies commerce, we know what time they come home and by what route.' A young mother received similar papers, demanding Q5000 for the 'protection' of her infant daughter: 'otherwise, we will kill her, the daughter.'

The mara today has virtually no checks on who constitutes an acceptable victim. Shortly before Easter 2012, a school director who had previously paid Q30,000 could or would not pay again when a second demand arrived. Soon after, when the school was full of children preparing for Holy Week processions, pandilleros sprayed the school's courtyard with gunfire. When a member of the clique *planchó*—fucked up—he was murdered, as was his girlfriend. But while he got one execution-style shot, her entire face was destroyed, 'erased by bullets,' an ex-member said, letting others know what would happen to their loved ones in case of future slip-ups. Another disgraced member was left alive, but his pregnant girlfriend was shot three times in the stomach. Terrorizing discipline is also directed outwards. Kevin reported that when he belonged to the barrio's clique between 2008 and 2011, girls who learned too much about their business (often through a member's boasting) would be gang-raped to traumatize them into silence. In a neighbouring red zone, a young boy stole the tires from a pandillero's car. His mother received three bullets to the head. Infants and schoolchildren, foetuses and mothers—there are no off-limits innocents in mara territory anymore.

Relatively few in number but high in impact are the murders perpetrated with special brutality or brazenness in order to convey a particular message to the audience of the act. These tactics were not always part of the mara's repertoire. Murci, who left El Romero's now-dominant M-18 clique after going to prison in 1999, insists this sort of violence was unthinkable in his day. He explains earnestly that 'it was not so inhuman. We killed, but not

so cruelly. None of this dismemberment. Two bullets, at most. Maybe a machete wound or two.'

Figure 12. 'They are killing us': *tuk-tuk* drivers protest the day after two transit workers are killed in separate incidents in the capital's zone 6, an M-18 territory. Photo: *La Hora* (Contreras 2015).

Mutilated bodies of murder victims, especially young women, showing signs of sexual assault and torture, have raised public alarm since the early 2000s. Female cadavers have shown disproportionately high rates and severity of torture before death, and are more likely to be disposed of in highly visible places (Sanford 2008: 107; Constantino 2006: 112).[14] Hypotheses and conspiracy theories abound to account for these 'femicides'. But residents of El Romero, where several such cases have taken place, are generally clear in their explanation: these murders are messages from the mara, and the bodies of young women are among the mara's favourite materials for making a message count. Sometimes, as in the disciplining of pandilleros described above, it is primarily intended to circulate as a sort of internal memo. In other instances, it is a broadcast aimed at the community, the state, and the Guatemalan public in general.

[14] One study found that in 85% of women's murders, no effort was made to conceal the body (GHRC 2009: 7).

The most notorious case of this latter sort to occur in the barrio took place in 2011. A new *Transurbano* bus route, complete with armed guards at each stop and on each bus, was to begin passing through the Colonia. This would be the first public transport to enter the barrio in several years, since extortion and violence led a previous route to bypass it. The coming intrusion was unwelcome to the gang, and they decided to make a point of it. One night, just before it was to begin operating, a *tuk-tuk* driver received a call from the gang. He picked up two members. 'What's the order?' one pandillero asked the other of the instructions received from the prison. 'A woman,' was the reply. 'Yeah, and?' 'To our taste.' A fifteen year-old girl they came upon after driving around for a while happened to be to their taste. The driver took them to a gang safe house where he was invited inside while the girl was stripped and raped. He waited outside while they tortured and killed her. The next morning, dismembered portions of her body were found at each of the new bus stops in the sector. 'They dismembered the girl as a warning,' Doña Juana stated. Another woman felt it was intended to show that the mara 'will do *anything*,' stop at nothing, to get its way.

Some cases communicate less through special brutality than through boldness. A May 2012 raid swept up about a dozen peripheral members and associates of El Romero's clique, and led the Minister of Governance to boast of the demise of a criminal group 'among the bloodiest' in Guatemala ('Desarticulan estructura de sicarios' 2012). The Ministry of Governance official responsible for local security programs was killed by a teenage assassin in El Romero ten days later. While the murder was acknowledged by the government as a reprisal for the raid, it was also understood by residents to convey messages intended for them, in addition to demonstrating the gang's continued existence and power over the neighbourhood. A family who witnessed the assassination abandoned its home that same day, having concluded that 'now we have no one to protect us anymore.'

II. Changing Codes and Cultures

In a process that Cadejo calls 'the mutation of violence in the barrio,' the mara has gone from a '*rollo* of protecting the barrio' to leaving its residents feeling that there is 'no one to protect us anymore.' Cadejo wasn't the only one to invoke a sort of natural selection gone awry. Colocho, who grew up with the gang's current leaders, describes this trajectory with reference to 'Charles Darwin's theory of evolution: the strongest, the most violent, the bloodiest is going to survive.'

Because my focus is the impact of this evolution on El Romero, the ways it plays out in daily life, and not primarily on its causes, I do not attempt a complete account of how or why the mara has changed over time.[15] However, several factors are worth mentioning to sketch some picture of the context in which Guatemala City's cliques have shaped and re-shaped their codes, cultures, and criminality, particularly with regards to the turn to predatory profiteering in their barrios.

i. Guns and Drugs

'Violence calls up more violence,' the ex-marero Murci shrugs: if your enemy in a territorial dispute has a pistol, you're not much good if you turn up with a knife. Several ex-gang members and numerous other residents who grew up in El Romero in the 1990s explained the escalation of violent behaviour by the maras from fistfights to streets weapons to handguns and even military-grade weapons as simply the outcome of a natural competitive progression, as predictable as it was inevitable.

But their enemies didn't always have pistols. Murci says that when he began carrying a gun in 1997, he was pretty much the only one in the clique who had access to one. Initially,

[15] Fontes (2015) and Levenson (2013) engage in more depth with these questions about Guatemalan maras. For more detail on various stages of their evolution, see Levenson (1988), Merino (2001, 2004a), and Hun, Lemus, and Monzón (2006) for Guatemala City's gangs in the late 1980s, late 1990s, and early 2000s, respectively.

he borrowed a friend's .38 calibre handgun for a very narrow purpose. When something serious was happening, his *homies* would send kids running to get him at the bakery where he worked and he would bring the gun as a deterrent, to see that things didn't get out of hand. As guns became more readily available to members of his clique and their rivals, things soon changed. Within months, they were conducting drive-by shootings in enemy territories, although he maintains that up until went to prison in 1999, they never fired a shot in El Romero except in its defense.

Virtually all informants concur that there was a time before the gangs had guns and another epoch after they acquired and began to use them. Rafa explains this as a vital juncture, because the acquisition of guns tipped the power balance between the gang and its barrio. 'How else are 300 people going to impose themselves on 30,000?' When asked to pinpoint when firearms started becoming more common, the turning point is almost always given as 1996 or 1997.

The 1996 Peace Accords provided for the demobilization of remaining guerrilla forces, of the extensive paramilitary system, and of swaths of the military itself. This process, however, was somewhat haphazardly managed, and 'not all of the weapons were controlled or destroyed, which meant that these stopped being in the hands of the armies to pass into the hands of new groups, maras and pandillas among them' (Hernández 2008: 144). As many as two million firearms were never accounted for (Reyes 2005). 'Who knows whose hands they're in,' a congressman said to me, throwing up his own hands. It is now impossible to say how many guns went from wartime arsenals to private hands or how they did so. But Guatemala has both many more guns relative to its population and a much larger proportion of unregistered and black market guns even compared to its neighbours. Only 7.5 per cent of the estimated 1.95 million guns in the country are registered, compared to 29.5 per cent for Honduras and 44 per cent in El Salvador (Ismatul 2011).

The flow of weapons from security forces to street gangs does not seem to have ended with the post-conflict transition. Mara and ex-mara informants claimed that some of their heavier weaponry originated with the military, trafficked to the cliques by corrupt middlemen in the police. 'For so much money, they give us so many weapons,' Kevin explained. Though they flatly reject any such notions, members of the military deployed in its increasingly common urban security operations acknowledge that mara cliques have weapons 'of military issue.' Two officers stationed in El Romero separately complained that they tire of discovering they have been issued with new weapons acquired at great cost only to find they are fighting a gang that always seems to get their hands on last year's model just after it has been replaced.

One factor that has contributed to the maras' increased capacity to access and purchase weapons has been the growth of the drug trade in and through Guatemala. Though the maras are not involved in cross-border traffic, the presence of drugs and drug-traffickers opened new possibilities for these gangs. Crackdowns on traditional Caribbean routes and the growing power of Mexican cartels in the 1990s began redirecting more cocaine overland through the Central American isthmus (Gavigan 2009: 65; UNODC 2012: 31). Especially from 2006, when enforcement efforts increased the risks of direct shipments to Mexico, Central America became a crucial cocaine transit zone (UNODC 2012: 31). Between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of cocaine shipments travelling north that passed through Central America jumped from 23 to 84 per cent (Malone 2012: 55). During this same period, Salvadoran maras were seen to be 'moving to more criminal-oriented behavior as a result, in part, of the introduction of hard drugs, such as cocaine and crack, onto the Salvadoran market' (Cruz 2014: 131).

Their entry into drug retailing may have played a part in shifting the territorial logic of Guatemalan cliques from one of pride and identity to one of profit-making. A high-ranking PNC officer offered a version of this hypothesis, telling a gathering of community organizers

in one red zone that 'the points of drug sales, those are what brought the violence because they started to fight each other for territory' (5 February, 2013). Cadejo similarly believes that the real change that escalated the use of firearms and violence by the maras was when they came to realize the profit that could be made by dominating territories. The maras began as 'a sort of trend, a sort of game, and then they saw that they could get economic resources out of it.'

ii. Prisons

In many marginal urban communities worldwide, 'prison is part of neighbourhood life and vice versa' (Hagedorn 2008: *xxx*). This has been true of the barrios from which Guatemala's street gangs arose as well. The zone 18 prison complex, the 'Preventivo' (officially the Centro de Detención Preventiva para Varones), has long had a significant place in local life, and El Romero's young men have always had a high incidence of contact with the penitentiary system. The flow of knowledge and savvy from prison to barrio was an important tool for young men learning to navigate their circumstances. The code-speak called *cuna* was one important example of the kind of 'fusion of ghetto and prison culture' that Wacquant identified in the US (2001: 116). This code involves inserting extra syllables into words, speaking quickly, and knowing which syllables to drop out when listening, and it allowed prisoners to converse without being understood by prison guards. Former Preventivo inmates would teach *cuna* to children on the barrio's streets, or boys would pick it up by listening to older boys and men. If you found yourself there, fluency in *cuna* meant you could 'move smoothly.' It also demonstrated their competent performance of a certain facet of barrio masculinity. But the relationship between prison life and barrio life has changed in the last decade, as the prison has increasingly supplanted the neighbourhood for the gangs of Guatemala City.

Cruz (2014: 133) argues that in El Salvador, the separation of MS and M-18 inmates from both the general population and from their rivals 'nourished a sort of long-term national gang assembly and facilitated communication and connections among gang members.' This has been the case in Guatemala as well. The move to segregated prisons for members of each mara in 2005 brought clique leaders from around the region into contact, expanding their territorial reach and resource bases. An ex-member of El Romero's clique said the Preventivo is 'where they all met,' where the barrio's *jefes* cemented alliances with other M-18 cliques in and around the capital. A degree of operational integration arose, with these allies collaborating on various 'well-planned things.' At one point, for instance, El Romero's M-18 clique traded places with a clique from the far south of the city so that both could continue to operate without interference from authorities who had identified the local membership of each neighbourhood. The former M-18 leader El Abuelo stated in courtroom testimony that the gang's leadership council, the Wheel of the Barrio, formed when its initial members were held together in the Preventivo's infamous Sector 11 ('Forma de operar de las maras sale a luz' 2012). The permeability of Guatemala's prisons poses little obstacle to effective communication and control from within. According to a pandillero released from prison in 2012, contraband cell phones are 'what there's most of' in Guatemalan detention centres. The facility of communication between prison and barrio permits incarcerated leaders to continue to manage operations closely. Junior, eighteen and trying to leave his mara clique, explains that every order 'comes from the prison. No one shoots nobody without that order. No one charges a rent without that permission.'

The state has been successful, in a sense, in that virtually the entire leadership of both maras are inmates of maximum-security institutions. They have been far less successful, however, in actually interrupting the operational capacity of these gangs. If anything, incarceration seems to have enhanced it, much as Sánchez-Jankowski (2003: 206-208) has argued that massive incarceration in the US transformed street gangs into more organized

and professional prison gangs. This progression is far from unique to Guatemala. In South America, North America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, as well as neighbouring El Salvador, it has been observed that the 'imprisonment of gang leaders has strengthened, not hampered, internal organisational structures' (Hagedorn 2008: 13; Salagaev and Safin 2014: 72; Hume 2009: 142).

But perhaps the most important outcome of the shift of the mara's locus of power into the prison system has been a more subjective one. The gang has come unmoored from the physical and social space of its barrio. Incarceration in segregated gang prisons for terms few of them expect to see the end of shrinks the social world of members down to the mara, reinforcing their ties to each other and weakening any other claims on them. In Guatemala's prisons today, 'mareros are only that' (Levenson 2013: 113). The 'cultural syncretism' that once existed between barrio and prison has largely disappeared as gang symbols and practices come to take over from neighbourhood space as the central provider of identity to cliques and individual members (Wacquant 2000: 383; see also Cruz 2014: 131). For many young mara members, prison represents the end of the lives they have lived in their barrios. Entering the prison system, a young gang member now unequivocally enters a mara space—one from which their old barrios are violently preyed upon.

iii. Hierarchy

As Cruz (2014: 136) found in El Salvador, Guatemalan maras have responded to trends of increasing incarceration of gang-affiliated youth with 'more group cohesion, brand-new hierarchical organization, and resolved violence.' Current and former mara participants agree that the gang's structure and discipline have become stricter and more defined as they have metamorphosed from bands into businesses.

'Before, there were leaders, but no bosses,' Arturo recalls of the barrio's pandillas when he was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s. In their earliest phase, mara leaders worked

more like pirate captains than perhaps any other form of leadership. Sometimes they rotated, sometimes they were elected, and sometimes they were appointed for seniority or perceived leadership qualities. Their role was to oversee the distribution of group funds, either equally or according to need (Levenson 1988: 32).

Most interviews and anecdotal evidence strongly support the idea that this model of egalitarian leadership has changed drastically, that the pandilla today is a rigidly hierarchical organization. Many say that they are now structured 'like the army, pyramidal.' But in some cases, active mara members continue to hold to the language of the old model. Lobo, for instance, rejects the idea that he is a *jefe*, a boss, someone with authoritarian control, but allows that he is a *líder*, implying a more informal status (Martínez and Sanz 2012). Similarly, three young inmates in a maximum-security MS-13 prison told me decisions on matters both within and beyond the prison walls were taken after open discussions in which everyone could offer his opinion freely.

Figure 13. Two boys, aged thriteen and fourteen, detained in zone 18. They told police that for two years, they had been collecting extortion for M-18 members in the Preventivo. Photo: *PNC de Guatemala* (PNC 2014b).

Against this, many former mara members allege that these days, 'the people on top receive all the benefits' while the younger members are 'used like chess pieces.' Junior feels those on the gang's lower rungs are handled as though their lives are worth 'less than shit. If they kill 500, there's another 500. We're disposable: cannon fodder.' Kevin, who left the M-18 to become a born-again Christian in 2011, said the leaders do nothing for the members but 'turn us into killers. They send us to our deaths.'

Those at the top of the hierarchy are said to have gained much more power, while those at the bottom have lost their right to protest decisions to tax or harm people within the gang's territory that they might wish to protect. Now, according to Arturo, 'the *jefe* says, for example, I want Q100,000 out of this community, and you had better find it. Before, you had that local power of who to fuck with or who not to fuck.' But since the end of the War of the Maras, when the 'order comes in, you carry it out. No questions asked or answered.'

There has been stratification of members within the maras since their appearance in the 1990s, varying by clique but following a general progression through several stages of association. Boys start out as *banderos*, conventionally performing lookout duties but often just tagging along. They can then be *paros*, charged with minor errands, often including extortion collection. In the third stage, *chequeo*, boys must prove themselves worthy of becoming *homies* and acceding to full membership. This process can take several months or it may take years, depending on the boy and his clique's traditions or circumstances. They will undergo initiation rituals, more or less elaborate and exacting according to clique, but which often involve participating in murders or rapes. In the Mara-18, *chequeo* ends with the 'baptism' that bestows status as a *homie*. The applicant is beaten for eighteen seconds by members of the gang (sometimes eighteen of them), and may be required not to cry out or made to count the seconds aloud while he is beaten. After the baptism, members of El Romero's clique are assigned a 'salary' in the form of a particular source of extortion for their personal use. During Kevin's tenure, aspiring members not only had to kill, but also

take part in gang rapes just to earn their baptism. And for those who wanted 'to get to a position of privilege, of leadership, you have to do many ugly things: kill so many people, participate in dismemberment.'

Above the barrio-level leaders, each gang has a council composed of incarcerated *jefes* (or *ranfleros*), known as the Council of Nine for the MS and the Wheel of the Barrio in the M-18's case.[16] According to El Abuelo, formerly of the M-18, their members are 'elected for the leadership they exercise in their groups and for their creativity in planning crimes' ('Forma de operar de maras sale a luz' 2012). In addition to its vertical structure, there is also a degree of functional specialization within the mara. One informant compared it to an army sorted by unit as well as rank. Another likened it to the way governments are divided by department: the *banderos*—the watchers—are in charge of intelligence, the *sicarios*—the assassins—are the soldiers, the *jefes* administer the money coming in, and on top of them all is the *primera palabra*, first-in-command of this figurative mara-state.

The basics of mara organization and hierarchy are common knowledge among residents of their territories. But it is not unusual to hear assertions that 'beyond and above them, there is another structure that even the pandilleros are ignorant of,' as Arturo told me. 'In the barrio,' he went on, 'they don't have any scrap of real power. Their only objective is to climb the ranks, but there are limits.' He explained that

> it is in the barrios that extortion is charged, that people are killed, that the resources come in. But they don't stay there, nor with the *jefes* in the prisons. The leading gangsters don't live in luxurious houses, not one. That cash is not going to be for you. You will die at 22 or 23, or end up serving a sentence of 200 years.

Convinced that the sheer quantity of resources being extracted from the red zones must be making someone very rich, and seeing that it is evidently not El Romero's pandilleros, either on the streets or in the prison, informants were convinced that behind them there must be

[16] It is not clear what degree of real authority these bodies exercise over individual cliques. The M-18 in El Romero is very closely controlled from within the prisons, but may be an exceptional case, because the alleged national leadership of the gang includes *jefes* from the barrio's clique. Other cliques may exercise greater independence in their daily affairs.

'white-collar gangsters who will never in their lives set foot in the barrio or stain their hands dismembering someone. For sure, they go to church.'

There is, to my knowledge, no firm evidence that mara leaders are beholden to, or taking orders from, higher shadowy powers, although it is plausible that they collaborate with or corrupt members of the professional classes who can provide them with various legal and financial services. But, much like the tendency to blame the Colonia's insecurity on its *asentamientos*, these conspiracy theories locate ultimate responsibility for the barrio's crisis with outsiders, only in this case with those well above them in status, power, and class. The young gangsters victimizing the neighbourhood in which they were born and raised seem to become more intelligible to at least some El Romero residents if they can believe that they are somehow not really the ones in control of the violence they inflict—that 'there is a hand that is directing this and there are more powerful hands that direct that hand.' Sinister though the thought may be, it at least implies that someone has a plan and that there are reasons, however nefarious, for what has happened to them and their neighbourhood.

III. Predation, Identity, and Gang Change

As they enter their third decade, Guatemala City's maras are coming to resemble what Hagedorn identifies as an institutional gang, albeit one still at an early and volatile point in this process. They began as 'unsupervised adolescent peer groups' in the manner of virtually all street gangs, but unlike most, did not remain so; they now seem closer to those gangs that 'institutionalize in barrios, favelas, ghettos, and prisons' (Hagedorn 2007b: 309). Many institutionalized gangs become important players in informal and illegal economies, as the maras have done (Hagedorn 2007b: 309). In this, they seem to be participating in something of a global trend of economic orientation superseding identity as the basis of the group cultures of street gangs.

Several contributors to the recent comparative volume *Global Gangs* flagged this as an important development altering the nature of gangs and gang membership (Hazen and Rodgers 2014). Vigil (2014: 62) found that Los Angeles gang life is increasingly organized around 'illicit entrepreneur activities.' In the Parisian *banlieues*, the involvement of youth gangs in the drug economy introduced 'practices that have little to do with the transition to adulthood and more to do with organized, armed brutality' (Mohammed 2014: 119). Meanwhile, youth gangs in post-Soviet Russia have ceased to be 'identity-based organizations' and have become 'nothing but illegal economic actors' (Salagaev and Safin 2014: 75). This has important ramifications for the resources, risks, and life chances that members find in gangs. But this shift, and the resulting changes to group codes and cultures, also has tremendous consequences for the communities in which they operate.

i. Pandilleros and the Profit Motive

'The codes are different,' Murci repeated for the third or fourth time, starting to get exasperated with my persistent questions about how the mara had changed from the time of his involvement in the late 1990s to today. He had already given me the same answer several times: 'the codes are different,' 'the codes changed,' 'they were different codes.' The codes of an earlier generation of pandilleros coincided with the more generalized ethos of community solidarity that people are typically invoking when they refer to the *códigos de barrio*. As the ex-mareros I spoke with described them, their codes in the 1990s mandated 'protection of the barrio, protecting the space from external things.'

They inherited this attitude from their predecessors. According to a contemporary of theirs, the *brekeros* of the 1980s and early 1990s had placed 'a lot of emphasis on defending the barrio. Not just from other cliques, but seeing to it that there weren't thefts, assaults, or rapes.' Whether such internal policing efforts had any effect is very uncertain, but it is widely agreed that the pandillas felt that it was, as Murci says, 'just bad form to rob your

own people, you know?' Though probably always imperfect in execution, certainly the early mara's *idea* when it came to predation on and in one's own community was 'Nah, man. We have to take care of the barrio.'

In the last ten years, however, the attitudes and behaviours behind these codes have changed. Kevin, who joined El Romero's M-18 clique in 2008, lamented how the codes had changed from what he grew up expecting. 'Before,' he explained, 'the code was to take care of the barrio, and not to mess with the people.' But instead of enforcing respect for the neighbourhood as a gang member, he found that 'more than anything else, you destroy it.' The territorial nature of the gang cliques continues, but the logic of territorial possession has changed. One ex-pandillero says that today, where violence persists between the maras, 'the fights are for extortion, not so much for turf'; another agrees that 'they look for more territory to charge rent to the stores that are in it.' As Cadejo, who took part in the very first wave of US-style mara cliques, remarks, 'the code of the barrio has been traded for the ideology of a business.'

Residents often link the intensification of problematic insecurity and violence to the move away from those barrio codes, to when gang members 'started to break those, to lose the few ethics they had.' Under the current model, 'if you kill someone, it's nothing personal. It's business, it's an order, they didn't pay. It works more like a corporation.' Whereas participants in earlier phases of the mara almost always insist they did not harm innocents or non-combatants, Kevin admits that 'I hurt a lot of people who had nothing to do with our problems.'

As Kevin demonstrates, those old codes have not disappeared completely. When those who have lately left mara cliques express shame, for instance, that they preyed on the neighbourhood instead of protecting it, they reveal at least an awareness of some better or higher standard, an alternative that they regret not maintaining. But overall, the 'moral imperatives' that were once part of the identity and ideology of mara cliques have almost

entirely 'given way in the face of economic imperatives' as these groups evolved (Salagaev and Safin 2014: 78).

ii. Violent Entrepreneurship and the Extortion Economy

With their extortion-based criminal economy, maras have come to resemble what Volkov (2002), in his study of post-Soviet protection rackets, terms 'violent entrepreneurs'. Violent entrepreneurship is defined by the 'conversion of organized force into permanent revenue,' as the maras have done in establishing persistent tributary relations (2002: 28). While the classic street gang employs violence towards 'identitary questions of gang fights and confrontation with the police,' the violent entrepreneur or 'merchant' prefers peacefully corrupt relationships with state forces, subordinates its use of violence to its economic interests, and views its territory as a source of income, not identity (Jensen 2014: 136). All this describes the contemporary mara quite well, at least as it operates where strong cliques have been able to establish relatively secure territorial monopolies. But in other regards, the mara does not fit the models of violent entrepreneurs or illicit merchants.

They do not, for instance, offer any meaningful service, product, or protection, as predicted by both Hagedorn's (2007b: 310) concept of institutional gangs and the 'market model' of organized crime (Volkov 2002: 19). Both Gambetta (1993) and Varese (2001), of Sicily and Russia respectively, describe the emergence of mafias in contexts of unsecured property rights, rising numbers of transactions, and absent or inefficient state protection. According to this 'economic theory of protection,' mafias arise in response to a real demand for protection, rather than simply imposing a supply (Chu 2000: 4). Gambetta and some of his successors may overemphasize the symbiotic nature of protection rackets and underestimate their parasitical aspects. Volkov (2002: 20) points out that this model, though theoretically plausible, tends 'to underestimate the actual capacity of force-wielding organizations to determine choices available to economic subjects.' Examining organized

non-state violence in West Africa, Mehler (2004: 540) similarly cautions that in 'the open "security market"…there is usually no real freedom of choice.'

Although they have more in common than definitions of ideal types suggest, it is still useful to distinguish the true protection racket from extortion or 'bogus protection' (Chu 2000: 124). Whereas a 'protection racket is an institutionalized relationship,' however coercively established, extortion is supposed 'not to occur on a regular basis or within the context of a broader organization in whose name the money is collected, and it does not offer regular or imaginary services in return' (Volkov 2002: 29, 33). The mara's enterprise seems to blend the ongoing relationship and organizational operation of a protection racket with the unadultered predation that defines extortion—a hybrid that I call an extortion economy. Another reason to prefer the term 'extortion' over 'protection' is that the latter very rarely appears in the language used to speak about the mara's exploitation of El Romero residents. Their payments are not phrased as protection, but as 'rent' or 'tax': that which is owed for the use of another's property, or for residing under the purview of a certain authority. The mara makes no pretence of claiming it in return for services provided, but effectively does so by right of conquest, because it was strong enough to eliminate its rivals within the neighbourhood, and remains strong enough to exclude competitors.

The mara's current approach may, however, prove untenable. There are reasons why long-term, institutionalized extortion—all the racket with none of the protection—is rare. Over time, groups of predatory criminals 'are likely to disappear, since they destroy their own source of revenue' (Varese 2001: 190). According to the market model, mafias deliver a measure of real protection because, to secure long-term revenue, it is in their interest to do so. Why then, has El Romero's clique been extracting extortion at levels high enough to force large numbers of businesses out of business and households out of homes? For one thing, they may have more of a captive base than other protection merchants, giving them more leeway for predation. In Russia, informal vendors who were over-taxed or over-threatened

by the mafia might choose to exit their market, either by changing professions or by emigrating (Varese 2001: 190). But Guatemala City's red zone residents have very limited options, all of which are associated with high barriers or high costs. Their economic opportunities are drastically restricted by poverty and stigma and leaving the neighbourhood generally means living in worse conditions and with other forms of insecurity. One mother in El Romero said that 'no one would choose to live in these circumstances': they are there because better circumstances are inaccessible. Most families will do all they can to meet an extortion demand before leaving as the very last resort. That so many have done so demonstrates just how virulent extortion has become.

Another factor influencing levels of predation is the violent entrepreneur's 'time horizon'. Those who expect to be able to stay in business for a long time will be less likely to risk future income through over-predation (Gambetta 1993: 33). Conversely, the 'more uncertain the prospect of remaining in business for a long time, the more likely that protection will drift towards extortion' (Chu 2000: 7). The average marero expects—and gets—a very short career. Most, an ex-pandillero told me, will not have more than two or three years on the streets after joining up before they are either killed or imprisoned. A drastically foreshortened sense of future seems to be a common aspect of both the imaginary and the reality of gang membership in Guatemala City. According to Levenson (2013: 6), members typically expect to die by 22. Many of them are right. Of new initiates, 'more than half die in the first two years, at least a third of them end in prison, and only about ten per cent abandon the pandilla before death or imprisonment' (Hernández 2008: 151). Facing these odds, 'the temptation to prey grows' (Gambetta 1993: 33).

It remains uncertain how long predation at current levels will continue to be feasible. Though each individual member of the mara may have poor life chances, the incarcerated leaders have the potential for much longer careers, and may veer towards longer-term economic strategies over time. Group survival may eventually necessitate moderating the

intensity of the violent exploitation of mara territories, either by reducing charges on residents to more manageable levels, by meeting some community needs in return for taxation, or both. There is, however, no teleology or fixed trajectory to gang change, and this outcome is by no means certain.

Conclusion: Legitimacy and Gang Identity

In the thirty-five years since the foundation of Colonia El Romero, Guatemala City's street gangs have changed dramatically from loose youth bands in the capital's poor barrios to complex, prison-based gangs ruthlessly exploiting these same neighbourhoods. As they have become more organized, professional, and institutionalized, the maras have gone from bands to businesses, but have also abandoned the bonds that once tied them to the neighbourhoods that their members come from and continue to live in. In explaining how this happened, barrio residents often fall back, as Arturo does, on 'the codes. The codes of the 80s were different from the codes of the 90s, which are distinct from those of 2000, which are different from those of 2010.' The social codes and compacts that gangs impose, adhere to, transform, or reject are vital to understanding what these groups mean to the communities that sustain and suffer them.

According to Hagedorn, an institutional gang 'must have at least a degree of legitimacy to survive' and so 'fulfils some needs of its community (economics, security, services)' (2007b: 310, 2008: 9-10). This, as the following chapter examines in greater detail, the mara does not seem to have or do in Guatemala City. Instead, as they have institutionalized, they have lost what marginal degree of legitimacy they may once have had as a deviant but tolerated phase of the transition to adulthood.

To understand why, it may be useful to distinguish between those gangs that 'institutionalize' within a broader social world—the barrios, ghettos, and favelas mentioned by Hagedorn—and those that do so within prisons—which Hagedorn (2007b: 309) includes

on the same list without differentiation. The correspondence between prison gangs and lack of legitimacy in the outside world is not universal. São Paulo's PCC (*Primeiro Comando do Capital*), for instance, is one exception. The PCC, however, bases the logic of its existence on its capacity to impose moral control—initially in prisons, and subsequently in the favelas it came to dominate. Favela residents express appreciation for the level of order and predictability that the PCC delivers (Denyer-Wills 2009: 172-73). But this arises less out of any desire for legitimacy in these neighbourhoods than as an outcome of the PCC's institutional traditions and ideology. Though far more comparative work would be needed to support the hypothesis, it seems highly plausible that, other things being equal, prison-based gangs are more likely to be predatory within the territories they control and less likely to deliver meaningful services to these communities.

At the outset, mara members saw their gangs as 'simply an extension of the neighbourhood': both were their 'barrios' (Brenneman 2011: 39). But as the key site of mara sociality moved from the streets into the echo chambers of segregated gang prisons, the identity of mara cliques and members came unmoored from their neighbourhoods. The barrio of the gang and the barrio of the broader community have been undergoing a sort of 'normative mitosis' as the mara has increasingly opted out of the neighbourhood's social and ethical world (Cover 1983: 31). Chapter 4 examines this process and its consequences from the perspective of the neighbourhood that El Romero's clique has left behind and turned against.

Chapter 4
'Like Ancient Ruins':
Insecurity and Community in Mara Territory

As for those who have embroidered laws (nomoi) into human life, to hell with them.
I will continue to indulge myself—and eat you.
- Euripides, The Cyclops

Introduction

'We are cannibalizing ourselves,' Rafa once said to me. Since the end of the 'War of the Maras', the local clique's extortion economy and its violent enforcement have been feeding on their territory's capital—financial, social, and human. From the perspective of barrio residents, a certain kind of cannibalism is perhaps distinctive of the mara today. But it is a curious form of cannibalism. Setting aside survival cannibalism in dire and exceptional circumstances, societies in which cannibalism has been practised as an aspect of the proper functioning and due course of things divide into two groups. Endophagous cannibals consume members of their own kinship group or community, typically in rites associated with recycling life-sustaining forces to perpetuate a group and its norms over the span of generations. Exophagous cannibals, on the other hand, consume outsiders, enemies to the in-group. Unlike the rituals of continuity associated with endophagy, cannibalism can here be understood as a form of violence done to a defeated foe, an assertion of power and dominance over the one consumed (Goldman 1999: 14, 17).

As maras evolved over the last twenty years, their barrios have become their prey (Levenson 2013: 95).The cannibalism of the mara appears most problematic, most intensely horrifying to barrio residents, because they are devouring endogenously with the rapaciousness and violence of exogenous cannibals. The mara's predatory turn violates fundamental expectations about group membership and reciprocity.

This chapter explores what this predation and violation have meant for El Romero and its residents. I first return to the trajectory of Guatemala City's gangs traced in the previous chapter, but this time seen from the perspective of the barrio and its inhabitants. I then detail the social and economic impact of the Mara-18's monopoly over the neighbourhood in recent years. The experience of insecurity in the capital's gang territories must be understood in light of the new forms of domination and exploitation that have arisen with the elaboration of an extortion economy. Its development has changed the relationship between gangs and their neighbourhoods, altered the extent and intensity of the control that the city's stronger cliques exercise over residents of these, and greatly increased the scale of the resources they extract from them. It also demands reconsideration and refinement of some prevailing assumptions regarding extra-legal 'governance' in Latin American cities.

In El Romero, changing norms and expectations of the relationship between clique and community, as well as between neighbourhood residents more generally, are sometimes talked about with reference to 'codes of the barrio' and their decline. When they invoke these codes, residents refer to practical limits on violence, but also to a broader ethic and vision of the barrio. The loss of these *códigos de barrio*—in both of those senses—is central to the narratives of insecurity and decline that so many relate.

I. Gangs Seen from the Barrio

Looking out over Colonia El Romero on my first visit, Rafa explained that the neighbourhood has always been attractive to criminal bands because 'it is a very strategic place.' Bordered by *barrancos*, with few access points to the network of alleyways beyond the main road, it is easy to monitor and control and, when necessary, easy to disappear into. An M-18 member would later tell me that the local clique became so powerful and respected in part because members of that gang from all over the sector would come to hide out in their territory. With only two streets entering and exiting, a pair of boys posted at the payphones

on the main road at the top can watch and report the comings and goings and dealings of an entire neighbourhood.

The existence in the barrio of local groups organized around criminal activity dates almost to its foundation after the 1976 earthquake. But while they have always been a feature of neighbourhood life, these bands and their relationship with community residents have changed dramatically. Two barrio-born ex-pandilleros recalled the gangs of their fathers' generation, those that stretched back into the 1970s, as completely different from the M-18 cliques they belonged to in the 1990s, and even more distinct from what their gang subsequently became. Asked to explain how they differed, they replied emphatically together: '*otros códigos*'.

At the outset, El Romero's bands were primarily small gangs dedicated to robbery, composed of adult men. Many informants insist that they chose targets exclusively outside the neighbourhood, that this was a matter of honour for them. There was, for instance, the band of car thieves who became famous among local kids for targeting the luxurious models of zone 10, the city's financial centre and one of its more moneyed leisure zones. The criminal groups of the early 1980s had, at least when contrasted with their successors, something of the allure of the noble, justified bandit.

From the mid-1980s, the Brek-33 had a strong presence in El Romero, the only youth gang to do so in that decade. Cadejo and Rafa remember the *brekeros* as 'one of the first youth movements from the start of the *colonia*.' They also report that while they were children there, although many adolescents belonged to the Brek-33, there were perhaps only three or four guns in the whole barrio. Arturo, born in 1974, concurs that 'in the eighties, we knew of four people in the *colonia* with weapons, with revolvers.' As Levenson (1988) found in her early study—the only contemporaneous academic engagement with Guatemala City's first-generation maras—gang membership in El Romero at this point does not seem to have involved committing serious violence, nor regular exposure to it. Virtually all members aged

out by their early twenties and took on the economic, social, and family roles and responsibilities expected of barrio adults. And even while they actively participated in youth gangs, members in the 1980s remained 'loyal and proud members of the family wage economy as well' (Levenson 2013: 65). Being a *brekero* was a part of their social life within the barrio, not an identity that superseded their community membership or other networks of social ties, either temporarily or permanently.

Things are now often said by El Romero residents to have changed in important ways when 'the American style perforated the culture of the cliques' in 1993 or 1994. But though Arturo says the new *onda* (style, outlook) that deportees brought with them always 'had a different edge,' the crucial changes did not manifest themselves immediately. In the first years of M-18 and MS-13 cliques, violence in and around the neighbourhood still largely involved the type of street brawls between bands of young men over turf and bragging rights that had characterized the maras of the 1980s. It would be several more years before guns began to appear in the hands of gang members with any regularity, and years more before they were habitually turned against residents.

A degree of innocence within the gang remained possible. Cadejo spins tales of *milpa* raids across the *barranco* with the boys from his block that took place in the same years, 1993-95, in which they were founding and developing their own Mara-18 clique.[1] In these stories, gang members practised mischief, like robbing ears of young corn for their sisters to cook; they plotted daring escapes from their arch-enemy Chenche, the cartoonishly miserly *milpa* guard, and his ferocious dogs. At the same time, Cadejo was also (at his mother's behest) a regular participant in the Catholic parish's youth group activities, which included putting on plays, organizing liberation theology workshops, and other community service initiatives.

[1] *Milpas* are small parcels of land on which families cultivate crops, most often the staple maize and beans, primarily for subsistence. The *milpas* across the *barrancos* from El Romero have since been covered over by the expansion of the surrounding *colonias*.

Mara membership, then, did not initially sever its bearer from participation in a potentially wide variety of social arenas, either at the time of involvement or after its end. The nonchalant view of one teenage girl in Guatemala City at the end of the 1990s was that joining a mara was simply 'a way of being a young man' (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 97-98). Barrio residents who grew up in that decade similarly remember joining a mara as a widespread '*moda juvenil*': a particular style of youth. It was not too uncommon, and not necessarily a terribly serious business, for a young person to join and, crucially, *to leave* a mara as they went through the phases of their adolescence and young adulthood. By their early twenties, the majority still aged out of their mara cliques, moving on in a fairly uncontested way to responsibilities felt to be incompatible with active participation in the pandilla, such as parenting, marriage, and steady employment (Merino 2001: 190).

Arturo reports that, at first, maras were seen as 'something pretty funny and harmless. They had an attitude of protecting the barrio.' Long-time neighbourhood residents told me that until the last decade, 'there were maras, but maras that were not troublesome.' 'It wasn't like today,' a school director recalled, 'you could go down any alleyway.' The gangs were preoccupied with their rivalries with each other, uninterested in involving bystanders. Wuicho was once stopped by members of a clique that were the enemies of those from his sector of El Romero. They were prepared to beat him because he was from that block and of pandillero age, but they let him go in the end because one of the clique said, 'no guys, I've never seen him with them.' The key point that many emphasize is that you could be uninvolved. Young pandilleros were often disapproved of, often disliked, and occasionally feared, but overall, things for most residents went on largely as before.

By the time of the barrio's 'War of the Maras' began in 2002, gang membership seems to have become a more serious business. The firearms that became increasingly common from the late 1990s were supplemented by weapons 'more military than street-level' in power. Murders and shoot-outs between rival gangs were now frequent. A young man who was

then a teenager tells me you could expect 'basically a death a day' as a matter of course, 'almost by law.' The neighbourhood was becoming more dangerous for residents, too, who risked getting caught in the crossfire. At this time, Wuicho says, 'you could still walk in the streets, but you never knew when they might shoot.' Inter-gang violence has since declined significantly in this sector, but residents warn that it is safest to assume that 'anybody walking down the street has got a gun on him,' including boys as young as eight or nine, who have more than once been caught transporting guns and grenades in their school backpacks.

The monopoly over El Romero gained by the Mara-18 in the gang war and the extortion economy set up in its wake have since been maintained by brute force, tactics of terror, and suffocatingly thorough surveillance. Although there are occasional rumours in El Romero of the appearance of some new clique of challengers or the persistence of an old one, most locals are very skeptical of such claims and agree with Rafa's assessment that 'if they really do exist, they are underground, invisible. If they see them, they will exterminate them.' After the M-18 secured its dominance, the trend of exile and outmigration from the barrio began as extortion, and the threatening violence it entailed against residents, became more common and more exacting.

