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## Introduction

*Conocereis la verdad y la verdad os hara libres.*

(You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.)

—graffiti, isolation block, Pavón prison, Guatemala City

*Maras*, transnational gangs, took root in Central America in the early 1990s, just as the region's Cold War conflicts were ending. At the time they were little more than disorganized groups of youths imitating Latino gangs born in Los Angeles, vying for turf in cities struggling to recover from authoritarian rule. Over the years, however, they have evolved into brutal organizations engaged in extortion, contract killings, and the drug trade. Feuds between Barrio18 and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS), the two most powerful *maras* in Central America, have helped to turn the region into the deadliest noncombat zone in the world.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, *maras* and *mareros* (gangsters), with their penchant for conspicuous tattoos and audacious violence, have become archetypal symbols of all that has gone wrong in Central America.

I arrived in Guatemala City in 2010 to begin field research that I hoped would penetrate the haze of fear and fantasy swirling about the *maras*.<sup>2</sup> Along with other cities in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), this metropolis of some seven million citizens has suffered from the gang phenomenon, in its poor neighborhoods and sprawling suburbs, as well as in the nation's overcrowded prison system.<sup>3</sup> And in this city—as in other cities across the region—the rise of the *maras* has been concomitant with the onset of a new kind of insecurity. This is not the overtly political and ethnic violence of prior epochs. Today, Guatemala City is a time and place dominated by both the fact and the fear of out-of-control crime.<sup>4</sup>

Following the signing of peace accords in 1996, the nation's homicide rate climbed to 40 per 100,000, the fifth highest in the world, and between 2000

and 2008 Guatemala City's homicide rate doubled, with the numbers climbing to as high as 60 per 100,000.<sup>5</sup> In the city's "red zones"—poor, insecure neighborhoods often dominated by gangs or other criminal groups—security officials claim that homicide rates have shot up to over 190 per 100,000.

But in a sense, such body counts obscure more than they reveal. As hard and fast as these numbers may seem, what makes this violence so terrifying for so many is its profound uncertainty. Fewer than 5 percent of violent crimes ever make it to trial, making Guatemala a great place to commit murder.<sup>6</sup> Forces of order and disorder often make distorted reflections of each other.<sup>7</sup> At best the law appears helpless and at worst complicit, making the list of usual suspects in every murder, extortion, and robbery long and poorly defined. Police regularly exchange places with the narco-traffickers, kidnapping rings, gangs, and other criminal groups they are meant to arrest. Massacre, torture, and dismemberment are also popular techniques to make murder register far and wide. The cacophony of public reaction—sensationalist media reporting, politicians' grandstanding, the rumors coursing through violence-stricken communities—warps the fear into every realm of public life.

With so many murders left unsolved and unpunished, overwhelming doubt haunts collective perceptions of danger and mires every avenue of investigation.<sup>8</sup> As a veteran homicide investigator with the National Civil Police told me, "A death may occur for a failure to pay extortion. A death, well, may occur because of a drug-related settling of accounts and have nothing to do with the gangs. And that's all one can say." From behind his cluttered desk, he fixed me with an incongruous grin. "You might die because your brother got caught up with the maras. Who can say with more specificity? There are many acts that have such consequences."

Such extreme levels of violence, arising from such inscrutable sources, cast long shadows over Guatemala City. Violence and its terror dictate how city residents think and live. People cast about for ways of understanding what has become a "war without sense."<sup>9</sup> These struggles to make sense of senselessness, to draw meaning and certainty out of cycles of violence that refuse to be fixed in time and place, converge upon the figure of the marero. Actors of all kinds draw on him to make meaning in political discourse, newspaper and TV headlines, casual conversation and rumors, and daydreams and nightmares. For Guatemalans from all walks of life, this figure has come to personify all the wounds and illnesses of the struggling social body. Thrust into the public imagination, the symbolic power of the marero fuses everyday

violence taking place in gang territories and other insecure spaces to the making of social and political perspectives dictating life across the city, the nation, and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

These brash vehicles of violence and emissaries of peacetime chaos have become absolutely essential to the making of a certain kind of order. Maras form a vital node, a flashpoint, in which overwhelming violence and fear circulating throughout the social body come into stark relief.<sup>11</sup> They are, in a sense, a way for people to know violence and its terror, or at least a way of providing a discernible form to the endless unknowns that make life under such conditions so terrifying. They have become a means of rendering the illegible legible, of imposing a sense of finitude and control on out-of-control insecurity. They have become the answer when no answers are enough. In a world that always appears to be coming undone, the maras play a pivotal role in holding it together. What's more, such meaning making is by no means isolated from the ongoing destruction of bodies, lives, and communities it is meant to keep at bay.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to explain and make sense of this kind of violence have knock-on effects that are absolutely pivotal to its perpetual cycles.

