
Migrant Gangs, Religion and Tattoo Removal

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Sitting in the lobby of San Francisco General Hospital, Carlos waits for the last in a yearlong series of laser treatments to remove tattoos—a tear under his left eye, names on his neck, numerous names and symbols on his chest, symbols signifying his gang membership on his arms. When asked the difference between his life before and now, after having his tattoos removed, he seemed uncomfortable and looked away towards the window. He turned and said, “Mira, todo lo que te puedo decir es que antes todo era obscuridad y ahora, luz” [“Look, all I can tell you is that before, everything was dark and now it is light”].

This essay explores a tattoo removal program in San Francisco; the relatively recent phenomenon of transnational gang activity, especially that between San Francisco and El Salvador; the attractiveness of gangs for new migrant youth; and the role of religion in encouraging youth to leave gangs. The observations below come from nearly two years of fieldwork spent in the San Francisco General Hospital lobby talking to former gang members who were having tattoos removed, with the doctors and nurses who administered the laser treatments, case workers at Juvenile Hall, police in San Francisco’s Mission district, the staff of a group we will call CASI (because of confidentiality agreements, the real name of the organization cannot be used), which initiated and runs a tattoo removal program, and most importantly, with gang members themselves—on the streets and in their homes. We were especially interested in how migrant youth adopt survival strategies to cope with the traumas of leaving one country, often under adverse circumstances, and entering a new land often hostile to them.

From 1981 to 1992, El Salvador suffered through a civil war, heavily financed by the United States, in which 80,000 people were killed. During the war, civilians were killed, human rights violations were common, massacres occurred, and up to one-fifth of the Salvadoran population was uprooted. Currently, one-fifth of the population still lives outside of El Salvador, primarily in the United States. Migrating to places like the Mission District in San Francisco, these migrants came from a country in which community and family life were often dismantled. More recent migrants from El Salvador leave to reunite with families or for economic reasons. Given that up to 75% of adults in San Salvador are unemployed, the motivations for migrating are strong. Drastic economic change, broken families and communities, and educational crises are legacies of

war, of centuries old socioeconomic marginalization, and of current global economic forces, represented in part by the rapid growth of the *maquila* industry in the countryside surrounding San Salvador. Recent migrants to the Mission District enter a predominantly Latino, low-income, working-class neighborhood (although this is changing somewhat as the area becomes increasingly gentrified).

The appeal of gangs should not surprise us given the many ways in which Salvadoran youth in the U.S. are marginalized. They have left their countries for an environment often hostile to them and many face generational conflicts as they attempt to adapt to U.S. popular culture. Given these multiple marginalities, some Salvadoran youth may turn to gangs. Since we know many of these youth personally, we are reluctant to talk about gangs given the negative ways lower-income Latino youth are often stereotyped in the media. Yet, gang life is also a reality both here and in El Salvador. Understanding the multiple pressures that make gang life appealing can hopefully be part of the process of de-demonizing these youth. Although we will suggest reasons for joining gangs, based on interviews with past and present gang members, we must also resist the tendency to oversimplify the complex reasons any individuals may have for joining a gang.

Maria, an ex-gang member, said that she did not know to which ethnic group she really belonged because even though she had been born in the U.S., her American friends considered her Salvadoran because she “thought like one,” while her family thought that she behaved like an American girl. Immigrant children may find it difficult when they first come to the U.S. and try to discover their identity. At the same time as they have to construct an identity in this country, they are categorized by others.

Susana’s story is common. Susana came to San Francisco when she was very young. Her father abandoned her mother shortly after arriving in the city, and she now lives in a family group that has gone through multiple permutations. She says that for years the gang was her “real” family, given the disintegration and lack of stability she found in her loosely biological family.

Lupita liked belonging to a gang because people recognized her power and they respected her. She said it felt good to walk down streets where people recognized in which gang she belonged. On her hand a tattoo displays the name of her band, Natona, the street where the gang lived.

Many gang members report that they were recruited in school. Cesar, a former gang member and now a social worker working with gangs, says, “You know, they recruit, like the army recruiting potential gang members. If they see a kid who is tough looking or looks cool, they will try to court him to get him.” Increasingly, young men without families or relatives come to the U.S. to work and send money home. These 14 and 15 year olds often cannot find work, and exhausted, they realize the easiest thing to do is to sell drugs. Cesar says, “so when you sell drugs you sell them in an area where there are gangs ... you are going to need protection so you got to join a gang to get protection. So you sell your drugs to make money and send back home. It is a vicious circle.” Increasingly, new migrant youth come to San Francisco, which has a reputation for police who are less strict than in other cities and a local INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services) that does not deport teenagers back to El Salvador,

for the purpose of selling drugs to make money. Parents may help these teenagers by paying for the “coyotes” to help them cross the border.