Fleeing residents have left behind empty houses. For many residents, these physical remnants and the stories of loss and violence that adhere to them encapsulate the neighbourhood's current situation of insecurity and decline. Abandoned homes are often looted of their doors, windows, furnishings, and *lámina*—anything that can be reused or sold as scrap. Others are used as informal garbage dumps, filling up with burnt refuse. A number are taken over by the pandilleros as *chantehuarios*—safe houses for gang activities. During my fieldwork, abandoned houses in El Romero were used by the mara for drug distribution, rapes, murder, torture and dismemberment, and clandestine burial.

These sad and dangerous places littering the neighbourhood are consistently invoked as concrete markers of insecurity in El Romero. 'Like ancient ruins,' Doña Juana said. A woman from a red zone on the capital's periphery wryly dubbed her neighbourhood 'the city of forgotten palaces.' One of the many days that I followed Doña Ana on her duties as president of her *asentamiento*'s Neighbourhood Committee, we came across a number of these ancient ruins and forgotten palaces. Going door-to-door to see where to direct the attentions of an anti-Dengue public health team, we found empty lots and unanswered doors on nearly every block. Where grass is already growing through the floor, that's where they killed the whole family for failing to pay the extortion. Further on, where an acrid garbage burn smoulders, that's where that girl was raped not long ago. 'No use,' a neighbour tells us as we knock on one door, 'they all left after their son was shot on the bus last month.' Down the staircase and into the next alley, our knocks go unanswered again: the gang wanted their boy, you see. Had to go, of course.

Their power to alter and dominate neighbourhood life is the crucial difference that, for residents of their territories, distinguishes the mara from the *pandillas de cuadra* that typified urban Latin American gangs for decades. 'They have control over this whole situation,' a mother from El Romero assured me. 'Delinquency owns zone 18,' was how a soldier from the barrio characterized it. For inhabitants of their territory, the years since El Romero's M-18 clique claimed their monopoly and gained this level of influence over their lives and neighbourhood are when things seem to have gone 'from worse to worse every day.'

II. Barrio Life under Mara Monopoly

The social and economic consequences of the mara's growing power over Colonia El Romero have left many residents feeling very differently about their neighbourhood and their neighbours. Danger is seen to have risen at the same time as supports and opportunities available within the community have diminished. People's assessments of

these changes are not uniform. Most do say their situation has been worsening. Others report some improvements in security, or say that levels of violence in the neighbourhood have only ever undergone minor and temporary fluctuations. One young man (an ex-pandillero) thinks there is probably less 'common delinquency' because the gang won't tolerate other criminals operating in their territory. He also believes that the danger of violence to the community as a whole has decreased in the time since there has been only one mara there. Instead of shootings between gangs anywhere and anytime, the clique now has the power to act directly against whoever they want to harm or punish. Others reject any sweeping claims about long-term change. 'It's changed,' says one woman who has lived in El Romero since its foundation, 'but not much. There have always been deaths.'

They may disagree over whether violence has increased, decreased, or gone on much the same, but almost everyone concurs that the barrio is now a worse place to live than it once was. Even those who think violence has lately declined identify problems and insecurities created by the operation and exploitation of the mara's extortion economy. These have to do with the quality of local life: empty streets, suspicious and suspect neighbours, new constraints on economic opportunity. 'We're all scared of the tax,' one young girl says of barrio residents.

The difficulty that many emphasise is not that there is violence, or even necessarily that there is more violence. Rather, it is that they feel more vulnerable to it, more exposed, and much less able to control whether or when violence will affect them. Over the last ten years, residents of mara territories have increasingly become the targets of new practices of violence and criminality. 'Now,' I was told, 'all of the impact of delinquency is suffered *in* the barrio.' Even the gang war, with its years of very high death rates, is remembered as a time of bloodshed 'between them'. You could still opt out of the conflict: 'If you didn't involve yourself,' Wuicho says, 'they respected that.' But a primary school director told me that compared to the years of gang warfare, when pandilleros mostly targeted each other,

'now the delinquency is another matter. They will extort or kill anybody.' A resident who grew up with the reigning mareros says that they 'kill as though it was something normal.'

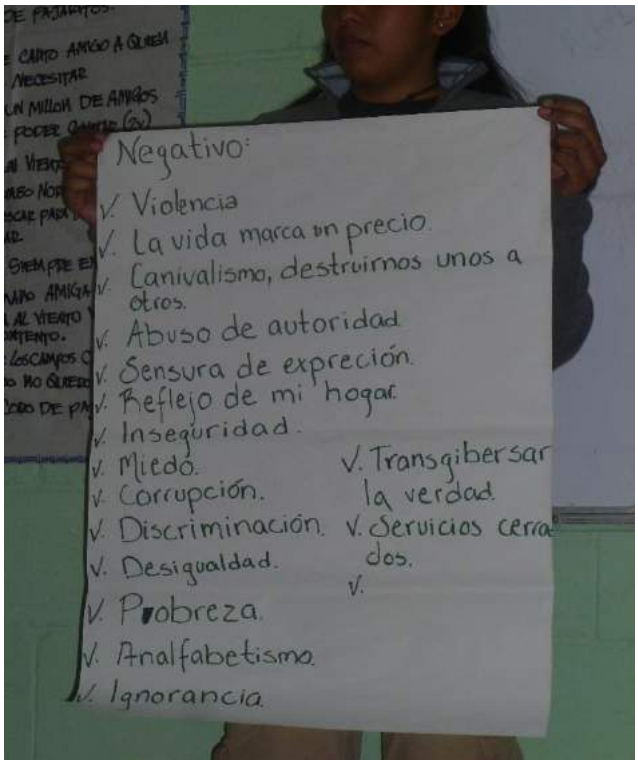


Figure 14. At a Catholic Church youth workshop, a girl holds up her group's list of negative aspects of life in El Romero. The first three items read, 'Violence; Life has a price; Cannibalism, we are destroying one another.' Author photo, March 2012.

'They hold life lightly, cheaply,' a self-described 'associate' of the clique told me. Numerous sources independently told me that the going rate for a murder or contract hit (a *sicariato*) ordered by the gang in the barrio is between Q50 and Q100 (approximately £4-8.50). A teenage girl attending a workshop at the Catholic Church lists 'that life has a price' among the worst aspects of living in El Romero. 'We shouldn't have a price,' she protests, 'but here they can take our lives for a hundred *barras*, for fifty, for a favour.'

i. Economic Contraction and Constraints

Extortion has had a huge impact in recent years, both in direct economic terms by sapping livelihoods and savings from businesses and households, and more indirectly by altering local expectations and ambitions for resource accumulation or the possibility of social

mobility. Although mara collaborators insist that theirs is a system akin to progressive taxation, in which the 'rent' or 'tax' demanded of a shop or family is adjusted according to the resources their local surveillance network indicates they have available, the amounts demanded have crippled the internal economy of the barrio and paralysed many families. Residents may joke darkly that the pandilleros 'are competing with the SAC,' the national tax bureau, but the clique is in fact far more efficient at extracting revenue from its 'tax base' than the Guatemalan state has ever been.

Most of the barrio's small shops and services have shut under the pressure of extortion, and the handful that remain are widely reported to be managed by girlfriends, mothers, and other close collaborators of incarcerated gang members. The 'tax' is now an accepted eventuality: 'Opening yourself a business is just like raising their income for them even more,' Colocho says, so few bother to try unless they have links to the gang. In other mara territories, too, the criminal economy seems to be following a similar trajectory. In Neddy's barrio, elsewhere in zone 18, maras only arrived around 2000 and don't yet charge extortion in homes, but they have already begun to choke off internal economic opportunity and activity in their territory. Extortion demands forced Neddy to shutter his carpentry shop; he says that now 'it is impossible to run a business around here.'

These pressures do not weigh just on business owners. Informants complain that the closing of so many local shops and services makes their errands much more arduous, requiring a great deal more time and energy to meet basic daily necessities. Furthermore, the 'tax' paid to the gang by providers of goods and services is passed on to customers through rising prices that take up ever-greater shares of already strained family budgets.

Extortion has reduced the capacity of El Romero to survive as a self-reliant community. The infamy of poverty and criminality severely limits economic opportunity outside of the neighbourhood, and gang activity has now restricted internal options and resources that used to exist. Doña Juana, whose three grown sons have all repeatedly been forced to

disrobe for tattoo checks and submit to lie-detector tests during long and fruitless job searches, explains that 'before, when you couldn't find work, you could defend yourself by opening a little business (*micro-negocio*) here. Now, because of extortion, that option for carrying on inside the barrio has disappeared.'

Attempting to avoid extortion, many residents have abandoned hope of improving the material circumstances of their lives within the neighbourhood. Extortionists 'fall so fast' on anyone who indiscreetly acquires a car, television, new piece of furniture, or extension to their home that 'to avoid problems, people make do with what they have.' 'They've killed people for painting their houses,' Juana claims. 'We really are oppressed by it.' Another barrio mother agrees that it is impossible to improve one's house without attracting notice. As a result, although stray bullets have pierced the *lámina* roof of her home on three separate occasions, each time while her children were inside, she will not replace it with a more sturdy material. More prudent to face the falling bullets and 'keep them from temptation.'

Doña Ana identifies the fact that 'people can't better their lives here anymore' as the cruelest effect of local insecurity. And Colocho agrees: 'What good is it to look for opportunities if the very people from right here are going to throw me to the ground?' In a community where acquiring a home of cement blocks, a set of domestic appliances, a car, and the ability to send every child to school every year might have shaped a family's ambitions over as many as three generations, this imposed resignation is much lamented and bitterly resented. But resource accumulation is now seen by many as simply too risky. As Arturo explains, 'if you have *anything* of interest to them—a car, a motorcycle, you build on your house—you're fucked. Just fucked.'

ii. Danger and Distrust

Rafa warned me many times: 'Don't be trusting, Kate. This is my barrio, and I don't trust them. Don't be too trusting.' Expressions of suspicion and distrust are common. All

community groups and local public spaces (and many private ones, too) are believed to be infiltrated by the gang's eyes and ears. With pandilleros and collaborators assumed to be everywhere, an atmosphere of pervasive surveillance permeates the barrio. Indeed, the first thing many people there wanted to teach me was that I should always assume I was being observed 'by them' and behave accordingly. They warned repeatedly of 'wolves dressed as sheep, people making themselves humble when they're really ferocious.'

One of the key changes that fuels such generalized distrust is the clique's abandonment of the distinctive stylistic cues that once identified them as gang members, which maras across Guatemala have done in an effort to minimize identification and interference from authorities. While the earlier phase of the mara was associated with bombastic visual display of allegiance to a deviant sub-culture, the prioritization of territorial control and profit over embodying gang identity has led to the practices inscribed on the skins of older members to be discarded and forbidden.[2] In the early 2000s, a young mother says, you knew exactly who the pandilleros were by their looks and style. Now, however, it is not so clear, making it much harder to know who you need to avoid. A pastor who runs an open-door Pentecostal youth ministry worries about it being used for gang recruitment: without the tattoos, with their dress cleaned up, they can look respectable while going about their business of manipulating children into the mara. Every innocent-looking boy might really be one of the 'pandillero kids who don't look like it. They're real formal, but they're killers.' Sonia complains that 'now all the kids look the same!' And she feels it's safer to distrust them all than to make the mistake of trusting the wrong one.

Suspicion is not confined to the young men who make up the core demographic of mara members. According to Arturo, it's no longer the case, as it used to be, that families of clique members can remain uninvolved in their activities. Today, 'they have two options. They co-

[2] This change is obvious on the bodies of inmates of gang prisons. In Boquerón, for instance, the maximum-security institution that houses MS-13 members, the older inmates in their late twenties and thirties are thickly tattooed on at least their arms and chests, and usually on their scalps, hands, and faces as well. Younger inmates, however, have no (visible) tattoos at all.

operate, or they leave.' As a result, when one person joins the clique, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, mothers and grandmothers may all become involved. So for Arturo, whether you have 80 members in the clique or 300 hardly matters, because no such estimate even approaches the full picture of collusion and collaboration in the barrio.

The gang's network goes far beyond the *banderos, paros*, *chequeos*, and *homies* of the membership structure. Collaborators outnumber members and range from elderly women to young children. There is the eleven year-old boy who spends his days walking the streets of the clique's territory, 'watching, watching, just watching he goes,' Doña Ana says, 'taking note of what goes on.' There is also the great-grandmother who collects tax payments from residents instructed to pose as customers for the bread she sells. There is the eight year-old girl who knocked on Juana's door, holding out a cellphone with incarcerated gang members on the other end of the line, demanding a 'rent'. The ten year-old boy who pretends his mother has sent him to buy the tortillas for lunch and has the women who make them leaf their quota between the warm maize sheets before wrapping them tightly in the dishcloth he's brought. It wouldn't do to bring home cold tortillas. There are the women who follow the military patrols carrying their babies in their arms, never doing anything untoward, but noticing who they speak to and who speaks to them. The exasperated director of a small Christian school once asked the gang members who called him for an extortion payment, 'Why do you bother us? You have people studying here.' They laughed, 'Yeah, but we have people *everywhere*.'

A teacher of 25 years' residence in El Romero says that they now live 'completely without security' because 'you cannot know who you are living with.' The fear that others elicit extends into the most intimate sphere of friends and family, and sometimes with good reason. Extortion demands or other threats not infrequently emerge from domestic betrayals, rather than from any carelessness with conspicuous consumption or display in public spaces. Over the course of my fieldwork, various informants were targeted on the

basis of information relayed to the gang by a cousin, a sister-in-law, nieces, or an orphan they had informally fostered for years. Rafa's mother Doña Francis was afraid of her granddaughters because they were involved with young men who were said to be *metido*—involved. She would hardly speak in front of the girls, imposing silence on her own home.

Informants say that there used to be a limited number of identifiable big personalities, particularly notorious or violent gangsters who you could look out for and avoid. But now, the fear and intimidation that a handful of men once elicited is triggered constantly, as anyone could belong to 'an inexhaustible army of criminality' (Hernández 2008: 149). As in an army—or, as Arturo describes it, a corporation—the institutional hierarchy the mara has established stabilizes the gang through personnel changes. There is always someone waiting to step up and into the position of a leader removed by rivals or the state. As in a corporation, Arturo says, if 'you take away the manager, another's put in; you get rid of the president, another's put in. So who do you have to kill? Nothing can be done.' Today's pandilla seems to be everyone, everywhere, every day in the barrio. It is Hydra-like: it can bite from any angle, and you will not come to the end of its heads.

iii. Withdrawal

There has been a significant degree of abandonment of shared spaces in the community due to feelings of distrust and danger. Many informants said they shut themselves and their families in their homes from six or seven in the evening, leaving only for work, school, or other necessities. It's a 'robotized life' according to one young father. Colocho calls it an 'undeclared curfew.' As I discuss in Chapter 7, the military occupation of El Romero from September 2012 made residents feel somewhat more secure moving around the neighbourhood, but many remained reluctant to be outside after dark.

Almost everyone notes changes to the use of the streets and public spaces as a result of insecurity. One very common claim is that children once played together outside until

midnight, whereas now streets are deserted after dark. It is widely said to be impossible to host a major celebration in one's own home, not to mention in a street or public space. A single mother in one of El Romero's *asentamientos* tells me she has lost virtually all the income she used to make by renting out chairs to neighbours celebrating baptisms, weddings, and *quinceañeras*. These days, she scrapes by on demand from funeral vigils.

Figure 15. Looking out from El Romero; a boy plays with a paper kite in the foreground. Author photo, October 2012.

Even children who can barely remember a time before the Mara-18's dominance, and may not even have been born when the gang war began, report on these changes in their lifetimes. 'Before, you could walk all over,' a boy of ten claims, 'and clowns came for birthday parties all the time.' Teenagers and adults recall when the neighbourhood hosted street parties that drew participants from all over their sector. 'It was all really joyful,' Doña Ana reminisces, specifying 'I say *was*, because it's gone now.' It's generally agreed that such events were 'interrupted by issues with the pandilla.' I was told that the last of these large street parties took place in 2008, meaning that their end coincided not with the peak of

violence in the barrio's streets, but later, with the beginning of one gang's monopoly and control. This suggests that it is not simply fear of violence that keeps people off the streets, but a more encompassing sense of insecurity.

This retreat from each other has meant more than empty roads and parks. 'Those places of encounter that existed have been lost,' in Cadejo's estimation, now that so many residents—young and old alike—avoid the streets and strangers when they can. For Mono, an eighteen year-old community activist, losing these places of connection and exchange led to the dissolution of the barrio's collectivist ethos: 'those codes started breaking down when people didn't feel safe in the streets anymore.'

Doña Juana explained that before, networks of trust, small favours, and daily help between neighbours extended throughout the community, and families relied on these to buffer the effects of particularly acute short-term economic crises occasioned by circumstances such as unemployment, illness, or disability. 'In that time, we were really united. Now, we live even more united, but only between those we know *really* well. We're united, but there's no trust.' She describes here not only a shrinking of the social world of barrio residents, but also a tension between the uncomfortable necessity of occasionally depending on others alongside the perceived impossibility of trusting anyone outside the most intimate circle. When she herself was a victim of extortion, Juana says that no-one would come to her aid or lend her money towards the amount demanded: people are too frightened to get involved with each other, she shrugged.

In San Salvador, too, Hume's (2009) informants linked the disintegration of local support networks to increasing criminality in their neighbourhoods, and specifically to the formation and growth of mara cliques: "Because of the badness, charity has ended," one woman told her (2009: 107). By diminishing trust and social solidarity, the rise of extortion has not only worsened the chronic economic precarity that El Romero's residents face, but also poisoned and weakened the mutual aid strategies that used to mitigate some of the worst uncertainty.

III. Gangs and Governance in the Red Zone

i. Models of Criminal Governance

The experience related by El Romero's residents provides a counterpoint to much of the existing literature from Latin America on how gangs and organized criminal actors operate in and relate to their territories. Such groups have often been depicted as substitute state actors, a cohesive force and source of resources in marginal zones unreached or abandoned by the official state. They may be seen to derive a certain local legitimacy from taking on a role that other authorities have abdicated. In Medellín, for instance, it has been argued that the drug trafficking cartels 'contributed to collective ends' in the city's slum neighbourhoods, building churches, schools, and parks, expanding community infrastructure, sponsoring public festivities, and serving as a major employer of young men from these barrios (Schneider and Susser 2003: 13; Roldán 2003: 140).

The identification of 'trends toward the provision of governance by armed illicit actors' has itself become a trend in the literature on criminal and political violence in Latin America (Arias 2010a: 116). The criminal group is expected to take on 'some of the *positive* functions of government, not least the safety and security of its taxed client communities' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 34). Hagedorn's (2007b, 2008) definition of an institutionalized gang includes the delivery of such goods and services within the group's territory. Their survival over the long term is predicated, to a certain extent, on their ability to 'outperform community organizations and government agencies' in delivering services, resources, or social order (Bobea 2010: 162).

Under this rubric of extra-legal alternative 'governance', it has become difficult to conceive of territorially-oriented criminal actors who do not have or claim some positive social role in ordering and organizing the communities under their control. This model of the relationship between criminal and community does exist in Guatemala City, but my

research strongly suggests it is no longer to be found in this form in mara territories. Doña Ana certainly has no time for arguments as to the productive social or economic roles groups like maras might take on. 'They only destroy,' she says. 'They don't create anything, not even for themselves. They only destroy what others have built.'

In barrios under the control of narco-traffickers, by contrast, such as El Gallito in zone 3, the relationship between the dominant criminal group and its territory was described very differently. The pastor of an evangelical church there acknowledges that the neighbourhood 'has a very bad reputation,' but insists that for residents, it's actually one of the safest places in the city to live. He approves of the prevailing social and moral regime: 'Here there are no maras, there are no prostitutes, there are no gangsters, there are no homosexuals. What we do have are narco-traffickers. But inside the community, there is security and order.' A Christian outreach worker attributed the pacification and policing of El Gallito by its drug-runners to the fact that 'they are businessmen who know the community needs to be on their side to let them do what they need to do. So they fix up an old lady's door from time, that sort of thing.' In a part of zone 18 where narco-traffickers operate alongside mara cliques, the presence and relatively greater power of the former is seen to keep the latter in check. As in El Gallito, locals told me that the head of the local drug business is keen to minimize attention and interventions from police and other state authorities. As a result, what he deems to be unnecessary or especially unruly violence on the part of pandilleros, such as the shooting of a bus driver in an extortion dispute, leads to harsh punishment, including the execution of offending parties and potentially the liquidation of a clique.

In areas where maras dominate, on the other hand, protection has largely given way to predation, parasitism. The resources that accrue from the gang's activities in and around El Romero are not inconsiderable in sum, though they are highly dispersed through the clique's large network of members, associates, collaborators and dependents. But importantly, they are not shared through contributions to 'collective ends' as Medellín's

cartels are said to have done (Schneider and Susser 2003). The situation in El Romero is much closer to the pattern Rodgers (2004) encountered in one Managua barrio, where over five years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a small number of community residents entered the drug economy. The neighbourhood became visibly more prosperous compared both to its own past and to similar barrios where local individuals and gangs had not taken up drug distribution and low-level trafficking. However, while the new prosperity did spread somewhat beyond the barrio's criminal nucleus, the obvious signs of material improvement appeared *only* on private homes or on individuals: they never extended to public spaces or community infrastructure (Rodgers 2004: 4). Similarly, in El Romero, profit remains private, and the mara clique does not distribute public goods.

It may be that the governance model of criminal groups needs re-evaluation. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 28) observe, gangs of various sorts around the world 'mimic both the state and the market.' It has typically been assumed that the crucial object of imitation is state governance, but in many cases, corporate enterprise may be the more suitable comparison. Arturo employs this image to describe how the mara has come to permeate the whole habitus of life in the barrio, becoming 'a transnational [corporation], like McDonalds, like Samsung, like Nokia, like Nike; it's part of the everyday.' In this imagining, the gang becomes a different sort of institution, playing by a different set of rules.

ii. Criminal Economies and Territorial Governance

Replacing government with business as the crux of comparison emphasizes the structure of criminal economies and can better account for certain variations in gang behaviour. Under this rubric, it is less a question of what kind of public authority they are than what sort of industry or enterprise they are engaged in—less a matter of social contract than of business model. The public services and collective goods that some organized criminal groups undeniably do provide within their territories would be seen to come about not because

they are filling some governance vacuum left by the state's weakness or absence, but primarily as strategic supports for their income-generating activities.

In his study of the networks that connect drug traffickers, politicians, and community actors in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, Arias (2006a: 47) argues that some limits on violence will be observed and collective benefits delivered by territorial criminals because they 'depend on access to particular spaces and the support of the population that lives in those spaces to do business.' Facing threats and competition both from the state and from other drug gangs, traffickers must 'operate within local norms of honour and reciprocity in order to retain residents' support' (Arias 2006b: 299). Similarly, the *Caballeros Templarios* drug cartel is described as carrying out a 'project of alternative governance' in the Mexican state of Michoacán that, in their core territory, provided 'a halo of social protection that shields them from territorial incursions of enemy actors' (Ernst 2013). It is not my intention to contest that criminal groups *do* sometimes deliver governance or take on state-like behaviours or appearances. The question is *why* they do so: who among criminal groups needs, desires, or can afford programmes of legitimation? What is the rationale behind their governance practices? The language of a 'social contract' (Ernst 2013) between criminals and the communities they operate in seems to me to carry too much normative baggage, to misapprehend the kinds of deals being struck and the nature of the relationships being formed.

Not every territorial criminal faces the same kinds of constraints or threats, or has the same resources, interests, and options. Arias (2006a: 53) does note that the nature of 'criminal opportunities' available affects the shape of criminal-community relationships. But his argument on this point (naturally, given his focus) is restricted to favelas occupying somewhat different positions in Rio de Janeiro's drug trade. The literature on how criminal groups relate to their territories or 'clients' focuses heavily on drug trafficking in Latin America and, from a more economistic perspective, on mafia-style protection rackets in

Europe and North America. Given their novelty, the extortion economies of Central American maras have not yet been examined in terms of how they shape the behaviour of criminal groups in their spheres of influence or control. The maras are distinct from drug gangs and narco-traffickers—drug retailing is a side-line rather than their core business, and they appear to lack the connections or resources to become significant players in the cross-border trade that represents the great majority of profit to be had in Guatemala's drug sector. Despite superficial resemblance, they are also, as I argued in the previous chapter, not engaged in a protection racket, but rather in a territorially-organized extortion economy.

For narco-trafficking operations or others which exist for the sake of dealing in contraband, territorial control and monopoly is primarily necessary to secure safe zones for the storage and transport of their goods beyond the state's reach. In its extortion-centred criminal economy, the pandilla's territory plays a very different role in the business model. Its residents *are* the resource they seek to extract profit from, not merely coincidental appendages of a useful geographic space from whom narco-traffickers largely need only non-interference or, in the best case, a measure of compliant loyalty purchased through public works. Thus, the clique's leadership, as a result of the structure of the local criminal economy, comes to view the barrio more as a manager would his mine, rather than a mayor his municipality.

The nature and structure of criminal economies not only have consequences for how criminals behave with regards to their territories, but also have secondary effects on local social capital and the capacity for collective action and resilience in the face of insecurity. Arias (2006a: 196) found, for instance, that Rio's drug traffickers 'appropriate existing social networks' in favelas, 'working with respected leaders' and 'within the local norms' to gain residents' support, or at least tolerance, for their activities. By establishing and leveraging strong relationships with local residents and leaders, territorial criminals can 'maintain an intense inward-based trust in specific places' that greatly strengthens their position therein

and stabilizes their business (Arias 2006a: 48). This outcome, however, is rather harder to achieve, and much less likely to come about, where that business and its income depend on extorting residents.

Pre-existing community networks in Rio's favelas, where they had sufficient strength, were sometimes able to 'substantially change criminal governance in a particular area' (Arias 2006b: 307). The drug trade does not necessarily extinguish the trust and solidarity on which collective action depends, because drug-traffickers may benefit from maintaining a certain level of local cohesion, provided it can be co-opted to their advantage. However, the extortion economy, as described above, has dismantled the 'inward-based trust' that once existed in El Romero through predation, collaboration, and surveillance. The way that the mara operates in the barrio has, through a feedback effect, increased its capacity to control and dominate local life, as it has progressively diminished residents' capacity to organize themselves, and thus to leverage public goods, services, or limits on violence from the mara.

IV. Codes and Criminal Violence

i. Barrio Codes and Normative Community

Many of El Romero's residents recount its recent history as a story of decline—a slide into alarming vulnerability and disorder, a poor but decent community's disintegration into a dangerous and notorious gang territory. This narrative arc is often traced through talk of 'codes of the barrio' and their abandonment: standards of reciprocity and decent behaviour that defined community life in the barrio's early years were first discarded by local gangs and then, as a result of rising suspicion and mutual fear, became impossible for residents in general to enact in their daily lives. *Código de barrio* can denote several different and interrelated kinds of codes. These sets of norms, expectations, and values are often mixed together in people's use of the term, but are in fact distinct in their content, function, and

context. Each is said to have been abandoned or damaged by the course of local insecurity, but for somewhat different reasons and with different consequences.

The decline of local codes is seen to have begun with changes to the *código de barrio* of local gangs.[3] The maras' rules about how, when, and against whom they used violence or committed crimes were for their members. But to the extent that they were reliably observed, they decreased unforeseen outbreaks of violence in the neighbourhood and allowed residents to anticipate what they could expect from gangs in terms of threats or protection. As described in the last chapter, gang codes included taboos against stealing within the barrio or victimizing 'non-combatants' and an emphasis on protecting neighbourhood space from outside incursions. However, over the last decade, as Cadejo put it, 'the code of the barrio has been traded for the ideology of a business.'

Other references to the code of the barrio resemble Anderson's (1999) concept of a 'code of the street' in his ethnography of a Philadelphia 'hyperghetto'. The code of the street 'works to organize problematic public arenas' by providing a set of informal rules and norms of behaviour that shape expectations about how social relations proceed (Anderson 1999: 179). Barrio residents describe a set of skills and habits that permitted safe movement through and interactions within their environment. These included ways that confrontations could be either defused or escalated, clues about the level of danger present in a particular space or interaction, and modes of self-presentation that allowed young people, especially, to identify themselves and others by their place in relation to local gangs. Like the code of the street, this version of the barrio code is, at least partly, a response to a certain level of violence and criminal activity within a community. It has a wider sphere of application than the mara's code of the barrio, but is similarly said to have increased predictability, and also to have given people a measure of control that bolstered feelings of security. As discussed further in the next chapter, the mara's predatory turn is seen to have disrupted residents'

[3] When mara members or ex-members use *código de barrio* in this sense, it means at once 'neighbourhood code / code of this neighbourhood' and 'gang code / code of this gang'.

ability to read and manage their environment. One man says that there is now 'no control whatsoever' over violence and insecurity. The only code he sees holding any sway in the barrio at present is 'the law of the strongest. It's become a jungle.'

Finally, *código de barrio* is also used of basic standards of decency, particularly of a generalized ethic of social trust and mutual support. Informants often used it in this sense when describing how changes to the mara had increased insecurity by fracturing this community ethos, with suspicion and fear poisoning networks of reciprocal aid that had helped them cope with crises and economic precarity in the past. The turn away from this idea or ideology of the neighbourhood began with the gang, as limits on internal predation and violence were discarded. But once they 'started to break all those codes that existed,' that broader local ethic rapidly strained.

Today, Cadejo believes that El Romero is living 'in a completely fractured context,' and describes a sharp decline from the code of the barrio that, he says, reigned as he grew up there in the 1980s and 1990s. To him, this code meant 'solidarity between everyone in the barrio. All had suffered the same thing, all were victims of the system. That fact of coming from a shared reality—it generated support amongst ourselves.' Mono, fifteen years younger than Cadejo, similarly says that 'the codes were all those relations of sociality within the community, that feeling of solidarity.' But solidarity, as Shelby (2007: 159) notes, writing of US ghetto communities, 'requires a sense of mutual trust, without which collective action cannot occur.' That feeling of solidarity seems to have been supplanted by a rather jealous self-preservation instinct. 'We're like crabs in a deep hole,' Doña Ana says. 'We could climb up out over each other's backs, pull each other along. But they don't let you out here. We in the hole pull down anyone who thinks of climbing.' Mono compares his generation's situation to the mutual aid codes that Rafa and Cadejo grew up with. 'Now, man, it's like "save yourself if you can."'

Those who most often use the specific phrase 'code of the barrio'—such as Rafa, Cadejo, Arturo, Chepe, Murci, Mono and his young friends—all either grew up in and around El Romero's gangs in the 1980s and 1990s, or are boys who have been heavily influenced by these men. Their use of the term frequently includes (but is not limited to) rules about the use of violence that applied within the earlier gangs they participated in or were familiar with: taboos on victimizing non-combatants, an emphasis on protecting the neighbourhood space from outside incursions, and so forth. However, 'the code of the barrio' is a term that everyone in El Romero recognizes and has a personal working definition for, even if it is not one that they would themselves habitually use unprompted.

There appears to be some implicit consensus about the core, if not the scope, of this set of codes, expectations, and understandings. When ex-mareros define it, they are most likely to speak of practical checks on violence within and between cliques. When older men and women explain the term, they generally speak of broader individual and collective values of community autonomy, self-reliance, and mutual aid. Their versions of the term include what they could expect from gangs and their members, but also emphasize notions of basic decency, family values, respect, and respectability. These different perspectives on the code coincide in the moral boundaries that they draw around the neighbourhood, depicting it as the unit within which solidarity and reciprocity are expected and predation is reprehensible.

Taken together, the various iterations of El Romero's code of the barrio convey the idea that the neighbourhood is a normative realm of a certain kind. Though many of the tenets of the code of the barrio are about quite general moral values of decency, respectability, and reciprocity, they express an ethic that is very much rooted in place. Informants frequently invoke the early post-earthquake history of the neighbourhood and residents' shared experience of displacement and resettlement as the source of both the content and the meaning of the *códigos de barrio*. Particularly when they are explicitly linked to local history and community experience, normative systems (laws, codes of honour, rules of etiquette,

etc.) provide groups with 'ways in which insiders can be distinguished from outsiders' (Pirie 2013: 158). An important part of what has been changing in El Romero as the mara evolved and then came to dominate is the definition of insider and outsider for the gangs and residents who share the barrio.

This has profound consequences for residents' experience of community. In Lindahl's (2006) examination of *nomos* (law, roughly) and political community in Ancient Greece, community involves a particular 'relation of a territory to a collective'—a relation which defines a group as a community by virtue of sharing interests in a given space and its boundaries (2006: 887). The *nomos* both expresses that relationship between people and between people and space and in many way produces and maintains it. But El Romero's dominant mara clique no longer holds to either the relationship or the rules that defined the community's *nomos*. Pirie (2013: 158-75) cites ethnographic evidence from regions of Tibet, Algeria, and Yemen that supports the work of codes and laws in establishing and maintaining 'moral domains'. In recollecting and lamenting the codes of the barrio, residents hold on to an idea of their community space as a bounded and viable 'moral unit' (Pirie and Scheele 2014: 18). Normative instruments, whether they are laws or less formal codes, create and sustain communities by defining 'places as *ought* places' (Lindahl 2006: 887).

However, unlike Pirie's (2013) examples of local, village, or tribal laws, El Romero's codes bind the community only in a very weak sense. There is, at least presently, little force in the obligations towards each other and the neighbourhood that residents attribute to the codes of the barrio. One way to parse the story that barrio residents tell about their neighbourhood is as a decline from a community in the full sense to a merely spatial territory. Though I use 'community' throughout this dissertation to refer to the territorial unit that I call Colonia El Romero, the term, as touched on above, implies more than just a certain space inhabited by a certain number of people. It evokes 'an abstract idea of sociality' and a degree of harmonious co-existence or 'natural togetherness' (Pirie and Scheele 2014:

12). These features of community seem to fit poorly with how El Romero's residents describe its present situation as one of disorder, abandonment, and dissociation from each other. Their recollections of the barrio's early years are, however, very different. They often approximate a vision of community as a system of social life in an equilibrium that 'is self-maintaining, restoring its order in the face of disturbances' (Martindale 1958: 55). This capacity is crucial to what barrio residents say they have lost with the growth and development of the mara.

In this regard, Wacquant's (2001) description of the transition in African-American urban neighbourhoods from 'communal ghetto' to 'hyperghetto' is analogous to narratives from Guatemala City's red zones. Wacquant argues that at its peak in the mid-20th century United States, the 'dark ghetto' was a 'double-edged sociospatial formation': functioning as an instrument of exclusion but, through this same sequestration, also offering residents 'partial *protection* and a platform for succor and solidarity' (2001: 103). This resonates in some ways with accounts of El Romero's early years that emphasize residents' self-sufficiency, mutual aid, and shared experiences and objectives. Through a series of economic and institutional changes, however, the US ghetto 'lost its capacity to buffer its residents from external forces. It is no longer Janus-faced, offering a sheltered space for collective sustenance and self-affirmation in the face of hostility and exclusion' (Wacquant 2001: 107). El Romero's '*petate*'—the supportive fabric of community life in this economically and socially marginal neighbourhood—is similarly seen to have dissolved. And as in the ghetto, this process has been linked to the 'depacification of everyday life' for residents of Guatemala City's gang territories (Wacquant 2001: 107).

ii. Criminals and Community Codes

Although it arose from the study of vastly different contexts, Hobsbawm's (2001 [1969]) 'social bandit' provides a useful figure for thinking through the changing local codes and

relationships that residents of El Romero narrated. Hobsbawm defines social bandits as 'peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people…as men to be admired, helped, and supported' (2001 [1969]: 20). He deals only with 'country people'—the peasantry and the bandits who came from this population—and leaves aside the 'urban equivalent of the bandit rebel' (2001 [1969]: 19). It is less the specific nature or history of these rural bandits that is of comparative interest than the more general terms of the relationship between criminal and community that he describes. Urban criminals and criminal groups have sometimes resembled the social bandit in certain respects, for example the Rio de Janeiro drug traffickers who presented themselves as 'defenders of group norms' to favela residents (Arias 2006a: 40). I think it plausible that their adherence to local expectations of reciprocity was much more about expediency and strategy than true affinity with those groups or their norms. Nevertheless, like Hobsbawm's bandits, for at least some (especially young men) among the poor, these traffickers 'emerge as folk heroes because of their efforts to provide aid to residents and enforce order' (Arias 2006a: 34).

With the possible exception of a few of the early robber bands, none of El Romero's criminals or gangs have risen to the level of popular approval that Hobsbawm's definition includes. However, until the mara's predatory turn towards an extortion economy, they almost always met the first criteria of remaining within the neighbourhood's social and ethical world. Their position in this regard recalls one of the earliest sociological portraits of street gangs in urban Latin America, in Lewis's (1961) *The Children of Sánchez*. The youth bands, called *palomillas*, of the Mexico City slum of Tepito are portrayed in this account as very much 'part of community and place rather than outside and delinquent' (Jones 2014: 258).

When the mara still held to its code of the barrio, members saw themselves and were seen by others as belonging to the same normative community as everyone else in the

barrio. In the late-1980s, mara participants self-consciously positioned themselves, their gangs, and their actions as 'belonging to the class world of the deserving poor': they expressed opinions like "robbing from the poor is evil" and maintained that "robbing from an equal would not be right" (Levenson 2013: 67). In return, gang membership did not necessarily alter young people's position in local social worlds and networks. Following qualitative research in a zone 18 *colonia* with multiple mara cliques, Merino (2001: 189) concluded that at the end of the 1990s, this neighbourhood's 'mothers, in general, are not too worried about whether or not their sons belong to a mara,' and were far more concerned about whether they were using drugs. In a study covering all of the Northern Triangle, Brenneman (2011: 37) found that many mara values, notably the primacy of loyalty, 'present little contrast with those of the barrio itself.'

Pandilleros always behaved in ways that displeased their elders and violated some of their expectations and values, but they still identified with shared notions of local solidarity and reciprocity, and did not pass seriously beyond the pale of community morality. This is supported by the fact that, at least until the end of the 1990s, most members of local cliques aged out of active gang membership, and remained within or reintegrated into social networks of kin and community. While they did participate in the gang, there were initially certain limits of decency or morality which they would not violate. Merino (2001: 191), for instance, gives the example of one young zone 18 pandillero who explained that the local priest and a group of nuns were exempt from the toll collected at the entrance to his clique's territory because 'to touch them for it (*tocar a ellas*) is like touching God.' Although already imposing a petty 'tax' on their community, the mara remained within the bounds of popular religiosity and respect. Despite a certain antagonism in the relationship, like the *bandas* of urban Mexico, the early mara cliques remained 'intimately embedded within the neighbourhood' and its complex of norms (Jones 2014: 261).

Continued membership by criminals or outlaws in a broader group gives rise to taboos on victimizing others who belong to the in-group and defines 'the peculiar relationship which makes banditry "social"' according to Hobsbawm (2001 [1969]: 20). But this relationship apparently no longer holds in El Romero. The mara now has much more in common with the 'underworld robbers and raiders' with which Hobsbawm contrasts the social bandit. Unlike bandits, who 'are in no sense heterodox, but share the value-system' of their communities of origin, underworld criminals are 'almost by definition outsiders,' forming separate societies alongside, or 'anti-societies' in opposition to, popular norms and mainstream values (Hobsbawm 2001 [1969]: 42-43). They saw themselves as distinct from the populations they operated among and preyed on, and were in turn regarded by these communities 'as criminals in their sense of the term and not merely by official law' (2001 [1969]: 20).

