

Della Burke

deburke@email.arizona.edu

University of Arizona

www.arizona.edu

They Banish Fools¹:
Salvadoran Gang Members in Los Angeles

Della Burke
University of Arizona

Prepared for presentation at
the Institute of Latin American Studies Student Association (ILASSA) Conference
Austin, Texas
February 12-14, 2004

¹ This title is taken from an interview of William “Weasel” Huezo Soriano for *This American Life* radio diaries. Speaking of his deportation, he says, “I’ve been banished from the U.S. you know. Like they used to do in the medieval days. They used to ban fools.” Produced by Joe Richman. “Deported: Weasel’s Diary.” *This American Life* Broadcast May, 1999. Accessed September 30, 2003.

“Si me voy a mi pais, a mi me van a matar allá.” Alejandro², age 26

“I just got to come back because this is my environment.” Noel, age 24

“Homies Unidos helped me change my mind...watching people who were really not involved anymore...I can do that, too and be responsible.” Juan, age 26

The tension between the state’s identification of Salvadoran gang members and their self-identification contributes to and perpetuates a circular migration pattern. Salvadoran gang members are deported from Los Angeles to El Salvador and return as undocumented immigrants to Los Angeles. With the help of Homies Unidos, a non-profit organization founded in El Salvador that promotes an end to gang violence through peaceful organizing, I interviewed gang members in Los Angeles who were not United States citizens. The literature on gangs in the United States and El Salvador fails to discuss the circular migration pattern of deported Central American gang members. This pattern is important because of the consistent return of deported Salvadoran gang members to Los Angeles due to their lack of identification with El Salvador. This paper will highlight two reasons deported Salvadoran gang members return to Los Angeles: country conditions in El Salvador and lack of identification with El Salvador. The paper concludes with the case study of Alex Sanchez, a Los Angeles activist working for gang peace who won political asylum from El Salvador.

Both the United States and Salvadoran governments agree: these people are Salvadoran citizens who should be removed from society by imprisonment, deportation or death. They grew

up as immigrants and joined gangs in the United States. Therefore, they must manipulate rules and laws to create space for existence. Although some organizations exist in the United States and El Salvador, Homies Unidos is the only transnational organization legitimizing their space and coming to their aid.

The interviewed gang members were deported after serving prison sentences because they are not United States citizens. They gave testimonies of life in Los Angeles and El Salvador and of the deportation process. Some of those interviewed who were deported and returned to Los Angeles profess that they will repeat the circle if they are deported again. Salvadoran gang members who were raised in Los Angeles have no hesitation when deciding to return to Los Angeles. Their identity is one of being a citizen of Los Angeles.

Gang-based persecution of Salvadorans in El Salvador

Homies Unidos San Salvador has been a proponent of peaceful gang activity and integration into Salvadoran society. In 2001, along with researchers from the University Institute of Public Opinion at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, they published an account of the opinions and results of a survey of gang members (Santacruz-Giralt and Concha-Eastman, 2001). They stated that the results of the survey are clear: “the situation is getting worse” (2001:2). The “situation” they speak of is the all encompassing condition of being a gang member in El Salvador. One of the most important findings of the survey, and a validation for the existence of Homies Unidos, was that an overwhelming majority of active gang members would like to become inactive, but do not know how to *calmarse*³ (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

² All names have been changed, unless they are those of a public figure.

³ Definition of *calmarse*: “...referido...al hecho de disminuir o abandonar algunas practicas al interior de la pandilla, principalmente aquellas referidas al uso de la violencia y al consumo de alcohol y drogas. Sin embargo, el *calmarse* no implica dejar de ser pandillero o abandonar la pandilla, ...” (ERIC et al. 2001:46).

More than a third (37.5%) of the gang members surveyed in El Salvador by Homies Unidos belonged to a gang in the United States (Santacruz-Giralt and Concha-Eastman 2001:64). These gang members import to El Salvador an intense gang rivalry. The most violent offenses attributed to gang violence are also attributed to the gang members who had been in the United States and were deported (UNHCR 1998; Montaigne 1999). Unfortunately, this attribution leads to typecasting young, male deportees.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the survey by Homies Unidos El Salvador found that there was a profound jump in violence directed towards gang members by police between 1996 and 2000 (Santacruz-Giralt and Concha-Eastman 2001). Several statements by gang members have acknowledged the relationship between the police and death squads. Statements like “they call them the death squads, we know them as the police” convey that the linkage between the police and the death squads is recognized by gang members (In the matter of C.L. 2000:70). This assumption is confirmed by the chief of police of San Salvador who affirms that “...it is suspected that members of the police have consented to the activities of the extermination groups and have even been participants” (In the matter of S. 2000). A specific occurrence demonstrates the public governmental support of the actions against gang and former gang members. In April of 1997 three members of the Black Shadow death squad were put on trial for the deaths of three Mara Salvatrucha gang members. Mara Salvatrucha is one of the larger Salvadoran gangs. However, the death squad members were praised by the mayor of San Miguel and the jury absolved them (Rohter, 1997).