Tracing the maras' footsteps, this book tracks the deadly play among out-of-control predation, overwhelming uncertainty, and desperate struggles to carve a sense of certainty back into the world. Through stories and perspectives collected from Guatemalan gangsters and ex-gangsters, police and prisoners, journalists and taxi drivers, judges, human rights activists, and narco-traffickers, among many others, this book explores the histories, spaces, businesses, and violent spectacles through which the mara phenomenon has evolved. Of course the maras are not the problem, and the problem does not begin or end with them. They have been forged through relationships of exchange that collapse the deceptive divides between the local and the global, the state and its underworld, the innocent and the guilty, and so forth. By tracing the endless enmeshing of the imagining and the making of the world, I show how the maras' flesh and blood violence is indissoluble from their symbolic power in social imaginaries and how they provide cover for a host of actors feeding and feeding off peacetime insecurity.<sup>13</sup> To this end, the marero who walks the streets and the marero infesting strung-out imaginations blend and merge in ways that cannot be drawn apart. This doubled figure, in turn, provides a lens through which to witness the making and mooring of collective terror in Guatemala City and beyond.

## ORDERS OF VIOLENCE, PAST AND PRESENT

How deep must one dig to uncover the roots of Guatemala's extreme peacetime violence, or for that matter, the roots of any contemporary catastrophe? The question begs an answer of infinite breadth and complexity far beyond the scope of any single book. But a story has to start somewhere, and in understanding how the *maras* were made and what they mean, the legacies of Cold War atrocities are both crucial and inescapable.<sup>14</sup> This history is particularly visible in the historic zone of Guatemala City, where activists continue to struggle to keep memories of the military's atrocities alive. They have posted images of the civil war dead and disappeared everywhere. These black-and-white portraits are plastered on car park walls, facades of buildings, and above the bars of certain cantinas. Many of them are Mayan villagers—men, women, and children—massacred in the highlands during military scorched-earth campaigns. Today they are called victims of genocide.<sup>15</sup> They are also trade unionists, students, journalists, and other “subversives” disappeared by the police, tortured by the military, and executed without ceremony.<sup>16</sup> A few are celebrated as martyrs, their memory sanctified in museums and scattered rituals of public mourning.

These faces are, without exception, solemn. They are reproduced from national ID cards, or in many cases from the archives of the police who kidnapped them. Their suffering, inflicted with considerable support from the United States, and the bitter disappointments of postwar progress, imbue these images with powerful emotional and political valence. They accuse, they plead, they condemn. Most of the bodies of massacre victims remain in mass graves in the mountains, bones woven and swirled together, picked apart by families and forensic anthropologists still searching for justice.<sup>17</sup>

As for the disappeared, some ended up interred in secret on military bases and in anonymous graves in city cemeteries.<sup>18</sup> State security forces discarded others like trash. At the height of the conflict, hundreds of bodies a month were dumped in the *barrancos*, steep ravines that cut through Guatemala City. Few were recovered by loved ones. Openly mourning these dead would only attract government suspicion. Public reaction to the government's campaign of urban terror remained quiet, muted by an “existential uncertainty.”<sup>19</sup> There were few public venues within Guatemala where accusations or even inquiries could safely be made. There were plenty of rumors whispered fearfully among friends and loved ones, but nowhere for them to register in the public sphere.



FIGURE 1. Portraits of the disappeared plastered around zone 1 of Guatemala City.

In 1984 human rights organizations and victims' families finally confronted Defense Minister Mejía Victores, demanding to be told the whereabouts of the disappeared. Mejía Victores is said to have responded, "Disappeared? There are no disappeared—those people probably migrated to the United States to find work, or died in the 1976 earthquake."<sup>20</sup>

More than thirty years later, of the roughly forty-five-thousand men and women disappeared during the civil war, the bones of only a few have been identified and returned to their people.<sup>21</sup> For the rest, it is the car park wall, the bar bathroom, the stained sidewalk, and empty reliquaries in the homes of their families.