In distinguishing the bandit from the underworld criminal, the relevant question is whether they are within or without the community's limits of what is acceptable or tolerable, not whether they in- or out-law. The centrality of moral status relative to community standards may be one reason why barrio residents are so much more likely to employ the vocabulary of delinquency than that of criminality. The latter lends primacy to legal categories of transgression and condemnation. It judges perpetrators from marginal communities according to 'a criterion of public law and order which is not theirs' (Hobsbawm 2001 [1969]: 8). Delinquency, on the other hand, captures a broader picture of violation that does not rely on the external authority of the state to articulate the wrong being done.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the growing importance of the prison system for maras' operations and group cultures may have facilitated and reinforced predatory attitudes towards their neighbourhoods. The excision of the clique from the social and ethical world of the barrio has affected both the practical limits on violence once observed

within their territories, but also the basic understanding of the nature of the relationship between clique and barrio from which those codes and compacts had arisen. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, members of first-generation maras identified with their neighbourhoods and framed their deviance in opposition to the more privileged classes of 'mainstream' society; their '"us" included the poor' (Levenson 2013: 3). But with the transplantation and subsequent local evolution of US-style maras, this identification gradually waned, and gang identities became more encompassing and more exclusive. Asked for his thoughts on 'society', a young inmate in an MS-13 prison replied simply that 'the pandilla is our society' (Tobar Estrada 2007: 48). Their worlds of reciprocity and responsibility no longer include their barrios, as these gangs 'have come to form a subjective "us," and everyone else, including the poor, constitutes "them"' (Levenson 2013: 3-4).

iii. Norms and Nostalgia

It is apparent that the mara today no longer falls under the terms of the 'special relationship' between criminals and the communities they come from that, for Hobsbawm, defines the 'social' dimension of banditry. However, it is less evident to what extent the 'old codes' described by mara participants and barrio residents ever truly constrained local gangs and shaped behaviour in the neighbourhood. To what degree are these recollections and reconstructions distorted by nostalgia? Hobsbawm (2001 [1969]: 20) allows that the line dividing social bandits from underworld criminals is, in practice, 'often less clear than in theory.' In his critique of social banditry, Blok (2001 [1972]) goes much further, characterizing the concept of the criminal allied with and defending the poor as a 'figment of human imagination' (2001 [1972]: 20). He accuses Hobsbawm of taking oral histories and folk tales about bandits at face value and thus failing to 'distinguish between practice and beliefs, between the reality of banditry and its ideological, discursive and symbolic dimensions' (Blok 2001 [1972]: 20). Assessing the veracity of local histories of crime and

violence via ethnographic methods is a daunting and perhaps not entirely possible task. With a nearly total lack of contemporaneous or reliable documentary evidence, there is very little to go on other than personal memories and neighbourhood legends, which are often imprecise, contradictory, or suspiciously grandiose.

There is some evidence to support the local narratives I have described. One researcher who has studied Guatemala City's life and politics since the 1980s told me El Romero was famous in its earlier years as a cohesive, organized, and solidary community. Guatemala's crime and homicide statistics map fairly well onto residents' timelines of rising violence and insecurity, and the general trajectory of local gangs and the development of an extortion economy also emerge in accounts of the recent history of a number of other high–risk communities in and around the capital. In an MS-13 territory in a neighbouring zone, residents report norms and limits similar to those included in El Romero's 'old codes'. Here, in fact, they are said to have been not merely observed, but sometimes actively enforced by the clique before the introduction of extortion around 2007. Gang members once served as the local 'authority—and not only the authority by force, but the moral authority' (Leslie Lemus, personal communication, February 2014).

Blok (2001 [1972]: 24) argues that, in peasant societies where bandits typically lived and operated separately from local populations, they were 'sufficiently far removed from daily routines to facilitate the formation of myths and legends.' However, the distance that permitted romanticism to supplant realism in popular views of outlaws never existed between barrios and their gangs. This may lend some credibility to the reports given by residents of their territories of gang attitudes and behaviour, and may also account for why the popular admiration and support that adhered to the bandit (or, in a more contemporary analogy, to drug barons in the style of Medellín's Pablo Escobar) was never extended to Guatemala City's gangsters.

Enough people insisted that, in one way or another, El Romero has always been violent, always been dangerous, to call into question the degree to which the old codes ever really worked to regulate social behaviour. Different inhabitants of the neighbourhood contradict each other on this point. Cadejo says that at any point in its history you might be robbed in the neighbourhood. But Wuicho, born and raised there at the same time as Cadejo, insists that 'before they didn't rob you in the Colonia.'

Nostalgia is characterized by the 'prioritization of positive accounts of the past to the exclusion of less than romantic aspects of experience' (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 923). This dynamic may well be at work in the narratives I encountered. Well before most of my informants now place the beginning of the worst gang violence, 'Mara or gang issues' were already the highest-priority concern reported by focus groups in two peripheral Guatemala City neighbourhoods (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 35).[4] Young people participating in this study often characterized maras in their neighbourhoods as informal peer support groups, but others, particularly older people, 'described the maras as dangerous robbers, drug addicts, and killers' and linked them to problems of sexual violence in their neighbourhoods (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 95-96, 6).

Perhaps bandits always make for better symbols than neighbours. Ethnographic research in a Managua barrio suggests that, even where the relationship between gang and neighbourhood is far less predatory than what now prevails in Guatemala City, it may still be far from uncomplicated or conflict-free (Rodgers, for instance 2005, 2007, 2009). In the late 1990s, the pandilla in Rodgers's research community positioned themselves as defenders of neighbourhood space and rarely used violence against its residents (Rodgers 2007: 453, 455). Yet in the same years, whenever his informants spoke 'of crime, of violence, or of fear…the word "pandilla" never failed to materialize in their discourses' (2009: 954). Even when the *pandilla de cuadra* supposedly behaved more as social bandit than

[4] The research for this study, which combined focus groups with some aspects of participant observation, was conducted in 1999.

underworld robber, it was the unanimous referent for anxieties around insecurity in that community. Hobsbawm (2001 [1969]: 47) admits that many of his social bandits were 'unsuitable candidates' pressed into the Robin Hood mould to service the people's need for champions. If the 'good bandit always exists in contradistinction to the bad robber' (Hobsbawm 2001 [1969]: 156), barrio residents feeling overwhelmed by bad robbers may find themselves retro-fitting good bandits out of sometimes unconvincing material.

To call into question the historical accuracy of narratives of barrio codes is not, however, to dismiss them. Incidents of internal predation in the past do not necessarily disprove the overall account of the local codes that once shaped relationships within and between the community and its gangs. Social rules frequently co-exist with a certain number who break them and who reject them as appropriate standards (Hart 1994: 56). And where they do accept certain standards as applying to themselves, Hobsbawm (2001 [1969]: 86) insists that this 'belief is significant, even if (as we may suspect), the outlaws fell short of it in practice.' That the codes of the barrio were never perfectly executed does not mean that they never existed.

In assessing what we can or cannot draw out of narratives of local codes, it is important to be clear about what they are and are not claiming. Hobsbawm (2001 [1969]: 139) used documented and oral histories, folklore and legends as sources 'about the social roles bandits are supposed to play (and therefore often do), the values they are supposed to represent, their ideal—and therefore often also real—relationship with the people.' The norms expressed in the codes of the barrio were never undisputed, hence the different inflections they took on for young gang members and middle-aged matrons. But common to them was an acceptance of the boundaries of the barrio as the borders of a unit, an in-group within which some reciprocity was owed and it was impermissable to kill, steal, or cheat. When people say the codes have been discarded, they are not saying that they are witnessing completely unprecedented, previously unheard-of crimes. Rather, they are

saying that a consensus around a certain model of community and relationships within it no longer holds as it once did. Ultimately, the *códigos de barrio* are less about history than social critique. Nostalgic narratives of neighbourhood codes convey what people feel they have lost and had taken from them, ascribing declining local safety and sociability to the mara's changing morality of violence.

I do, however, believe that what are now presented as codes of the barrio describe life in the first decades after El Romero's foundation fairly well, but not necessarily in terms that would have been used by residents at the time. I suspect that the systematization of norms and values into 'codes' may be relatively recent, a response to the mara's rise to power over the neighbourhood. Explicit rules can emerge from the breach of more diffuse, even tacit expectations as 'ways of patching up transgressions that ought to have been unthinkable' (Pirie and Scheele 2014: 19).

This is most likely to happen when existing social norms are cast in doubt by changing circumstances or novel, controversial practices. It is at these times that values and norms that may otherwise be implicit or vague are most likely to be articulated as codes, rules, or laws (Roberts 1979: 43). When there is moral consensus, a group rarely needs to articulate its norms explicitly (Geertz 1983: 217; Pirie 2013: 132-33). Conversely, when a significant number begin flouting local expectations of reciprocity or respectability, norms that could previously remain unstated may be phrased as broken tenets of a code, mobilized in explanations of why this distressing behaviour is reprehensible and intolerable.[5] The prominence of talk about the codes of the barrio that I encountered may emerge as a retroactive account of norms previously observed as a matter of course in the barrio as people struggle to explain to themselves and to each other what has gone wrong.

[5] The place of nostalgic discourses in local coping strategies is discussed further in Chapter 5.

V. Violence and Reciprocity

In El Romero, rising insecurity is often explained in terms of declining local relationships and the rules that governed them, which are compiled under the idea of codes of the barrio. According to Cadejo, local maras once believed in 'protecting the territory. For example, a lot of people robbed. But very, *very* few robbed in the Colonia.' It was not just by happenstance that they did not steal in the barrio. It was a normative, not an instrumental or incidental, matter that constrained them: there was a shared belief that these were things that ought not to be done.

But these norms—the codes that made up the *nomos* of the barrio—no longer seem to bind. Though typically translated from ancient Greek as 'law', the concept of *nomos* covers not only rules of explicit legality, but also all those codes, habits, and customs that are caught up in a community's construction of an ethical vision and order. Those who share a *nomos* share 'an integrated world of obligation' (Cover 1983: 31). They are enmeshed in a web of reciprocity that specifies what they can and must do for each other and what they shouldn't or mustn't do to one another. Despite a certain degree of value conflict and behavioural deviance, the mara and its barrio once shared such a normative community, whose members had a distinct ethical status for each other and certain claims on reciprocity. But as the gang's developing extortion economy entrenched their dependency on community resources and led them to rely on a diffuse and ever-expanding network of collaboration, the clique rejected these mores at the same time as it became more economically and socially intertwined with its territory than ever before.

That turn from a gang composed of a defined set of individuals to one with a tight nucleus but long and numerous tentacles has coincided with a great increase in violence against members of the community that they depend on for income, information, and other resources. This is not coincidental. Firstly, much of this violence is patently instrumental: to enforce extortion, punish defectors, eliminate rivals. But violence is 'more than an

instrumental way of getting what one wants: it is also very much a discursive practice' (Whitehead 2004: 2). Understanding violence not merely as a means but as a 'form of *meaningful* action' involves seeing it as 'a changing form of interaction and communication' in human societies (Blok 2001 [19991]: 104).

Harrison's (1993) work on warfare in Melanesia hints at this expressive dimension of the work being done by the violence the mara now practises within its territory. He presents violence as profoundly social, not anti-social, behaviour. This inverts the assumptions of the Hobbesian state of nature, in which war between individuals is universal and perpetual because each is accountable only to himself, radically free of duty to others but subject always to their violence (Harrison 1993: 2-3). On this account, the fundamental step towards both society and peace is the invention of relationships of reciprocity; the maintenance of these is the basic social problem. 'Negative reciprocity', which includes both economic predation and the physical predation of violence, arises as a function of social distance, the lack of ties that bind one individual or group to another. But social distance is hardly characteristic of the clique-community relationship.

In Harrison's (1993) analysis, by contrast, violence is not necessarily evidence of nomic separation, but productive of it; it can draw boundaries between persons and groups rather than indicating pre-existing joints. The default position here is not a self-contained individual who opts in to social relationships, but 'inescapable relations of obligation' that leave groups 'working constantly to extract themselves from the other' (1993: 23, 9). Their problem is how to cut, not create, bonds of reciprocity. The mara as it exists and operates today is certainly an 'intrinsically permeable' group (1993: 14). Gang members have parents, siblings, children, lovers, friends, acquaintances, and helpers throughout the population they exploit, all of whom have their own cascading networks of loyalty and reciprocity. These 'cross-cutting ties' between groups in conflict produce 'incompatible loyalties' if they are not somehow suspended or severed (Roberts 1979: 56). In this socially-dense landscape,

acts of negative reciprocity 'may be not so much a *consequence* of social distance as a means of *creating or asserting* it' (Harrison 1993: 16).

Acts undertaken 'in reference to a norm,' whether positively or negatively, acquire a particular communicative cast and power (Cover 1983: 8). This may be particularly true of norms around violence. In his cross-cultural survey of social conflict and dispute resolution, Roberts (1979: 31) argues that 'socially accepted norms regulating inter-personal violence' are the most basic modicum of order that must exist for group life to be tolerable, for society to be possible. Perhaps in part because of the fundamental nature of norms governing its use, violence 'often has the character of theatre and performance in which things are "said" as much as they are "done"' (Blok 2001 [1991]: 111). One way in which apparently 'senseless' violence might be rendered intelligible is to ask what this 'violence "says" about honour, reputation, status, identity, and group solidarity' (Blok 2001 [1991]: 113). By preying on and profiting from its own community, the clique claims a separation, a lack of obligation.

Whitehead (2007: 43) observes that evolutionary behaviouralism attributes to humans 'an inherent tendency for in-group amity and out-group enmity.' But the borders of those groups and the distribution of persons among them is not a given or immutable fact, and violence can be mobilized towards (re)creating spheres of reciprocity and enmity. Transgressive violence is undertaken not outside of normative systems but against them. It is possible that, for gang members born into the densely social world of the barrio, with its visions of decency and morality, their more aberrant violence—the murder and mutilation of young women, for instance—may be both constructing and communicating a vicious rejection of those values. The Melanesian tribes described by Harrison (1993) believed it took powerful magic and ritual work to make someone a murderer, to overcome his innate disposition towards positively reciprocal relationships. For gang members to be capable of the physical and economic depredations demanded of them, they must come to view their own community as (at least ethical) strangers to them, persons to whom they have no

obligations or duty of care. It is always a fabricated, fragile, and uncomfortable strangeness, however, as they are inextricably bound up with the community they victimise, not only coming from and still inhabiting it, but also needing its financial and human resources to supply their profit and personnel.

Conclusion

'It is no longer possible to live peacefully here. There were many lovely things that are no longer.' This is how one young mother summarized life in El Romero. Changes in the cultures and criminal economies of local gangs have re-shaped the experience of insecurity in the communities they control. Shifting relationships between gang and barrio, nostalgia and neglected codes feature prominently in the narrative repertoires that people use to explain what has happened to them and to their neighbourhood. The codes of the barrio are said to have been lost as a result of the mara's predatory turn. The decline of practical supports which are seen to have limited violence and predation and made risk more predictable, seems to residents to have destroyed a certain form of community life based on shared norms and standards.

Harking back to 'old codes', 'other codes', the 'codes of before', residents invoke a time before the mara's turn to exploitation and extortion, before they were targeted by their sometimes extravagant violence despite being resolutely uninvolved in their business, before the breakdown of trust between neighbours, before they needed a military occupation to feel safe walking their own streets. But they are generally not invoking a time before violence. Colocho distinguishes the mara's earlier phase from its current parasitic mode by explaining that 'violence has always existed here. Now, what we have more than anything is extortion.'

Violence itself, at least in purely quantitative rather than qualitative terms, is not necessarily at the core of what has changed for residents of this mara territory. During El

Romero's first twenty to 25 years, as in the Rio de Janeiro favelas described by Arias (2006a: 26) before the explosion of the city's drug trade, 'violence and crime played a significant, though not overwhelming role' in neighbourhood life. Allowing that violence—in the street and in the home, minor, mundane, or fatal—has always been a part of El Romero's reality, they assert that there was a time when violence was normal and norm-governed in a way that it no longer is. The loss conveyed in talk about the barrio's old codes isn't telling us that everything was peaceable and easy, in some Arcadian 'before'. What it does tell us is that its inhabitants are claiming to have lost—and to feel this loss acutely—the local mechanisms, shared assumptions, and tacit rules that *did* used to apply and work to make some of the challenges of life in a marginal barrio more manageable.

Furthermore, the sense of the barrio as a normative unit productive of ethical duties and relationships is no longer shared by local gangs. It is also far weaker among barrio residents generally, due to the toll that violence and insecurity have taken on their capacity for trust, solidarity, and collective action. As the mara's social world became sealed off from that of its territory, and profit supplanted barrio identity and youth culture in defining these groups, internal predation went from taboo to necessity. The gang's use of violence within its neighbourhood has worked to redefine local relationships, constructing and communicating that separation between the social and moral worlds of gang and barrio. The 'normative mitosis' of criminals and community has split the 'socially-constituted *nomos*' that serves 'as a shield against terror' (Cover 1983: 31; Berger 1967: 22). The next chapter turns to the means by which barrio residents attempt to cope with and control an environment full of physical, economic, and ethical insecurity.

Chapter 5
Coping with Everyday Danger

It is not a good thing for a man to live like this…always as though in the midst of enemies. This sensation of hostility all about him and the nervous strain involved in resisting it, this ceaseless mistrust one of another—all this is a source of pain.
- Emile Durkheim, Professional Ethics and Civic Morals

Introduction: Danger and Disorder

'Another challenge, of course, is navigating through the violence.' Pastor Gerardo was counting off on his fingers the problems that barrio residents face. He had filled his hand with 'poverty', 'insecurity', 'extortion', 'exclusion', 'assassinations'. But then there was the question of how people in El Romero make their way through these hazards. This chapter examines their strategies of knowing risk, navigating threats, and negotiating their position, both practically and morally, in relation to the local clique. Barrio residents speak about challenges that are cognitive—how to know when they are in danger—practical—how to act so as to maximise their safety and minimize vulnerability—and ethical—how to maintain standards for themselves in confusing and compromising circumstances. The gang is, for residents, a moral problem as well as a practical one. It poses a very real danger to their lives and welfare. But in its current incarnation, it also violates a host of local norms and values. These issues are distinct, although they frequently interact and intertwine in practice.

Gang violence and extortion, as seen in the previous chapter, have altered many of the habits, expectations, and relationships that shaped everyday life in El Romero. Residents say things have become harder, scarier, uglier in recent years. When I asked people how they cope with these changes and challenges, it was striking how often the answer was along the lines of, 'Oh, we don't cope. We used to, but not anymore.' Yet though they sometimes deny it in narrating crisis, barrio residents demonstrably *do* cope with the chronic insecurity of their environment. They get on as best they can, living in a landscape densely populated with signs and sources of threat.

i. Landscapes of Threat

One day Doña Ana and I go to market, a short trip by foot and bus from her home on a narrow staircase in the Colonia's oldest *asentamiento* to another infamous red zone not far down the main road where she has her favourite food vendors. That morning, she tells me about death threats she has just received for interfering with the mara's 'rent' collection. Looking out over the neighbourhood from her home, she shows me where the collaborator who told the incarcerated Mara-18 leaders she was causing trouble lives. She points out a brightly painted house on an alley beneath us, where the owner has 'eight extortionist mareros living in there!' She comments on a group of boys lounging, as they often do, by a tiny cement park on the *salida* road, singling out a tall seventeen year-old newly released from juvenile penitentiary after a five-year sentence for transporting concealed grenades.

They are still there when we leave for the market. Given their gang ties, they will be aware of the threats against Ana, who is well-known in the barrio for her community work and pretty daughters. But this morning they greet her as the neighbourhood's young men habitually do, cheerfully shouting '*Suegra! Suegra!*' (mother-in-law). And Ana teases them back as usual, though she hurries us on quickly. On our way up the hill, she nods towards a pale, drawn woman across the street. An AIDS-infected extortionist for the gang, she whispers, 'and you see her walking around with a Bible under her arm, what a sin!' The bus back from the market is driven by the father of the pandillero who was briefly involved with Ana's daughter Hailey. On that bus, we chat with a one-time friend, of whom Ana has become wary since this woman's daughter became the girlfriend of a prominent local mara leader. Back in El Romero, young boys hawk pirated DVDs in the small street market near the bus stop. They killed the gas vendor in his shop on this block not long ago, 'an old man, a good man' executed on the gang's orders. The woman selling snacks along our shortcut home works for 'the real, serious thugs.' Both coming and going, we cross paths with a

skinny eleven year-old boy, bony arms sticking out of his neon tank-top, who spends his days walking the clique's territory, watching on their behalf.

We complete our errand in less than forty minutes. This was a perfectly routine transit through El Romero's environs, where many seemingly casual interactions are weighted with unspoken shared knowledge about past or present entanglements with crime and violence or future threats. Its only unusual feature was Ana's explicitness about the observations and tensions that are usually implicit in such movements through a red zone's social and physical space.

ii. Barrio Codes and Social Rules

'There are codes in the barrio. There are codes all over,' Cadejo told me. 'You have to know how to move yourself, or the place will eat you up.' Cadejo's codes share features with the 'street cultures' described in a strain of urban ethnography, notably Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street* and Bourgois' (2003) *In Search of Respect*.[1] Though the term's precise definition varies, 'street culture' typically refers to the mores and mechanisms that organize social life in poor urban communities where violent illegal economies are present. Studies in this vein 'emphasize that street culture should be analysed as a social system with its own values, rules and regulations. It demands particular resources, knowledge, and has its own rationale' (Sandberg 2008: 155). Compliance with its rules and competent performance of its values is a form of cultural capital that 'is recognized and valued on the streets,' so that 'to lack it is to be vulnerable there' (Anderson 1999: 105). Cadejo, Rafa, and others boast of their skill in dodging and diffusing risky situations and esteem those who display suaveness or moxie in handling danger. But the environment they recall navigating so confidently and smoothly as they grew up in the 1980s and 1990s has changed considerably.

[1] Sandberg (2008) provides an overview of this literature.

Anderson's (1999) ethnography of a Philadelphia 'hyperghetto' yielded his concept of the 'code of the street'. Somewhat like the code of the barrio, the 'code of the street' 'works to organize problematic public areas' into predictable social landscapes (Anderson 1999: 179). Both involve informal rules and norms that govern expectations about how social relations proceed and generate a measure of predictability to the violence that underpins the operation of local criminal economies. There are, however, important differences in the place that each of these codes has (or had) within neighbourhood life.

Notably, '*código de barrio*' refers to rules, habits, and assumptions that have both practical benefits for neighbourhood residents (Cadejo's rules for navigating danger, the gang codes that once limited their use of violence against residents) and ethical value (norms regarding respectability and reciprocity). '*Código de barrio*' can take on these different emphases, and it is necessary to bear in mind the distinctions between its various possible referents when asking what the disintegration of neighbourhood codes means for and to residents. But it is equally important that the single phrase is used for both factual description—what does or did happen in local interactions—and for normative evaluation—what should and shouldn't occur in the neighbourhood.

In contrast, Anderson (1999) sets the devotion to reputation and retaliation that comprises the 'street orientation' in opposition to a 'decency' orientation aligned with mainstream values. The code of the street is a system that 'decent' individuals and families require to cope with their environment, but do not identify with or value. They adopt it from pragmatic necessity because 'the street element so dominates the public spaces, even the decent people must show they are ready to meet the street ethic in order to survive unmolested' (Anderson 1999: 64). The code of the street comes to the fore as the criminal element gains in power.

The code of the barrio, on the other hand, is said to have been lost as the mara's power waxed and their modes of domination intensified. Many informants—including those who

abhor past and present mara culture in general—describe it in positive, nostalgic tones. And this is perhaps where accounts the barrio's codes differ most significantly from the code of the street. The latter is 'a kind of adaptation to a lost sense of security of the local inner-city neighbourhood' (Anderson 1999: 323). It both arises from endemic violence and establishes an ordering of public space and social relations based on the habitual practice of violence. The code of the street is not, as El Romero's inhabitants now describe the code of the barrio, a pre-existing normative system that is seen to be damaged and undone by violence.

The overlap and divergence between the code of the street and the codes of the barrio result from the double function of these kinds of social norms. They are at once predictive and ethical tools, norms in the sense of normal and norms in the sense of morals. This double structure is common to codes of all kinds—barrio codes, gang codes, state law: codes legal, non-legal, and illegal. Hart (1994: 54) defines external and internal aspects of rules, which can be related to a rule's predictive and justificatory functions respectively. The external aspect, the observable regularity of behaviour that arises from a group following a rule, is what the mara's predatory turn has stripped away in the barrio. What remains to residents—what they actively retain—is the internal point of view. They persevere in using the rules as 'standards of appraisal of their own and others' behaviour' even if they feel incapable of conforming to them (Hart 1994: 98).

For residents of the Philadelphia ghetto, regardless of their personal involvement in the local drug economy, knowledge of the code of the street is 'literally a necessity for operating in public' (Anderson 1999: 33). 'Decent' ghetto residents adapt to the code of the street because its structuring of social spaces and interactions permits them to navigate a difficult environment. But only the minority 'street element' defines and defends their success as moral and economic agents according to the aggressive, individualistic values of the code of the street. In Guatemala City, on the contrary, the predictive applications of the codes of the barrio appear to have disintegrated far more than the ethical content they communicate.

Where the predictive functions of social rules are handicapped, justification through reference to rules may come to the fore: invoking codes allows barrio residents to articulate why what they are experiencing is wrong, and reassert their convictions about elements of basic decency and respectability.

El Romero's inhabitants thus continue to look to barrio codes to fulfil what, for Durkheim, represents one of the core functions of rules: 'providing a secure moral environment' (Cotterrell 1999: 21). The vitality (as importance and as liveliness) of rules and codes in social life lies 'not just in their effects and power but in what they express' (Pirie 2013: 10). Though its practical effects currently appear to be very limited, the barrio code continues to serve as 'a public expression of moral order' (Pirie 2013: 10). From the outside, the capital's red zones appear, in the words of one American NGO executive, 'utterly lawless,' places where normative sense has broken down. But residents' accounts reveal the barrio as an essentially moral place, with a common vocabulary that conveys a clear and strong sense of what it is to be a decent person, family, or community. When they speak with nostalgia for the 'old codes', they are mourning the loss of practical supports to their security and, at the same time, asserting a still-thriving vision of what their social world *should* look like and how relationships within it should proceed.

iii. Insecurity and Dis/Order

Where such a normative vision is enacted through widely observed social rules, a group achieves what Durkheim (1992 [1957]) terms 'moral discipline'. As with Hart's bivalent definition of social rules, Durkheim's moral discipline combines behavioural uniformity with moral cohesion. Defined as 'a code of rules that lays down for the individual what he should do so as not to damage collective interests and so as not to disorganize the society of which he forms a part,' moral discipline for Durkheim (1992 [1957]: 14-15) represents 'a condition which is the most fundamental to any social structure.' Many since Durkheim

have similarly given social order pride of place in their accounts of social life. 'Societies,' according to Just (2007: 128), 'need all the order they can get.' O'Donnell (1993: 1357) claims social order is 'actually the supreme collective good.' A classic of legal anthropology considers it 'implied in the very idea of society' that 'a degree of order and regularity *must* be maintained in any human group' (Roberts 1979: 28, 13).

Order also appears as something needed and valued in ethnographic descriptions of contemporary insecurity in Latin America. For poor residents of the marginal barrios of Cochabamba, Bolivia, Goldstein (2012: 5) found that insecurity is 'fundamentally about disorder.' At the root of their complaints about their situation is 'the absence of a force capable of providing order, rationality, stability, and predictability in their physical and social environments' (Goldstein 2012: 252). Durkheim describes moral discipline as a system that 'marks the boundaries' for a person within society, that 'tells him what his relations with his associates should be, where illicit encroachments begin' (1992 [1957]: 14). These boundaries, that structure and content of local relationships, are a major component of what is said to have been lost in El Romero. So, too, when Moodie's (2010: 161) informants in San Salvador told her the present was 'worse than the war,' they were also 'talking about a changing social imaginary, a loss of community, a slipping away of solidarity.' Their assumptions about their social world had come undone, and they no longer knew what to expect (or fear) from one another.

This is not to say that urban Central Americans had, or necessarily want, Durkheim's (1992 [1957]: 16) vision of social life as a 'harmonious community of endeavours.' Strathern (1985: 116), critiquing the assumption of a universal need and desire for social regulation, warns against assuming that 'order in the sense (1) of structure, regularity, the ground rules for expectations, the definitive contextualisation of actions, implies order in the sense (2) of non-contradictory, non-conflictual, non-violent regulation.' It seems to be very much the former that is most felt to be lacking in El Romero. What residents say they are missing is

order in the sense of knowing where one stands in relation to others, what convictions and obligations guide actions and interactions.

Certain societies—perhaps all—esteem those who disregard order, who can flout norms, laws, or basic morals with impunity, at least to some extent. Such figures include the 'great criminal' who attracts the covert admiration of European publics (Benjamin 2007: 283), or the Hagen man of Papua New Guinea who harms because he knows he can pay reparation and is willing to trade his wealth for another's hurt (Strathern 1985: 124-25). But the capacity to break the rules or do without them altogether is usually a sign of unusual power or strength, the exception that proves the rule. And the vast majority do seem to need and desire the order of a stable normative terrain, if not that of a consistently peaceable social life.

Order has often been quite superficially 'conceptualized by the absence of its seeming antithesis: violence' (Moncada 2013: 220). Conversely, studies of violence often begin from the assumption that it represents the '"breakdown" of order' rather than part of a continuum of normal social action within a given context (Strathern 1985: 13). The relationship between violence and social (dis)order can be clarified somewhat by distinguishing between what is orderly in the sense of predictable and orderly in the sense of appropriate, justified, or within acceptable limits. Acts of violence can be orderly on both counts, or disorderly on both counts. But both dimensions contribute to the distress and insecurity that can be generated by 'disorderly' violence.

There are certainly societies where interpersonal violence is 'part of the normal flow of social relations' rather than a sign of their disintegration (Pirie 2013: 29). In nearly all of these cases, however, the approved or tolerated exercise of violence 'is made subject to considerable limitations' (Roberts 1979: 111). The Amdo people of Tibet are one example of a society where some forms of violence are normal, but also norm-governed: the man who responds violently to a provocation behaves admirably, but is also subject to 'conflicting

norms of restraint' that keep his (socially acceptable) behaviour within certain limits (Pirie 2013: 36). Roberts (1979: 91) cites the 'Eskimos' as 'one of the very few groups in which scarcely regulated violence seems commonplace.' Although he makes a pointed exception of this case, the evidence he cites in support are killings that, while striking us as being out of all proportion, occurred in each instance in response to identifiable transgressions, which explained the punishment within the context of prevailing norms. Groups for whom violence is an acceptable way to respond to conflict typically have both values that encourage individual aggression and norms that impose limits on it (Roberts 1979: 157). Part of what appears to distress residents of El Romero is that the chronic violence they are experiencing is not lining up with their values, making it feel unnatural and unpredictable. Normal violence is not anomic violence.

Accounts from El Romero support the assertion that 'the very fine line that is drawn between acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence' is often 'also a line between predictability and uncertainty' (von Benda-Beckman and Pirie 2007: 6). Anxiety and suffering are aggravated by the absence of a structure of predictability that allows people to feel they can insulate themselves somehow from being drawn into danger. Order is less about the absence of violence than the availability of 'processes of containment and adjustment by which people react to and limit its effects' (von Benda-Beckman and Pirie 2007: 6).

Moodie (2010: 93-94) and Hume (2009: 79) both propose that an important part of what Salvadorans find so troubling about the 'new' urban violence is that they have lost the wartime scripts that allowed them to know (or believe they knew) what to do and not do to keep from becoming victims. Despite extremely high rates of violence during El Salvador's internal conflict (1980-92), urban residents felt there was some order in the sense that 'social relationships are engaged on the basis of stable (if not necessarily approved) norms and expectations' (O'Donnell 1993: 1356). Now lacking that stability, many express 'a strange

nostalgia for the managed violence of the war, its predictability and political logic' (Zilberg 2007: 39). El Romero residents, too, struggle with the sense that the dangers they face have become somehow 'less knowable' (Moodie 2010: 2). They look for a new logic, a new body of knowledge or set of skills, that can permit them to cope with risks that feel less predictable than in the past and far less readily controlled.

Figure 16. Crime scene tape in El Romero. Author photo, December 2011.

I. Knowing Risk

Evaluating potential risks and elaborating ways to avoid them is something of a compulsive daily ritual in the barrio. The director of a small Christian school says that there 'is always the question. Are they causing trouble? Are they calling?' Not a day goes by for him without those questions being exchanged numerous times, between numerous people. Still, he frets that 'you never know at what moment something unspeakable might be born.' For everyone

in El Romero, knowledge about threat and its sources is a vital and volatile commodity. The ability to collect timely information and act appropriately on this knowledge is seen to be essential. But to know (or be seen to know) too much can be dangerous. Spreading the wrong rumour to the wrong person or failing to hear the right rumour at the right time can be a matter of life and death. This section outlines several approaches used by barrio residents for managing the information and communication crucial to daily decision-making, for negotiating the delicate balance between silence and gossip, between knowledge and ignorance.

i. Ignorance

A significant portion of the barrio's population prefers to cultivate ignorance over knowledge, 'trying their best to ignore what is much more than a nuisance' (Anderson 1999: 81). A young schoolteacher says that the 'less you know the better. Do not see the harm they do when they force people out of their homes.' This approach is similar to Didion's (1983: 36) account of her reaction to witnessing violence in wartime El Salvador: walking 'straight ahead, not wanting to see anything at all.' Moodie (2010) also describes this sort of protective 'not-knowing' in the crime stories told in post-war San Salvador.

This is a tactical ignorance, which helps people to cope with feelings of helplessness in the face of rising danger. Those who speak about their preference for ignorance of El Romero's more distasteful or distressing dealings tend to say they do so to keep out of harm's way. But truly not knowing about sources of threat seems unlikely to be safer than gathering what information is available and managing it discretely, as I describe other residents doing below. It may well, though, provide a sort of denial or moral suasion that helps them to cope in a different way. Claiming ignorance repudiates one's place in the neighbourhood's overwhelming array of dangers and encompassing web of complicity. It is

based on the conviction that you 'are innocent if you don't know; you cannot take responsibility for what happens' (Moodie 2010: 179).

Padre Martín describes his parishioners' strategy as being 'to make themselves uncomprehending: "I do not see. I do not hear." But they know many things.' They can pursue and pretend ignorance, but awareness of the violence happening around them is to a certain extent unavoidable. A woman from another red zone complained that she and her neighbours 'have had the opportunity to hear the screams in the night that tell us these things are taking place.' Yet some insist on their unknowingness. Sara, despite living all of her twenty-nine years in the barrio, denies knowing the name of any gang operating there. It is virtually inconceivable that this could be true; it is almost certainly a disavowal of basic knowledge designed to pre-empt questions of a more delicate, compromising nature.

Juana, for one, wants to know as little as possible about the gang and its members. Extorted for a large sum, she asked the voices over the phone to let her make a deposit in a bank account rather than hand over money in person. 'I didn't want to see a face,' she explains 'so as not to have problems later.' Sometimes, these efforts involve pretences of literal unseeing. Héctor, a taxi driver, was eating lunch one day at a market in a neighbouring zone when a man walked into the crowded *comedor*, shot the man sitting next to them, and turned to walk away.[2] Looking back, he saw Héctor watching. 'What's up, *compadre*?' 'Not much, *compadre*,' Héctor replied, deciding that he did not want to have seen anything at all either.

ii. Silence

The pretence of ignorance bleeds in to the practice of silence. Knowledge, in various forms, is valued, respected, and sought-after. But it is also dangerous. Because of this, Pastor Gerardo explains, his congregation members have to 'know how to keep quiet.' The value

[2] A *comedor* is an inexpensive restaurant or food counter.

and rules of silence came up often during interviews, when informants qualified their participation as somehow exceptional—'I would never say this to a Guatemalan journalist', 'I do not speak of this to anyone, but…'—dodged certain lines of questioning, or fell silent if another person entered the room.

The hope behind the silence is '*que callito no pasa nada*': that keeping very quiet, nothing will happen. People worry that the gang's surveillance network is so thorough that 'everything comes to be known' by them. Pastor Gerardo explained a spate of murders in March 2012 as 'controlling people who had talked.' Juana says that now

> there is no place you can talk. There was a time in which we talked only of that, of delinquency. But later they killed two women on a bus because they were always gossiping about these things to everyone, everywhere.

In an indigenous community deeply affected by the violence of the Guatemalan civil war, Green (1994: 239) found silence serving as both 'a survival strategy' and 'a powerful mechanism of control enforced through fear.' The control that El Romero's gang obtains through fear-induced silence reaches well beyond its territory. A few days after Doña Ana received death threats in February 2013, we were waiting for a meeting with a congressman she had met through Neighbourhood Committee work who offered to bring the case to the PNC's Director. But Ana wanted to back out of the meeting, she didn't want to tell who had threatened and who had warned her. 'It's that you don't want to say names,' she said, 'because they are always listening, and it gets back to them that you've talked.' We were not on a barrio street-corner, where gossip might be overheard by a collaborator, but in the congressional caucus offices off the nation's central plaza.

Silence is transmitted and enforced not only through the gang's communicative brutality, but also within families and friendships; residents have become self-disciplining subjects in this regard and are vigilant in discouraging imprudent talk by those close to them. Learning when not to speak and what not to speak about is an important part of children's socialization. A thirteen year-old girl from a red zone on the capital's periphery

says that her mother has taught her to keep quiet about violence around her. But she has also grasped the difference between silence and ignorance, noting that 'my mother has the habit of never saying anything, but she knows a *ton* of things.' Keeping silent is useful and protective, but it is not at all the same as staying ignorant. Many informants speak of a tension between knowing and silence, the necessity and ubiquity of both. A 21 year-old man calls this 'an epoch in which everyone sees, they hear, they talk, but no one knows anything.' An older mother tells me that 'here one sees, hears, and *shuts up*.'

iii. Circulating Knowledge

Rafa insists that 'information in El Romero always comes out. And it always, but always, comes out *before* the thing happens.' How could knowledge about an event reliably precede its occurrence if everyone is so busy keeping quiet? Cadejo describes incidents of violence and victimization as 'things under water, that are not spoken, that are not seen, but are known.' The '*secreto a voces*' (open secret) is everywhere in the barrio. People tend to be circumspect about how they come to have their information. When I asked friends how they knew what they told me about violence, extortion, or gang, involvement, I generally got only a vague 'we found out': in the usual way, from the usual circuits. Doña Ana, on how she knew about the collaboration of a particular woman extortionist, shrugged, 'oh, one learns their things around here.' Of course, as an outsider, I occupied a very particular place in people's networks of confidence, gossip, and silence. I was both a more unknown quantity, and therefore potentially more hazardous, but also exempt from the webs of suspicion and complicity that permeate the neighbourhood. Some people seemed to trust me with certain information much more readily than they did their neighbours, while others obviously judged it unwise to speak candidly with me. I expect, though, that virtually everyone I encountered calculated the potential risks I involved, and that our exchanges were shaped accordingly.

Gossip and rumour are essential information sources in the barrio—about who is a target, who is informing, who is leaving and why, which boys 'have gotten themselves involved in nonsense.' Despite warnings about its dangers, talk about extortion, violence, gang activity, and risk is very much a part of everyday interactions in El Romero. In fact, these are among the most common topics of conversation, although people may well be more careful than before in what they say, where, and to whom, more cautious with how openly they seek information or admit having it. Waiting their turn during an annual free cancer screening, two women from the same *asentamiento* passed the time going over recent incidents and emerging threats. They covered gang rapes, a shooting, a burglary, and a murder that led three families to abandon their homes. They also exchanged opinions on rumours of a new pandilla trying to make in-roads in the Colonia and whether they were allies or rivals of the reigning clique, on talk of whether or not the soldiers would really leave when their mandate expired the next month, on indications that the gang was reorganizing itself to prepare for the task force's withdrawal, and they confirmed for each other that the new food stand at the entrance to the market was indeed a front for gang surveillance.

Rafa and Cadejo describe something nearing a compulsion to tell and trade information. They say that whenever they arrive in the barrio, 'someone comes up and starts telling us things. What happened, who did it, how a certain thing went. Like automatically!' Their acquaintances may do this for the sheer pleasure of gossip, of being the first to report the latest or juiciest news on some matter of local interest. In a climate where risk and knowing why, from whom, where, and when it arises are pressing concerns, there is a good deal of social prestige to be derived from being seen to be an authority on these matters.

However, there are also more immediate and practical reasons for these risky exchanges. I heard many stories of timely hints from well-placed acquaintances helping residents to avoid serious harm by, as Rafa put it, delivering information about danger before the thing

happens. A neighbour who passed on an overheard conversation between gang collaborators about the mara's plan to kill Cadejo's brother for his car the next day may have saved his life. Their mother called him at work to warn him not to come home, and since that day he has not been back to the neighbourhood where he was born and raised. Ana learned of the death threats against her when she was returning from an errand around ten at night. A woman stopped her to say she had better be careful out in the street because they were coming after her. Sonia later told her that she had been warned to keep away from Ana for her own safety. Ana says, 'I knew then that it wasn't a lie,' because a friend she trusted had confirmed the warning received in the street. Residents build their knowledge by seeking to combine broad networks through which to exchange rumour and gossip in quantity with a more restricted circle of particularly well-placed or dependable sources.