As a result of the reemergence of death squads and their mission to ‘clean up’ Salvadoran society, bodies of assassinated youths with their hands and feet bound are appearing in El Salvador. Almost all of the victims have tattoos (La Prensa Gráfica 1999). Tattoos are a marker

which make a person a suspected gang member. Unlike gang violence, which is largely unplanned and openly violent, death squads abduct their victims and kill them in secluded areas (La Prensa Gráfica 1999). One interviewee related his experience of surviving an abduction by the police. Alejandro, a 26 year old Salvadoran who has lived in Los Angeles for 14 years, stated that while living in El Salvador after deportation from the United States, he was abducted by police in a marked police vehicle after walking out of a bar one afternoon. After being taken to a remote area he refused to leave the police car and declared, “*si me va a matar, matame acá.*” Since the police were unable to remove Alejandro from the police car and they did not want to murder the gang member inside their marked car, he was returned to town and made to run away while the police fired their guns at him, hitting him in the shoulder. After a month of recovery, he journeyed north, returning to Los Angeles as an undocumented immigrant. When asked what he planned to do if he were to be deported again, Alejandro claimed without hesitation that he would return to Los Angeles.

Gang members in Los Angeles are aware of the conditions which await them in Central America (similar conditions exist in Guatemala and Honduras). When asked what would happen if he were to be deported, Jesús, a 23 year old, already had a bleak outlook on the possibilities for him.

J – I don’t know, I’ll get killed, I don’t think I’ll make it, I don’t think I’ll make it, I’ll probably get killed, I know for sure.

D – By other gang members?

J – Yeah, look at myself, they would look at me like I’m the worst, I’ll probably just get killed with the own government, ‘cause they might think that I’m a bad influence to little kids, and they’ll be like, oh, you know, they’ll be like ‘this guy’s gonna come up with some gang stuff and he’s gonna make things worse right here, you know, they’re gonna try, he’ll probably try to convince little kids to be gang members, he’s bad influence,’ that’s how they’re gonna call me, I’m a

bad influence for little kids over there, so they're gonna get rid of me, they're probably gonna take me for a ride, never come back.

One of the immediate problems that deported gang members encounter is the reconstruction of their geographies. Gang members in Los Angeles live their lives in territories they call neighborhoods or barrios, which define where they can safely go. Juan, a 26 year old, noted in his interview that his mother and grandmother both live in El Salvador. However, they live in the neighborhood controlled by the Eighteenth Street gang and he was not able to leave his relatives' house while living in El Salvador since he is a member of Mara Salvatrucha.

Donna DeCesare tackles the issue of deported gang members in the post-civil war era (the civil war ended in 1992) in her article "The Children of War" (1998). She states that El Salvador had the highest homicide rate in the Americas in 1997 (1998:23). In addition, the homicide rate in El Salvador is currently significantly higher than during the civil war. Other authors support her claim and maintain that in 2000 the homicide rate in El Salvador was 40% higher than that of Colombia, a nation currently in a state of war (Wallace 2000).

DeCesare also criticized the Salvadoran press reports of gang activities. She contends that the two most widely read newspapers, *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, report sensationalized, rumor-filled accounts, which only escalate the depersonalization of gang members. She states that this type of reporting only "feeds the vengeful thinking that escalates violence while fostering public perceptions that U.S. deportees...are the principal perpetrators of violent crime" (1998:24).

One subject that DeCesare touches on has not been addressed in any other literature. In her assessment of the Salvadoran government's response to the rise in youth violence, DeCesare lists the reinstatement of the death penalty and the "formation of special anti-gang police units

trained by experts from the Los Angeles Police Department” (1998:28). She does not address which experts from the LAPD trained the anti-gang units in San Salvador, or if they were affiliated with the notorious CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit.⁴

These extremely violent responses to the surge in gang activity in El Salvador coupled with their own lack of experience in the country lead many Salvadoran gang members to return to Los Angeles due to fear and insecurity after being deported.