The legions of *desaparecidos* haunt the postwar order.<sup>22</sup> Lingering uncertainty over their fate steals the possibility of peace for those they left behind. "Disappearance is even more cruel than public assassination," writes Edelberto Torres Rivas, "since it raises the perception of danger by placing it in an imaginary world, unsure but probable, created by the possibility that the disappeared person is alive. While one suspects that the disappeared person may be dead, nobody knows the truth. Doubt, prolonged over time, is a highly productive way of sowing fear."<sup>23</sup> During the Cold War, counterinsurgent terror provoked and preserved collective doubt through the "sacred currency"

of silence.<sup>24</sup> Such strategies proved highly effective.<sup>25</sup> With political, logistical, and sometimes financial support from the United States, military-backed dictatorships across Latin America destroyed progressive social movements and armed groups struggling to reform their societies from below, virtually ensuring that the causes for which they fought would remain pipe dreams in the era of so-called peace.<sup>26</sup>

Today, doubt about violence is still a basic fact of everyday life in Guatemala City. However, something has changed radically. Violence and its suffering move through the social body in ways altogether different from civil war atrocities. The most obvious distinction is this: in place of silence, a dissonant chorus greets peacetime brutality, screaming accusation, seeking to blame, determined to name the source of so much murder and suffering. Each act of violence that infiltrates the public sphere is immediately embroiled in the chaos of postwar political maneuvering for power and influence. Guatemalan politicians from across the spectrum blame their adversaries' policies for creating the conditions giving rise to so much murder. Researchers, activists, analysts, and journalists seek to describe, often in minute detail, how and why this violence is happening. International donors and organizations—the United States, the United Nations—make endless prescriptions for diminishing it.<sup>27</sup> The litany of voices rising up in response to contemporary violence creates a distinct kind of confusion. But these voices are no less paralyzing than was the past's profuse silence.

Such intense and fearful uncertainties about criminal violence help to push concerns over past injustices, no matter how grievous, into the background. In Guatemala City, the collective experience of living with violent crime has given rise to widespread nostalgia for what is remembered as the ordered violence of civil war. This nostalgia is certainly not universal. "Things are certainly better now," said Mario Polanco, longtime human rights activist and executive director of Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), when I asked him to compare the terror of the past with that of the present. "Back then, you could be disappeared simply for owning a copy of Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*. I had a copy that I would have to cover with newspaper so it wouldn't be seen on the bus. Now you have the freedom to think and say what you want."<sup>28</sup>

For most residents of Guatemala City, however, the freedom of thought and expression they have gained does not appear as important as the sense of security they sense they have lost. Today, among urban residents the dominant

sentiment regarding the wartime past is that “in those days at least you knew if you stayed out of politics you could avoid trouble.” Without the ideological, class, and ethnic categories defining who might be a likely target of counter-insurgent state brutality, the logic goes, the violence of Guatemalan society has become unhinged. Even if nostalgia for wartime terror is driven by distorted reckonings of the ever-receding golden past (as so much nostalgia is), such longing still exposes how unstable the present has become.<sup>29</sup> Peacetime violence has been freed from the narrow constraints of revolution and counter-revolution, making potential prey out of those who once imagined themselves safe, and every new murder becomes a hotbed for rumor and supposition, another reason to feel vulnerable.

### *What Maras Mean*

The institutional and existential chaos of Guatemala’s postwar order requires a standard-bearer capable of containing the collective confusion, rage, and despair. In their brash celebrations of brutality and the place they have come to occupy in the public imagination, the maras fit the bill.<sup>30</sup> Over the last thirty years, across the Northern Triangle of Central America they have become public enemy number 1, emerging as packed and contradictory symbols of violence driven by seemingly new faces and forces, yet still haunted by the ghosts of Cold War and even colonial atrocities.<sup>31</sup> This role is spectacularly overdetermined. Playing so perfectly to such a wide array of collective fears, the maras have come to represent “an almost incomprehensibly dark reality,” emerging as the erstwhile emissaries of all the failures of peacetime progress to heal the wounds of war and find a path toward collective prosperity.<sup>32</sup> And so, investigating the making of the maras is a means of probing the spaces, circuits, and discourses—the worlds—out of which they emerge and which they cannot help but forge.<sup>33</sup>

The maras have come to represent a world unhinged by fear and violence, both past and present. The gangs are symbolic figures through which politicians, scholars, and others link the revolutionary past with the insecure present, and their violence becomes coded as a legacy and inheritance of civil war. In this sense, the MS and Barrio18 replace the Marxist guerrillas of another age as foot soldiers of the “new urban insurgency”<sup>34</sup> fighting in the “slum wars of the 21st century.”<sup>35</sup> This rendering is dangerous in its own right, because it imputes a coherent politics to gang violence that it simply does not have, while opening the door to right-wing politicians’ calls to remilitarize society in

defense against the insurgent threat.<sup>36</sup> In El Salvador, Elana Zilberg highlights this confused play between past and present, showing how a veritable “hall of mirrors” turns contemporary conceptions of the *maras* into “double faced” reflections of a host of Cold War killers.<sup>37</sup>