Rafa says that 'everyone, I'm telling you, *everyone* in the barrio has their contacts,' their web of connections that inevitably includes links to or near enough to the gang to supply vital information on developing dangers. But even the best-connected face a daunting challenge in sifting reliable from unreliable knowledge, given that there are so many stories, often conflicting, to parse and sort. Conversations with informants often revealed clashing rumours about a single event. For instance, although the victim whose dismembered body was placed at the sector's new *Transurbano* stops was widely reported to be an innocent girl, chosen for her availability and vulnerability at the crucial moment, another local teenager—an evangelical Christian—claimed otherwise. She alleged the victim was in fact a pandillera herself, caught by a rival clique. This is almost certainly untrue, not only because it runs contrary to the account of the driver who witnessed the preliminaries to that murder, but because in their most spectacularly communicative acts of violence, those that aim for the highest possible public profile and impact, the mara almost always prefers to use 'innocent' victims. The victim's innocence is part of their point. But she had reasons for preferring the opposing story. As a rumour circulates, especially among a dominated or disempowered

group, it alters in a way that 'brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear it and retell it' (Scott 1990: 145). Trying to make moral sense of the frighteningly brutal and seemingly random violence happening to people very much like her, she wanted badly to believe that being a 'good' Christian girl could make her safe.

Accounts like this do considerable post-mortem violence to victims: the application of violence to their bodies transfigures them into bad people. Such moralising labours of sense-making appear to come to the fore when violence seems incomprehensible and practical strategies for minimizing risk thus feel inaccessible. Believing the murdered girl to be involved with the gang lets this church-going teenager believe that she might be less vulnerable than the prevailing account would suggest, that there are ways she can behave and choices she can make that mean she will not end up the same way. Participating in the circulation of rumours and stories—including those that are tenuous or fabricated—is a way to pursue the reassuring conviction that you are in the know, somehow in control.

Changes to the gang's culture and criminal economy have left barrio residents unsure of what puts them in danger and how to keep safe. Where expectations about risk are shifting or disappearing, it becomes a priority to (re)learn how to navigate the new order (or lack thereof), to master the new dispensation of danger. Moodie (2010: 89) found that narrating experiences of violence was, for her informants, also about 'sharing key information about the new models, new scripts, new roles in the postwar climate.' Gossip about insecurity disseminates knowledge and beliefs about new codes and rules in a volatile terrain.

II. Navigating Risk

Maritza explains that virtually everyone in El Romero shares 'the fear of engaging with [the mara] in the wrong way. Do I shut the door to them or open it? That's the question everyone asks themselves.' Your answer to that question determines your choice from among limited options. As Maritza says, 'there are two opposed poles with them: either you shut your

mouth and shut your home, or you become an acquaintance of theirs.' In describing how they negotiate the gang and the insecurity it generates, most residents place themselves and their neighbours somewhere along a spectrum running through avoidance, collaboration, and—rarely—outright opposition. This section turns from questions of knowing to questions of navigating a landscape of risk and threat, focusing on the 'practical rationality of social life' and the strategies barrio residents employ to cope with what residing in mara territory means for them (Sandberg 2008: 165).

i. Avoidance

Likely the largest group of barrio residents chooses to employ what Arturo calls the 'key strategy, the *only* defence': keep your mouth shut and your head down. Responding to my question about coping mechanisms, one woman said that 'there's not a strategy, really, except for just ignoring the problem.' This position arises from the view that if it is impossible to resist the gang, the best you can do is avoid it as much as possible. The pursuit of protective ignorance described in the previous section finds its practical expression in the avoidance of social interaction with anyone who may be dangerous or compromising which, in the barrio today, includes most everybody.

Efforts to evade danger are behind much of the withdrawal from community ties and public space that residents describe as a consequence of insecurity. An informal 'risk-mapping' activity conducted in El Romero by the Ministry of Social Development in late 2012 revealed the extent to which the neighbourhood's space feels daunting and frightening. Participants managed to name just one safe open space in the entire community, where the Catholic Church faces the public primary school on the street that bisects the Colonia. Every other safe space was enclosed, off the street: churches or charitable projects 'where people go to hide.' Barrio residents confirm Moser and McIlwaine's (2001: 139) earlier finding that perhaps the most common way of coping with violence for poor urban Guatemalans was

'adopting *avoidance mechanisms* that included changing their mobility patterns and "ignoring the situation."' Don Justo, the elderly janitor, says he doesn't really know or speak to anyone in the neighbourhood: 'Best to avoid problems.' A young woman over fifty years his junior shares his tactic of avoiding trouble by avoiding engagement. It is more difficult in her case since the gang members are her peers, the boys she grew up with, but she does her best 'not to go out, no to talk to them much, to keep them at a distance.'

The strategic avoidance necessary to maintain tactical ignorance precludes presence in certain spaces. Juana, among others, advised that it is important to stay away from scenes of crimes, shootings, or murders. To be *chute* (nosy, gossipy) is 'very dangerous, because the delinquents return to monitor who is there; they come to see who's watching, what they're saying.' Once again, to know, or be seen to know, is to lose your (claim to) innocence.

Some also attempt to insulate themselves psychologically. I disagree with Pastor Gerardo's claim that residents have become so inured to suffering that they 'are not hurt by the pain of others.' However, there do seem to be times when this posture—an imposition of psychic rather than physical distance—is adopted as a measure of self-preservation. Rafa tried to convince me of this when I was worried about Ana's daughter Lena being pursued by a gang member. With two teenage nieces of his own in El Romero, both of whom were pregnant by gang members by the end of my fieldwork, he understood my concern but warned me not to get too invested in her. 'You can't save people, and you have to know when to walk away from someone going down the wrong path. I know it sounds cruel,' he said, 'but you have to know when to stop caring for people.' This practice shows once again just how entangled residents' psychological, practical, and ethical needs and strategies can be. Feeling helpless to act on their behalf, they may need to enforce emotional detachment from certain high-risk individuals or relationships, which bolsters the literal withdrawal of so many residents from the social space of their community.

ii. Acquaintance and Alliance

Opposed to tactics of avoidance are strategies of rapprochement with the gang, which can include outright collaboration in their crimes, but are usually far more passive (and less compromising). The mildest form of this aims at a sort of peaceful cohabitation with those involved in the violent criminal economy. Maritza, for instance, says that she combines her general strategy of 'keeping quiet' with an attitude of 'going with their flow, not being contrary to them.' A young Pentecostal mother similarly feels that the best way to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention is not to withdraw completely but to 'take in their party in peace with them.'

Others cultivate a somewhat closer familiarity. Early in my fieldwork, Doña Ana told me that she used a strategy of warmth and friendliness to try to protect herself and her children, especially her daughters. She preferred 'not to marginalize that type of person, to make friendships with them' instead; she often complimented and flattered young men in and around the gang 'to make them feel important, so that they hold no ill-feeling for you.' This way, they will help you out, warn you of trouble, and 'restrain themselves from doing harm to you or the family.'

Though certainly a minority, a large number of barrio residents do collaborate more actively in the gang's criminal economy, seeking some protection or advantage. While some seek to survive by collaborating, the clique also survives on the basis of this co-operation and needs to encourage it. Residents who are not readily identified as gang members, especially women and young children, are crucial to the gang's intelligence system and their extortion operations. Their involvement often begins when a family member joins the clique. Kevin, who left the M-18 in late 2011, says his greatest regret is recruiting his brothers and cousins. However, it is not always the gang member himself who initiates relatives' relationship with the clique. Juana, an active member of the Catholic Church, says that 'there are a lot of infiltrators in the parish' who assist the gang because they want to protect their

children and grandchildren who are involved. Co-operation may also be preventive: Ana says some adults do favours for the gang in the hope that their work for them will shield their children from being targeted for recruitment or sent on dangerous errands. Many people become what Maritza calls 'indirectly involved. Maybe they don't kill, maybe they don't steal, but they inform.' Collaborators expose themselves to prosecution and punishment by authorities and to violence (not a few women and children have been shot while collecting extortion), not to mention their contribution to the violent exploitation of their neighbours. Associates can also be subject to the same harsh discipline as gang members. Some may have the risks of collaboration more or less imposed on them. Maritza says that once one child or teenager gets involved with the mara, 'the whole chain, the whole family has to leave [the neighbourhood] or the whole family has to collaborate.'

Figure 17. Five women, three of them minors, detained in zone 18, accused of collecting extortion on behalf of the M-18. Photo: PNC de Guatemala (PNC 2014a).

Opportunities as well as risks do come to those who co-operate. It is not just an individual who can access otherwise scarce resources by participating in the criminal economy. 'Whole families have lived from ill-gotten money,' a captain of El Romero's military task force said. And Maritza notes that in such a low-income neighbourhood, not every family discourages gang involvement once this money starts coming in. Gang ties can also bolster a family's above-board economic activities. Pastor Gerardo says the stores and services that are still able to operate in the barrio are protected by 'friendships between certain families,' and that those who compete with entrepreneurs close to the clique quickly come under pressure. Friends of the gang may also see its members' status and respect extended to them. A young middle-school instructor who describes himself as 'friendly' with the mareros says that because 'they identify me in other places' with El Romero's powerful and notorious clique, he received 'easy passage' through Mara-18 prisons and territories throughout the city. Collaboration in various degrees can be a means to seek both protection and privilege in an insecure environment.

iii. Confrontation

Maritza's husband Edwin says that adults in mara territory choose from three options: some struggle and flounder to get by in a tough economy, others allow themselves to benefit from the gang, and the last group participates directly in their criminal activities. There is actually also a fourth group, but those who choose to openly oppose the gang's control over the barrio are few, and they rarely last very long in the community these days. Those who do so need a great deal of local capital, allies to provide support and protection, and a willingness to leave when their situation becomes untenable.

When I first got to know her, Doña Ana preferred to appease gang members in the hopes of gaining affection and respect for her and her daughters. She shared the attitude of most locals that opposition was not worth the risk. She spoke to this one day, after gang members

had come to the school where she works to shoot someone inside. Another staff member accused her of having opened the door to them. Ana says the police questioned her at length, until she lost her temper, demanding of them:

> So what if I did? Even though I didn't open the door today, what would you have done if you went to the gate and they stuck a gun in your face? I have nine kids, how many do you have? If they had threatened me, I would have let them in, because I have people to live for.

However, Ana's position began to change when the military task force took up residence in El Romero at the end of September 2012. As president of her *asentamiento*'s Neighbourhood Committee, she was in frequent contact with the soldiers and officers. Before long, soldiers were standing guard over craft-making activities she organized for children her sector's alleyways and army captains were dropping by her house unannounced for coffee. By December, she was terrified of what it would mean for her if they really did withdraw the following month as announced. She would be an obvious target for reprisals as the gang reasserted its power, as almost no one in the community had been so visibly associated with the task force as she had been, generally because they were too cautious to put themselves in the situation that Ana now faced and had avoided any unnecessary interaction with military personnel.

The soldiers did stay on, and with an indefinite mandate. In early February 2013, however, Ana received death threats. She was told 'they' were tired of her 'putting her finger' in their business. The clique was largely able to operate as before—with some augmented discretion—under the military presence. But it was hardest for those who collected 'rents' from houses on the alleys immediately around where the barracks had been installed, and the threats came from them. With dozens of soldiers to hand at all times of the day, inhabitants of these blocks may have felt more confident that the task force would be a deterrent to punishment if they resisted. These gang collaborators said the soldiers had

taken away their living and that it was Ana who had 'their hands tied, because she's the one that made them be here.'

Figure 18. Soldiers help children make paper kites ahead of Día de los Muertos. Author photo, October 2012.

In this instance, Ana was able to call on her extensive network of allies and the reserves of goodwill amassed through her volunteer work on the Neighbourhood Committee. Friends helped her with errands when she couldn't leave the house, accompanied her through the streets when she had to, and covered for her at community meetings. The soldiers were exceedingly vigilant of her safety, and political contacts performed favours to help her secure documentation she might need to build a refugee case if she did have to leave. The tension dissipated gradually and without explicit resolution. The extortionists seem either to have found other ways to enforce their collection, alternative sources of income, or to have decided that carrying through on their threat was not worth the added

pressure from security forces likely to result from the murder of a prominent and well-liked community leader.

The reprieve was only temporary, however. In January 2014, Ana abandoned the family home she had so long dreamt of, saved for, and worked on to flee with her younger children to the rural eastern region of Guatemala that she had left as a teenager. She told me they had to leave 'over the same thing as last year.' After gang members sprayed her home with bullets one night, she decided that the risk was less tolerable than before and the protection available to her less reliable. Ana's exile is the most typical end for those seen to oppose the gang. Residents who contest their dominance over the neighbourhood are eventually targeted, either by death threats designed to make them withdraw from their activism or to leave their territory, or more indirectly by impossibly extravagant extortion demands intended to produce the same result. Ana's case is exceptional only in that her social capital (and considerable courage) allowed her to stay in open opposition to the mara for an unusually long time.

III. Position, Identity, and Risk

In deciding how they will manage the insecurity of their neighbourhood and position themselves in relation to its dominant gang, barrio residents also take into account how their identities and relationships give rise to particular risks. Different identities alter the combination of vulnerabilities, commitments, and attachments that barrio residents must weigh up in determining how they will meet the challenges of living in a red zone. The variable evaluation of kinds of risk and levels of threat that I encountered in El Romero reproduces the findings of earlier work on poor Guatemalans' perceptions of urban violence and insecurity (Moser and McIlwaine 2001, 2004). This research highlights how experiences and understandings of violence are internally differentiated within urban communities. Opinions about the most problematic forms of insecurity diverged especially along

gendered and generational lines (Moser and McIlwaine 2001). Adult men still worried about political violence and were typically most concerned by infrastructure deficiencies that hampered local safety or growth. Adult women, on the other hand, emphasized intra-family violence and lack of access to healthcare and education. Young people ranked gangs and drugs highly among the problems affecting their lives and neighbourhoods.

Barrio residents today likewise disagree on both the most problematic forms of danger and how levels of risk have been changing over time. For instance, Eddy, a young man in his twenties, says that two years ago, 'when people started to leave, the violence started to diminish.' But Sara, a young woman in her twenties, says that things had been improving somewhat until two years ago, when they took a turn for the worse. When people disagree like this, the crux of the matter is often what sort or source of risk they are prioritizing. Eddy was a gang member during the later phase of the barrio's gang war. He's now a born-again Christian with a secondary school diploma, a wife, and a child. Having made a break accepted by his clique, what he was most afraid of and exposed to—violent death—is now less likely to affect him. Sara says she feels 'unsafe as a woman, I feel unsafe as a human being, I feel unsafe as a mother.' For her, what 'changed two years ago is that you can no longer identify the delinquents' because mara members abandoned their distinctive style. Sara feels she is in more danger than before because she can no longer identify its sources and react appropriately. Unlike Eddy, risk for Sara has become more present, more menacing, and less controllable than before.

As Sara's invocation of her motherhood implies, perceptions of risk also depend on those close to you and what you fear for them. One mother of three sons between fourteen and twenty, who has lost two brothers and a nephew to gang executions, tells me that she feels sick with terror every time she sees or hears *bomberos*.[3] What she dreads most is not a risk that she personally faces as an older woman, but that one of her sons will fall victim to

[3] *Bomberos* (firemen) also, and often primarily, serve as paramedics.

the violence that threatens young men in the red zones. Similarly, Doña Ana's priorities and strategies for mitigating risk have a great deal to do with her children, and centre on the safety of her pretty teenage daughters even more than they do her own.

Young people are those with the most obvious specific vulnerabilities, due to their statistical preponderance as victims and perpetrators of contemporary urban violence in Guatemala. Their complex relationship with, and role in, the violent criminal economy of the maras is dealt with in detail in the next chapter. However, adult men, women, and parents of both genders (though primarily mothers because of the unequal distribution of child-rearing responsibilities) each face distinct challenges and struggle to elaborate appropriate responses to them. While they inhabit a shared landscape of danger, barrio residents navigate risk in highly personal and differentiated ways that seek to play to their strengths and advantages and to minimize their vulnerabilities.

i. Men

Despite her frequent grumblings about the hardships that fall disproportionately on women and mothers, Ana also thought that in some ways, 'maybe life is harder for the men' in neighbourhoods like El Romero. The way she sees it, women like her have more options than do men, who can rarely find legitimate gainful employment. Many choose between sporadic unskilled labour and taking their chances in the criminal economy (see also Pine 2008: 33). Women, she explains, can partake of a host of opportunities in the informal economy: bartering housework for food between neighbours, providing domestic labour to better-off families, or selling their cooking in street markets. 'There's always something to do' to keep a family going another day. A similar pattern existed in the Puerto Rican ghetto of East Harlem, where Bourgois (2003) situated crack-dealing within a much larger and more varied underground economy used by both men and women living in poverty to meet their subsistence needs. He notes that 'male income-generating strategies in the

underground economy are more publically visible,' thus tending to involve more risk, more attention from authorities, and more stigma than do those of women (Bourgois 2003: 2-3).

Men are at greater risk of dying violently than women are. In 2010, the official homicide rate was 75.1/100,000 for Guatemalan men and 9.4 for women (PNUD 2013: 54). However, men also worry about being on the other end of violence. The *machismo* that underpins the dominant model of Central American masculinity both valorises and normalises men's violence (Hume 2009: 128-129). The drinking, smoking, womanizing, fighting 'macho', the traditional stereotype of lower-class Central American masculinity, is in some ways outmoded, and by no means exhausts what the region's poor urban men are or aspire to be (Pine 2008: 97). But male informants in El Romero nevertheless spoke to the ongoing power and pressure of certain ideals of *machismo*, described by Lancaster (1992: 40) as a 'cult of aggressive masculinity, defined as a mode of sexual and physical conquest.'

A man in his late twenties says the biggest challenge he faced growing up in El Romero was 'trying not to stain your soul by killing someone.' Rafa thought it almost miraculous that he had made it out of his youth and a period of gang involvement without having done so. 'I was crazy,' he says, 'I was really crazy. And it was only thanks to I-Don't-Know-Who that I never killed anybody.' Rafa, Cadejo, and Arturo (all of whom are now violence prevention educators) each told me how close they came to killing when they found out who had attacked their friend Wuicho and left him for dead in a *barranco*. They say they could and would have done it easily—Cadejo even slept with a handgun under his pillow for a time—and they all credit Wuicho with stopping them. They grew up in an environment where men 'often learn to be men through exposure to violence' and its use is 'central to the performance of masculinity' (Hume 2009: 172, 48). They spoke to the challenges, 'when you live in that system,' of setting and maintaining alternative ethical boundaries. The problem they confronted was at once practical and moral—how to balance living up to the standards they set for themselves against gaining and maintaining the

'credible reputation for vengeance' in response to aggression that protects men within street cultures (Anderson 1999: 10).

Murci, a retired barrio marero critical of the unregulated violence he sees today, says that 'in the old codes, those fights had a limit, man.' Fights escalated and ended according to certain implicit rules of proportionality, which allowed men to anticipate when violence was likely to begin but also, just as importantly, to know where it would end. It has become far more difficult to perform the *machista* model of aggressive masculinity with confidence that you can avoid both killing and getting yourself killed.

ii. Women

The particular forms of insecurity and risk faced by women are not confined to encounters with violence; in El Romero and other socio-economically marginal communities, women also live their economic precarity in gendered ways. It is very common in these neighbourhoods for households to be headed by single women. Ana's partner of nearly twenty-five years comes and goes periodically from the family home, and rarely contributes significant income when he is present. She complains that the financial burdens of providing for a family alone are compounded by stigma against single mothers and their children. She claims that children not carrying both a father and mother's last name can still be excluded from schools, that working mothers cannot find (let alone afford) childcare, and that landlords often will not rent to single mothers.[4] 'There are a pile of things that hold back a single mother. We have to do the impossible to get by.' In a newly founded *asentamiento*, Marta had the same complaint. She had participated in the land invasion 'to try to get our own bit of land, because renting, with kids? They don't accept you anywhere, except for impossible money.'

[4] Guatemala follows the usual Hispanic practice of forming a child's surname from the father's last name followed by the mother's last name. In typical everyday usage, however, most Guatemalans use only the first (patrilineal) surname.

Informal relations of mutual aid remain crucial in El Romero, even if there is less trust behind them than before. They are most prominent in the survival strategies of adult women, who call upon them for support in times of personal crisis or for everyday assistance, in return for providing similar help in times of need. Ana's network of care includes many friends and neighbours and now spans five generations of women within her family: Ana often looks after her grandchildren while her daughters work, her older daughters or mother look after Ana's younger children while she works or attends meetings, Ana's daughters provide daily care for their sisters' children, and Ana takes care of her father when her mother has to attend to Ana's grandmother. When Ana couldn't afford any celebration for Karen's eighth birthday, eighteen year-old Hailey bought a cake with one of her first paycheques from the army. When Ana couldn't afford to celebrate Lena's *quinceañera*, Lena's older half-sister paid for a party as she had a good job working for a congressman at the time.

By combining their financial resources and labour and contributing disproportionately to the collective pool when they are in a position to do so, the women of Ana's family are able to buffer themselves and each other from some of the risks of their economic insecurity. When older women like Ana allude to or define the old codes of the barrio, ethical notions of reciprocity and decency feature prominently, and these almost always include an emphasis on strong and supportive family relationships. The reciprocal aid provided by this network of female kin reveals the practical effects of this moral premium on family values.

Women in the barrio also face gendered threats to their physical security. Moser and McIlwaine (2001: 56) found that violence 'between spouses was so widespread that it was an assumed occurrence within households' in marginal urban Guatemalan communities. More than a decade later, Sonia says women are physically mistreated virtually 'within every home' in El Romero. It is less clear how—or whether—women perceive as a risk a form of

violence that is so normalized. Is an assumed eventuality threatening or frightening in the same way as a dreaded but more distant possibility?[5]

Whereas Moser and McIlwaine (2001: 48) found that domestic violence was ubiquitous, but not a high-priority concern for poor urban women, acute fear of sexual violence outside the home was a constant of their daily lives. When I asked people what, if any, forms of violence affected women particularly, they often named both domestic and sexual violence. But no woman ever ranked domestic violence as one of the most severe forms of insecurity affecting her or her community. By contrast, they regularly listed sexual assault among their biggest fears and problems. Stories of rapes, often of very young women in abandoned homes, were frequently exchanged between women, circulating as cautionary tales.

While both men and women perceive their risk of violent mortality to have risen with the growth and evolution of urban insecurity, women are subject to types of fatal violence seen to be novel and somehow especially disturbing. These 'femicides'—homicides that target women in specifically gendered ways that often involve mutilation and dismemberment—have generated substantial public anxiety in Guatemala over the last decade. Arturo cites the intensification of violence against women as evidence that the maras 'really lost their scruples.' He claims that during his youth in the 1980s, 'it was unthinkable' to seriously injure a woman. Because of this, he says, when they started to kill women, it shocked the whole community. As in the *Transurbano* dismemberment, generating such shock can, in fact, be the primary motivation for killing a woman. A teenage girl affirms that lately women have been killed differently than men. They are murdered 'in

[5] Because domestic violence is generally thought to be both unremarkable and private, it was difficult to access candid accounts about it as an outsider (on this issue as a challenge in ethnographic research, see Lancaster 1992: 34-36). More focused and tailored research would be needed to analyse the subject more fully and to illuminate how intra-family violence interacts with other forms of violence and insecurity in red zone communities.

a really ugly way,' she says, but doesn't know why the mara kills women rather than men with particular brutality, nor what puts any particular woman at risk of dying this way.[6]

This inability to predict what behaviour puts them at risk is a crucial component of why these murders cause so much distress. It is commonly assumed, by both barrio residents and the broader public, that when a man turns up dead it is because he was either involved or in trouble with the gang. But women seem to be killed simply for having female bodies. The order the gang's killers received the night they spread a girl's corpse around the barrio's new bus stops was '*mujer*': woman, and the rest to their taste. Rafa and Cadejo identify the helplessness of women to control the violence in their lives as something that, in their view, makes it considerably worse to be a woman than a man in the red zone. How can you behave so as to mitigate risk when 'simply the fact of being a woman means that they're going to kill you?'

iii. Parents

Parents in El Romero have always struggled to protect their children from deprivation and danger, and trying to keep them out of trouble with both gangs and the authorities has always been part of this. Sonia says that the greatest challenge they face in the barrio is to ensure their children 'don't slip through our hands. As a mother, that's a risk you run every day.' Rafa, raised by a single mother, praises the determination and ferocity with which the neighbourhood's 'lionesses' defended local children. He remembers many times growing up when groups of women would emerge from their homes to shout abuse at police or soldiers detaining young people, sometimes successfully preventing their being taken away. When the staircase passing in front of their home was the frontier in a turf battle between mara cliques, Ana tired of getting stuck inside with her children during the frequent shootings.

[6] Male cadavers do sometimes show the torture and mutilation typical of the murders she was talking about. But female homicide victims are highly overrepresented among those subjected to such pre- and post-mortem brutality (for instance, Constantino 2006: 112).

During one especially tiresome gun battle, she simply used a machete to cut a safer rear exit in the *lámina* their home was then made of, took the children out to complete the day's errands, and informed her husband when he came home that he would need to find them a second door.

But parents often feel they have lost control of their children's safety as the violence around them has changed. Alfonso, a pastor, was at a loss to help his eighteen year-old son in his attempt to escape gang life. Junior rebuffed his advice, saying 'Dad, you do not understand.' 'Sometimes,' Alfonso said to me, 'as a parent you don't even know what it is you don't understand. I try to understand, but understand what?' Once again, the importance of knowledge in generating a sense that insecurity can be managed is clear. Without understanding the violence that their children perpetrate and suffer, parents do not know what actions they can take to protect them. It is frightening and heart-breaking to Alfonso that his son has become unknowable to him. All he knows, he says, is that as an M-18 member, 'that boy did barbarous things. Until the day that I die, I will not know all that he has done.'

For many parents, not knowing how to help children navigate the dangers of the streets, protecting them takes the form of confining them inside. Don Justo says that he forbids the two grandsons in his care, aged eleven and thirteen, from leaving the house alone, or from going outside at all after 6 p.m. 'Not to keep them prisoner, you understand—for their safety.' Ana took other, but similarly drastic, measures reacting to dangers she saw around her children. She jokes that, with seven daughters, her 'house might as well have a sign advertising "Accessories for Gentlemen."' Her greatest fear 'is that a marero comes to steal what I have protected here.' To avoid this happening in Hailey's case, she forced her to join the army to remove her from the barrio and the 'involved' boys she associated with. Arturo, although he condemned her choice, understood it arose because of foreshortened horizons imposed by both poverty and insecurity:

> In El Romero, the worry is for today, for finding today's bread, for keeping your kid away from the mara. [You think,] 'Oh, my girl is tangling with a gang member?' The question is, 'how do I keep her from being dismembered tomorrow?' not 'what do I want for her five years from now?'

Rafa, too, understood Ana's desperation to protect her daughter, but disliked the outcome. 'Great that she wanted to get her away from the mara, but she just took her out of one pack of violent armed members of a *machista* organization and stuck her in another.' He is critical of El Romero's parents in general for seeing little hope for their daughters other than to align them with one group or another of the professionally violent men who operate around them. 'Either you look for a gangster for them, or you look for a soldier for them, so that your daughter will be economically "secure."' By having Hailey join the army, Ana at least gained her daughter a measure of financial security in her own right.

IV. Negotiating Positions

Barrio residents employ a range of strategies in their efforts to shield themselves from the dangers of inhabiting a gang territory. Their choices, however, are ultimately constrained: they can leave, they can stay and try to avoid the gang, or they can stay and collaborate with the gang. Perhaps in part because their tactics for practically managing their situation are so limited, residents pair these with morally-freighted negotiations that aim to justify, rationalize, or clarify their position. They may no longer feel confident that they know how likely it is that any given person might do them harm, or that they are able to prevent their own victimization, but a certain reassurance may be gained by mapping out an ethical landscape and defining their position within it. It appears that as the sense of disorder in their social and physical environment rises, and their capacity to predict and react to it diminishes, residents increasingly turn to moral narratives, discourses, and taxonomies in their efforts to regain some feeling of control and stability.

In this, they partake of what Caldeira (2000: 77) argues is a practice common to all social classes: 'what one might call symbolic labour to make sense of their experiences of violence. One of the main activities of this labour is to differentiate the image of the criminal as far as possible from oneself.' In Guatemala City, those who inhabit the 'red zones', where the contemporary criminality crisis has been located in the public imagination, have to labour harder to achieve this separation than do more privileged sectors. They undertake the work of making sense of their situation in a number of ways, including through rationalizing accounts of violence and its victims, constantly sorting the morally worthy and blameworthy, and defending certain ethical visions of decency and community against the depredations of insecurity.

i. Distancing and Distinguishing

Discourses about crime and violence establish a kind of moral taxonomy of the public sphere, distinguishing victims, perpetrators, and crime fighters, those with clean and dirty hands (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2006: 8). Public representations of mara members commonly characterize them as essentially destructive, enemy and alien to the decent citizens they victimize. The splitting-off of criminals from society is one of the main effects of Caldeira's (2000) 'talk of crime.' In her influential account of São Paulo, she argues that this discursive separation bolstered a process of literal separation as a 'city of walls' arose to keep the 'criminals' apart from 'decent' citizens. Because Caldeira is concerned with the atomization and privatization of urban space, she largely focuses on the sectors with the resources to participate in these trends of spatial segregation. She does note, however, that as one slides lower down the socio-economic scale, the categorical separation of decent and delinquent and the moral certainty it permits become much harder to maintain. As a result, it is 'among the poor that discourses become more contradictory and elaborated' (2000: 78).

Perhaps because it is so difficult to establish where the line lies between mara and barrio, or determine where any given person stands relative to this illusory boundary, my informants frequently offered narratives distancing themselves from the criminal element. Guatemala City's better-off tend to live behind barred windows in houses surrounded by high walls in *colonias* whose borders are patrolled by hired men with big guns. Not everyone can purchase this physical isolation from the dangerous, but where you cannot achieve literal distance, you can at least assert moral difference. Caldeira (2000: 54) points out that people who confront negative stereotypes of themselves typically 'do not question the stereotype but instead disassociate themselves from the images and try to associate them with others, usually neighbours.' These efforts include claims that are directed primarily beyond the excluded groups or community, with the ultimate objective of convincing outsiders that one does not belong to or with the denigrated *them*. But in El Romero, they are also part of an ongoing internal conversation through which residents sort themselves and each other into moral categories.

Many of them assert, much as did members of indigenous communities subject to wartime violence, that those killed must have been '*metido en babosadas*'—involved in silliness, nonsense, stupidity (Nelson 2009: 173). They make sense of what is happening by expanding the circle of culpability to whomever violence touches. But experience undoes such reassuring claims. Juana, for instance, tells me that 'innocent people die' in the neighbourhood. A few minutes later, though, she insists that 'everyone [killed] has something to do with it.' Not long after, she explains the difficulty of determining innocence and guilt, since so many of the young people involved are 'forced' to commit violence under the threat of violence to themselves and their families.

Given the gang's reliance on an extensive network of collaborators since the rise of the extortion economy, it has become increasingly difficult to assign responsibility to a defined set of individual deviants. As Rafa observed, everyone has their connections to the mara and

its network. Those who dominate and terrorize the neighbourhood are often well-known to its residents. 'One has seen them small,' Sonia says, and she cannot see the threatening gangsters without remembering those children she knew. The pandilleros are both intimately familiar—the vulnerable little boys who grew up on your block, with your children, in your home—and monstrously threatening. They are in part so monstrous because their relationship with the community is at once so very intimate and so very violent. Its clique is not an entity that stands apart from the barrio by any means, despite considerable efforts expended by residents to set themselves apart from the gang. I am guilty of reproducing this illusion: for ease and concision I use 'residents' in opposition to 'clique', as though gang members are not residents, as though residents don't make up the gang and its collaborators.

Distinguishing between decent and delinquent is a daily pursuit for red zone residents. On the trip to market recounted at the beginning of this chapter, Ana labelled the numerous unsavoury characters we encountered as '*desgraciados*', a word with connotations of both shamefulness and shamelessness. As we walked, she explained that it was a fine thing, morally, to be poor, provided that you struggle to better yourself and your circumstances. The 'shame of the poor' are those who wait for others to change things for them or, worse, feel entitled to take what others have worked for. She draws a clear distinction between the worthy and unworthy, poisonous poor. In the Dominican Republic, Bobea (2010) found residents of Santo Domingo's 'pariah barrios' employing similar discursive tactics to produce separation. They characterized themselves as 'decent folk' while emphasizing 'the "otherness" of the criminals they fear and the externality of the violence they produce' (Bobea 2010: 176-77, 180).

Wacquant (2002) criticizes Anderson's (1999) work on ghetto street culture for the dichotomized and allegedly moralizing view of inner city residents that he presents. But Anderson's language of decent and indecent would not seem foreign to barrio residents,

who align themselves carefully and explicitly with different sets of values and define their success—as economic, social, and moral agents—in those terms. The opposition so many residents mark between decent and delinquent represents a crucial moral boundary for them. As suggested in the previous chapter, the importance of moral status relative to neighbourhood norms and values may lie behind the language of delinquency most often used to describe local gang members. Criminality relies on external, authoritative categories. To be a criminal can be a factual matter: we can say that someone has or has not committed what the state deems a crime, regardless of our feelings about that law or the state in general. But delinquency and disgrace are fundamentally moral judgments. They convey a sense of a failing of duty, a disobedience to, or breach of, a standard, which recalls how residents describe the mara's move away from shared norms of reciprocity and community solidarity. The pandilleros and their helpers are delinquents for breaking those codes and behaving with scorn for the values that defined a poor but worthy community. They are only secondarily, and almost incidentally, criminal.

ii. Codes, Claims, and Convictions

The rules that govern social life are perpetually subject to dispute as we 'constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong' (Cover 1983: 4), in part through the kind of ongoing, everyday process of distinction and classification undertaken by barrio residents. Codes provide the backdrop of meaning against which social behaviour takes place: there is a communicative specificity to acts undertaken with reference to a norm, either in affirming or transgressing it (Cover 1983: 8). The 'normative vocabulary' that is uniquely triggered by such behaviour allows for the formulation of 'demands, criticisms, or acknowledgments' and provides 'resources for justification, condemnation and argument by actors within the group' (Hart 1994: 85; Cover 1983: 46).

This may clarify the work that negotiations around decency and delinquency and talk of the old codes are doing for barrio residents. Narratives of praise and blame advance claims about the desirable shape, functioning, and rules of the social world that they inhabit. They provide tools and resources as they try to negotiate 'the constraints of reality and the demands of an ethic' (Cover 1983: 9). This struggle to balance practice and ethics is a daily one in El Romero. Some residents continue to put into practice the norms associated with the old codes of the barrio, while for others, belief in the code's continued existence seems simply to provide psychological assurance and support.

There are remnants in the community of the old codes of local solidarity that indicate they remain (at least for some) a standard of ethical behaviour, even if they can no longer practically or safely orient action in a consistent fashion. As in the two poor Salvadoran communities described by Hume, despite reporting high levels of distrust in response to insecurity, 'people still look out for each other' in El Romero (2009: 96-97). Though Ana does not allow older boys into her house anymore, I often arrived to find some neighbourhood child at her lunch table because she had decided they weren't getting enough food at home. She did this habitually, even though there were many days when food was short for her own large family. A woman living in the same *asentamiento* fostered two local orphans despite their behavioural problems and the considerable burden of the extra mouths to feed, bodies to clothe, and minds to school. Mono and several other teenage boys volunteer hours every week to organize games, activities, and drop-in classes for younger kids. In each case, their image of themselves as decent people depended on providing this kind of aid, even though they can no longer rely on the reciprocity they may once have hoped for in return.

Those who continue to identify with the codes of the barrio may feel they are fighting a doomed rear-guard action against self-interest and predation. But there were some hints that these sorts of altruistic, community-minded choices can still garner a measure of status and even protection. Don Beto, Ana's close friend, told me early in my fieldwork that he and

Ana received the affection and protection of their neighbours in return for their skills and commitment: her political savvy, his work as a volunteer paramedic. 'Everyone loves us,' he said, claiming even the gang was respectful and gave them no trouble. That much had obviously changed by the end of my research. Although local support was ultimately not enough to make staying in the barrio possible, people did rally around Ana when she was most at risk—facing death threats in part because of her community work—and helped her through the period of most acute danger.

Don Beto was not the only one who attributed some lingering allegiance to local norms even to mara members. When a high-ranking gang member was shot dead in El Romero by his own clique, stories went around that he was killed for trying to protect the neighbourhood. 'El Barranco', so named for the number of corpses he had fed to the gorges, was said by some to have died defending the old codes, opposing the extortion of barrio families. Others, however, countered that he had been executed not for resisting extortion, but for skimming from its profits. Those who told the first story may be looking to believe in something particular about local gang members and the codes at least some of them might still hold to.

Expressing a similar hope, a teenager claims there are times when the mara and barrio residents still 'help each other among themselves.' Her cousin had recently had her phone stolen by a gang associate. More senior members identified the culprit and returned the phone. Considering that her father and brothers had done the clique many 'favours', it appears to have been an instance of rewarding collaboration, rather than simply redressing wrongs against fellow community members. Rafa also claims that some aura of the codes still inhibits gang members. He maintains that he has the right call out the gang's *chinches* (bedbug: bloodsucker)—even Lobo, the local kid several years younger than Rafa, who became national leader of the Mara-18—for the way that they disrespect and prey on the barrio. According to Rafa, he can call them all 'sons of whores' to their faces without

consequence because, as an M-18 member in the 1990s, 'I am from the codes of before.' Whether or not he could actually get away with insulting one of the country's most powerful gangsters, Rafa's assertion alleges some kind of endurance to the moral authority of the old model.

iii. Nostalgia and Resistance

Narratives and claims about bygone codes reassert a vision of moral order in an environment experienced as frighteningly disorderly. As the order of predictability fails, these narratives of moral order flourish. They are not only a way to explain what is felt to have gone wrong in the barrio; they also help residents to cope with insecurity in the present. People continue to draw on the rules of the barrio's old code to interpret and justify their experience.

Obviously inflected with nostalgia, it is now difficult to ascertain to what extent narratives of the *códigos de barrio* present a factually accurate picture of the neighbourhood's history. Nostalgia is often discussed in terms of distortion of the past, as the defect of 'inauthentic longing' (Dames 2010: 271-272). However, the longing can be very authentic, even if the history it imagines isn't perfectly so. Despite dismissing the noble, honour-bound bandit as a 'figment of the human imagination,' Blok (2001 [1972]: 20) allows that such figures and the stories about them are in a sense 'real since they represent fundamental aspirations of real people.' The question then becomes not whether a particular nostalgic narrative corresponds to a real time, a true place, but what hopes, needs, or claims motivate its articulation in the present? Nostalgia here becomes an 'action rather than an attitude' (Pickering and Keightely 2006: 937), associated not merely with moods and memories, but with social (inter)action.

Attempting to reconstruct El Romero's history through its codes would be, I believe, to cast these narratives in the wrong tense: they are providing residents with 'visions of

community, not echoes of it' (Geertz 1983: 218). These codes complicate the traditional anthropological view, by which people's ideas and statements about norms 'are held to represent society as it "normally" exists' (Strathern 1985: 127). We need, instead, to focus on how people use norms and normative language to reclaim 'normalcy' amid disruption. In her introduction to a volume on ethnography in 'unstable places', Greenhouse (2002) observes that it is through elaborating and exchanging everyday narratives—frequently including tropes of loss and lament similar to the nostalgia encountered in El Romero—that people take on the challenge of adjusting themselves to profoundly altered social systems or situations.

In the wake of economic collapse on the Zambian Copperbelt, Ferguson (1999) encountered confusion, despair, and a profound sense of decline. Yet though their ability to understand their experience according to old rules and expectations had rapidly diminished, people were not passive in their disorientation (Ferguson 1999: 14, 19). They struggled towards new narratives of progress and dignity out of a 'pragmatic logic, the need to come to terms with a social world that can no longer be grasped in terms of the old scripts' (Ferguson 1999: 252). It was often with reference to the past, by reinterpreting and redeploying old scripts, that these new understandings took shape. Zambians repurposed and reimagined their myths, as El Romero residents have done with their stories of the barrio's codes, such that they could provide 'a set of categories and premises that continue to shape people's experiences and interpretations of their lives' (Ferguson 1999: 14). Greenhouse (2002: 15) urges the importance of 'attending ethnographically to people's active husbandry of the symbolic resources with which they might claim a space for their self-identities within the chaos of moral, social, and economic contradictions.' It is in these terms that I want to consider narratives of neighbourhood codes: as an active marshalling of normative resources in the struggle to adapt social practice to daunting instability.