Perceptions of Identity

The other prevailing reason given for why gang members are returning to Los Angeles after being deported is a positive identification with the city of Los Angeles. The gang members who I interviewed identified Los Angeles as their home. Jesús, who came to Los Angeles when he was 10, notes this identification with the city when he talks about the decision to return to the United States after being deported. “I was there for a week and I was already missing my homies, and I was already missing LA, Los, so I decided to come back go back, you know, I need to go back to LA,…” Jesús’ comment is echoed in a statement made by Noel in response to the question of what he would do if he were to be deported. “...I gotta come back to my peeps. Even if I wasn’t born here, but I still consider this my home, my homeland.”

When Jesús makes his statement about returning to Los Angeles after being deported, he is not talking about returning from Central America; he was deported to Mexico. The issue of Mexicanization by Central Americans was first discussed by scholars within the realm of migration from Central America to the United States during the 1980s. Sergio Aguayo raises the issue of Mexicanization in his article “Refugees: Another Piece in the Central American Quagmire” published in 1986. Although a thorough definition is missing from his article, he

⁴ The CRASH unit of the LAPD was discovered in September 1999 to have committed a range of crimes from planting evidence and weapons to shooting unarmed suspects. CRASH also collaborated with the INS, which was

simply states that Mexicanization happens when Central Americans disguise themselves as Mexicans. However, the art of making yourself Mexican has many implications and functions for Central Americans which are not discussed. By Mexicanizing, a Salvadoran can not only pass through Mexico with fewer difficulties, but in the event that they are caught by the INS, a Mexicanized Salvadoran may be able to get deported by bus to Mexico (usually a border town) instead being deported by plane to San Salvador.

Now, almost 20 years after the first massive waves of immigration from El Salvador, some of the Salvadoran gang members who are being deported are using Mexicanization to their advantage to avoid being deported to a country they know almost nothing about. Weasel, who is 31 and the Director of Homies Unidos El Salvador, described being interviewed by an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent while in prison to determine that he was from El Salvador. “[He] said, ‘What’s the national anthem?’ I was like, ‘Man, I don’t know.’ ‘What’s the biggest railroad?’ I was like, ‘What?’ I told him, ‘Look man, I don’t know nothing about El Salvador. I’ve been in this country for over, you know, 20 years man. I don’t know nothing about that country.’ He was all pissed off ‘cause I didn’t know what the biggest river was. I mean, I grew up in L.A.. The longest river there is L.A. River, you know?” (Richman 1999). His lack of knowledge about basic Salvadoran geography and national symbols is not uncommon among Salvadorans who grew up in the United States. Had the INS agent not suspected that Weasel was from El Salvador he might have been able to convince them that he was Mexican.

After interviewing Miguel, who is 32, he asked me how he could possibly be deported to El Salvador since he left there when he was 4 months old. What could possibly be in El Salvador for him? Miguel’s familiarity with the geography of Los Angeles makes it easy for him

to pass as a Chicano who was born in East L.A. Both Miguel and Jesús have been deported to Mexico, although they are not Mexican. They both are active in altering their identity and use their identification with Chicano or Mexican culture to their advantage.

Miguel details how he makes a false claim to United States citizenship when crossing from Mexico:

M – Due to the fact that, um, it's simple, because, I don't even know my country. I came to this country when I was four months old, you know, I'm used to live in this country, so...

D – And you've been deported to El Salvador?

M – No, to Mexico.

D – Why do you get deported to Mexico?

M – Because it's easy for me to come back, to come back across, that way, you know, all I got to do is just come to the border, INS officer gonna be right there, you know checking people out, and then when I walk across, they ask me 'what's your citizenship?' I say I'm a US citizen. 'Where you born?' I say 'UCLA medical center.' 'Go, go, go,' and that's about it.

D – Alright, how many times have you done that?

M – Like about 5.

D – Wow, and have you ever been deported to El Salvador?

M – No, I never have, it's too far.

Not only do some Salvadoran gang members in Los Angeles capitalize on their knowledge of Chicano identity, some actually identify more with Chicanos than Salvadorans. Noel, a 24 year old, grew up in what he describes as a "Chicano environment." Although he has never been deported he believes it would be especially difficult for him if he were deported. "...a lot of my people, my kind, from my country will call me as a sell-out. I guess, reason being, 'cause the way I talk, you know. My Spanish is more Mexican than it is, of my country,

you know.” The lack of identification with their country of birth does not appear to be abnormal within this group.