A sense of belonging, a surrogate family, ethnic or national identity, being “cool,” a way to make money, having fun: any number of these elements could easily appeal to a 14-year-old migrant youth, the most common age for gang recruitment. As Manuel Vasquez notes, gangs affirm the self, family (the extended community of the gang), and place. Vasquez writes that “gangs offer disenfranchised and dislocated Salvadoran youths discourses, practices, and forms of organization that allow them to re-territorialize their lives, that is to re-assert locality against global forces that have disarticulated their communities and families. Gangs also provide a context where the self can be re-centered in an intimate setting, where loyalty and collective identity are central.” Our interviews, fieldwork, and findings corroborate Vasquez’s insight. The youth we interviewed look to gangs for belonging, identity, family, and a sense of power. What surprised us was that virtually none of our respondents reported being intimidated to join. Most claimed they were not forced to join gangs, not forced to get tattoos, and were not threatened upon leaving the gangs.

Mission District gangs can locate themselves by this street, that corner, that park, and so forth. In this sense, as Vasquez writes, gangs allow young Salvadorans to respond to dislocation and multiple marginalities by reasserting territory. Significant for our study is that this marking of territory becomes present on the body. (Remember Lupita’s “Natona” tattoo?) It makes sense then, that the Salvadoran self-help group, CASI, would provide tattoo removal as a way to mark the departure from a gang locality and way of life.

In our study of Pentecostal churches, we have found that they often offer an alternative for Salvadoran youth. Active participation of ex-gang members in numerous storefront Pentecostal churches is not uncommon. Victory Outreach is a well-known ministry in which ex-convicts, ex-gang members, ex-drug addicts work to convert people and get them off the streets. Although these groups are understandably well known for their work with gangs, they are not the focus of today’s study. Instead, we have studied the only tattoo removal program in San Francisco. As suggested, this program is sponsored by CASI, a self-help group. Central American refugees founded CASI in 1981, with considerable support from the church-based Sanctuary Movement. Many religious organizations helped build CASI, including the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Jewish communities. CASI claims its work is inspired by the courage and vision of the assassinated Salvadoran Archbishop Monsignor Oscar Romero. CASI is arguably the most highly regarded organization in San Francisco working with migrants.

In 1998, CASI was asked to restructure and lead the Tattoo Removal Program, which had been started by another agency in 1996. In conjunction with San Francisco General Hospital, the program offers participants the option of removing gang-related tattoos. Participants must be between 12 and 23 years old, must live in San Francisco, must provide 10 hours of community service

before joining the program, 50 hours of community service throughout the course of the program, and must want to change their gang life. The laser treatments to remove the tattoos occur over the course of what can be up to a year, with monthly appointments. CASI's goal is to treat 90 patients a month. Of these, 25% are new migrant youth. Since the city's response to gangs is to attempt to eradicate them, to encourage citizens to call the police, and to put gang members in jail, CASI is seen as having a key role in the community.

Unlike Pentecostal groups who work with gang members, CASI does not demand religious conversion, or indeed any spiritual practice of its clients. It is enough that the client wishes to change his or her lifestyle for whatever reason. Yet, a visit to the office makes clear the religious orientation, as the office is full of symbols signifying both religion and nation. Pictures of Monsignor Romero, seen as a martyr to El Salvador, are found in numerous rooms. The name of the Health Clinic is Celina Ramos Health Center, the name of the housekeeper who was killed at the Jesuit University of El Salvador in 1989 along with her daughter and six Jesuits. CASI says that Romero provides the inspiration for its founding and work. Romero and Celina Ramos signify both religion (Catholicism, especially liberation theology) and religious martyrdom coupled with justice. They are powerful religious symbols that also signify national identity—in this case that of El Salvador. And, in the service of religious and national symbols, other religious and national symbols are removed from the bodies of youths.

Most of the gang members we interviewed said that their religious tattoos didn't really have religious meanings for them. They didn't necessarily know what the symbols meant, just that a cross for example, meant that they belong to the Pachucos, and the Virgin of Guadalupe signified Mexico or Mexican Americans. Lupita sarcastically makes the sign of the cross, saying "You know how they are ... most cholos have a cross or a Virgin of Guadalupe." Cesar says, "I tease with the kids that are gang members, they have like Jesucristo, la Virgen o la cruz, Sagrado Corazón, muy religioso cabrón, pero andas matando a tu gente, ay si muy religioso" ["very religious jerk, but you are killing your own people, yeah, very religious"].

How do the clients of the tattoo removal program leave gangs? This occurs in several ways. Ex-gang members often report positively about the community service hours demanded of them by CASI. The new relationships formed in the program with both staff and other clients also provide new, intense and close ties within an environment experienced as safe. The ex-gang member now has a "new home" and "new family." Religious groups, whether CASI or Pentecostal churches, may allow gang members to enjoy an alternative social network to that provided by gangs. We are not claiming that only religious groups do this, although it is interesting that CASI is the only tattoo removal program in the city, and that Pentecostal churches are rather famous for their success with gang members.

We end where we started: with Carlos. Looking out the window, he tells us, "Mira, todo lo que te puedo decir es que antes todo era obscuridad y ahora,

luz” [“Look, all I can tell you is that before, everything was dark and now it is light”].

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