In Rafa's work with local young people, he tries to transmit to them the memory of the community's old codes in a way that draws on the 'past as a set of resources for the future' (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 937). He wants them to 'remember what we were' in the hope that it will influence their conception of 'what we could be.' 'Nostalgic laments' can be mobilized in the service of both 'moral critique of the present' and formulating alternative hopes and plans for the future (Angé and Berliner 2014: 5).Their moral discourses, so frequently based on narratives of neighbourhood codes and community values, often seem to provide residents with more room for manoeuvre and space for (at least psychological) resistance to the mara's domination than they can find in terms of practical action or opposition. Flouting some of the most basic local norms has facilitated the clique's aggressive predation on the barrio. But it has also meant that they have, in a sense, abandoned the field of ethical claim represented by the old codes of the barrio. By failing to advance a competing vision that includes the whole community or offer some claim to legitimacy for their power over their neighbourhood, the mara has left the old codes as the still-dominant normative system. With tenacious moral notions of decency, family, and community confronted by the exigencies of survival in a gang territory, barrio residents strive 'to imagine principled lives they can practicably lead' (Geertz 1983: 234).

Conclusion

Though they often say that they are living an intolerable, impossible situation, most residents cope and carry on. Some, seeking protection and advantage, align themselves with the criminal economy and those in it. But for many others, their strategies aim less at building bridges than at insulating themselves from danger and the dangerous. People try to collect knowledge about levels and sources of risk, take decisions about how to navigate this insecurity, and articulate claims about the wrongs and responsibilities that arise from it.

These tactics accompany the perceived deterioration of internal codes that had defined the normative community and life of the barrio. For Cover (1983: 6), to 'inhabit a *nomos* is to know how to *live* in it.' Residents complain that the integrity and reliability of their *nomos* has been lost, and they express bafflement at how they are to live in this 'unpredictable new mode of danger' (Moodie 2010: 2). They expend a great deal of effort in negotiating the ethics as well as the practicalities of their lives, struggling to re-assert a workable *nomos* that can make a slippery world hold still, a frightening one habitable.

As their sense of disorder in their social and physical environment rises, residents appear increasingly to turn to ethical narratives, discourses, and taxonomies in their efforts to regain some feeling of control and stability. The *códigos de barrio* are more aspirational than practical, more narrative protest against disorder than a workable instrument of social regulation. But their norms lend ethical weight and unity to the space and history shared by El Romero's residents. It is such beliefs about the kind of place they have been and should be that facilitate residents' moral discourses on order as a genre of regret and resistance amid disorder.

Although this *nomos* no longer seems to shape life in the barrio, it is far from forgotten. It is invoked all the time, sustained as a 'lexicon of normative action' by these very acts of eulogising it (Cover 1983: 9). In this sense, today's stories of the old codes might be doing more for residents that merely memorialising the arc of a downward spiral. They keep alive an imagination of the community as autonomous, solidary, and resilient, which retains moral weight even if it can no longer serve as a reliable compass for action. The language of loss and lament that we hear used in talk about the codes of the barrio might also be read and deployed as a language of claim and of positive assertion—about who we are or were, about what we deserve and why we are hurt, about what we owe to each other, after all.

Chapter 6
'And where is this Country Gonna Put Us?' Young People in and out of the Gang

Introduction

One October afternoon in El Romero, I sat on a basketball court in a compound built by a departed NGO watching a teenage gang boss graduate from middle school. I had come with Doña Ana's family to see eighteen year-old Hailey receive her c*iclo básico* diploma.[1] She almost hadn't made it, having left home and school in July to live with her boyfriend. He was bad news, said to be 'involved in things.' 'An extortionist,' her mother reported, 'already a killer.' To everyone's relief, she was home by September, after she got bored of him or he got tired of her or her mother's threats got through to her. It depended who you asked.

Unexpectedly, the second name called as the students marched in was that of the seventeen year-old I had just learned was the mara clique's senior authority on the streets of El Romero. The previous night, during a late interview in the back room of a Pentecostal church, a recent defector had told me he was the '*llavero*'. This is the clique member charged with relaying orders from the incarcerated leaders, guarding the weapons cache, and making judgement calls in situations that did not allow for referrals up the chain of command. 'What he orders,' I was told, 'here it gets done.'

The thin, compact boy sat with splayed legs, making a good effort to look as tough as a young man might hope to while wearing a uniform of lavender dress shirt and navy bowtie. As girls from younger grades performed uncomfortably sexual choreography to US pop songs, the clique's younger members and hangers-on turned out to show their support for their *llavero*. This took the form of scattering themselves among the chickens hopping about the cement risers around the court and striking self-consciously nonchalant lounging poses.

[1] The *Ciclo Básico* ends with the completion of the ninth year of schooling.

After the national anthem played the students out, Hailey—who within three months was forced into the army by her mother to curtail another romantic entanglement with a gang member—tearfully thanked her teachers for the discretionary second chances that let her graduate. Meanwhile, the young gangster's parents smiled broadly, presenting him with a graduation ring and posing for photos with their arms around him.

The young men and women I watched that afternoon had made, and were making, decisions about 'what they want to do in their lives, or rather what society and the reality of the Colonia will *let* them do in their lives,' as Padre Martín phrased it. Building on my discussion of local coping strategies in the previous chapter, this chapter examines how El Romero's children, adolescents, and young adults negotiate physical, economic, and moral insecurity. How do young people perceive the landscape of risk around them and evaluate their vulnerability and that of their peers? Why, how, and when do they get involved in the gang? What do they look for, and what do they get? Conversely, what does the criminal economy mean to and for those outside of it? What do they hope for and expect?

While much of the last chapter looked at the ways in which neighbourhood residents try to cope *with* the mara, a major theme here is how and why young people may seek to cope *through* the gang. Much more than for adults, for whom the mara almost always represents a practical and moral obstacle, some younger residents view the gang as a tool and conduit for their own efforts at social navigation.[2]

Young people's experiences of a shifting terrain of options and expectations, both within and without the gang, are central to understanding the reality of insecurity in Guatemala City's red zones. Locally as well as nationally and regionally, young people are the most likely to become both victims and perpetrators of violence. Their prominent role in public discourses of criminality and insecurity also limits their opportunities in mainstream society

[2] Vigh (2006) uses the concept of 'social navigation' to examine how and why young people in Guinea-Bissau participated in armed conflict. However, his use of the term seems to imply a more tactical and calculated approach than what I observed in El Romero's young people, whose strategies are primarily reactive.

and the licit economy. The barrio's young people are often described in ways that evoke the idea that they are infected with threat, tainted with risk. Rafa explains that, as much as he, Wuicho, and Cadejo would like to include adolescents in their informal violence prevention programs, they target their projects to younger children because 'the little kids are less contaminated.' To be young is to be in danger, but to be young is also to be dangerous.

i. Encounters with Violence

A teenager from an infamous town on the capital's periphery says that what makes him most afraid is that young people like him in places like that 'are the closest to the violence.' From Johannesburg to Medellín, from Detroit to São Paulo, the young and poor are the most likely to both kill violently and to be violently killed. In Latin America as a whole, 49 per cent of all homicide victims are males aged fifteen to 29; the homicide rate for young people is double that of the regional average, and Guatemala—along with four other Latin American countries—has one of the five highest 'youth homicides rates' globally (PNUD 2013: 53). Fully 72 per cent of homicide victims in the country are under 30, and El Romero's zone 18 is the most deadly place in the capital in which to be a young person (Mendoza and Méndez 2013: 4).

The director of El Romero's largest primary school estimates that 'about 98 per cent' of her students have been 'affected' by violence. Death was already part of local life for the generation born there in its first years, those who grew up with and through the earliest mara cliques. Especially from the late 1990s, they saw their peer group decimated. Arturo says that of everyone he studied with, there are only four or five left, all women. The men are 'in prison, killed by the pandilla, killed for being pandilleros, killed by the police, killed by booze or drugs.' Cadejo starts his own list of casualties among his school friends not by naming the dead, but asking, 'Now, who's still alive?'

Exposure to violence both in the streets and in their homes remains exceedingly common for children growing up in El Romero. Levenson (2013: 50) cites a 2010 survey conducted by the PNC (National Civilian Police) in a Guatemala City red zone in which 135 of 170 children under eleven 'said that they had witnessed murders, and they could often describe in detail where the bullets went and the way the blood squirted out.' In a newspaper article on the presence of children at homicide scenes, Guatemalan psychiatrist Carlos de León Zea distinguishes between their effects on children from neighbourhoods with low rates of violence who "may suffer from post-traumatic stress" and those from areas with high death rates, where "the condition of violence is internalized in the minds of the children as something normal" (Paxtor et al. 2011: 23).

Figure 19. An image posted on a Facebook page run by barrio teenagers. The smiling man in the shot-up car announces, 'I've just come from zone 18, guys...and everything's quiet over there.'

However problematic the assertion that children from red zones are not traumatized by witnessing murders, violence does distort what passes for normal (see Winton 2005: 170). A nine year-old girl I meet at one of Rafa's juggling sessions in the barrio's roughest sector says there are lots of shootings outside her house, so it makes a nice change when we come

to play instead. The photo above, posted by a teenager to a local Facebook group, is a knowing joke on their own twisted sense of normalcy.

Children learn about their vulnerability very young. In Edwin and Maritza's home, their daughter's godfather gives a graphic account of a nine year-old's rape, torture, and dismemberment by the gang. His goddaughter sits in his lap, and he squeezes her shoulders to emphasize just how young and small the murdered girl had been: 'Just like this one.' As a parent, he says, 'you are powerless in the face of such savagery.' What must it mean for a child to live not only with stories like that about people like you, but with such blunt confessions that the grown-ups in your life are helpless to protect you? Eighteen year-old Mono says they learn resignation. He says his peers accept that violence 'is always going to be there and there's nothing you can do about it. It's just what's there, and it falls to you to live it.' And so, with few other options, Rafa says that 'the kids go about learning ways to survive.'

ii. Barrio Space and Community Codes

The spatial and social landscapes that the barrio's young people inhabit differ from those of previous generations. Violence, Cadejo says, transformed the streets 'from a place of play into a place of danger.' Time in and knowledge of the streets once played a central role in young men's processes of identity formation. Rafa boasts that he was 'born in the streets.' He would come home from school—later from work—drop his things and be off, disappearing into the neighbourhood for hours. Today, the street is clearly a much less familiar destination. Cadejo, Rafa, and Wuicho sometimes host informal juggling lessons in empty lots, an effort to reclaim some spaces for play. It's common to see children who live just blocks apart meeting for the first time. A generation ago, it would have been unthinkable for them to be strangers, but the social spaces that generated bonds across the community from a young age no longer exist.

To a certain extent, however, time in the streets is still essential due to the cramped and uncomfortable conditions of many barrio homes. As one young man says, 'in the barrio, the only spaces you really have are the streets.' 'You've seen the size of the houses around here,' Pastor Gerardo says. 'How are six kids going to play inside? Of necessity they are going to go out in the street, and what are they going to learn there?' For one thing, they learn to distrust authorities. In a parking lot at the bottom of El Romero, whenever a group of boys between six and eight notice a police or military patrol coming, they scatter, hissing to each other '*¡Aguas, aguas, hay jura!*'—Careful, careful, the law!—imitating the lingo and aversions of older boys.

'The street, see, is *maestro* (master and teacher) of the little ones,' Murci says. Through informal and often implicit processes of 'street socialization,' children acquire rules and habits to guide their behaviour in neighbourhood spaces and learn 'the routines and rhythms of the street subculture of gangs' (Vigil 2014: 49, 56). However, the barrio's young people, like its adults, have in recent years seen these rules and routines break down in important ways due to the mara's predatory turn. Mono singles out the absence of reliable predictive tools as one of the major problems he and his peers face, that 'in the end, you do not have an established code.'

The *códigos de barrio* are strikingly absent from this chapter. Mono referred back to neighbourhood codes that he hears a great deal about from adult mentors of his like Arturo and Rafa, both a generation older then him. Kevin contrasts his experience of mara membership after the rise of extortion with older gang codes, which he had learned about from brothers who belonged years earlier. They are exceptions, though. For most teenagers and children in the barrio today—who have grown up under the Mara-18 monopoly established in 2008 and are unlikely to recall other models of the clique-community relationship—the 'codes of the barrio' do not seem to be a particularly important reference point as either predictive rules or ethical standards. Unlike adults, few young people can

invoke the *códigos de barrio* as a source of moral values such as solidarity and reciprocity that, in their own experience, have been not only decent but doable. They may thus be less likely to employ narratives of 'old codes' as part of the kind of normative affirmation and resistance described in the previous chapter.

The loss of both practical and moral support for young people, which might have been described through talk of neighbourhood codes, is encapsulated in the metamorphosis of the figure of the *paro*. The term means a good deed done for someone. But it was also the person who did these for you, your 'brothers of the street.' The *paro*, Mono says, was 'the one you trust in. If you're walking in the street and get assaulted in an alley, your *paro* is the one who doesn't leave.' Rafa tells me they were also available for less dramatic forms of assistance. Seeing there was no food in your house, they might say, 'You haven't got anything to eat? Come to my house. Even if it's only half a tortilla, we'll eat there together.' Food, beds, advice, girls, streets, families, you shared everything with your *cuate*, your *paro*. The plays Rafa and Cadejo put on for schools and youth groups depict this kind of sharing between friends as a mode of coping with poverty and a crucial component of a childhood spent out of the home, out in the streets, with each other. To do and to be a *paro* was at the core of how young people interpreted and enacted the barrio's more general ethos of localized mutual aid in their relationships with each other. But both older generations and the young people growing up in the barrio today say that level of trust and support between peers is a thing of the past, that the gang took from them both the word itself and the back-up it had represented. Today, a *paro* is a mara errand-boy, a reliable potential recruit. For Arturo, 'it's painful when the pandilleros use it like that. They've stained it.'

I. Inside the Gang

i. Why Get In?

To understand how violent criminal economies perpetuate themselves, it is necessary to grasp why they offer a 'persuasive, even if violent and self-destructive, alternative lifestyle to the youths growing up around them' (Bourgois 2003: 11). Junior says that young people who, like him, join the mara 'look to the street for what we don't have in our homes. And in my home, what we didn't have was money, and we didn't have confidence.' Rafa and Cadejo say that the mara thrives on local youth being 'easy to manipulate' into believing that the gang is the best place for them to be as they search 'for spaces of identity, of power, of protection.'

The criminological literature on gangs has often linked individual delinquency to personal deficiencies, depicting gangs as a 'pathological form of brutality' and making membership 'appear to be the result of psychological pathologies instead of understandable reactions to a particular socio-economic environment' (Hazen and Rodgers 2014: 1; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 201). In examining how the mara features in local young people's strategies of social navigation, I wish to take up the proposal that for children and adolescents growing up in red zones, 'criminal activity might express something more, or something other, than a character flaw' (Shelby 2007: 136).

In El Romero, gang membership is less evidence of young people's impairment with regards to impulse control or future-oriented decision making than a tool by which they address deficiencies in their lives. This is not a new insight by any means. Already in the foundational text of gang studies, Thrasher (1927: 37) argued that street gangs arise out of 'the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists.' The reasons and risk factors that neighbourhood residents and mara participants give for why local kids join gangs are various and sometimes inconsistent or

contradictory. But uniting them is the use of gang involvement by young people in a highly disadvantaged position as a means to resolve problems and gain access to what they find lacking in their lives (see Valdez 2007: 86-87). They join not because they themselves are broken, but because they have identified the gang as a way to repair what they feel to be wrong, to access what they are missing.

Gangs as family and protection

From adults and outsiders, the most commonly-cited rationale for why children join gangs is some family defect, whether of unity, discipline, or affection. Reasoning from broken families is especially popular among older, more conservative, and more Christian Guatemalans, but is certainly not confined to these groups. Explaining their liability to gang recruitment, a primary school principal emphasizes that maybe only twenty percent of her students live with both parents. 'That contributes a lot,' she says, 'the lack of love. They are looking for a group.' Her counterpart in the middle school similarly figures 'that's why so many kids become mareros, for not having that stable father figure.'

These common local views are reflected in the literature on youth gangs. Many studies have proposed that

> gang members are more likely to come from single-parent families with no father in the house, leaving these young men without a male role model that would help them establish a 'conventional' identity and lifestyle. … [H]ere, the gang assumes the role of a surrogate family. (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 193)

Sánchez-Jankowski (2003: 193) points out, however, that the prevalence of female-headed households in poor urban areas 'makes it difficult to portray single parenthood as a cause when, quite simply, more kids from this background do not join gangs than do.' This portrayal of who joins gangs and why thus confuses coincidental products of urban poverty for a causal relationship.

And yet, it is an explanation that barrio residents, including single parents, often reach for to account for the violent deviance of local youth, adding their own qualifications and interpretations. Ana insists that single mothers and absent fathers can't be the cause of delinquency because so many such families produce decent, hardworking offspring. Rather, she believes the most at risk are the unplanned and unwanted children, most of whom will end up being raised by their mothers alone. These children 'carry resentment with them, wounded from their mothers' stomachs, growing up in anger.' A congressman visiting El Romero also locates the most important risk factors for mara membership in the home. In his opinion, however, it is the corrupting presence of delinquent parents that creates a cycle of 'deformed parents deforming their children.' Most give parents a much more passive role: their negligence allows children to be 'deformed' by nefarious influences outside the home.

Family deficiencies are also offered by mara participants and young people generally as a reason for gang involvement. But unlike adult informants who focus on parents, they often emphasize how young people choose the mara when seeking to take control of their lives, preferring 'to be beaten in the streets than that their own parents beat them.' A young woman trying to sever her gang ties joined after her mother's death to get away from her drug-addicted father. 'I left my home because my father was raping me. He'd done it to me since I was a little girl. I couldn't stand it. I preferred to leave for the streets.'

The mara can provide a fantasy of protection for desperately vulnerable children. 'They think that for being with them, they'll be untouchable,' Maritza says. A soldier from El Romero admits he 'saw the attraction of it when I was little…you feel that they will defend you, that you have support, back-up.' This kind of support can be a psychological as well as practical boon for children. 'What the pandilla does,' according to Pastor Gerardo, 'is make themselves a family. They adopt them, they take care of them.'

Although the contemporary mara is no longer a socially- and entertainment-oriented group, as the earliest cliques were, lonely children in frightening circumstances are still

drawn into the gang in search of company and comfort. Their longing for people to rely on and belong to is simple and palpable. When a group of children are asked what they like best about the barrio, an eleven year-old gang member pipes up. Christmas and New Year are the best because 'everyone is with their family. A kid, even though he doesn't have a mom, can always be with another family. He doesn't have to be sad.'

In turning to the gang for a network of loyalty and support, Padilla (2006: 143) proposes that young Puerto Ricans in the US make their gang into an extension of the traditional family unit. Far from rejecting the family values that feature so prominently in the codes of decency articulated by people like Doña Ana, gang-involved boys and girls in El Romero may instead try to affirm 'the norms of family life and tradition' by seeking out a surrogate family when their own fails to live up to those norms (Padilla 2006: 143). Whether the mara in fact does any better at meeting the hopes and expectations that young people have for their 'families' is quite another matter, but it is clear that many 'believe that the gang will do so when they become involved' (Miller 2006: 50).

Gangs as identity

Studies of motivations and risk factors for gang membership often emphasize that it can fill an 'identity vacuum' by connecting young people to a group that provides 'a sense of worth otherwise absent in individuals' lives' (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 193). This can be particularly valuable for young people facing negative stereotypes of their neighbourhoods and themselves. It is a way, for Rafa and Cadejo, that young people 'make themselves seen by society,' an assertion of presence and power. Kevin describes the violence he took part in as 'the things we did to make El Romero *tremendous*.'[3] Gangs can offer 'an alternative forum' for status and dignity to poor young men who are often the most stigmatized members of marginalized communities (Bourgois 2003: 8-9).

[3] *Tremendo* translates most directly to 'tremendous', but has strong connotations of something that is terrible, closer to awe-inspiring or the original sense of awesome.

Comparing the attraction of gangs in poor US neighbourhoods to that of fraternities for more privileged young people, Sánchez-Jankowski (2003: 195) observes that both fulfil the 'desire to join an exclusionary organization that will provide entertainment and social status.' The analogy is somewhat more apt for earlier incarnations of local gangs. However, given how few spaces there are in the community for young people to socialize, elaborate a generational identity, and jockey for position, popularity, and respect, the mara continues to serve this function, simply because it is a group of young people where almost no other such groups exist.

Boys are drawn to the gang because of the opportunity for a certain presentation of self. What they want is not unique, but more privileged young people 'usually have a wider variety of ways to express the fact that they consider themselves worthwhile' (Anderson 1999: 68). 'They want to be respected'; 'for the simple fact of feeling powerful'; 'they are the most popular, the stars': these are all motives that young people attribute to their involved peers. When he was a member of the barrio clique, Kevin recruited his cousins and brother with the promise that that 'we can have money, the girls that we want, power when we want it, and people will respect us.'

The vision of themselves that young people pursue in mara membership is an important factor in why cultural products like *Blood In, Blood Out* become so beloved by those whose lives they fictionalize and stylize. They portray gangsterism as epic, grandiose, heroic. Gambetta (2009: 269) examines the status of the *Godfather* films as sacred texts for the American mafia: 'It made our life seem honourable,' he quotes one mafioso explaining their appeal. They give a cinematic lustre to a meagre and desperate existence.

Where access to socially-sanctioned routes to respect and power is limited, violence may become a viable substitute (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 209). 'They feel big with a weapon in their hands,' a teenage girl says of the pandilleros. Murci, one of the first barrio pandilleros to carry a gun, confirms that 'with a pistol, one feels like a "he-man."' Harking back to the

days when local gangsters were readily identifiable by visual cues, Maritza paints an image of them walking down El Romero's street, strutting down the slope watched by all the little boys. 'They see the power and the respect. Seeing this, they look for a way to get it.' As it had for young coloured men on the Cape Town Flats, for El Romero's teenage boys, belonging to a gang became a 'way in which to emerge as strong men in a world where the odds were stacked against masculine assertion' (Jensen 2014: 44).

Gangs as opportunity

The gang can deliver more tangible benefits to its members than augmented self-image. Economic resources and remuneration—'easy money', 'the easy life', 'that ambition to make money'—often feature in the reasons young people give for becoming involved. Local young people's goals and the means they use to attain them are shaped, naturally enough, by their model of the good life. What they aspire to largely coincides with the mainstream consumerist picture of material success. Yet in El Romero, as in so many other poor neighbourhoods worldwide, there is frequently a very wide gap between those aspirations and their assessment of their chances of achieving them by conventional means (Padilla 2006: 142). Young people here are routinely denied work or training in above-board economic sectors and constantly hear from family and neighbours about the impossibility of making an honest living because of the address on your papers. 'The system is really fucked,' Arturo says, 'because it sells you a lifestyle that you cannot access.'

Studies that look beyond the individual psychology (and pathology) of gang members typically 'confirm that it is money, and the social "respect" that money can buy, that is the primary motivation for young people to join' (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 194). In this regard, 'instead of being deviants from the prevailing economic culture, gang members have accepted the principles of the dominant social ideology' and are availing themselves of the networks and access points at hand (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 211). Anderson (1999: 114)

argues that, while they face numerous and substantial barriers to legitimate employment, inner-city boys in the US readily acquire the skills needed for work in the criminal economy—'"street knowledge" and the ability to act on it—simply by virtue of growing up where they do.' Similarly, a young man in the barrio explains that 'if you do not have access to an education, what you do have access to is the street. If you do not have access to employment, what you do have access to is the street.' Much too often, studies of gangs have emphasized the negative personal attributes of their members and treated them as 'collections of not very smart individuals' (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003: 194). Against this, Bourgois finds the Harlem drug economy populated by 'highly-motivated, ambitious inner-city youths' (2003: 326). As Cadejo says of today's pandilleros, 'they are young, and they are sharp little bastards.'

The economic dimension of the gang's appeal, or at least its prominence, seems to be a fairly recent development, tied to the mara's transition to a more profit-oriented enterprise. Arturo says that until even a few years ago, the mara was made up of the neighbourhood's 'black sheep'; it was an outlet for the most wayward, not a career path for the most ambitious. Echoing several others, Arturo told me they used to come from the roughest, poorest, most desperate families. Domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, or malnutrition were usually part of their stories. 'Before,' he says, 'when they fought, when they killed, you saw a rage break in them.' It was a terrible thing to behold, but you understood what fed their capacity to do violence. Today, however, pandilleros may come from the relatively better-off families, the ones who live in two-storey cement block houses, who maybe even managed to send these kids to private *colegios*. They join now, according to Arturo, out of calculated avarice. And they kill in a way that horrifies him more than the desperate bloodlusts: coldly, casually, as part of the job.

Financial inducements may be superseding social ones in motivating gang membership, but it must be noted that economic opportunities within the mara remain very restricted.

While gangs do provide poor youth with alternative sources of income, gang labour is rarely less exploitative or much more remunerative than the marginal jobs they could access in the legitimate economy (Padilla 2006: 149-50). Most mara members who do not die as young footsoldiers will live as prisoners A few may move up into positions of leadership and relatively greater earning power within the gang, but given the mara's current structure, they will also have to do so as prisoners. It seems patently obvious that, as for young men around the world who involve themselves in violent criminal economies, 'the earnings do not add up to the risks of the game that they play' (Utas 2014: 184).

This apparent irrationality can be attributed to adolescent hubris regarding their own immortality or ability to rise up the ranks. It could also be taken as a damning statement on the dimness of their view of their chances in the legitimate economy. But Utas (2014: 184-85) argues that there is a particular logic to street livelihoods that escapes economic calculations based on individual income alone. The young urban Sierra Leonean men whose illegal and informal work he studies employ strategies that 'rest on group loyalty' and include the individual in a 'broader network of sharing' that provides access to greater resources and stability than his personal revenue alone would suggest (Utas 2014: 185).

Several people told me that gang members no longer share amongst each other as completely or equitably as they once did (cf. Levenson 1988: 25, 32). But it is still in the mara's organizational interest to look after its own, and there is some suggestion that they may do so. For instance, a pandillero's family might be taken care of while he is incarcerated, although often in return for 'favours' on their part, such as storing weapons or drugs in their home. It was not clear to what extent boys in El Romero's clique were able access group resources separately from those they received in return for specific labours on behalf of the mara. But it is plausible that they perceive an added measure of both opportunity and security in incorporating themselves into a powerful economic unit instead of trying to make their way as individuals in illegal, informal, or legitimate economies.

ii. Gang Life

Whether they are hoping to address some emotional, social, or financial need or desire—or as is probably most common, some combination of these—a good number of local young people see possibilities for themselves in the mara. But being in the gang has meant very different things—in terms of members' autonomy, day-to-day life, discipline, personal risks, and life trajectories—in different epochs of the mara's evolution. Those who belong today are part of much more hierarchical and profit-oriented organization than members of the early cliques, and the experience of the young people who join differs accordingly.

Getting in

The practicalities of getting into the gang have varied over time and between cliques. When Junior joined his zone 18 barrio's M-18 clique around 2006, a *chequeo* who got approval to become a full member first had to go into Mara Salvatrucha territory and leave graffiti on their turf. Five days later, an order would come to kill an MS-13 member. Once you had, eighteen pandilleros came to beat you for eighteen seconds. You had to prove yourself reliable and cool-headed to get to be a *chequeo*, and capable of murder to be a real marero. Now, though, he says that in his clique, kids just have to be *banderos* (lookouts) for a bit before they consider themselves gangsters. However they go about getting in, it is at least clear to one red zone pastor that 'there are a tonne of kids between nine and fifteen who want to be in the mara. And they manage it.'

Recruitment in El Romero, such as it was, used to be based on informal social bonds. Cadejo relates that kids from the same block formed into cliques when the mania for US-style maras took off, simply because those were the boys you already knew, trusted, and spent all your leisure time with. In Murci's day in the late 1990s, they tended to join officially at fourteen or fifteen, but there was always a pack of nine and ten year-olds with them. He insists that it was a 'barrio thing.' They made them lookouts, sometimes, but he says the

gang mostly kept the little ones around so they could look out for them, protect them. Some of them would join the clique after hanging around for a few years, and others would not.

At least since the 'War of the Maras', the organic approach to clique formation Murci and Cadejo describe also seems to have been supplanted by targeted, and often somewhat coercive, recruitment. Kevin compares the pandilla's current recruitment model to that of an army. They 'walk around picking out kids, saying this one will do for this, that one we can use for that.' If chosen 'recruits' are not eager to join, they may be manipulated with inducements such as name-brand clothes or sneakers presented initially as gifts. They later discover that they have incurred a debt to the gang by accepting these, which they have to work off by performing 'errands' like extortion collection. Recruitment also takes place through threat and intimidation. Reluctant boys have had their families threatened with death, or been given the choice between joining and leaving the barrio permanently. Essentially, two teenage boys tell me, 'once they decide you could be useful to the pandilla, well then you join or…you join.'

What you get

The changes to the maras' group cultures and criminal economies described in Chapter 3 transformed the day-to-day business of being a gang member: how their time is spent, what kinds of crimes and violence they perpetrate, the hierarchy and discipline they are subject to. All this is rooted in the fundamental shift from a mara that functioned primarily as a vehicle for expressing an oppositional youth identity to the mara as unit of criminal enterprise. The aspects of gang life that had intermingled with a particular urban sub-culture started to drop away. For mara members in the 1990s, Arturo says that 'there was still a certain amount of time for hobbies as long as they had to do with chicano things' and many members were

involved in activities popular among young people in general.[4] It was, Murci recalled, a 'more healthy' relationship between pandilleros and their barrio.

These days, however, members 'live their lives waiting for orders. They don't get involved in anything else, unless it's to infiltrate' some group or space, according to Arturo. While the *brekeros* of the 1980s were justifiably referred to as a 'youth movement' and the maras could fairly be called a 'youth trend' in their early years, these are not terms used of the cliques today. A native of an *asentamiento* on the capital's southern periphery, which has been notorious for its gang presence since its foundation in 1996, draws a line between two kinds of groups, both called maras, but otherwise dissimilar. The distinction he wants to make is between maras as 'pandillas and as criminal groups. Some years back, it was more like a family.' He insists on a difference between pandillas as essentially youth support networks in marginalized communities and the 'real' criminals that later co-opted and transformed these streets bands.

That transition coincided with the move to an incarcerated leadership and a more hierarchical structure, and was also roughly contemporaneous with a shift in the age distribution of mara membership. Mara cliques that began as peer groups have been superseded by small numbers of adult men leading large groups of boys. Two small studies of members of first-generation maras in the late 1980s found they were overwhelmingly adolescent groups. In one survey, 80 per cent were between fifteen and nineteen; in the other, 73 per cent were twelve to fifteen (Levenson 1988: 17). In the last ten years, however, the age range has spread out in both directions. Some cliques now initiate boys as young as eight or nine; at the other end, the number of older gang members is rising because 'aging out' is no longer a common practice (Brenneman 2011: 36). It is only in relative terms that maras can be said to have come under the control of 'older' men. 'El Abuelo', for instance,

[4] Arturo's 'chicano things' refers to the local craze for Mexican-American youth culture that was sparked by the appearance of California-style maras. Mara members adopted, in particular, the stylistic and artistic preferences associated with street-oriented 'cholo' sub-culture in US Hispanic communities.

had already *discarded* his identity as 'The Grandfather' by the time he was 31 and was succeeded as the M-18's leader by a 29 year-old.[5] But there is now a span of twenty years or more between the youngest and oldest members of a clique, which was unheard of a generation ago.

Figure 20. Nine alleged M-18 members, including seven minors (those with lowered heads), detained in Guatemala City. Men are often still made to remove their shirts for such arrest photos, despite the fact that younger gang members never have damning tattoos to display. Photo: Policía Nacional Civil (PNC 2014c).

Their profile in the community remains very youthful, some say between fourteen and eighteen, others between ten and seventeen. In El Romero, clique members who make it to 25 (all of whom are currently in jail) take on the epithet '*el veterano*'. On average, mara members are probably as young as they have ever been. But their striking youth today is largely a result of their appallingly poor odds once they join rather than a core feature of their group culture or identity. An ex-pandillero tells me that those who join do so expecting

[5] The MS-13's leaders appear to be somewhat older. The eight members of the MS-13's national council identified by the authorities had, in 2013, an average age of 34.4 years, with the oldest aged 43 (Alvarado 2013: 3)

a short career and assuming the probability of an early death. 'They don't go past 23,' he says. 'They die or are in jail.'

Because I did not develop close relationships with current clique members, I cannot say with any certainty how young pandilleros perceive their life expectancy and understand what Rafa, an ex-M-18 member, calls the 'strange and intimate relationship with death' that he developed in his youth. They appear to view the very real possibility of their own violent deaths with fatalism and equanimity, though it is difficult to know how much of this is feigned bravado. In the 1990s, a fifteen year-old MS-13 member told Levenson (2013: 91) that he was "prepared. I don't have any obligations. If I die, so what?" Murci reports having felt similarly about his own numerous brushes with death while in the M-18, saying '*me daba igual*'—that he did not care one way or the other whether he survived. Levenson (2013: 97) interprets the anticipation of dying young as a way in which gang-involved boys shelter themselves from bleak and disappointing futures: if they die as youth, they cannot have failed as men.

While they live, mara members' primary responsibilities are to enable the smooth and profitable functioning of the gang's criminal economy. Kevin dropped out of school to be a full-time marero for almost four years. He spent this time doing what a lot of kids working for the mara do: 'I dedicated myself a lot to charging the tax, up to where I couldn't fit the cash in my pockets.' Other common duties for more junior members include transporting drugs and weapons around the sector. Kevin was also expected to take part in group violence. He still uses 'we', 'our', and 'us' to refer to the clique, having left it just a few months before we met. But it is always in the third person that he tells me about the gang rapes that were part of the initiation process for 'their members', about how 'they went around abducting girls,' or how 'they raped girls, girls as young as ten.' The fact that he shakes, cries, begs me to understand there was no choice, and asks me to forgive him makes

me doubt his pronouns. Children also murder in the barrio. One twelve year-old gang member, a very promising recruit, is said to have killed ten people already.

Discipline is required of these children. The members are 'like soldiers: you do not question orders, you execute them.' Members who fail to comply or step out of line place themselves in grave danger. 'For any mistake,' Kevin says, 'they can take your life away.' As the major inter-gang confrontations in the sector recede into the past, most violent deaths are now thought to be due to intra-mara dynamics and discipline. 'For the errors they committed,' an associate reports, 'many young people are dead.' Most fatalities are believed to be *por plancha*—for a screw-up—or *por ladiado*—for a betrayal, such as skimming from extortion profits, collaborating with authorities or enemies, or attempting to leave the gang. 'No forgiveness in the mara,' their associate explains.

Getting out

Over time, joining the gang has become an increasingly irrevocable decision. In the 1990s, when Rafa was inducted into an M-18 clique by undergoing an eighteen-second beating, he wasn't necessarily making a lifetime commitment. He and Murci say that of their generation, 'the majority didn't continue.' Leaving was not only possible, but normal. However, from around 2000, it was becoming 'impossible' to leave.[6] As the barrio clique's saying goes, '*canyón o rincón*, the only options.' A canyon for the *barrancos* where corpses are often discarded and a corner for a prison cell: these are the two possible ends of the true pandillero, both in the gang's ideology and often in the actual biographies of its members.

Several ex-pandilleros told me that, compared to when they joined from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, it's now both easier to get into the gang and much harder to leave it. One

[6] Informants give different timelines for when this change took place, and opportunities for exit and when these were restricted vary by clique. In and around El Romero, some say it was already becoming much harder to leave before the 'War of the Maras' began in 2002. More commonly, though, the change is placed later, between about 2005 and 2008.

explained that until about 2006, two major exit routes existed: family and religion. Retiring from the mara to attend to new parental obligations or spiritual awakenings was generally, if grudgingly, permitted, although always with conditions and ongoing surveillance to ensure the commitment to clean living was sincere and maintained. When one ex-pandillero told his *jefe* that he wished to leave to join an evangelical church and be a better father, the reply was, 'Leave then, we're cool. But if you ever leave that church and don't come back to us, I'll kill you.'

'It's easy to get in,' Kevin says, 'the hard part is getting out of this alive.' A few months earlier, he had left El Romero's clique, becoming a Pentecostal convert. His resignation was accepted in return for a severe beating and the forfeiture of all his money. But within days, the clique received a call from the prison, telling its members that anyone else who planned to get born again had better do so right away, because from that day on, 'you only leave dead.' Edwin, a Catholic youth leader, says gang-involved boys often tell him they want to leave but cannot. They say 'that pact is made for life and death. While we're in, we live. If we leave, we die.'

Pastor Alfonso says it 'is an open secret that there *are* ways to leave the pandilla,' although they are few and perilous. His son Junior says that 'the *only* way is to make yourself Christian,' and even that even this is not always possible. The rationale for some cliques continuing to allow this after other routes have been eliminated is not very clear, but Pastor Gerardo hypothesizes that 'pandillas believe in loyalty. If you betray them, let it be for something bigger than them' (see also Hernández 2008: 149-53).[7] Kevin's older brother, also an ex-marero, says he was allowed to convert only because he 'wasn't very deeply

[7] Catholic religious epiphanies do not provide the same possibilities for exit. Mara culture is suffused with the symbols of popular (Catholic) religiosity. Many of these—for instance, the Virgen de Guadalupe tattoos commonly sported by older M-18 members—seem to be more a legacy of the emphasis placed on ethnic identity and pride in by Californian maras than testaments to sincere religious belief. Nevertheless, being Catholic and being in the mara are not seen as incompatible in the same way as evangelical Christianity and gang membership. Brenneman (2011: 17) also suggests there is something of a sectarian division of labour in which Catholics have tended to 'promote gang *prevention* through social programs and community development, while evangelicals have tended almost exclusively toward promoting gang *exit*.'

involved.' He has friends that 'they killed for leaving the pandilla,' in spite of their new religiosity. Kevin was in a different mara but similarly says that he 'only got to such a rank where I could get out' and that he's also known many who got in too deep to escape.

The only other option is to run and hide. One father observes that the trouble for those 'absorbed by the Mara-18' is that it is not enough simply to leave El Romero. Because local members become connected to, and known by, members of M-18 cliques all around the capital, they cannot easily pass undetected if they leave without permission. Boys from the barrio have fled as far as the Petén on the northeastern border and the remote central highlands of Alta Verapaz to spend time in hiding. Ex-members discovered years after leaving the mara have been executed for their betrayal. The difficulty and danger of trying to exit the mara discourages many gang-involved youth from trying. 'They know the price of getting out is their life,' Maritza says, 'and they do not want to pay it.'

Pandilleros who do manage to become ex-pandilleros still face a host of obstacles and risks. They may have virtually no support network outside of the clique. Arturo says that for many, the 'pandilla completely broke the links to the family.' He knows of cases of boys who killed their own cousins or brothers to prove their loyalty. 'You've entered the pandilla: you have no mother, you have no home. There is no way back.' Quite apart from the willingness of one's clique to accept evangelical conversion as justification for exit, this absence of support networks makes Christian churches very appealing to pandilleros trying to become *ex*-pandilleros. Ex-mara members said that evangelical conversion provided them with benefits 'both social and psychological, such as helping them to find work, reorder their priorities, and rebuild networks of trust after the gang' (Brenneman 2011: 16). Many young people say that they became involved in the mara seeking protection and support at times of grave vulnerability such as violence in their homes. The 'barrio evangelism' that Brenneman (2011) describes provides a substitute community at another extremely precarious point in their lives.

The economic burdens of a gang past are considerable. Two outreach workers describe the blanket refusal to employ tattooed youth as 'the greatest rejection we've faced.' There are even fewer chances for ex-mareros who have convictions on their records. Their '*papeles manchados*' (stained papers) mark the end of any prospect of steady employment. Almost all end up in precarious informal work, scraping together a meagre living as street or bus vendors in the best cases, and landing back in the criminal economy. Chepe's older brother is an ex-pandillero Christian convert who was 'given his passes' out of the gang. He kicked his drug habit, paid his debts to the clique, went back to school, and now works as a nurse in a drug rehabilitation hospital, where his considerable physical strength and experience using it are handy for restraining patients going through ugly withdrawals: a tremendous success for a one-time marero. But he lives in fear of his old life being exposed to his new one, which, with his extensive gang tattoos, threatens whenever the skin of his limbs might show. When his nursing class took a trip to the beach, he stood alone in the thick heat while everyone swam, covered to his ankles and his wrists. He could barely breathe, he says. And so, with good reason, one ex-pandillero says that "my dream is that my skin might go back to being clean" (Hernández 2008: 155). Stained papers and stained skins leave the odds severely stacked against hopes for a clean life.