Alex Sanchez

The most famous illustration of the circular migration through deportation of Salvadoran gang members is the case of Alex Sanchez. Alex was born in El Salvador in 1971. In 1979 in the midst of the civil war, he was smuggled to California to reunite with his parents who had migrated four years earlier. In junior high school for the first time he met other Salvadoran students and he joined the Mara Salvatrucha gang. In 1994, after a series of incarcerations, he was deported to what he calls: “a country I did not know” (Sanchez 2003)

Alex fled El Salvador in 1995 after he was targeted by death squads, and returned to Los Angeles to be with his son. In 1998 he helped form Homies Unidos Los Angeles the sister office of the San Salvador organization. “I felt I could make a change in our community. I thought everyone would appreciate my work, but I was wrong” (Sanchez 2003). In January 2000, while the Rampart CRASH scandal was unfolding in Los Angeles, Alex was arrested by the police on an immigration warrant. Ironically, the LAPD helped raise the notoriety of Homies Unidos and the issue of gang-based deportations to El Salvador to a national level (Hernandez 2000). His arrest only added fuel to the criticism of the operation of the LAPD’s anti-gang units (Hernandez 2000). The matter was further complicated by the fact that Sanchez was due to testify against his arresting officer in a murder trial (Hernandez 2000).

Sanchez’s lawyer confirmed that of the five members of Homies Unidos who had been deported since 1999, all five had been murdered in El Salvador (Chang 2002). Former California State Senator Tom Hayden criticized the United States government for not providing assistance to Homies Unidos for fear of being perceived as “soft on gangs” (Hayden 2000:26).

After being held in San Pedro immigration detention facility for eight months and mounting public attention, Sanchez was able to win his case against the INS and return to his position at Homies Unidos in Los Angeles (Maclay 2002).

Alex Sanchez's case illustrates how the circular migration pattern for Salvadoran gang members functions. However, Alex's case is also unique because he was able to win political asylum from El Salvador. No case of political asylum based on gang membership has been successful. Alex was able to win political asylum based on his political activism.

Conclusion

Because there is much public debate regarding the issue of Salvadoran migration to the United States, there is an abundance of articles and books on the subject. Scholarship is lacking however, on the issue of the conflict between identity and country of nationality for Salvadoran gang members. After spending time in the United States prison system, gang members are deported by the INS to a country which they may not know. This lack of identification is evident in my research and leads the gang members to return to Los Angeles. The deported gang members' situation is further complicated by the resurgence of various government sponsored death squads which had functioned during the civil war. Their new targets are young, tattooed, English-speaking, 'Americanized' men. As I have demonstrated, the issues of identity and violence lend themselves to a migration pattern which is perpetuated through deportations. The issue of gang based deportations of Salvadorans is an important issue receiving little attention from scholars.

Partial List of Informants

Maclay, Suzannah. Senior Staff Attorney, Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project. October 25, 2002.

Sanchez, Alex. Program Director, Homies Unidos. December 4, 2003.

Bibliography

Aguayo, Sergio. "Refugees: Another Piece in the Central American Quagmire" In *Fleeing the Maelstrom: Central American Refugees*. Fagen, Patricia Weiss and Sergio Aguayo. Pg. 95-176. Washington, DC: Central American and Caribbean Program, School of Advanced International Studies, 1986.

Chang, Jeff. "Deporting to Death?" *www.motherjones.com* February 15, 2002.

DeCesare, Donna. "The Children of War" *NACLA Report on the Americas* 32:1 (1998), 21-32.

ERIC, IDESO, IDIES and UIDOP. *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica*. UCA Publications, Nicaragua, 2001.

Hamilton, Nora and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla. *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles*. Temple U. Press, Philadelphia, 2001.

Hayden, Tom. "Gato and Alex – No Safe Place" *Nation* July 10, 2000, pg. 24-28.

Hernandez, Sandra. "Caught in the LAPD cross-fire" *www.salon.com* February 4, 2000.

In the Matter of C. L. In Removal Proceedings, Transcript of Hearing. Florence, Arizona. April 26, 2000.

In the Matter of S., Declaration of Eduardo Alfonso Linares, March 2, 2000.

La Prensa Gráfica. "Alleged Delinquents Found Dead: Rebirth of Death Squads." *Central American NewsPak*. In La Prensa Gráfica, El Salvador, February 1, 1999.

Montaigne, Fen. "Deporting America's Gang Culture." *Mother Jones* 24:4 (1999) 44-51.

Richman, Joe. "Deported: Weasel's Diary." Broadcast on *This American Life*. May 1999. *www.radiodiaries.com*. Accessed September 30, 2003.

Rohter, Larry. "U.S. deportations leave southern neighbors to face an alien force." *Austin American-Statesman*. August 17, 1997.

Santacruz Giralt, María and Alberto Concha-Eastman. *Barrio adentro: La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas*. Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, UCA-José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, El Salvador, 2001.

Wallace, Scott. "You Must Go Home Again" *Harper's Magazine* 301:1803 (2000).

UNHCR. "Country Information, El Salvador" *Refworld* February 3, 1998.