Against these odds, Doña Ana notes approvingly, there are 'at least a few who see the destruction they are causing' and try to make it right, citing Rafa, Cadejo, and Wuicho as examples of notorious troublemakers made good. While they've become community activists and performers, many others work informally for evangelical churches. Bus preaching is a popular occupation for born-again gangsters, who testify to their violent pasts and conversion stories before asking for donations to their ministries. Rocky is one of the best. He was the MS-13's top *jefe* in zone 18 before they largely lost this sector to the M-18. He got permission from the gang's leadership council to leave, provided he showed his 'support' for his old gang through indemnity payments. He preaches daily on the main bus

route running through zone 18 to the city centre, getting on at high-traffic points in the territories he used to control. His distinctive voice is low and raspy, his head still *rapado* (shaved) in the stereotypical marero style, but his tattoos are mostly covered by the cuffs and collars of the dress shirts he wears under the too-small sweater vests that never fail to look a little comical on his powerfully stocky frame. But everyone on the bus knows who he is and was. When he passes down the aisle, his tattooed hands always fill up with donations. The sway he still has with his audience makes him a valuable resource for the Pentecostal church he works with, and also allows him to make the payments that keep him alive.

El Romero's clique, too, once imposed financial penalties in return for permission to retire. Several members of the clique who left as early as 2000 to become evangelicals are still under obligation to 'pay rent or come back to the pandilla.' But while old deals of this sort are still honoured, it is said that this kind of arrangement 'is no longer possible.' The costs of these payments can be crippling, especially for those who have had any form of leadership position in the mara. An M-18 *jefe* from another zone 18 barrio had to go to a regional meeting of clique leaders in the southern city of Escuintla to present his case for leaving 'to search for God.' By a narrow vote, his request was granted, provided he pays Q1000 monthly for five years and 'shows himself loyal.' His pastor is convinced his conversion is sincere, but this man has an 18 inked from forehead to chin. It is unclear how someone with a gang sign covering his face is going to come by Q60,000 (£5000) honestly.

Lapsed pandilleros also remain subject to the vengeance of former rivals. Pastor Gerardo tells of ex-mara members of his congregation who have been 'killed preaching' years after retiring. An M-18 member from a peripheral *asentamiento* had become a clown, performing on buses and at parties. But he was shot, a good friend of his says, because 'he was 18, he entered an MS area. They shot him, even though it had been years since he left the pandilla. They left him paralyzed. A year and a half later, they finished it in his neighbourhood.' One

wonders how much advantage or glory there was to be gained in murdering a wheelchair-bound clown, but his story is further evidence that ex-pandilleros are rarely able to put themselves beyond the reach of their gang pasts.

Girls in the gang

Young women have a particular and, arguably, particularly difficult position within the gang. An ex-member and a current associate both estimate female members account for five per cent or less of El Romero's clique.[8] While only a few now become members in their own right, many more become affiliated with the clique through relationships with its members. 'A lot of girls are involved now,' Maritza says, because once they become romantically or sexually attached to a gang member, then 'sooner or later, they're going to ask you for a favour.' The enticements that draw them to the gang—protection, status, economic opportunity—are the same that motivate boys, though girls have to mediate their strategies for personal gain on any of these fronts through a male member. However, they perform distinct tasks, or 'favours'. Female associates are assigned to smuggle drugs and contraband into prisons, to pass messages between incarcerated *jefes* and street operators, to serve as 'bait' in traps and ambushes, and are, alongside young children, used to deliver extortion demands and collect payments.

Girls also experience gang life differently and, according to several informants, with an added layer of brutality. 'One is moved by the men's stories,' an outreach worker says, 'but with the women's stories? Wow! The girls have always been the most violated.' Rafa, too, sees additional burdens and dangers in experimenting with the mara as a young woman. When his fifteen year-old niece was said to be getting involved, he tried to offer himself as a role model of someone who made mistakes as a teenager but then turned things around.

[8] It is not clear how representative this number is. The proportion of female members may vary widely by clique, but there certainly seems to have been a drop since surveys of first-generation mara members in 1987 and 1988 found that 20% and 44% of participants respectively were female (Levenson 2013: 59).

'She's living what I lived through, in a way,' he said. 'But it's going to hit her that much harder to live it because she is a woman. And I told her just that.'

The stories that Rafa and others of his generation tell suggest that there was a time when gang membership could be a sort of subversive hobby for young men, but they do not seem to believe that sort of participation was ever available to their female peers. Rafa states bluntly that 'girls have always been sexual instruments' for and in the gang, that 'if they are involved in the maras it is purely as sex objects.' Kevin, more than fifteen years younger, agrees that girls are 'only used as objects, sometimes taken by force.' Their hopes for what they will gain from the mara are—like those of many boys, including Kevin—betrayed by the reality they encounter. 'The *señoritas* come thinking that we'll protect them a bit,' he says, 'but it's a lie.'

Research on young women in street gangs suggests that they 'have disproportionate histories of victimization before gang involvement as compared with non-gang associated females and male gang members' (Valdez 2007: 110). The victimization of girls in and around the gang often reproduces physical, emotional, and sexual abuse they have experienced in their homes (Bobea 2010: 175). The testimony of young men and women who have lived through the mara depicts sexual violence as an extremely common experience for girls around the gang. Kevin, who spoke of gang rapes as a way to initiate new members into the mara's violent masculine culture, also told me that sexual abuse and beatings were used to discipline and punish girls who 'knew too much' about their business. 'There is hardly a girl who has lived the life of the street who has not been raped,' a nineteen year-old ex-gang member said. Like many other gang-associated girls, she had traded known dangers in her home for unknown risks on the streets (Valdez 2007: 111). She ran away from her father's abuse when she was ten, was sexually and physically assaulted by police as a homeless teenager, and joined a mara clique to try to shield herself from such victimization in the streets. She was used to being vulnerable to the predations of adult men who were

supposed to protect her. But her worst experiences, she said, came in the gang. '*Compañeros* abused *compañeras* in there': the friends she had looked to as protectors became just another set of violators.

A sixteen year-old, who I met at the school where Ana worked, was confronting similar dangers and disappointments. At twelve, she started drinking heavily when her father went to the US. He 'found himself a new family there, forgot us.' Kicked out of school for drinking, she joined her neighbourhood's M-18 clique. After a stint in juvenile penitentiary, she had gone back to school and stayed away from alcohol for a few months. But her own clique 'killed my friend the other week. They dismembered her.' She was convinced they would do the same to her if she acted on her desire to leave the gang. When we met she was being sent away from school again, having turned up drunk the day before. Abandoned by her father, abused by her drug-addicted mother, and fearing for her life from the gang she had joined for protection and support, 'I drink,' she told me, 'when I feel like my life doesn't matter to anybody at all.'

II. Outside the Gang

In negotiating how they relate to the mara, the majority of local young people who do not become members employ similar tactics of avoidance and strategic engagement as the adults around them. However, their manoeuvres are complicated by the degree to which red zone youth are treated as synonymous with the gang problem. Residents and outsiders eye them warily, authorities suspect (and often abuse) them, and the mara sees them as their recruiting pool. Anderson (1999: 22) notes that whether or not they covet the regard of the 'street element', children 'need to show themselves as being capable of dealing with the street.' But young people who do not define themselves by the 'street ethic' must also learn to navigate the mores and standards of mainstream society and the legitimate economy. They must become functionally 'bicultural' (Bourgois 2003: 170). In some ways then, it can

take more skill and savvy for a young person to negotiate a red zone upbringing *without* entering the mara's violent world.

Perhaps even more than the neighbourhood's adults, young people define themselves against the gang. The mara is the negative pole away from which they steer themselves. But the positive values according to, and towards which, they navigate most often remain implicit. It is clear that, at present, most are anxious to distinguish themselves from their 'delinquent' peers and that, as regards their future, the most common definition of success is leaving the barrio. Beyond that, there is very little specificity. What they aspire to largely seems to coincide with older residents' views of decency and respectability centred on work and family. Young men often hope, but rarely expect, to find steady and secure employment by which to support themselves, and possibly future dependents. Many girls hope, but few expect, to establish a stable relationship with a man able to support a family's financial needs. Their pessimistic evaluation of their chances of living up to their values and goals may be one reason why young people rarely discuss them openly. Another factor could be that they spend a great deal of time and energy on coping with much more immediate problems presented by the insecurity around them.

i. Avoidance

'The best defence is to be invisible,' Rafa says of the safest way to get by as a kid in gang territory: stay quiet, stay out of their way. As described in Chapter 5, many barrio residents advocate avoiding the criminal economy and its participants as the most prudent course of action. Isolating themselves from trouble is, however, a more challenging business for the neighbourhood's young people. This is not just because their peer group makes up the gang's members and many of its collaborators, such that few can entirely dispense with interacting with the mara. The increasingly intense fear provoked by maras has led to a preoccupation in Central America with controlling and repressing not only the gangs

themselves, but also urban youth more generally (see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2006; Rey 2006). Adults and authorities apply the label of delinquency liberally to El Romero's young people, especially those who express themselves in unconventional ways and styles.

Figure 21. A teenage boy runs past a police patrol during a neighbourhood event. Author photo, May 2012.

The barrio's children and teenagers are subject to frequent interference from public authorities and many seem resigned to this treatment. Asked how he would wish police and soldiers to behave, an eleven year-old answers, 'calmly. That they'd say to us, "against the wall" and not [*shouting and brandishing an imaginary gun*] "Against the wall, you sons of whores!" Instead, [*calmly*] "against the wall, boys."' He doesn't question that he will regularly find himself facing a wall at gunpoint, legs splayed for a search of his person. He just wants to be asked nicely.

Even though the old signatures—certain haircuts, styles of dress, and tattoos—are no longer so commonly used by pandilleros and were never really exclusive to them, residents

and authorities continue to discriminate against visible signs of what is seen to be a deviant youth culture. Piercings, more associated with alternative sub-cultures than mara culture, are nevertheless frequently identified as evidence of delinquent inclinations. Both Mono—the neighbourhood's most prominent young community activist—and Ana's son Andy had their earrings forcibly removed by soldiers during random stops on barrio streets. Arturo alleges that the confusion of youth style with gang symbols is sometimes intentional, that targeting uninvolved but mildly rebellious teenagers is a way for people to feel they are taking action against 'delinquency' without incurring the risks of confronting the mara. He says neighbourhood residents ensure any graffiti is painted over immediately, on the basis that it is linked to gangs. But no 18 or other mara symbol would ever be covered out of fear of the consequences. 'It's taking out the community's frustration on young people against whom they can afford to.'

Young people looking to develop identities and earn livings that are not dependent on the mara find little outside support. Most of the NGOs that ran youth-focused programs have left El Romero. And according to Padre Martín, these charitable projects were always at a serious disadvantage because they pass through for a few hours or years while 'the maras are there the whole day, they are planning the whole time.' This creates what Arturo sees as disjuncture between 'the NGO space and their everyday space': local kids are perfectly capable of giving the answers grown-ups want from them in workshops designed to make them resilient to gang recruitment or less vulnerable to violence, drugs, or crime. But they walk out the door into streets where different values rule.

ii. Equilibrium and Code-Switching

As they grow up, every barrio child is, as Arturo says, 'instructed in the theme of the street.' They do not have the luxury of not knowing how to handle gang-dominated street space. Some manage their situation by orienting themselves towards the ascendant mara. 'Here in

El Romero,' a young man says, 'you cannot be far from them for you own safety.' He had taken to heart the same lesson Bourgois' (2003: 76) informant learned growing up in East Harlem: that the "only way to survive in this world is to be connected or to be connected dirty." And barrio kids can rarely get connected clean.

In his generation, 33 year-old Wuicho tells me, their main strategy to protect themselves was making 'alliances' with gang members, 'relations of *compadrazgo*—not up to participating.'[9] Many today, though, are wary of getting too close to the clique. 'You have to try to find the right balance,' two teenage boys told me, 'not being too visible, but not disappearing entirely either. Always keeping that balance.' They feel they need to maintain cordial relations with gang-involved peers both so that they will not be suspected of opposing them, and in the hope that they might thereby be better-informed about risks and developments. But they fear that becoming too familiar would expose them to recruitment into the gang or the expectation that they will demonstrate their friendship via 'favours'—invitations they know they could not safely refuse. Similarly, teenage boys participating in discussion groups in marginal Guatemala City neighbourhoods spoke of the 'constant struggle of maintaining enough distance from the mara not to get drawn in, but to know enough to be able to deal with them' (Winton 2005: 176).

What they describe is what Anderson (1999: 144) calls the 'social tightrope' walked by young people growing up amid street cultures: to survive their environments, they must be at least 'somewhat adept at handling the streets, but to be streetwise is to risk one's claim to decency.' Young people who succeed in maintaining that equilibrium tend 'to have a wide array of styles from which to choose how to act, and certainly with which to gauge and understand the conduct of others' (Anderson 1999: 105). A teenage girl says she and her friends pay close attention to a range of subtle clues in a person's look and manner to evaluate who they are and how to behave towards them. Young people also deploy these

[9] *Compadrazgo* here means friendship (from *compadre*—godfather or godparent, colloquially a good friend).

signals in strategic self-presentation. One sixteen year-old boy thinks it unwise to cut off gang members he knows. 'I talk to them, but I have to mark out the difference.' He is careful to speak unlike them, avoiding their slang 'so that they see that I don't have anything to do with it.'

Habits and patterns that allow for successful navigation of a childhood in gang territory can pose obstacles for those trying to move beyond it. Sandberg (2008) draws this out in adapting Bourdieu's theory of cachet to 'street capital'. He emphasizes that for Bourdieu, 'cultural capital is characterized by transferability in social space. On the street, capital accumulation is specific to street culture, and having street habitus will be disadvantageous in other social arenas' (2008: 156-157). The tools that many use to negotiate the insecurity of their neighbourhood and to establish parameters for identity and self-worth in the face of exclusion rarely yield behaviours or attitudes that augment young people's value in the mainstream economy or society. They must learn, as Cadejo likes to say, 'how to move themselves' on barrio streets, but doing so successfully may inhibit their ability to move themselves off those streets and into safer, more prosperous environments.

According to Anderson (1999: 36), young people straddling 'street' and 'decent' cultures engage in 'a great deal of "code-switching": a person may behave according to either set of rules, depending on the situation.' While young people are often anxious to distinguish themselves from gangs, in certain situations they marshal their familiarity with the code of the street in order to give the opposite impression (see Sandberg 2008: 161). Used wisely, this can be a valuable strategy. Playing to their neighbourhood's reputation can, for instance, serve young people very well in prison. When Cadejo spent a few nights in the Preventivo some years ago, the other inmates were initially aggressive, sizing him up, testing him. At the 'right moment', he casually let slip that he came from El Romero. He could answer their follow-up questions correctly, naming a long list of M-18 members. 'Yeah,' he could say, 'I grew up with all those guys.' He was protected by association.

Their neighbourhood's fearsome reputation most often works to exclude, isolate, and hamper barrio youth, but 'stereotypes can also be used strategically' (Sandberg 2008: 162). Entering another red zone with a team from an NGO project, Arturo was able to prevent them all being mugged when they were accosted by a local pandillero. He put on his toughest attitude, made it known he was from El Romero, and implied the connections one might assume from that. The aggressor not only backed down, but apologized and told him he was welcome to move freely around their territory.

Growing up in the barrio, young people are sometimes able to turn people's assumptions about them to their advantage, and they relish stories of this kind of play. As the neighbourhood's children grow, they experiment with what they can expect from others and what others expect from them. This process of learning norms and codes of social behaviour through lessons both implicit and explicit is, of course, 'part of the business of growing up in any group' (Roberts 1979: 35). The special challenge faced by young people who do not join the gang is to meet the exigencies of the street while struggling to pursue their notions of success or worth according to more mainstream norms.

iii. Love, Sex, and Risk for Barrio Girls

'There is *machismo*, man, down to the bones,' Cadejo says, shaking his head. In Rafa and Cadejo's view, they had it easier growing up in the barrio for being male. Boys, they say, are at least taught to defend themselves, but girls have less control over the violence in their lives. As in the Mexican-American barrios studied by Valdez (2007: 109), from the onset of puberty girls in El Romero come to be seen as 'sexual quarry' by many of the male adolescents and adults around them. According to many informants, gang members essentially take their pick of their territory's young women. A mother says that 'if they fix their eyes on one, they don't stop until they've had her.' 'It is truly fucked, being pretty in the barrio,' Rafa concludes.

A girl who ends up in a relationship with a pandillero is in a delicate position. She may be able to secure some protection for herself and her family, to gain access to the resources that accrue to mara members, but it will also generally only be a matter of time before she is expected to help with gang business. She and her family can also be at risk if the relationship goes sour. When the older of Rafa's two teenage nieces was involved with a pandillero, her parents were anxious and conflicted. Would she behave with the necessary prudence? What if she was foolish enough to try to break it off? Though that relationship ended without incident, their younger daughter was later shot by the gang member she had a child with, causing the whole family to flee El Romero.

Many families try to strictly limit their daughters' movements outside the home. 'I almost never leave [the house],' a fourteen year-old said. 'They almost never let me.' The anxiety surrounding girls' presence in public space is not merely an effect of conservative values regarding women's place and purity. Residents who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s say the neighbourhood's streets were used freely for play by girls as much as boys. But they also say that for 'women now there are many more limitations in the street. Because of the fear.'

It is not clear just how much safety such constraints buy them. Ana's teenage daughters Lena and Hailey say of 'involved' boys that 'if we don't talk to them, they won't do us harm.' But they also say that 'if you won't talk to them, they grab you.' These statements are clearly incompatible. Like one girl who claimed the mareros respected her for being a devout church-goer, or the teenager who insisted a dismembered girl must have been a pandillera, they seem to need to believe there is something they can do, some identifiable course of action that will make them less vulnerable. They want to be convinced that if they are 'good' girls, they can escape bad attention, bad boys, and bad ends.

While much effort and worry go into limiting the sexual interest girls attract, their sexuality is also one of often very few tools that they have to pursue their goals for

themselves. Sex and reproduction become tactical risks for young women seeking personal and material security. Girls may willingly take on the considerable risks of romantic relationships with gang members, whose social status and financial resources often outstrip those of their uninvolved peers. But sexual relationships and behaviour—especially if perceived to be promiscuous—can incur high costs. One fifteen year-old girl's family refused to let her make a legal complaint against the two gang members who abducted her and raped her in an abandoned house. She would not be a credible victim, they reasoned, because she had previously told friends that she had a crush on another teenage pandillero.[10] The dilemma girls face here is not unique to this neighbourhood. Girls negotiating gangs and street cultures often struggle to reconcile the social and economic advantages that connections with certain young men can gain them with the condemnation they are likely to face for 'engaging in deviant risk behaviors' such as early or promiscuous sexual activity (Valdez 2007: 2).

The weight of responsibility for prudently managing sexual relationships is placed very much on women and girls. Ana is much more concerned with policing her daughters' sexuality than her sons'. This may in part express her internalization of a sexual double standard working against women, but it is also based on a realistic appraisal of the different consequences her male and female children could face for sexual behaviour. Early pregnancies are common in El Romero, and the responsibility for child-rearing falls much more heavily (indeed, often exclusively) on girls.[11] Ana and her neighbours joked about this counting up their grandchildren. 'That we know of,' they said to qualify their tally, 'that is, from our girls. From the boys? Who knows?'

[10] It is quite possible that they also feared retaliation by the gang if a police report was filed. As discussed in Chapter 2, few barrio residents expect anything positive to result from involving the police.

[11] 17.1% of girls in Guatemala will have at least one child by the age of nineteen (PNUD 2012: 11). Anecdotally and from my own observations, I would estimate the number is somewhat higher than this in El Romero.

Despite the considerable burdens it imposes on them, including narrowing their options for education and employment, early parenthood is not necessarily unwelcome to local girls. To the contrary, Wuicho claims that 'it's like a goal for them.' Bourgois (2003: 275) found that in East Harlem, the 'dearth of alternative scenarios for female adulthood on the street not only normalizes motherhood at an early age but also makes it attractive.' Anderson (1999) also points out that early reproduction can be a way for girls to achieve entry into womanhood, to gain a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, and to access tangible economic benefits. He cites US welfare benefits available to parents of dependent children as an example of the economic advantages girls may gain through early reproduction (1999: 177). Although fewer public supports are available in Guatemala, the point still applies. Many of the basic necessities (foodstuffs, hygiene products) in Ana's household are obtained through the charitable sponsorship programs her youngest children are enrolled in. Women in El Romero, many of whom are single parents or primary breadwinners if not both, are often at the heart of household economies and family support networks. Early and unplanned pregnancies often create or increase their financial responsibilities, but motherhood can also help women and girls to meet them. For many barrio teenagers, the 'benefits they perceive as deriving from their sexual behaviour outweigh the risks. Their outlook on sex and pregnancy, like their outlook on violence, is strongly affected by their perceived options in life' (Anderson 1999: 142).

When enumerating risk factors, residents and officials often cite the lack of male role models to provide positive examples for local boys. But Arturo points out that this deficit might be even more striking for girls. Boys like Mono can look to people like him or to Rafa, Cadejo, and Wuicho: barrio kids who made it out on their own terms, some of whom have studied at the public university, who make something of a living from their passions, and who have all stayed deeply involved with their community. But in the same generation, there aren't really women that girls could look to for a model of how to achieve that for

themselves. The women he knew growing up who had left El Romero did through or for a man. Some girls do seem hungry for women who embody alternative possibilities. One morning, sixteen year-old Lena tells me she wants to join the army. She's been admiring a striking young female soldier stationed with El Romero's task force. 'They look at her with so much respect,' she says wonderingly. And that is not a reaction barrio girls get to experience very often.

Figure 22. Ana's daughters Mariana (thirteen), Karen (seven), and Lena (sixteen) get ready for their sister Hailey's graduation. Author photo, October 2012.

It is typically through their intimate relationships with men that local girls both gain and lose esteem. Ana was furious when Hailey left home with her gang-involved boyfriend. She was scandalized by her daughter's behaviour: hearing that she was in bars with several boys, having friends call her late at night to warn, 'Ana, listen, your daughter's out in the

street.' But Ana is also blunt about the exchange value of sex as well as the risks of using it. She believes young women need to know their value, to set it for themselves rather than let men set it for them. 'If you offer it for five pesos, everyone will take you up on it, you'll be busy all day but worth nothing at the end.' But, she says, if you tell a man that it's going for 400, 'bring him home if he's serious, that's a lot of money. The thing is to set your own price.' Though they disagreed over the relationship Hailey had chosen, Ana sympathized with her daughter's basic motivation. She left home with this man 'wanting experience, wanting independence, not because it was a great love.' She understood that, more or less of necessity, her daughters would use sexual, romantic, and reproductive relationships to negotiate their vulnerability and their goals.

III. Red Zone Blues: Traps and Lines of Flight

'If you tell me my whole life that I'm nothing more than a gangster, a delinquent, garbage—how are you going to act all surprised when that's what I turn out to be?' Junior swung repeatedly between exhausted vulnerability and angry defiance while we talked. The stigma of their red zone origins featured in the justifications several young people gave for their gang involvement. They are told that they come from criminal and violent surroundings, but are rarely given a chance to either disprove that stereotype or to escape that environment. From a young age, barrio children are made acutely aware of their unacceptability by dominant measures. Boys and young men are almost never allowed to forget the assumptions that adhere to them, whether through constant interference from authorities as they move around their neighbourhood or through the way that people recoil from them as they move around the city, if they are not managing to 'pass' as someone else from somewhere else. To 'be self-respecting,' they 'exhibit contempt for a system they are sure has contempt for them' (Anderson 1999: 113).

They are caught in a daunting trap. Dozens of informants spoke about how it is virtually impossible for young men to find work because El Romero addresses make them suspect. But they are automatically suspect if they are not employed, with a senior officer of the military task force alleging that 'the majority of young people who do not work commit delinquent acts.' Even staying alive through a barrio childhood can suggest culpability. This same army captain says that 'of those who have survived,' about half of all young people are 'involved'. Such claims recall the old trial by ordeal for suspected witches: the innocent drown and those who swim must be helped by dark powers.

Junior, a teenage father struggling to make a break from his mara, poignantly expresses the degree of alienation many young men and women in red zones feel with regards to the city and society beyond their barrios:

> See, everyone says that you can't leave the gang, that the thing these days is impossible. But that's not how it is. Every order comes from the prison. No one shoots nobody without that order. No one charges a rent without that permission. Let's say we're 500 in the pandilla in this part of this zone. If all of a sudden all of us agree that we're done with this, then all at once we cut those lines of communication with the *jefes*. We just ignore them. We're free. And where is this country gonna put us, the 500 from the pandilla? What do we eat? Who gives us a *chance*?[12]

Even in his wildest dreams, where he can fantasize a way *out* of the mara, he cannot stretch his suspension of disbelief so far as to imagine a way *in* to Guatemalan society.

'The dream is to get away,' Pastor Gerardo says, claiming that most residents of El Romero would abandon it if they had the chance. But that flight can be a difficult proposition for young people. Chepe's nine year-old daughter, whose private schooling takes up most of her parents' income, while they all live in one room of her grandparents' house, says she already knows what she wants to be when she grows up. She wants to be someone who flies in an airplane, the kind of person who flies away from the barrio to Mexico, Spain, or the US. That escape itself is the victory, it hardly matters what the move is

[12] The slang term '*chance*', taken from English, has the same meaning of 'opportunity' but is usually used as a synonym for 'job'.

made towards. Boasting about a former student, a primary school director says, 'I don't know what she's doing with herself, but she is triumphing over there in Europe.'

Some of those who don't pull off the trick escape into what one pastor calls 'that world of fantasy' chased through solvents and other cheap drugs. But Huesos, a barrio character, dreams up that fantasy world for himself. An avid reader and sponge for facts and stories, Huesos has for years spun out a complex web of grandiose lies. He is a descendent of Spanish royalty, scion of the Bourbon kings. He's also a member of the Castillo family—one of Guatemala's wealthiest—due a huge inheritance of money, houses, and land that his many enemies constantly conspire to keep from him. Unable to get to those ultimately responsible for his dispossession, he lashes out at people he can reach, accusing other young men in the neighbourhood of being in league with his enemies, of keeping him in the ignominious state that they share but that he does not deserve.

Others who cannot make the literal escape find self-worth in faith, typically of the fervent evangelical variety. One of the many ex-convict preacher-beggars who work the buses expressed its appeal to those who feel rejected and denigrated. He runs through the usual narrative of gangsterism, imprisonment, and conversion. Most Guatemalans, he says, won't even look him in the eye, but 'in the eyes of God, *you* and *I* are equals.' His pitch is not the usual plea for charity from our good Christian hearts, but an aggressive assertion of his right to consider himself the equal of each and every one of us on that bus, a right based in, and justified by, his born-again faith.

Alongside drugs, dreams, and religion, there are more practical roads leading away from the barrio for the cleverest, luckiest, and most determined. Arturo and Wuicho studied at the public university and won themselves a shot at mainstream respectability, although in early 2013, Arturo spent the first weeks at a new NGO job (for which he had to take out his earrings and cut off his long hair) failing to realize he was being addressed when colleagues used the deferential *Licenciado* title. Cadejo and Rafa, using the considerable social savvy

gained in learning how to 'move themselves' smoothly around the neighbourhood and its gangs, have instead made the transition from barrio kids to bohemians. They all straddle their two worlds uncomfortably at times, causing friction for and between them.

One night all of the surviving members of the different incarnations of a barrio theatre troupe, to which Rafa, Cadejo, Wuicho, Arturo, and Chepe have all belonged, gather together for the first time in years. These nearly twenty men, the oldest almost forty, are scattered through the city, sometimes by choice, but for many due to extortion demands or other threats. Only Chepe still lives in El Romero. They joke that it's the neighbourhood's clowns who made it through and made it out, that anyone from the barrio who survives into his thirties does so as some kind of prisoner, soldier, or clown.

Conclusion

I do not know what has become of the lavender-shirted teenage gang boss since his middle school graduation. If, over two years later, he is still serving as the clique's highest-ranking member outside of the prison, then he has played the game very well and with considerable luck. But cleverness and luck would also have been needed to make him *llavero* by seventeen. There is a fair chance he is now inside one of the prisons from which he used to relay orders. If so, he has shifted into a new field of both risks and opportunities for advancement in his vocation. There is no small chance that his luck ran out in a more final way, and the parents who so proudly presented him with his graduation ring have since had to bury him. Perhaps he even disappeared from El Romero to leave the gang behind, assume a new identity, and start over as a taxi driver in a small provincial town. This is what one mara collaborator in the barrio was rumoured to have done, although it later emerged that he had been dismembered by the gang and buried beneath the floor of an abandoned house. Even were I to receive news of the teenage *llavero*, it would shed little light on how he felt about the decisions he took in navigating the challenges of his young life

in a red zone, about the circumstances these had led him to, or about what they cost him or others along the way.

'In El Romero, not everything in life is gentle,' Murci said by way of explaining why he joined the M-18 in 1995. That much remains true. But in other ways, the dangers and possibilities of a barrio youth have changed since the community's early years. The gang's scope and power have grown tremendously, providing more opportunities within the criminal economy and making it increasingly difficult to stand entirely apart from it. At the same time, the notoriety of mara territories and association of young people with violent delinquency drastically restrict options outside of the gang's orbit and beyond El Romero. Searching for protection, status, and economic advantage, many young people are drawn into a criminal economy that involves doing and suffering a great deal of violence. Joining the gang under these circumstances is best understood as being 'not the act of thrill seekers but the act of those whose space of possibilities is narrow or non-existent' (Vigh 2006: 30).

Yet many more young people do not to participate in gangs than do. They struggle to minimize or strategically manage their relations with the gang, needing to perform to the standards of both the street culture and its mainstream counterpart to maximize their chances of security and success. In attempting to navigate this challenging terrain, they do not seem to find the same moral succour in nostalgic narratives of the barrio's past and its codes that some older residents do. The 'space of possibilities' for local autonomy and solidarity that those narratives recollect and imagine either does not captivate or does not convince them, and they most often situate their hopes for themselves and their futures beyond the barrio's boundaries.

Chapter 7
Behind Enemy Lines? State and Citizens in the Red Zone

Introduction

When I returned to El Romero in October 2012 to resume my fieldwork after several months, I arrived two weeks after a new urban security task force. Nearly three hundred soldiers—one detachment of a larger operation, the *Fuerza de Tarea Maya*, deployed in zone 18's most notorious red zones—had installed their barracks in the community hall. They remain there, occupying the territory of what is allegedly one of Guatemala's most powerful mara cliques.

On the first day of the operation, President Pérez announced that zone 18 had been chosen because it registered more homicides and violent assaults than anywhere else in the metropolitan area (Government of Guatemala 2012). Minister of Governance López Bonilla commented that the zone's residents 'have lived as captives, especially of the pandillas,' and that the task force was being implemented because they 'should not have to be under the yoke of these people' (Government of Guatemala 2012). The initiative has since been widely touted by the Guatemalan government for its purported success in reducing homicides in the sector and has been expanded to other zones and municipalities.

Although the military presence affected some aspects of how the gang and its collaborators operate in the neighbourhood, it did not significantly impede the mara's local criminal economy during the next eight months that I was present in El Romero. The clique continued to collect extortion, discipline non-compliance, and force the emigration of many residents. It was able to maintain the credibility of its threats and its status as a powerful M-18 clique inside the prison system and on the capital's streets. Barrio inhabitants were largely eager to retain the soldiers in their neighbourhood, but continued to respond to the gang's presence, demands, and threats much as they did prior to the army's arrival. The

soldiers' presence made many feel safer in the streets, but it did not substantially change their calculus of risk where the gang's extortion economy was concerned.

Chapter 5 examined the risk mitigation strategies employed by barrio residents in what many feel to be an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable environment. But it said little about the fact that from the midpoint of my fieldwork, the military and the Guatemalan state more broadly occupied a newly central but highly complex position amid these tactics. Neighbourhood residents now faced the challenge of navigating not one, but two coercive forces claiming control in this space. They had to decide not only how to position themselves relative to the gang and its criminal economy, but also whether and to what extent they would aid, avoid, or undermine the military operation. Perhaps most importantly, they had to balance their interactions with both mara and military to maximize their chances of safety and protection.

Situating El Romero's case within regional patterns of community- and state-level responses to insecurity, this chapter examines residents' expectations and experiences of state intervention and military occupation. El Romero provides a compelling example of how *mano dura* (strong hand or iron fist) politics play out in the communities they target, and particularly how such state security politics interact with local efforts to find order amid insecurity. Explaining the military presence, Doña Ana alluded to the deterioration of local norms and coping mechanisms traced in previous chapters and linked to the mara's predatory turn. The soldiers were there because, as Ana saw it, the neighbourhood had lost its capacity to survive as an autonomous community. 'They have to send others to look after us now,' she said, 'because we can't do it for ourselves anymore.'

Insecurity affects a great deal about life in El Romero—how residents move around their neighbourhood, interact with each other, evaluate risks in the present, and perceive possibilities for the future. It has also affected residents' relationship with the Guatemalan state, shaping how state agents perceive and use the barrio and its residents and the forms in

which the state intervenes in the neighbourhood, as well as what barrio residents expect, claim, and fear from the state.

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the interaction—or surprising lack thereof—between the mara and the military. The cohabitation of gangsters and soldiers in the barrio challenges certain assumptions about both states and criminal groups. Unpacking the layers of control and profit available in El Romero, I examine the distinct logics of territory and violent display that shape how the mara clique and Guatemalan state relate to each other, as well as to the barrio and its residents.

I. Red Zone State

El Romero's status as one of the country's most notorious red zones defines the blend of exclusion and inclusion faced by its inhabitants. They are at the edge of city, society, and economy, but at the centre of maps of security and insecurity, control and disorder for the state and the broader Guatemalan public. The breakdown of local order and control that Doña Ana linked to their need for outside intervention has been making the problem of their marginality an increasingly relevant and pressing one for barrio residents. As they feel less able to rely on internal norms and supports, they become more willing to look to external sources of order and predictability. But the way they are looked at from the outside limits what they can hope to claim or gain from resources beyond the neighbourhood's borders. The red zone label and association with gangs, violence, insecurity, and threat that this establishes in the public imagination both defines and reinforces their marginality.

A relation of marginality should not by any means be conflated with an absence of relationship (Ferguson 1999: 236-38). Though residents of marginal and marginalized urban spaces 'describe the state as absent and their relation to it as one of abandonment,' the state does in fact involve itself frequently, if selectively, with these areas as it 'strains to impose its own conception of order, which may not conform well to the kinds of social order that

barrio residents desire' (Goldstein 2012: 6). Despite what residents may perceive as a 'public policy of abandonment' (Auyero 2000: 110), the state projects itself forcefully, but unevenly, into the life of marginal barrios. The particular form of marginality characteristic of El Romero's red zone status shapes the ways in which the state is present as well as absent.

With the rise of urban insecurity to the top of the political agenda, the state's interest in El Romero has been growing. Its infamy as the 'reddest of the red zones' gives it a certain cachet in the kind of politics that brought retired general Otto Pérez Molina to the presidency in 2012 on a *mano dura* platform, using a clenched fist as his party logo. His administration's branding has pushed security at every turn, as can be seen in the name changes undergone by several government programs. The *bolsa solidaria*, an assemblage of basic food and hygiene products given periodically to the poor, has become the *bolsa segura*; the canteens that supply free meals are no longer called *comedores solidarios* but *comedores seguros*; during school vacations, day camp-style programs in poor neighbourhoods are now not *escuelas abiertas* but *escuelas seguras*. An opposition congressman told me that El Romero's national profile has made it 'the ultimate place' for politicians to be seen in connection with security policies and pronouncements. During the 2011 election campaign, the barrio was used by Pérez as a backdrop for announcing key elements of his urban security platform. In January 2013, the now-President appeared again to mark the first anniversary of his government and promote its recent achievements in reducing violence there through the *Fuerza de Tarea Maya*.

This was hardly the first time that military personnel were deployed to combat crime. Indeed, at no point in the postwar period have the armed forces *not* been involved in internal security. Joint military-police patrols were initially employed during the Arzú administration (1996-2000) as an interim measure to cover personnel shortages in the newly-

founded Policía Nacional Civil.[1] The first efforts to incorporate military personnel more formally into PNC operations with 'combined forces' came under President Berger (2004-2008), and despite protests by national and international human rights groups, there were 2,400 soldiers serving in these special units by 2006 (Dickins 2011: 110). Nevertheless, the intensity and duration of military involvement in policing and controlling sectors of the capital vastly expanded with the establishment of the *Fuerza de Tarea Maya*, which introduced a model that has since been extended to other notorious zones and municipalities around the capital (Government of Guatemala 2013).

The Pérez administration has brought not only a high profile to El Romero in government activity, but a new model of state engagement. Like rural bandit zones of bygone eras, urban gang territories have often been places where the state's presence and power were 'great, but intermittent' (Hobsbawm 2001 [1969]: 14). From El Romero's foundation, this was very much the model under which residents encountered the forces of public order: in sporadic but spectacular interventions targeting local criminal groups or broader suspect categories, such as young men. A major *cateo* (raid) in May 2012 is fairly typical.

Early one Friday morning, the barrio was shut down by 200 police and 100 soldiers, accompanied by machine gun mounted pick-up trucks and a handful of tanks. A house-to-house search resulted in the detention of thirteen alleged members of the M-18. Minister of Governance López Bonilla gave a press conference crowing about the disarticulation of what he called one of the country's most bloody and sinister criminal structures ('Desarticulan estructura de sicarios' 2012). The consensus in the barrio, however, held that those arrested were all merely peripheral members or former collaborators. As there is no doubt that the

[1] The 1996 peace accords ending the internal conflict called for sweeping reform of police forces that had been implicated in wartime abuses (Acuerdo sobre el fortalecimiento del poder civil 1996, IV.B.22). The Policía Nacional Civil was deployed beginning in mid-1997 and covered all twenty-two departments of Guatemala by 1999.

gang's leadership is now based in the prison system, nor that the gang is able to recruit new members and collaborators as necessary, the potential of such an operation to meaningfully affect El Romero's security situation or extortion economy seems minimal. The only real impact such raids had was to heighten fear as residents waited for the retaliation they were sure would come as the clique asserted its continued presence and power. Once it did—in this case with the assassination of a Ministry of Governance official in the barrio ten days later—I was told it was again the state's turn to retaliate and repress, as their 'game of cat and mouse' went on and residents tried to avoid becoming collateral damage of the next move. But the outlay of resources to stage such an elaborate defeat of a handful of teenagers apparently gives the state some return, because this was neither the first nor last *cateo* of this kind. For those witnessing this blockbuster security theatre at close range it projects an image of the state 'that mixes omnipotence with naked impotence' (O'Donnell 1993: 1364).

Goldstein (2012: 32) describes the Bolivian state as 'a ghostly presence that haunts the margins of the city.' If the state in Guatemala City's red zones had anything ghostly about it, however, it was more in the mode of a poltergeist—showing up uninvited and throwing things into disarray. Barrio residents must balance their prospects for 'security through the state vs. security from the state' (Roitman 2007: 195). There is almost always an ambivalence in local encounters with the state, in which residents struggle to reconcile what they hope and fear will result.

The new urban security operation marked a transition from spectacular and sporadic appearances by public authorities to a strategy of control based on constant proximity and vigilance. Guatemala is not alone in this recent shift in security policy, and the task forces (of which zone 18's was only the first) can be seen as a more thoroughly militarized version of the kind of sustained contact policing also employed by special Police Pacification Units in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. This new model, however, did not change the terms of the relationship between state and barrio. The state now permeates the barrio's space every

hour of every day, but its engagement with the neighbourhood is still defined by its red zone status, based in understanding the place as a criminal margin. As a result, its drastically increased presence has not dispelled the ambiguity and ambivalence, the 'slippage between threat and guarantee,' that characterizes residents' encounters with the state (Poole 2004: 36).

II. Insecurity and the *Mano Dura* Ethos

The opposing urges to turn towards, and pull away from, the state are reflected in two apparently conflicting tendencies in responses to insecurity by Latin American publics. On the one hand is the rise of private security and justice as people across the region 'increasingly look to nonstate actors (including themselves) rather than the state for protection' (Arias 2010b: 252). Expressions of this impulse range from the retreat to guarded enclaves (Caldeira 2000; Rodgers 2005), to the unprecedented security industry boom (Dickins 2011), to the use of lynching and vigilante patrols (Godoy 2006; Goldstein 2012). All of these have manifested themselves in and around Guatemala City.[2] At the same time, demand for public sector security involvement has grown drastically. *Mano dura* policies have proved enormously successful across the region, delivering electoral victories to numerous candidates campaigning for extensions of state activity and power in the arena of security and criminal justice. Both taking hard, punitive stances on crime and delinquency and elevating the 'right' to security (Goldstein 2007), these trends can be seen as two faces of the same coin. Both draw on what might be termed a '*mano dura* ethos' that can be identified in many Latin American socities (see, for instance, Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2007, 2012; Pine

[2] Lynching, vigilante patrols, and other forms of local practices combining violence, justice, and security are most often discussed in the context of rural and majority indigenous communities in Guatemala (see Godoy 2002, 2006; Sandoval Girón 2007; Sharp 2014). However, collective violence against alleged criminals also occurs in urban centres. In February 2013, for instance, a 'mob' of up to 1000 rioted in the capital's *centro histórico* after police interfered with their attempts to lynch three supposed delinquents (González 2013: 6). Security patrols have also been organized in Guatemala City's peripheral settlements (see Mazariegos and Mutz 2011 on the organization of one such patrol).

2008; Hume 2009). It is not confined to the state arena or electoral politics, but may find expression through unofficial means as readily as through official policy.

Figure 23. A press photo of masked security patrol members on Guatemala City's western periphery. The banner reads, 'Patrollers. Organized community. Delinquents NOT welcome.' Photo: *Nuestro Diario* (Mazariegos and Mutz 2011).

The full range of motivations, fears, and strategies that foster such a *mano dura* ethos has rarely been appreciated. Popular justice and informal security measures are most often treated in terms of a problem of rule of law, evidence of a 'crisis of the state as the lawful source of social predictability' (O'Donnell 19993: 1365). On this view, vigilantism is first and foremost about the state and its shortcomings: it arises in response to 'a justice system that has failed' (Sandoval Girón 2007: 537). Examinations of government *mano dura* interventions also typically focus on the weakness of and need for the rule of law (Malone 2012). Prevailing understandings of *mano dura* policies and practices are strongly biased towards explanations that centre on legal and political institutions, leaving what Godoy (2006: 25) terms an 'epistemological blind spot' with regards to relevant intra-community dynamics and relationships. I believe the most convincing account of the proliferation and popularity

of both official and unofficial *mano dura* departs not from the state and its absence or inadequacies, but from much more local crises in the capacity of communities to order and organize their lives and to respond to disruptions.

i. Official and Unofficial *Mano Dura*

Popular justice

In one major regional survey, Guatemala ranked highest among Central American nations on respondents' support for people 'taking justice into their own hands' to punish criminals if the state fails to do so (Malone 2012: 118). Over lunch one day, in response to a television news report on the release of the alleged perpetrators of an armed assault, Doña Ana and her husband debated how they should have been treated. 'Set them on fire!' Ana exclaimed, specifying that they should first be doused in gasoline, according to the most common method of lynching. But Jairo wanted a slower process: 'Cut off little pieces of finger until they don't have any fingers. Stick rods under their fingernails. Torture them.' By way of justification, he explained, 'it's that here, justice is no use (*no sirve*). You have to take things into your own hands.'

I did not hear of any cases of barrio residents acting out such fantasies, though some suggested that matters would be better there if they were capable of organizing vigilante action. This was the position of Pastor Gerardo, who leads one of El Romero's major neo-Pentecostal churches but lives in another *colonia*. 'The thing is, Kate, that the people here are scared. Where I live,' he said approvingly,

> the *vecinos* have taken justice into our own hands and we don't have this problem. The *vecinos* are armed and take action and go find any delinquents themselves. They don't call the authorities. In El Romero, they don't denounce [to the authorities] out of fear, and they don't take action out of fear.

Goldstein (2012: 119) suggests that in circumstances of 'profound and unmitigated insecurity, barrio residents often opt to leave the state out of things entirely, turning to much

more local sets of resources to resolve their problems.' But residents say the local resources they might have turned to—the complex of norms and expectations referred to by the shorthand '*códigos de barrio*'—have been destroyed by the predation and violence they have been exposed to in recent years. Talk of barrio codes may boost moral security, but it does little at present to guide individual and collective behaviour at moments of stress, conflict, or crisis. In both rural Guatemala and urban Bolivia, majority indigenous communities have appropriated discourses promoting 'traditional' justice, stretching these to justify novel local practices including lynchings of delinquents suspected of threatening the community and its security (Sharp 2014; Goldstein 2012). Narratives of barrio codes in El Romero, by contrast, apparently do not have the force to animate or authorize action to confront insecurity. There is also an important difference between the kinds of (alleged) criminals subject to 'community justice' in those settings and those operating in El Romero. The well-organized and powerful mara clique is able, and very likely, to take reprisals for violence against their own, unlike the unaffiliated *rateros* subject to lynching in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Goldstein 2012).

Para-state *mano dura*

Official and unofficial, state law and popular justice make for convenient oppositions but are not true dichotomies. These terms are more accurately seen as the ends of a spectrum of security strategies and practices, which pass through grey zones on their way to 'official' or 'legitimate' state action. Social cleansing and other forms of extra-judicial killing lie here. As the name implies, social cleansing is justified by the need to purge corruption or infection from the social body. Its perpetrators are frequently somehow linked to security forces—retired military personnel, off-duty police, and demobilized members of wartime Civilian Self-Defence Patrols (PACs)—who go beyond the pale of the law to eliminate despised persons. They act unofficially, off the books, while leveraging resources and contacts within

the state to ensure impunity. Death squads targeted political opponents and suspected dissidents in Guatemala City during the internal conflict, and similar patterns of repression have been sporadically applied to the capital's 'delinquents', gang members, and homeless youth since the 1990s (Weld 2014; Sanford 2008).[3]

It was this sort of security service that Doña Ana longed for after receiving death threats from the gang in February 2013. She wished there was some way to just 'disappear' them all, someone you could point them out to and say 'those are the ones, that's them,' and all the problems and dangers would go away. Such figures—some more welcome than others—have operated in the neighbourhood in the past, and a number of barrio residents crave their return even while acknowledging the injustice and ultimate inefficacy of their approach. Holding his young goddaughter in his lap, a young man said that he and others were wishing for a return of the period in the early 1990s when an unmarked car would come in the night and open fire on supposed delinquents. He specified that back then, most of them were really just kids smoking marijuana on an unlucky street corner, but he still insisted that, with people dismembering little girls just like his goddaughter in the neighbourhood, there are those who simply don't deserve to live, and he saw no other way to resist them. 'People want it and they fear it,' he explained of the local attitude to such social cleansing.

More recently and more selectively, the elimination of El Romero's most unsavoury characters was arranged by the Ministry of Governance official assassinated in the wake of the May 2012 *cateo*. It is one of the barrio's '*secretos a voces*' that, on a number of occasions, he arranged for police and military contacts to 'disappear' local pandilleros. Several months after his murder, Cadejo called him a '*buen cuate*', a good friend of the neighbourhood. As a long-time resident of El Romero, he said, this official knew which were the most serious local villains tormenting inhabitants. Although vociferously opposed to *mano dura*-style

[3] For social cleansing of gang members, see the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Executions on Guatemala (Alston 2007: 7-11, §15-21). Sanford (2008) discusses death squad activity in post-war Guatemala City.

policing, and particularly its targeting of local youth in both the past and present, Cadejo was unwilling to say that he couldn't understand or wouldn't have done the same: 'I'm not saying that it's good or bad. It's complicated. I don't know what qualifier to give it. The ideal would be for justice to work, but it's never been like that around here.'[4]

State *mano dura*

In the past decade, Latin America has seen many moves by states to extend government, police, and military prerogatives in response to rising rates of, and anxieties over, crime. Some observers identify in these the resurgence of elements of authoritarian pasts as 'counterinsurgency has been replaced by crime fighting' as the leading justification for state repression (Godoy 2006: 159; see also Goldstein 2007). Yet these measures are being rolled out in electoral democracies across the region to widespread popularity, suggesting that 'there is clearly a "democratic" component to a substantial portion of state violence in the region' (Arias 2010b: 244). The success of this approach in Guatemala, and in Guatemala City in particular, was confirmed in the country's most recent presidential election. Positioning himself as the *mano dura* candidate, Otto Pérez Molina won the support of a large majority of urban voters paralysed by fear of violence and criminality. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal reported that 77.99 per cent of valid votes in Guatemala City were cast for Pérez in the November 2011 presidential run-off, outdoing his national performance by over 25 per cent (TSE 2011).

Urban insecurity in Latin America has often led to vocal support for repressive state and para-state responses, including by those sectors of the population most likely to be harmed by such measures (for instance Caldeira 2000; Scheper-Hughes 2004; Goldstein 2007, 2012). Moreover, these demands often coexist with profound (and typically well-earned) distrust in the efficacy and good intentions of the state and its representatives (Godoy 2006: 56;

[4] When people refer to '*la justicia*' in this and similar contexts (like Jairo's '*la justicia no sirve*' above), they mean the state's legal system, rather than more abstract or normative notions of justice.

Goldstein 2012: 21). In El Romero, too, many residents demand more and stronger action on violence and criminality from a state that they typically describe as highly corrupt, broadly incompetent, and generally disinterested in their needs. This conjunction has troubled researchers in the region: how to explain why groups with histories of victimization and exclusion at the hands of the state appear to be asking for more of the same?

One answer has been to point to an insidious spread, through media and other publically-circulating discourses, of moral panics and 'punitive populism' originating in more elite classes (Hume 2009: 141; Pontón 2008: 125). Pine (2008: 62), for instance, remarks that in Honduras the bellicose rhetoric of *mano dura* 'resonates with many poor people…who tend to forget that they themselves will be the victims of a war on crime.' She is right, of course, that the urban poor are by far the most likely see their neighbourhoods and families targeted by these discourses and their associated practices. But this view substantially reduces the complexity of the anxieties and motivations at work and risks attributing a patronizing form of false consciousness to the poor. El Romero's experience of military occupation in the name of urban security suggests that support for repressive state security policies can be situated within a poor urban neighbourhood's internal dynamics, rather than being seen as seeping in from outside.

ii. Local Disorder and State Order

Local attitudes towards state intervention must be understood in light of the impact of the mara's predatory turn and the consequent deterioration of local social and normative order. The operation of the mara's extortion economy has left El Romero with what Godoy (2006: 35) identifies as a 'devastated toolkit' of collective action. This dissolution of community cohesion and control—which residents often describe with reference to the decline of barrio 'codes'—is an important factor in understanding the tolerance for military occupation of

community space. It has led many to turn to external providers of order as they attempt to find new strategies to cope with novel or newly intensified forms of insecurity.

In a study of how Indonesian villagers choose among the various forums available to them for the resolution of disputes, von Benda-Beckmann (1981: 143) concludes that their apparent preference for local over formal legal options depended on 'the existence of social control at the village level which is strong enough to keep villagers from taking their problems directly to the state courts.' If an aversion to, or disuse of, state forums is indeed related to the vigour of their local or informal correlates, it might provide a clue to understanding the relationship between accounts of declining internal codes in the barrio and residents' eagerness for state intervention in their neighbourhood.

Existing ethnographic studies of insecurity in Latin America seem to support the plausibility of this interpretation. Godoy (2006) and Goldstein (2012) offer accounts that reconcile the use of unofficial *mano dura* practices with support for official *mano dura* programs, depicting both as arising from the loss of local capacity for non-violent resolution of danger and conflict. Compounding wartime damage to social fabric and capital, the chronic and everyday nature of contemporary insecurity in the rural Guatemalan communities studied by Godoy (2006: 165) turned 'residents against one another, leaving most more afraid of their neighbors than they are of the state.' Along similar lines, Goldstein (2012: 236-37) argues that in urban Bolivia, support for both official *mano dura* and for lynching follows from the breakdown of communities' capacity for internal control and resilience under insecurity and fear. On this view, 'lynchings and other elements of *mano dura* speak more to the quality of communal life than they do to the actual crime rate or to characteristics of the criminal justice system, strictly speaking' (Godoy 2006: 35).

El Romero's experience, too, suggests that a turn towards law, understood as seeking out the state's capacity for ordering, may come about as a community's own internal capacity to order violence, conflict, and insecurity breaks down. As Doña Ana said, outsiders were now

needed to supply the care and safety that the community could no longer provide for itself. As in Cochabamba, Bolivia, when barrio residents 'describe themselves and their spaces as insecure, they mean more than that there is a lot of crime there, with no reliable police or judicial presence to protect them from harm' (Goldstein 2012: 252). They also mean, in part, that they cannot trust each other and that they are at a loss for how to cope with or respond to danger. As the complex of norms and expectations compiled under the idea of barrio codes seemed to deteriorate under the pressure of criminal predation, residents became more anxious for state intervention while remaining highly sceptical of what it could deliver in terms of security and justice. Their turn to the state is justified by necessity rather than legitimacy. Residents looked to the military task force to secure a certain amount of predictability in their environment. But the standards by which they evaluate their own and others' success or failure as moral agents remain rooted within the community's space and history, as expressed in talk about the codes of the barrio. The response one man offered when asked for his opinion of the military occupation's potential to improve security in El Romero illustrates this pragmatic pessimism: 'If you set an armed guard over your kid, he'll probably behave. Doesn't mean you're raising him right.'

III. The Barracks and the Barrio

i. Task Force Maya in El Romero

That armed guard arrived on 22 September 2012, when some 300 soldiers claimed the barrio's community hall for their new barracks. Much of the task force's daily activity focused on deterring violence by maintaining a highly visible presence all through the barrio at all times. Military and police trucks, some mounted with artillery, constantly circulated around the neighbourhood's three navigable streets, foot patrols walked the alleys and staircases, and soldiers were stationed on most corners and at fortified look-out points. The neighbourhood's space had been mapped out strategically, I was told by one officer. At 'key

points' there were soldiers stationed at all times, much like the young gang members posted by payphones at the roads entering and exiting El Romero. Mirroring the boys who go walking and watching all though the gang's territory, standard patrols of five soldiers made rounds of the alleys all hours of every day. These were supplemented by 'civilian affairs' patrols of eight soldiers and one officer, charged with 'gathering all the information they can' on the neighbourhood's residents and happenings.

Figure 24. A soldier stands outside of the *salón comunal*. Author photo, October 2012.

The *Fuerza de Tarea Maya* is consistently touted as a 'joint operation' of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Governance, which are responsible for the military and police respectively. With 1300 military personnel deployed in zone 18 and 120 police involved, it

was, however, a somewhat skewed partnership (Government of Guatemala 2012).[5] It is coordinated out of the capital's largest military base, which sits in a neighbouring zone, rather than out of police stations, as was the case with previous operations involving the military in public security. The PNC have had a small station at the top of El Romero's *entrada* road since 2006, but no new police were stationed there, and no police resided in the neighbourhood during this operation. On the other hand, scores of soldiers now stayed in and operated out of the barracks.[6] A sign was placed on the new wall erected to block off entry to the old community hall welcoming visitors *al hogar del soldado*: to the soldier's home. Because of this disparity, I find it more concise and accurate to refer to the task force in El Romero as a military operation and a military occupation. This was how residents perceived it.

Although seen by residents—and derided by several soldiers—as minor players in the operation, the police are technically necessary for its work. Captain Argueta, an officer with the *destacamiento*, explained that military personnel are legally incapable of making arrests, initiating criminal investigations, or conducting searches of persons, vehicles, or property.[7] Representatives from the PNC or Ministerio Público (MP—Public Prosecutor—responsible for criminal investigations) were needed to do any of this, at least officially.[8] Many task force patrols were accompanied by a police officer, in case need of their particular

[5] The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently expressed concern that the extent of Guatemala's militarization of public security may be masked through the use of 'joint' operations that involve the PNC but are 'made up of majority military personnel' (2015: 11 §41).

[6] Their numbers fluctuated somewhat over the following eight months. There were typically 250-300 soldiers stationed with this detachment, but the force fell as low as 160 in spring 2013 due to heavy demand for personnel with new task forces inaugurated elsewhere in the city and a lag in training the squadrons that would replace those who had been rotated out of the neighbourhood.

[7] *Destacamiento* (detachment) refers to both a military unit split off from a larger operation and, more colloquially, to the building or barracks the group operates from.

[8] These restrictions stem from provisions in the Peace Accords and a subsequent constitutional reform that defined the Guatemalan military as a force exclusively concerned with the defence of the nation's borders and sovereignty, which can only co-operate in the alleviation of internal emergencies under the tutelage of civilian authorities (Acuerdo sobre el fortalecimiento del poder civil 1996, IV.A.18; Constitución Política de la República de Guatemala (1993), Artículo 248).

prerogatives should arise. But members of the military complained that the PNC and MP were slow, uncooperative, and corrupt, that their incompetence hampered their capacity to accomplish their mission of liberating zone 18 from delinquency. So justifying themselves, they regularly flouted or circumvented these limitations. Soldiers stopped and searched dozens of teenagers and *tuk-tuks* in the barrio every day. They were also not shy about detaining people, either until a formal arrest could be made or until they felt they'd made their point. One lieutenant proudly related an incident that occurred while on patrol in another *colonia*. They apprehended a 'delinquent' who the lieutenant was certain had just assaulted someone. The police officer present declined to arrest the suspect, however (because he was on the pandilla's payroll, I was assured), so the lieutenant beat the police officer in the street until he came to see things his way and made the arrest 'according to the rules.'

Police incompetence was also offered by members of the military as a reason for why they were in El Romero in the first place. 'These are police duties that the police could not fulfil,' Captain Argueta said. The lieutenant who publically assaulted a police officer found it 'a bit extreme' that the army was being used in this way, but insisted they were needed because the gang was dangerous and well-armed, and if the PNC and MP could not handle them, then 'who else is there but us?' Both tied the task force's work to the state's need to reclaim control of the sector from the mara. 'Delinquency was the owner of zone 18,' the lieutenant said; according to the captain, the area 'was becoming ungovernable' before they arrived.

It was initially announced that the task force would be deployed for four months, until 15 January, 2013. This timeline, however, proved too short to re-establish the zone's 'governability'. Residents feared a violent reassertion of the pandilla if the soldiers left so soon. Organized by the successor of the assassinated Ministry of Governance official (who was otherwise not seen in the neighbourhood in the first year of his appointment as local

security representative), a number of residents petitioned for them to stay on. The operation was extended initially through the end of 2013, and then indefinitely.

Interviews with officers of the task force, both before and after this petition, suggest that they always assumed they would be establishing an indefinite, if not permanent, military presence, but that, for political reasons, it was thought expedient to secure a more popular mandate for longer-term deployment rather than announce it from the outset. Less than a month after they had arrived, Captain Argueta was saying that 'we all think it's impossible that we'll leave' at the end of the four months: 'It is illogical and also inhuman that we go all at once. There will have to be something permanent.' Eight months into the operation, the lieutenant colonel serving as the detachment's commanding officer also thought that the military presence would be effectively permanent. He felt it would take 'at least ten years' to make any lasting change to the neighbourhood's culture and patterns of violence and criminality. Any child or teenager, he explained, was already a lost cause, and only babies born under the military's control of the neighbourhood could reasonably be expected to be any different or any better. If they pulled out in the near future, the mara would just come back stronger and worse.

ii. Public Opinion and Expectations

As the lieutenant colonel's comments suggest, the military's perception of El Romero was very much shaped by the idea of its being a red zone and thus a contaminated and contaminating environment, a hostile terrain. Arturo said that, for the first weeks, all the soldiers were afraid to be in the barrio. He mimicked them looking around jumpily from behind their *garritas*, waiting for some kid to toss a grenade at them, for some passing granny to have a machine gun hidden behind her back. Several soldiers admitted to milder versions of Arturo's parody of their anxiety. 'Despite being a member of the army,' Captain Argueta said, 'I was afraid to enter El Romero.'

Public relations efforts aimed to position the task force as a friendly community ally. 'If you need a hand, remember that a soldier has two,' ran a banner hung on the commandeered community hall. Another invited residents to 'like' the neighbourhood's detachment of the task force on Facebook. Arturo, although he allowed there had initially been less overt intimidation of neighbourhood residents than he had expected, remained suspicious of these outreach efforts. 'They're trying to clean their face, to say "look, the army's cool, the army's chill."' Few residents were ever convinced that active collaboration or public affiliation with the task force was in their interests.

A month into the operation, Captain Argueta estimated that roughly 60 per cent of El Romero's inhabitants were in favour of the military's presence there. Reflecting a rather polarized view of the neighbourhood, which was common among the soldiers and officers I spoke with, he explained that the other 40 per cent were against them 'because their children are the ones committing these crimes.' By this accounting, the barrio would contain about 8000 gang members, collaborators, and approving kin.

Not included in the captain's sums were those equally wary of, or hostile to, the mara and the military. Wuicho, for one, saw little difference between them, saying that a soldier 'is like putting a green uniform on a gangster.' Wuicho, Rafa, Cadejo, and Arturo, all of whom are more politically active and progressive than most residents, were among those most opposed to the military occupation of their neighbourhood. Unlike older adults, younger children, and newer arrivals to the neighbourhood, they are all also of the generation of young men who experienced the most military harassment during the internal conflict. They all had stories from their youth of being assaulted by military patrols, both individually and when in groups of barrio kids. As boys, they learned to recognize the bluebird's call, made to warn young men off the streets when a military patrol was passing through. With the exception of this group of men, however, residents almost never brought

up wartime encounters with the military when speaking about its contemporary involvement in their neighbourhood.

Several weeks after they arrived, Arturo worried that the soldiers were more of a liability than a boon to residents' security. 'Bringing the army to the barrio,' he said, 'I believe it makes the state and the community more vulnerable. It was stupidity to send them here.' Though relieved that the pandilla so far did 'not take them very seriously' and appeared willing to wait out the occupation, he feared the consequences of a change of heart by the gang that would replace tense calm with violent confrontation. Why, despite the indefinite extension of the military presence, this did not occur, is a question I explore later in this chapter.

The military is likely to have encountered relatively low resistance from community residents compared to other state enforcers. Among Guatemala public institutions, the armed forces rank relatively very highly on public trust—ahead of the Presidency, the Human Rights Ombudsman and, notably, the PNC (PNUD 2012: 24) The police, on the other hand, ranked last on one survey of trust in public institutions among Guatemalans and, in another, was said to be trusted by only 10 per cent of respondents (Malone 2012: 13; Sanford 2008: 111). For most Guatemalans, the police are 'not a resource to turn to in times of trouble; they themselves *are* trouble' (Godoy 2006: 56). Soldiers, seen as far less corrupt, are often compared favourably to police officers by local residents. This is part of the self-image of many in the military as well, who contrasted their martial discipline and civic virtues with police venality. 'You can't buy me for a few *barras*,' boasted one young officer in El Romero's barracks.

Although residents trusted soldiers more than other representatives of the state, they did not trust them to stay. At the outset, Pastor Gerardo identified how long the military would remain as the 'million-dollar question.' Over subsequent months, the majority of residents who welcomed the military's presence remained conflicted because of this concern, often

citing it as the main reason why people had not changed their behaviour with regards to the gang. In February 2013, after it was known that the mandate extended until at least the end of that year, Sonia still worried that 'one knows nothing of whether or not they'll stay a good while. There's always that little doubt.'

After an initial period of wariness, during which rumours of impending grenade attacks by the mara circulated constantly (not least among the soldiers), things settled into a routine. The most notable change, aside from the ubiquity of khaki, was that people began to spend more time in the streets, to be willing to stay out of doors a little later, than they had for several years.

Young men and the military

Not everyone in the barrio was moving more freely in the streets, however. Young men and boys as young as seven or eight had to carry identification papers with them at all times, or risk very rough treatment during the various stops and searches they could expect from military patrols in the course of a day. Several male adolescents of my acquaintance took to spending much less time in public spaces after a number of unpleasant run-ins that included verbal and quite serious physical abuse. Older boys withdrew from neighbourhood activities like the informal juggling and clowning lessons held in empty lots by Rafa, Cadejo, and Wuicho. Young people were, in general, less likely than older adults to view the presence of the task force positively.

They were, in turn, viewed with a great deal of suspicion by the soldiers. Asked to characterize relations between the *destacamiento* and the neighbourhood's young people, Captain Argueta replied that 'there is no relation; there is a clash.' The dislike was frequently mutual. Doña Ana's nineteen year-old son Andy found the soldiers two-faced. Shortly after I returned early in the military occupation, I had my first extended encounter with soldiers from the barracks when an officer visited Doña Ana's house for coffee one

afternoon, bringing several subordinates with him. As they left, Andy whispered to me, 'they're not really like that.' He said the polite and solicitous face they presented to his mother and me was not the one he and his friends typically saw. The stops they went through every day were always rough and always involved denigrating insults and insinuations. But what Andy said he hated most was the humiliation of feeling so impotent, that with the soldiers you can't say a thing while they've got you shoved up against a wall, can't answer back when they've got you with your legs spread at gunpoint.

The *destacamiento* did not appear very responsive to concerns regarding excessive force. When one community representative brought up the need for soldiers to respect residents' human rights at a public meeting, he was interrupted by the task force's spokesman. 'You don't understand anything,' he was told. 'Human rights have nothing to do with this. We're in charge here now, and we'll do what we need to do.' The spokesman had been seconded to the *destacamiento* from the air force to serve as its community relations officer due to his special training in 'civilian affairs.' He was perhaps a little off from the message delivered by the president in inaugurating the next task force in the capital, where he assured residents that the army 'is coming to take care of you and to respect you' ('Presidente Otto Pérez Molina instala Fuerza de Tarea Kaminal' 2012). At least some residents of El Romero were disappointed in that regard.

iii. Change and Continuity in a Militarized Barrio

The *Fuerza de Tarea Maya* was soon being promoted as highly successful, a promising model for breaking the back of Guatemala's urban security crisis and proof of the Pérez administration's ability to deliver on its *mano dura* platform. Based on its purported success in reducing rates of violence, the scheme was expanded to other troublesome zones of the capital. The task force's achievements have been widely publicized in press conferences, media reports, and on the presidential Twitter feed.

Figure 25. Post to Twitter account of President Otto Pérez Molina, 19 March 2013: 'Task Force Maya succeeds in reducing number of cases of violent deaths and delinquency in zone 18.'

A deputy director of the PNC was, however, less fulsome when addressing an informal gathering of representatives from zone 7's most high-risk communities, which I attended in February 2013. Violence and criminality, he said, had merely been displaced, claiming that since the deployment of the military in zone 18, there had been a dramatic rise in the number of bodies of homicide victims found in neighbouring municipalities. He explained the challenge of policing red zones was that the delinquents simply moved out as security moved in, and that

> zone 18 is a perfect example of this. With the task force, they are leaving the *colonias* but we are seeing that they end up in Palencia, in other places. We've managed to reduce criminality by 55 per cent in the *colonias*, but it's rising in other municipalities.

Not all murders moved either. Although there almost certainly was a drop from the average of four daily murders previously registered in zone 18, only twelve days out of the operation's first 286 could be declared '24-0': without homicides (Gámez 2013). In 2013, zone 18 'succeeded' in recording a total of 77 days without a murder in the course of the year (Government of Guatemala 2013). More recently, a UN human rights reports expressing concern over the militarization of security in Guatemala reported that 'attempted murders and homicides' in zone 18 had in fact risen by 5 per cent after an initial dip following the task force's deployment (United Nations 2015: 11 §42).

The task force's impact on rates of violent death was mentioned much less often by barrio residents than by public officials. One exception was the director of the public middle school who, after five months, said it was clear that homicides were now much rarer than when I had first come to El Romero over a year earlier. Back then, he reminded me, you expected at least a death or two in the neighbourhood per week. But now, he continued, 'there will be quiet for a few weeks, then one murder over something particular, then back to quiet, then one more. That makes a big difference to people.'

It is not homicide, though, but almost always extortion that ranks at the top of residents' lists of the most problematic forms of insecurity, and the task force was much less successful in interrupting this practice. The fetishization of the homicide rate in policy responses to urban insecurity in Central America enshrines a myopic view of the issue that misses much of what is most important about the violence they are living to the people living through it. Homicide is also not the gang's first recourse in disciplining residents. While execution is habitually used against mara members and rivals, death threats intended to force uncooperative residents out of the neighbourhood are very much the mara's preferred tactic, and murder typically only follows if several attempts at this have been unsuccessful. These threats continued to be issued during the military occupation, and they continued to be taken seriously by the residents who abandoned their homes during the second half of my fieldwork and subsequently.

Barrio residents more often phrased their evaluations of the military's impact in terms of broader qualitative notions of security, rather than according to quantitative metrics. The most significant positive change credited to the task force was an improvement in how safe they felt moving around the neighbourhood. When I returned to El Romero in October 2012, this was one of the first things a number of friends and acquaintances raised when speaking of what had happened since I had been away. Pastor Gerardo told me that 'the extortions continue, but the streets are much safer, and people feel safer too.' He had been pleased

when leaving an evening service at his evangelical church the previous weekend to see plenty of people out in the streets at 9pm on a Saturday.

Figure 26. Two soldiers watch children play from their posts on a staircase in one of El Romero's asentamientos. Author photo, April 2013.

The greater sense of safety came, according to Ana's daughter Hailey, from a sense of omnipresent surveillance. Men still went around bothering girls in the street, she explained, but she was more confident nothing 'serious' would come of it, because 'in every last alleyway, there's always a soldier watching.' As detailed in Chapter 5, the uncertainty and unpredictability of everyday movements around the barrio and the implicit threat in so many interactions are major components residents' feelings of insecurity. Now some—namely young men—had another volatile source of risk added to their daily routines by the

army's arrival. But for many, the ubiquity of soldiers—who unlike pandilleros and their associates wear identifying uniforms and display their weapons openly—lessened that unpredictability and provided a reassuring visual structure of order and control in their environment. It was in this way that the task force made its greatest contribution to augmenting residents' sense of security.

Community organizers had also hoped that resources and support associated with the task force would benefit their work. Government programs managed by a new Ministry of Social Development (MIDES—*Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*) were meant to follow once the army had 'secured' the area.[9] This led some local activists, otherwise wary of the military occupation, to hope that it might provide a chance to reclaim some of the shared spaces and rebuild some of the networks that had been lost. But in the first six months, the involvement of MIDES in El Romero was limited to convening a few meetings of a pre-existing community working group and supplying a donation of paint in the bright blue of the Guatemalan flag to spruce up some of the sorrier-looking *champas* before the President visited in January 2013. A presentation by a MIDES official identifying the ministry's priorities in the barrio cited its 'image' as its first area of concern.

The insertion of both MIDES and the military (the former of which was often equated with the latter) into community networks in fact undermined local social capital in some ways. Most notably, it created rifts between young community activists, who felt they were mistreated by the soldiers and disrespected by government workers, and older Neighbourhood Committee members like Don Beto, who accused them of 'not liking security.' The generational divide in attitudes towards and experiences of military occupation weakened the working relationships between several of the youngest, most energetic local activists and more formal, politically-connected community groups. To the extent that it diminished cohesion and the capacity for collective action, the task force and its

[9] MIDES was created in February 2012 and given oversight over policies aiming to 'improve the level of well-being of socially vulnerable persons and groups' (www.mides.gob.gt).

associated policy interventions hampered resilience to violence and insecurity instead of fostering it.

Whatever its effect on homicide numbers, the task force cannot be said to have 'provided the security necessary for inhabitants of the zone,' as President Pérez characterized its goal, nor to have 'neutralized the criminal bands operating' therein (Government of Guatemala 2012; 'Soldados llegan a zona 18 tras ataque' 2014). The gang continued to demand extortion payments in the barrio; residents by and large continued to pay them; those who refused continued to be exiled; and the military patrols continued their endless rounds. After all, how could it be the case, as an army spokesman claimed, that 'the criminal structures in this zone have been disarticulated' by the task force (Gámez 2013), given that the core of those structures is not on the streets they patrol, but in the prisons that they cannot or will not control?

Most (adult) residents that I spoke with supported the military's presence, but not to the extent of actively co-operating with their work. Those rumoured to have done so, including Doña Ana, were eventually forced out of the neighbourhood through death threats and shootings at their homes. Seven months in, a high-ranking officer complained that people still would not denounce gang members or collaborators, even when they were being directly victimized. That week, a ten year-old boy had been stopped leaving a *tortilleria* with a substantial amount of cash leafed between the maize sheets; clearly an extortion quota. But the woman who had just wrapped the warm tortillas inside the boy's dishcloth insisted that the money was not hers, that she had no complaint against the boy or anyone else for that matter, and no idea how that amount (which happened to correspond to what her kind of business owed the gang as a weekly payment) had come to be in her stack of tortillas. As Arturo had told me soon after the task force arrived, 'people have it very clear that if they denounce, if they say anything, when the soldiers go, the pandilleros will come back to kill them.'

Few expected any change in street violence or security to outlast the presence of the soldiers themselves. After six months, Sonia judged the task force 'a good form of security,' but did not believe it would ultimately do anything more than 'momentarily change' the balance of power the neighbourhood. 'Everything is hidden,' she said. 'It will grow again when they leave.'

The extension into de facto permanence of the task force's mandate in the barrio did not take away the generalized fear of terrible reprisals on the part of the gang if and when the soldiers do withdraw. The gang continued to charge and collect extortion as residents remained convinced of their capacity to exact harsh punishment for refusal. After six months of military vigilance, Sonia explained of residents' continued compliance with extortion demands that 'there are places in which the soldiers cannot be. So you keep paying them.' The chilling effect of the patrols and guard posts was confined to the most public and visible manifestations of violence. And so, as Arturo had assured me, 'that subterranean world that exists in the barrio stays intact. They do not touch the daily life of criminality.'

Because of its failure to intervene on this deeper level, some dismiss the whole operation by the military as essentially an elaborate stage for the political performance of a sort of security theatre. Arturo supposed that because El Romero is such an 'emblematic place' ('the ultimate place,' the congressman had called it), it was a good spot for the government 'to be seen arriving to make war against the delinquents.' He imagined a dialogue between government officials wanting to put on a big display of their *mano dura* bona fides:

> What's the most violent part of the world?'
> 'The Northern Triangle.'
> 'And what's the most violent part of Guatemala?'
> 'The capital, of course.'
> 'Now, what's the most violent part of the capital?'
> 'Zone 18.'
> 'And the most violent part of zone 18 is…'
> 'El Romero!'
> 'Well, boys—let's go put on a show!'

It was not only those inclined to be distrustful of the state and military who suggested this possibility. The detachment's commanding officer apparently felt the same after serving a few months in the barrio. 'Sweetheart,' he told me, 'we're here to change the "image" of this place: its image, not its reality.'

IV. The Military and the Mara

i. Mara Operations under Military Occupation

El Romero's military detachment did not present an insuperable obstacle to the neighbourhood's gang members and their operations. In part, this may have been due to the fact that young people who tied to the mara clique had very few options but to accommodate themselves to the new circumstances and to continue complying with the orders emanating from the prisons as best they could. Echoing the PNC official's remark that the task force redistributed criminality rather than truly reducing it, the director of the neighbourhood's middle school pointed out that 'the young people who had to steal, to extort are still doing it. They're just doing it in other places.'

Because of its relative strength and power, El Romero's clique has a greater reach than most. It claims the right to collect the 'tax' or 'rent' in several nearby *colonias* which were not among those covered by the *Fuerza de Tarea Maya*. As a result, this clique may have been able to shift the focus of its extortion economy from its core territory to these. Though this seems plausible, I was not able to confirm whether the incidence or intensity of extortion in these neighbourhoods did in fact increase during the military occupation of El Romero.

It is clear, however, that even if El Romero's centrality in its criminal economy did decline, the clique did not abandon its efforts to extract resources from inhabitants, nor to violently discipline members, collaborators, and others in this space. 'Soldiers or no,' as Chepe said, several people assumed to be 'somewhat involved' were murdered quite openly in the neighbourhood, and others may well have been eliminated elsewhere. Possibly due to

military interference with young people loitering in the streets, new food stalls widely known by residents to be fronts for the gang were installed at the top of the barrio's *entrada* and *salida* roads. Gang surveillance of comings and goings in the neighbourhood could thus continue immediately alongside military vigilance over the same movements. Soldiers also felt they were under constant surveillance. One noted that they always seemed to be shadowed by either small children or women carrying babies. Though they never did anything untoward, they put themselves in a position to observe who interacted with the patrols and how.

The day-to-day operations of the mara may have become a little more covert, more '*bajo aguas*' (underwater). But this does not mark a radical change so much as a further extension of the kind of tactics that began with the abandonment of visual markers of gang membership and led to the cultivation of a wide network of collaborators, to whom much of the legwork of surveillance and extortion collection could be devolved. After the soldiers arrived, the mara did nothing as brazen as assassinating public officials in broad daylight or spraying a schoolyard with bullets during morning activities because of a failure to comply with an extortion demand. More of their shootings seemed to take place at night (though at least four gang executions were perpetrated in public during daytime); the threats arriving with extortion demands conveyed detailed knowledge of the family's movements within and beyond the barrio; as the PNC official had speculated, more homicide victims from within the occupied neighbourhoods may have been disposed of elsewhere to avoid undue attention or interference. None of this behaviour was new to the mara's repertoire, but after the task force's installation, certain strategies of coercion came to the fore while others receded. The gang's members and collaborators permeate residents' intimate networks in ways that military personnel never could. In addition to relying on established patterns of fear and compliance, the mara was thus able to leverage those 'places the soldiers cannot be' that Sonia had referred to.

In late January 2013, shortly after the military's mandate in El Romero had been extended, Chepe saw it as a good thing overall that the soldiers were staying, but did not believe they had diminished the gang's power in any significant way. The pandilleros, he said, 'are still more organized than they are.' It is not, perhaps, surprising that a military presence in the barrio had little effect on the mara's organizational integrity. This rests, after all, in the prison system, beyond the reach of policing operations on the street regardless of their intensity or duration. The gang is structured around the chain of command that runs from inside the prison onto the streets. Maintaining that flow of communication between prison and barrio, the clique was able to keep intact the crucial element of their operational structure and capacity. Asked to evaluate the military's ability to improve security there, Captain Argueta said, 'let's sort out the prisons, and then we'll see.' 'So long as they do not control the prison,' Pastor Gerardo said of the state, 'there will be no change in the street.'

Although the clique's centre of power lies beyond the reach of state intervention in the barrio, there were certainly points of friction between the mara and the military in the neighbourhood. This was most in evidence the day of the military '*toma*' (takeover), as the soldiers described their arrival. There was a good deal of shooting between members of the gang and the task force as the latter entered and searched the *barrancos* at the bottom of El Romero in the course of securing the neighbourhood's perimeter. More pointedly, as the various detachments of the task force were deployed that morning, the pieces of a dismembered corpse were discovered around the sectors of zone 18 to which they were assigned. The head was placed in the street less than fifty metres from El Romero's new barracks. 'To provoke them,' Pastor Gerardo surmised.

After this, however, there was virtually no open conflict between the mara and the military. Instead, both largely applied their violence and coercive pressure to residents. When extortion collectors in the blocks closest to the barracks had difficulty meeting their quotas, they targeted not the soldiers who were bolstering their victims' confidence in

resisting, but Doña Ana, who they accused of 'keeping their hands tied' by passing information about their activities to the *destacamiento*. Though nothing came of the death threats at that point, Doña Ana and her children did abandon the barrio several months later, after the gang opened fire on their home one night. The task force may have led to some tactical adjustments, but the mara can still make life in the barrio untenable for residents who undermine their operations or fail to comply with their demands.

Similarly, the military's violent display focused on boys and young men without ties to the gang. Although residents were (understandably) more reluctant to share information with soldiers than with me, I knew the names and faces of the more important clique members still at large, the ones charged with relaying orders from the prison and with managing their weapons caches. Despite an officer of one of the intelligence-gathering patrols boasting after a month that he had 'figured out the whole structure, got the whole picture,' none of these boys had been detained when I left nearly eight months later. In fact, in the first three and a half months, all detachments of the task force made only 39 arrests in the entire zone (Gámez 2013).

In February 2013, the local middle school director told me that the task force and its extension through the year was at once a good and a bad thing for the neighbourhood. The good, as I related above, was that deaths had decreased. The downside, as he saw it, was that 'the pressure is building and there is no outlet to relieve it. The tension will build and build and it will have to break.' People had worried about the gang and the state reaching that breaking point, about an explosion of violent conflict between them, since the army arrived. Why, then, did it not come?

ii. Violence, Control, and the State

The cohabitation of the gang and the state in the barrio challenges certain assumptions regarding both extra-legal and legal territorial power and governance. Criminal

organizations, in academic analyses of Latin America, often seem to acquire control as a result of the absence of the state. They take up and organize 'the social spaces that the state has failed to occupy' (Bobea 2010: 194). Criminal power like that exercised by the mara is described as characteristic of places where 'the state is notable for its absence, which creates a space for so-called violence entrepreneurs to emerge unchallenged' (Denyer-Willis 2009: 172). Yet the state is undeniably, perhaps excessively, present in El Romero, and it is there with the stated purpose of challenging the violent entrepreneurs operating there.

Arias (2010a: 132) criticizes the tendency to 'place the question of violence in Latin America squarely within the bounds of state failure.' Criminal violence—especially when it takes organized, territorial form—is seen to signal state failure in two ways. First, the state is failing in its positive duty to provide its citizens with a reasonable level of physical security. Second, state weakness and absence allow criminal groups to appropriate and pervert forms, functions, and power proper to the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 4-5). By 'taking control of portions of the national territory,' gangs are supposedly 'directly performing the tasks of government and acting as states within states' (Manwaring 2005: 26).

The primary concern here is for the monopoly on violence, a central component of theories of state and government since Machiavelli and Hobbes (Tilly 1985: 171). Alhough not the first, certainly the most influential formulation of the idea is Weber's (2009 [1919]: 78) definition of the state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims that *monopoly of the legitimate use of force* within a given territory.' Weber's concept of the state hinges on the monopoly of force, but his fragmentary writings on the state also make it clear that while force defines the state as a form of human organization, it is neither the state's only nor its normal means, nor is the nature of the state exhausted by force (Anter 2014: 26). Weber also does not suppose, of course, that no one outside the state will use violence, only that the 'state is considered the sole source of the "right" to use violence' (Weber 2009 [1919]: 78).

Weber's definition came to dominate academic engagement with the state, and the monopoly of the use of force is frequently assumed to be both empirically and normatively necessary to a state's existence (Anter 2014: 30; also Abrams 1988: 60). A recent book evaluating the rule of law in Central America, for instance, judges it

> problematic to see the state relinquishing its monopoly on coercion. The fundamental job of the state is to provide security for the life and property of its citizens, and monopolizing the tools of coercion is the way in which the state fulfils this goal. (Malone 2012: 153)

This conception of a state that monopolizes coercion for the good of its citizens is, however, 'empirically difficult to find' in large parts of the developing world (Mehler 2004: 539). Defining the state's purpose and evaluating its performance in this way may ultimately obscure more than it reveals about how states behave (and why). Writing on West Africa, Mehler (2004) argues that the debate around state failure that centres on the monopoly of violence has been 'characterized by normative overkill,' defining in advance what a state is and should be instead of beginning from the 'real functioning of relations of domination' (2004: 539, 543; see also Hibou 1998: 165).

Aiming to better approximate the realities of domination in contemporary Latin America, several scholars have questioned the view that the existence of extra-legal power is premised on state failure and absence. Research in drug trafficker-controlled *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro convinced Arias (2006b: 322-23) that the dominant model of 'parallel "states" or "polities"' was inapposite; these were not zones where the state was 'somehow absent, but rather a specific type of political constellation in which state power is deployed and transformed.' Building on this, Arias and Goldstein (2010) argue for supplanting the parallel model (predicated on absence and exclusivity of territorial control) with one that acknowledges the frequent cooperation and coordination between licit and illicit actors in producing governance at the local level. Violent pluralism is one facet of a broader framework in political anthropology, which views formal-informal and licit-illicit networks

not as anomalies or aberrations but as 'part and parcel of the political logics of the state' (Roitman 2007: 204; Hibou 1998: 166).

The advantage of 'violent pluralism' is its insistence on the connection between centre and margin, between the inside and outside of political, economic, and social systems. However, concerned as they are to displace a stark division between the actors, activities, and interests of the state and those of illegal armed groups and criminal organizations, Arias and Goldstein (2010) may overemphasize the degree of cooperation. Violent pluralism arises where 'state actors and armed groups accommodate one another and help each other accomplish their goals' (Arias 2010b: 245). Much like the model of 'parallel polities', theirs is still predicated on the devolution of governance functions to criminal actors. This transpires not through simple absence of the state, but through pact-making and bargaining to mutual advantage on the part of actors within the state and within illicit armed or criminal groups. The end result, however, is still often a territorial division of labour, only with more porous borders between the parcels.

This is not what we see in El Romero where, despite their claustrophobic proximity, there is, more than anything, a lack of interaction—whether collaborative of conflictive—between the mara and the military. To better grasp this dynamic, we need to displace the state from the position of primacy given it in both the parallel and pluralist models discussed above. Though Arias (2010a) argues for moving the debate away from state failure, both positions depart from a critique of the state: either it is failing to monopolize the forms of governance proper to it, or it is succeeding at rather perverse forms of governance alongside extra-legal actors and interests.

The coexistence of state and criminal forces in El Romero suggests that, under certain circumstances, these may share space without the need to engage in either confrontation or cooperation. In this case, it is made possible by the fact that the gang and military have agendas that mostly run parallel, only occasionally rubbing up against each other in ways

that result in friction. The mara and the state are not playing a zero-sum game in the barrio. This is confirmed by closer examination of the kinds of power and profit each is looking to get from the space and who they intend to get it from.

iii. Force, Power, and Profit in the Red Zone

The state and the gang are most often speaking to different publics. The mara's exercise of violence is largely directed at barrio residents—communicating the cost of resisting extortion or acting against the gang's interests—or against their own, maintaining discipline among members and collaborators. The military's displays of force are much more outwardly-directed. El Romero serves as a useful stage on which to perform the military and the state's capacity for control and authority.

The idea of 'a' state is vital to how people interact with it in many situations. But in practice, the state is heterogeneous, composed of agents and institutions that have a wide range of different, and potentially competing, interests. The state thus serves as 'the unified symbol of an actual disunity' of practice and purpose among the component parts of the 'state-system' (Abrams 1988: 79). For a certain faction of the Guatemalan state, gangs and the fear they elicit provide 'a convenient means of raising the profile of its discredited military regime' (Brenneman 2011: 45). In his study of the 'protection racket state' in wartime El Salvador, Stanley (1996: 7) argues that the military's power derived from its capacity to corner the market in violence as a 'currency of relations between state and non-state elites.' In its own way—quite different from that of the mara—the military, too, is a 'violent entrepreneur' (Volkov 2002: 28). The Salvadoran military used violence—their capacity to coerce and repress—to leverage political power from economic elites fearful of social disorder (Stanley 1996). An officer of El Romero's task force pointed to the similar opportunity provided to the Guatemalan military and its allies by the rising urban violence of the last decade. 'At the peace,' he said, 'people didn't want, didn't like the army. But now,

with the insecurity, those same people are asking the army to come back to the streets to bring order.'

The urban security crisis and the success of *mano dura* politics has moved Guatemala in the direction of the 'garrison state', a term coined in response to the rise of militarized nationalism in East Asia and Europe in the 1930s. It describes a situation 'in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society' based on their capacity to secure the nation and defeat its enemies (Lasswell 1941: 455). As for the counter-insurgency states that characterized much of Latin America from the Southern Cone to the Central American isthmus several decades ago, the criminal threat is an internal, not external, one. But across the region, contemporary specialists on violence are—often successfully—pressing their claims to be the best qualified to defend their nation's citizens from their enemies. Despite provisions in both the Peace Accords and the constitution restricting its role to defence of the nation from external threats, the Guatemalan military is presently more involved in internal security and policing, more politically prestigious, and more visible in daily life than at any time since the war's end. [10] This prominence is based on the military's status for the Guatemalan public as the most credible institution confronting the insecurity crisis—a claim which is deployed and reinforced by the kind of security theatre staged every day in the barrio's streets.

For Weber (2009 [1919]: 77-78), the sociological nature of the state 'cannot be defined in terms of its ends,' but rather 'only in terms of the specific *means* peculiar to it…namely, the use of physical force.' Means were the necessary starting point for Weber because state ends were subject to constant change and variation—needed for historical analysis of any particular state, but of no help in defining the unique and fundamental nature of the state as a form of human organization (Anter 2014: 12). This distinction is too often elided; the

[10] The 1996 Accords for a Firm and Lasting Peace included provisions to reduce the both size and the budget of the military by one third and to circumscribe its future involvement in politics and internal security (Acuerdo sobre el fortalecimiento del poder civil 1996, IV.C.35 and VII.63)

monopoly of violence as the means by which the state secures its institutional capacity for rule comes to be conflated with the purpose for which it exists and the ends towards which it ought to strive. To grasp the empirical reality of the state as it exists in El Romero, it is necessary to bring back into view the range of particular ends in play.

Elucidating these helps to illuminate why neither the state nor the gang appears too concerned to monopolize violence within this territory. Each does make a territorial claim on El Romero. The M-18 clique, an associate told me, controls the barrio 'from the *entrada* to the *salida*.' Disputing that claim was a core part of the task force's mission. On the day of its deployment, Minister of Governance López Bonilla announced that 'this Task Force is for territorial control, to secure territory and be able to work inside of it' (Government of Guatemala 2012). The question is what kind of territorial control is needed by the gang and government respectively to accomplish the work they want to do within.

The mara needs to convince barrio residents of their territorial control in order to secure compliance with extortion demands. They also needs rival gangs—both MS-13 cliques and other M-18 factions—to believe that they hold the territory securely enough that a take-over attempt would be more costly than beneficial. In persuading 'clients' of the futility of resistance and potential rivals of the futility of competition, 'boundary maintenance is crucial' to the violent entrepreneur (Volkov 2002: 28). The mara, whose group identity has come unmoored from the physical space of the barrio, is now much less concerned with preventing incursions by 'enemy' outsiders for the sake of local pride than with controlling extraction in the form of extortion. Whether the state tries to monopolize *legitimate* force is not especially relevant to its interests or concerns, so long as it is not, in fact, successfully monopolizing violence. The monopoly it seeks is the classic economic monopoly.

The government is claiming a different form of monopoly, and has another audience that it aims to assure of its territorial control. Anter (2014: 33) distinguishes the economic monopoly, relatively easy to define and detect, from the monopoly of violence that states

seek, which 'can never be absolute' and 'always remains incomplete.' Because no state is 'capable of closing down all competing sources of violence,' its claim to monopolize legitimate force is one that 'requires constant renewal, assertion and implementation' (Anter 2014: 33). This is precisely what the Guatemalan state is doing through its widely publicized presence and activities in one of the country's most notorious red zones, through—as Arturo said—being 'seen arriving to make war' against gangs. Its claim is not necessarily threatened by the existence of other violent groups, so long as it is generally perceived to be energetically confronting those who usurp its exclusive right to organized coercion within its territory. It matters little that it did not, in fact, eliminate the other source of organized domination to which barrio residents are subject, so long as the military faction is still able to reap the political capital it seeks to gain beyond the neighbourhood's borders from the security theatre staged inside of it. At present, this political capital is largely based on its ability to credibly claim to have reduced homicides in the sector, not on any broader sense of security or well-being its inhabitants do or do not feel.

Given the empirical rarity of state monopolization of organized force in much of the developing world, Mehler (2004: 544) proposes instead the concept of an 'oligopoly of violence' characterized by the 'distribution of means of violence to a limited number of violence actors.' Participants in these oligopolies can divide profits—through either competition or cooperation—by differentiating themselves territorially (occupying different spaces) or functionally (offering different products or services) (Mehler 2004). In effect, while they share both space and the means of violence, the mara and the military coexist in a kind of functional oligopoly with each largely monopolizing different resources, different layers of power and profit in the barrio.

iii. Compliance and Legitimacy

Between the mara and the military, the barrio is a space that is at once over- and under-governed: there is an excess of control, of vigilance, of violent domination, but very little legitimacy in any of these exercises or exercisers of power. What consequences follow for how red zone residents experience their relationship with the Guatemalan state and conceive of their citizenship?

Legitimacy is one of the key terms in Weber's definition of the state. Abrams (1988: 76) goes even further, seeing the state as 'first and foremost an exercise in legitimation': the fundamental reason why the diverse body of agents and agencies that make up the 'state-system' present themselves as 'a' state is to legitimize power and domination. A state, according to O'Donnell (1993: 1358) has achieved legitimacy if it 'is not perceived by most of the population as just an arena for the pursuit of particularistic interests.' The claim to be a neutral arbiter and instrument of the common good is vital to 'the pretensions of regimes to be states' (Abrams 1988: 77). But it is a claim that Cadejo, for one, is not buying. 'What's article number one of the Guatemalan constitution?' he asks rhetorically. '"That the government of the Republic acts for the common good." Shit, we're off to a really bad start.'[11] Numerous other informants expressed similar views. According to Ingrid, the 'state in Guatemala does not produce anything. It only consumes.' Don Beto believes congressional candidates only seek election 'for the juicy salary they get. They steal it. They go raise their hands [to vote] like they're ordering another bottle of whiskey.' For Arturo, the military was 'like a mafia' organized around benefitting its own, while for Wuicho the representatives of state order in El Romero were just gangsters in green uniforms. Red zone residents, by and large, do not fail to see behind the legitimating 'mask' of the state to see an arena for the pursuit of power and profit (Abrams 1988).

[11] 'The State of Guatemala is organized for the protection of the individual and of the family; its supreme purpose is the realization of the common good' (Constitución Política de la República de Guatemala, Artículo 1).

It may be necessary for a state to claim legitimacy, even to be granted it by at least some sectors of the population inhabiting its territory, but legitimacy is not necessarily central to people's experience of the state. This is perhaps especially true at the margins of state control, where the power of its 'mystification' and 'misrepresentation' of domination wears thin (Abrams 1988: 77). Khoury and Kostiner (1991: 16) suggest that in many nations of Southwestern Asia, the 'state identities that emerged…have been based more on "compliance" with the state's existence rather than on modern legitimizing forces.' In Latin America's poor urban communities, this notion of compliance may capture the dominant mode of citizenship better than the contract model of classic liberal theory.

The difference between compliance with the existence of the state (or any other form of power) and granting legitimacy to its rule is illuminated by Scott's (1990: 72) distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' versions of the Gramscian notion of the false consciousness that secures acceptance of domination from subordinate groups. The 'thick' version holds that hegemony works by convincing members of subordinate groups to believe in the values that justify their subordination, while the 'thin' version of false consciousness only requires subordinate groups to believe their situation is inevitable and unchangeable. In terms that can be applied to the contrast between contract and compliance citizenship respectively, the 'thick theory claims consent; the thin theory settles for resignation' (Scott 1990: 72). Both the mara and the state generally have only thin legitimacy in the barrio, but this situation is far from static or definite: either could look to 'thicken' its legitimacy in the eyes of El Romero's residents.

The 'institutionalized' gang that hopes to be more than an ephemeral social group is, after all, supposed to need 'at least a degree of legitimacy to survive,' which is secured by providing resources or services that meet 'some needs of its community' (Hagedorn 2007b: 310; Hagedorn 2008: 9-10). One of the goods a criminal group can deliver in exchange for legitimacy is order. For instance, in a São Paulo favela dominated by the criminal syndicate

Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), transgressions of gang-imposed rules were met with summary executions; residents 'did not reject the violence of the PCC, but rather accommodated themselves to its presence, even extolling its virtues' (Denyer Willis 20009: 173). Its chief virtue in their eyes was that the 'PCC imposes a brutal order that is nevertheless predictable' (Denyer Willis 2009: 177).

No less than a state, an illicit violent group may establish itself as 'a compulsory association which organizes domination' (Weber 2009 [1919]: 82-83). The PCC here represents the gang as Leviathan, the Hobbesian figure 'born from a fear of violence' who offers security and stability in exchange for submission (Anter 2014: 29). The mara, however, does not deliver this kind of order or claim this (or any) form of legitimacy. Its failure to do so creates space for the state to potentially thicken its legitimacy on the ground in El Romero. Danger and disorder have led to a local willingness to accept intensive intervention by the state's most repressive organs. Not because the state is seen as the 'right' body to deliver order and security, but simply because people no longer see any other candidates to do so. They are looking for Leviathan. Whether the state can or will deliver—and how this might change residents' view of the Guatemalan state and their relationship with it—has yet to be seen.

V. Conclusion

Through its occupation of barrio space, the Guatemalan state has manifested itself powerfully as both a resource and a risk for residents as they struggle to assemble the greatest possible measure of security and order for themselves. As the state establishes itself as an essentially permanent feature of the neighbourhood's physical and social landscape, residents have inevitably had to incorporate it into their assessments of risk and threat (both arising from the military directly and from the mara in response) and into local repertoires of coping strategies.

Both the mara and the military are very much invested in the barrio's space and population. Despite friction and occasional clashes, however, their agendas in this territory are not nearly as conflicting as might be expected. Although the installation of the barracks has affected some details of how the gang behaves, it has not significantly affected the operation of the local criminal economy. Nor, consequently, has it seriously diminished the mara's territorial monopoly in the terms that now seem to matter most to it.

The mara's predatory turn severed the link that bound clique and neighbourhood together as one moral community. The consequences of this shift include eagerness on the part of residents for state intervention in the community as they attempt to find new strategies to cope with insecurity. What barrio residents expect from the state, however, is predictability, not legitimacy. The provision of order in streets and public spaces was what most sought, and to a degree, received from the military occupation. Moral authority and justification appears to remain with the codes of the barrio for most residents rather than transferring to any significant degree to state order. Nor does the state appear overly preoccupied with gaining legitimacy in the barrio, despite the opportunity to do so created by the mara's predation and the deterioration of local social and normative order. The state is making a claim to legitimacy through its occupation of the barrio, but this claim is directed elsewhere. The political capital gained by those affiliated with *mano dura* is much more valuable beyond the red zones than within them.

It is unclear how long barrio residents will continue to see military occupation as the best option available to them. Doña Ana became disillusioned with the task force, despite having been one of their most prominent supporters. By their eighth month there, she judged that the state had only come to El Romero 'to take away opportunities, to take all the young people prisoner. Help?' she scoffed, of its promises of security: 'Hoaxes.'

Chapter 8
Conclusion

So the city became the material expression of a particular loss of innocence…
- Thomas Pynchon, Against the Day

Violence is occurring at very high rates in Central America's Northern Triangle, but it is highly concentrated in certain areas within each of these countries. Between 2011 and early 2013, over 80 per cent of registered homicides in Guatemala happened in just 25 of its 334 municipalities, and the majority of those 25 are part of the capital's metropolitan area (Hernández 2013: 6). Of all homicides in that period, 45 per cent were recorded in Guatemala City proper, and zone 18's murders are said to make up for just under a quarter of these (Hernández 2013: 6; Mendoza and Méndez 2013: 2).[1] If these figures are accurate, it would mean El Romero sits in the district where about one out of every ten killings in Guatemala took place during my fieldwork.

What urban Guatemalans have been experiencing over the last twenty years amounts to much more than an increase in their statistical likelihood of encountering violence or homicide. A more general sense of insecurity permeates everyday life in the capital, combining fear of violence and of crimes of economic predation, feeding on the feeling that danger is everywhere, unpredictable, and out of control. Insecurity has altered how residents of Guatemala City inhabit and move through urban space, what they want and expect from the state and its security forces, and how they relate to intimates, neighbours, and strangers. The far-reaching effects of insecurity have been especially intense in the 'red zones' where the capital's violence, gang activity, and security interventions are concentrated. Through the poor and notorious Colonia El Romero, I have explored how

[1] Depending on which estimate is used, the 22 zones of Guatemala City comprise 10-20% of the national population.

people are experiencing and understanding violence and insecurity in these neighbourhoods situated at the heart of Guatemala's 'cartographies of fear' (Rey 2005: 30).

The maras of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—the gangs that contribute a great deal to the 'redness' of the region's marginal barrios—have changed dramatically in their group cultures and criminal economies since they appeared in the 1990s. This transformation has reshaped the experience of insecurity and everyday life in the communities that form their territories, provide their members, and make up their resource base. Inhabitants of El Romero report a heightening of danger in their lives, brought about by the decline of certain local norms that had previously moderated gang violence and bolstered community resilience. They say that there is more violence, that it is less predictable, and more frightening. They have shown themselves increasingly willing to turn to the repressive capacities of the state in the search for a measure of security in what many feel to be an unmanageably dangerous environment.

I have sought to capture the complexity of the local relationships and dynamics that shape urban insecurity and gang violence in Guatemala City's most high-risk communities. This dissertation addresses some of the gaps left by political, journalistic, and academic debates that have generally been 'more interested in the increase or decrease of violence…than in ethnographic detail, form, meaning and context of violence' (Blok 2001 [1991]: 106). The nations of the Northern Triangle are frequently characterized as 'high crime, low rule of law countries' (Malone 2012: 155). I aim to fill in such sweeping statements by asking what insecurity looks like on the ground in one Guatemalan gang territory—what does 'high crime, low rule of law' mean for people in practice, in the context of everyday life?

I. Marginality, Violence, and Disorder

Narrowing the scope of my study to the neighbourhood level has allowed me to depict in detail the multiple sources of insecurity, control, and coercion that El Romero's residents are faced with, as well as the strategies, coping mechanisms, and narratives they call upon in their efforts to confront these. To understand their situation, however, it is important not to lose sight of this barrio's connections to and relationships with larger spaces and dynamics. Their marginal position within the city, society, and economy has important consequences for how residents negotiate their lives in El Romero. People's hopes and goals, and the tactics they deploy towards realizing them, are shaped by how they perceive their 'ability to act in relation to [their] social horizons' (Vigh 2006: 138-39). El Romero's residents navigate their circumstances according to their evaluation of both dangers inside their barrio and constraints outside, according to what they are trying to avoid, what they are aiming for, and the paths they can see open to them. Chapter 2 described how the material poverty of most residents is compounded by their neighbourhood's infamy as one of the 'reddest of the red zones.' The broader Guatemalan public perceives El Romero and its inhabitants to belong firmly within the '*universo rojo*' of gangs, delinquency, and disorder (Merino 2004a: 115). The fear and antipathy that residents so often elicit limits their opportunities for employment and education, increases the social isolation of the barrio, and foments feelings of anger and resentment for many, especially young people.

Their economic exclusion, coupled with the stigma applied to residents by those beyond the barrio, may have encouraged a turn inwards, and the elaboration of the norms of local solidarity and mutual aid that many describe as having operated in the Colonia's earlier years. Like the US urban ghetto, the red zone 'encages a dishonored category and severely curtails the life chances of its members' (Wacquant 2000: 383). But Wacquant (2001: 103) proposes that the ghetto represents a sort of 'double-edged' marginality—the very exclusion it imposes fosters the development of communal supports and protection. Early sociological

theories of the city often advanced the notion that urban life is inherently destructive of spatially-defined communities, with social relations and interactions characterized by instrumentality and tending towards the 'impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental' (Wirth 1938: 12). For excluded groups within the city, the neighbourhood may, however, retain greater primacy and social density (Martindale 1958: 21): marginalized in the economic and social circuits of the broader city, their members fall back on each other to a greater extent, unable to afford the 'devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others' that Wirth (1938: 12) assumes urbanites need and desire.

However, the 'sheltered space' that blunted some of the ghetto's more vicious social and economic effects disintegrated in the US during the late 20th century, leading to the 'depacification of everyday life' in the emerging 'hyperghettos' (Wacquant 2001: 107). Similar processes of disruption have transformed life in poor urban communities worldwide (for instance, Auyero 2000 on the Argentine 'hyper-shantytown'). This dissertation describes how people in El Romero have experienced, understood, and reacted to the 'depacification' of their neighbourhood and their lives.

This is not to say that their lives were ever peaceful in the sense of being completely free of violence. Residents did speak of an increasing incidence of violence in the barrio, but what they often emphasized was how violence had changed in ways that made it more distressing and destabilizing. Violence is frequently represented as 'senseless and disruptive—as the reverse of social order' (Blok 2001 [1991]: 103). Yet the ethnographic literature is full of examples of 'violent means of conflict resolution and order maintenance' (Ventsel 2007: 44). We must, therefore, ask when and why violence becomes disorderly and disordering, specifying what makes violence *socially*, rather than merely personally, dangerous. The contextual relationship of violence to both order and disorder becomes clearer when violence is understood to be 'not a natural fact but a moral one' (Whitehead 2007: 40). The experience of violence as a transgression, violation, or social harm is not

given, but shaped by people's definitions of right and wrong, proportionality and reciprocity. These filters define what violence means and does in social worlds. There is an important distinction to be made between violence that, implicitly or explicitly, affirms a social group's values, norms, and conceptions of sociality, and violence that rejects established relationships and the expectations and duties those imply. Violence that exceeds or repudiates group norms and values can indeed provoke a profound sense of disorder. I have argued that the M-18's violence in El Romero has become of this kind.

II. Insecurity and Decline

The disruption of basic norms and values, the experience of 'everyday life as the loss of *context*' explains much of the 'intolerable nature of insecurity' in many parts of Latin America today (Das and Kleinman 2000: 8; Goldstein 2012: 253; see also Moodie 2010). 'Insecurity'—along with the categories of 'criminality' and 'violence' that are often collapsed into it—has become one of the dominant discourses of deficit and decline in the region, used to express doubts about democracy or human rights (Moodie 2010; Goldstein 2007), to justify retreats from public space (Caldeira 2000), to identify a lack of local autonomy (Godoy 2006: 111), or to name an encompassing 'habitus of fear' (Goldstein 2012: 4). It provides a flexible analytical category that scholars have leveraged to examine issues, anxieties, and demands that have been reshaping social life in the region.

Insecurity is also a central category of local experience for many Latin Americans, as it was for my informants. People can use 'insecurity' to mean a great many things and make a great many claims about what has gone wrong, who is responsible, and what must be done. It is no more a definite or pre-defined category of social experience than is violence. Paying close attention to what any given individual or group is saying and explaining by reference to insecurity is a way to engage with 'the social experience of "decline"' that Ferguson (1999: 15) urged ethnographers in contexts of crisis and disruption to make a focal point of study.

I have described local accounts of the *códigos de barrio* and their disintegration as a way in which El Romero's residents articulate a pervading sense of insecurity, unpredictability, and vulnerability. A great deal can be learned about the experience and understanding of insecurity by examining what these codes are or were, what people use them to do and to say to themselves and others, about themselves and others. The codes of the barrio cover several interrelated sets of norms. They include the gang's rules about where, why, and against whom they did and did not use violence or practise other forms of predation, such as stealing. They cover guidelines that barrio residents used to evaluate risk and to shape movements through, and interactions within, the neighbourhood. Finally, the codes also include norms of local solidarity and mutual aid between neighbours, as well as values about decency and respectability. Taking these different inflections together, the phrase '*códigos de barrio*' serves as shorthand for a sort of local *nomos* that defined El Romero as a moral unit, shaped how people expected things to go in their neighbourhood, and offered standards by which to judge one's conduct and that of others in the barrio.

As I suggested in Chapter 4, the tenets of the barrio codes as such—their articulation as rules and explicit norms—may be largely retrospective and reactive. I think it less likely that El Romero's inhabitants thought of the favours they traded with neighbours in the early 1980s in terms of following the rules of a code than that this framing emerged in response to the onset of insecurity, as a way of naming what went wrong. Because narratives about barrio codes are so intertwined with how contemporary insecurity is seen and experienced, it is impossible to say to what degree the norms assigned to them did shape and control local behaviour in the past. But in understanding what insecurity means here, their historical accuracy is less important than the ways in which claims about the past are deployed to contrast with the present, specifying what is lacking, dangerous, and upsetting about neighbourhood life today. They describe not so much a point in history, as the local perception of a process of decline and a present state of insecurity.

III. Changing Gangs

The narrative of decline that barrio residents so frequently recount often traces the disintegration of local norms and order to changes in the mara and its 'codes' of behaviour with regards to its barrio. As described in Chapter 3, the mara cliques that proliferated in Guatemala City's poorer zones in the early 1990s initially maintained the strong identification with and defensive attitude towards their barrios typical of both earlier generations of Guatemalan street gangs and, to a certain extent, the MS-13 and M-18 in southern California. Although they were seen as deviant youth groups, in their early years El Romero's mara cliques did not seriously violate core norms of local solidarity and reciprocity, and did not represent a particularly serious threat to other residents' lives and welfare. But by 2000, hostility between the M-18 and MS-13 intensified and, with the acquisition of guns from the late 1990s, their capacity to persecute this rivalry became much more deadly.

'War taxes' extracted first from outside vendors and public transit, then sporadically from residents of gang territories, helped fund this escalating violence. These were the first seeds of the extortion economies that would develop a logic and momentum of their own as territorial disputes between maras gave way to more settled territorial monopolies of one or the other of the major gangs in parts of the city. The M-18 clique that has controlled El Romero since the end of the sector's 'War of the Maras' had secured its monopoly by 2008. It soon became apparent to residents that, as Cadejo put it, the gang's 'code of the barrio has been traded for the ideology of a business.' Their business centres on extracting extortion from businesses, transport, services, schools, and, most distressingly for most barrio residents, households.

Guatemala City's maras have ceased to be the 'unsupervised adolescent peer groups' that characterize the majority of street gangs worldwide and have become more professional and economically-oriented 'institutionalized' (or institutionalizing) gangs (Hagedorn 2007b:

309-10). I argued that incarceration of mara members and clique leaders in segregated gang prisons has been an important factor in this process of transformation. The prisons are now the centre of the maras' organizational structure and the core site for the elaboration and reinforcement of this gang culture. As a result, the close identification of gang with barrio has been broken, facilitating the mara's predatory turn to extortion within the spaces they once boasted of protecting.

Departing from Hagedorn's (2007b, 2008: 9-10) definition of the institutionalized gang, as well as Jensen's (2014) description of the street merchant and Arias' (2006a, 2006b) expectations of territorially-oriented criminals, Guatemala City's maras neither have nor seek any degree of legitimacy among the inhabitants of their territories. Bucking the predictions of economistic analyses of protection rackets (Gambetta 1993; Chu 2000; Varese 2001), the mara also fails to limit violence against its 'client' base or moderate the rapaciousness of its economic exploitation. The sustainability of their current business model is very much in doubt. Gangs are volatile social organizations, and they do not evolve along set trajectories (Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 14). It is at this point impossible to say for how long this phase of the mara may last, or whether these gangs will break apart, shift their focus to other illicit activities, or begin cultivating some legitimacy within their territories by delivering goods, services, or meaningful protection to residents.

IV. Changing Codes

The experience and impact of insecurity in Guatemala City's gang territories must be understood in light of the new modes of domination and predation that have arisen with the elaboration of an extortion economy. Due to this development, the gang's use of violence against barrio residents has intensified greatly, its web of collaboration has spread through the neighbourhood, the economic burden of its demands has drained resources from businesses and families, and abandoned houses have multiplied around El Romero. People

have retreated from public spaces, from local social engagements, and from each other. One of the most powerful and regularly observed effects of insecurity is this 'individualization of local populations, making truly collective action in the marginal barrio a difficult prospect and an infrequent occurrence' (Goldstein 2012: 122; also Godoy 2006: 35). El Romero's residents say that once the mara began to 'break all those codes that existed' and abandon rules that limited physical and economic predation, it became increasingly impossible to rely on the barrio codes that had made interactions in the neighbourhood more predictable or to live up to the standards of behaviour specified by the more normative versions of those codes.

The narrative related by barrio residents can be expressed in vocabulary borrowed from Moore (1973) and Galligan's (2007) related concepts of semi-autonomous social fields and social spheres. If we understand the barrio as a normative environment that generated standards, values, rules, and relationships, what has happened is a drastic loss of autonomy, of the social field's capacity to order and organize its members' lives and their relationships with one another. The mara as a distinct social sphere within the barrio has, with the growing importance of profit and the prison, itself become much more 'dense' (Galligan 2007: 103): its relative power and control over its members has grown and the mara has become less permeable to claims and duties originating in relationships and social ties beyond the gang. The result has been a sort of 'normative mitosis' (Cover 1983: 31). A gang that had once seen itself, and been seen, as part of the barrio's social and moral world became increasingly autonomous and exclusive as a social sphere. This enabled its predatory control over the neighbourhood and diminished the control that residents have over their lives.

Although El Romero's inhabitants say that the codes of the barrio no longer structure how they expect things to go or people to behave, they do retain force for many as moral standards. Insecurity stripped the barrio codes of what Hart (1994: 54) identified as the

'external aspect' of social rules—the regularity of behaviour that results from a group's commitment to a norm—but many barrio residents maintain the 'internal aspect'. They persevere in using the codes as 'standards of appraisal of their own and others' behaviour' even if they feel incapable of conforming to them (Hart 1994: 98). They do not describe how things go in the barrio today, but the codes are regularly invoked in explanations of how they *should* go. While the predictive capacity of local norms is seen to have broken down almost entirely, their use in evaluation and justification has not only persisted, but potentially gained in salience.

The codes do important work for barrio residents by 'providing a moral vision for an uncertain world' (Pirie 2013: 164). I proposed in Chapter 5 that talk about barrio codes has an important place in local ways of coping with insecurity. In an environment that feels disorderly and dangerous, it permits residents to reassert a normative order by drawing on narratives about the community's past and values. Their use of barrio codes in this way confirms the importance of examining not only the efficacy of social rules in controlling behaviour, but also the value to people and groups of their 'capacity to provide a meaningful map or model for the world' even if that model does not map onto reality (Pirie 2013: 63; also Geertz 1983).

It is, nevertheless, important to note that, in spite of accounts of the codes that depict their practical effect in the neighbourhood as extinct, some people do continue to enact values of decency, mutual aid, and generosity. For instance, when the task force's soldiers were missing items for their barracks, Ana gave them her own stool, her biggest pot, one of her brooms. She washed and changed the bandages of one young soldier from a remote indigenous village who fell down a steep *asentamiento* staircase on patrol and cut his leg badly. She offered coffee to every soldier who came to her door. As Ana well knew, this was risky behaviour, and being seen as an ally of the military did eventually get her and her family into trouble with the gang. But she did not do those things because she was trying to

support the military's gang-eradication mission; she insisted she wanted to stay out of that. She once explained that she did them simply because this is how she hopes people would treat her children if they were strangers in a new place, in need of help or friends. She did it because she is a decent person, and this is what decent people do for each other. So Mono and his friends work fewer hours than they might so that they can run arts classes and drop-in spaces for the barrio's younger kids, people ran errands for Ana and took her place at meetings when threats from the gang made leaving the house unsafe, women share meals cooked for their families with the widower Don Beto because he volunteers his skills as a paramedic. But all the while everyone insists that no one can be trusted and everyone is out for themselves. This situation—a 'life where violence and solidarity coexist among neighbours' (Hume 2009: 20)—may well be widespread among Central America's gang territories and marginal barrios, where people are struggling to reconcile the consequences of insecurity for them and their neighbourhoods with their conceptions of what it takes to be a good person and a poor but decent community.

V. The Barrio and the State

Barrio residents also seek to counter insecurity by turning to external sources of order—primarily the state and the repressive capacity of its security forces. While barrio codes continue to express a localized moral order, many residents supported intensive state intervention in their neighbourhood in the hope that it could bring a greater measure of predictability to their environment. They sought out, as Doña Ana put it, 'others to take care of us now, because we can't do it for ourselves anymore.'

The widespread support for *mano dura* politics in Latin America among poor communities, whose members they are most likely to target, raises at least two kinds of questions. There is the more empirical question: why do poor people want more heavy-handed interventions in their lives and neighbourhoods from a state that they generally

distrust (for instance, Goldstein 2012: 210; Pine 2008: 62)? There is also the more theoretical question of why these demands arise in places like El Romero if social fields do, as Moore (1973: 744) proposed, display a 'tendency to fight any encroachment on autonomy previously enjoyed.' I have situated the general tolerance, even eagerness, for military occupation among El Romero's residents within dynamics of insecurity and gang violence that have disabled coping mechanisms that drew on resources internal to the community. I argued that, at least in some cases, support for *mano dura* is best understood not as arising from poor people's credulous reception of discourses of 'punitive populism' (Hume 2009: 141), but as rooted in a declining capacity of poor communities to resist and respond to insecurity on their own terms. Succinctly expressing an important line of inquiry in socio-legal studies, Ellickson (1991: 123) asks 'in what social contexts and with what content informal norms emerge to help people achieve order without law.' The recent history of El Romero provides a case study for an inversion of that question: in what social contexts do informal norms deteriorate, such that people need law to help them achieve order?

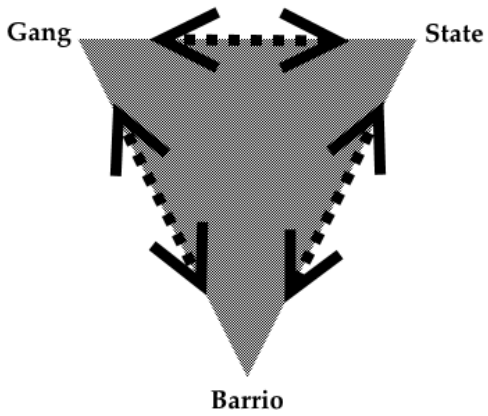
El Romero's residents are looking to the state for a 'set of social relations that establishes a certain order, and ultimately backs it with a centralized coercive guarantee, over a given territory' (O'Donnell 1993: 1356). But while they do hope that the state will live up to O'Donnell's definition, they set no particular store in the state as 'the lawful source of social predictability' (O'Donnell 1993: 1365). The turn to the state is a pragmatic choice from among very limited options; it is not a normative statement about what barrio residents view as the proper source of social order. Although Durkheim saw one of law's vital social functions to be 'providing a secure moral environment' (Cotterrell 1999: 21), this is not part of what barrio residents are expecting from or entrusting to the state. They look to the state's coercive capacity for a certain structuring of, and control over, their environment. In their narratives of barrio codes, residents attempt to reassert the status of the community as a

viable 'moral unit'; in doing so, they partake of 'one of the central preoccupations of law-giving' without turning to the law (Pirie and Scheele 2014: 18).

VI. The Gang and the State

In the introduction to this dissertation, I suggested that the dynamics of insecurity in El Romero can be seen as arising from the fluctuating relationships within and between three points of a triangle: barrio, gang, and state. Studies of urban violence and insecurity in Central America's Northern Triangle are incomplete if they do not acknowledge the numerous and complex ways that the strands in this bundle of relationships interact with and influence each other. With the exception of the latter portion of Chapter 7, I have said relatively little about the line that runs between gang and state. This is partly because, for reasons of safety and ethics, I did not develop close relationships with informants who were active in the mara or the military during my fieldwork, and consequently my data on how they each conceive of their relationship to the other is much thinner than for how barrio residents think about their neighbourhood, the gang, and the state.

Figure 27. A highly simplified diagram of the complex dynamics of insecurity and control in El Romero.



Observing what resulted (and what did not) from the semi-permanent installation of the Guatemalan military in El Romero raised questions about prevailing models of both extra-legal power and state governance in Latin America. Neither force pressed for exclusivity of

coercion or control in El Romero, as might be expected from the model of gang territories as 'parallel polities' usurping 'the tasks of government and acting as states within a state' (Arias 2006b: 323-22; Manwaring 2005: 26). They also did not engage in the kind of negotiations or pact-making implied by the concept of 'violent pluralism' (Arias and Goldstein 2010).

Volkov (2002: 28) observes that 'wielders of force always tend to think in terms of "territories" or "spheres of interest."' What the coexistence of the mara and the military in El Romero demonstrates is that separate spheres of interest on the part of the exercisers of coercion can coincide in space without necessarily clashing. The state was not contesting the economic monopoly that the mara depends on, which is that over the extraction of extortion from this sector of the city. Nor did the continued extraction of that extortion prevent the state from asserting its claim to be able to control the red zones, which was a legitimating performance staged in, but directed beyond, the occupied barrios. Their audiences were separate and their agendas largely ran parallel. In spite of friction, the territorial interests of the gang and the government were not mutually exclusive, even though they were invested in the same space. There is a valuable contribution to be made by further empirical studies of gang-state dynamics in Latin America that do not lose sight of the triangle's third point, which examine the important role played by the spaces in which criminal groups and the state encounter each other and the intentions that these parties have for and in those spaces.

Conclusion

I do not want to leave the impression that El Romero today is nothing more than 'an accumulation of pathology' (Wacquant 2007: 39). Its residents undoubtedly inhabit a difficult and often dangerous physical, social, and economic environment. But although catastrophe and decline feature prominently in the narratives that they use to describe their situation to themselves, to each other, and to outsiders like myself, people in El Romero

continue to go about the business of daily life, finding savvy, stubborn, creative, and courageous ways to negotiate their vulnerabilities and their goals. Insecurity is an important feature of their lives, but it is not all that defines them. As Cadejo emphasized, 'we are looking to *live*, not just to survive.' In ways big and small, they succeed at doing so. 'I am not happy,' Doña Ana once told me, 'but I have happinesses.'

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