Some scholars have tied the rapid spread of gang culture to deep socioeconomic inequalities.<sup>38</sup> While absolute levels of urban poverty are not significantly greater than in prior epochs, widespread access to globalized media has made poor youths keenly aware of their position on the proverbial totem pole. Gang membership can provide a “pathway to manhood” for ambitious youths with few options of finding dignified, licit employment.<sup>39</sup> Children growing up in poor urban neighborhoods have plenty of other reasons to join gangs: for self-protection, for revenge, to make money, to become desirable, to gain a sense of belonging, to survive.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, the circulation of symbols, language, and imagery traveling via migrant bodies, Hollywood films, and the internet has also contributed to the gangs’ allure for poor youth. Gangs are said to be products of a globalized consumer society and its inherent brand name fetishism. As Donna Decesare writes of gangs in El Salvador, “[K]ids desperate for ‘real’ Nike kicks will spend a family’s whole remittance check, sell crack, or steal to buy them. Acquiring style is costly and requires some effort. Clearly, poverty is not the only thing drawing . . . youth into gangs.”<sup>41</sup>

Popular opinions of what *maras* are and why they do what they do both interweave with and diverge from scholarly analyses, running the gamut of psychological, spiritual, social, and historical explanations. The notion that gangs are the inheritance of civil war, for one, is widely shared, prompting a taxi driver to tell me, “These gangs do the same thing to poor people as the guerrilla once did!” We spoke as he maneuvered his beat-up taxi through the early morning Guatemala City traffic. “All they do is extort and brainwash the people for their own destruction.”

Or, as a truck driver who had served in the military toward the end of the civil war declared, “I know exactly how to take care of these *maras*. The same way we took care of the guerrilla. Give me 10 platoons of *kaibiles* armed to the teeth, and we’ll clean them all out street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood.”<sup>42</sup>

I asked him how he and his platoons would identify the enemy. “Just ask the people,” he yelled over the grinding engine. “Everyone knows. Just ask someone who is not afraid to say.”



Indeed, “everyone” knows, or pretends to. Experts and laypeople, politicians and pundits all seem to have an explanation of the why and wherefore of the maras.<sup>43</sup> Gangs are a deep-throated articulation of profound *odia y envidia*—hatred and envy—coursing through Guatemalan society.<sup>44</sup> Gang members are “like sex addicts, but addicted to killing,” as a Salvadoran crime reporter declared at a meeting of police and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss peaceful crime prevention. Another taxi driver repeated the common refrain that mareros “worship the devil and the Santa Muerte—they have given their souls to the Beast (*La Bestia*).”<sup>45</sup> An evangelical gang pastor ministering to a violent suburb of Guatemala City put it slightly more subtly. “The nights are worse,” he said as he excused himself from our interview to return to his neighborhood. He laughed bitterly. “This is like Alcoholics Anonymous. They need a twelve-step program to stop from killing. Constant supervision, constant intervention, because killing is all they know.”

The maras are also an *answer* to the conundrums facing vulnerable urban youth in search of protection. “When a drunken father comes home and beats a kid’s mom and molests the kid’s sister,” said longtime youth advocate Emilio Goubaud, “and the boy tries to fight back and gets kicked in the stomach, the gangster is across the street. He offers the child a toke of his joint, and smiles at him. ‘The whole world is shit,’ he says. ‘The only thing to do about it is to have more power. You want to fight your father? Here, take this gun. Fuck that bitch. He deserves to die. Welcome to *la vida loca*.”<sup>46</sup>

For some, the maras’ willingness to kill and die has made them useful mercenaries following the orders of higher powers—doing the dirty work of corrupt police, who in turn take orders from politicians, organized crime, and the rich elite intent on maintaining the status quo. For others, gangs are simply an ugly expression of a collective fall from grace and loss of traditional values. I asked Walter Villatoro, a well-respected criminal circuit court judge, why maras had become so violent. “Aha,” he thundered, pounding his desk. “I will tell you! We have become rotten from the beginning. It starts with Caesarean sections, the separation of child from mother, feeding newborns animal milk, and leaving them alone in their cribs. The gangs are the vomit of a sick society.”<sup>47</sup>

Like savage “Others” raised up through history and across cultures, the maras’ image enshrouds and eclipses the complex structural and historical forces that make the catastrophic present so deeply uncertain. They have become another justification for savagery in the name of the law and order



FIGURE 2. Marero in isolation lockdown, Canada prison, Escuintla, Guatemala.

promised by so-called civilization.<sup>48</sup> They are foot soldiers in a vague and dystopian civil war. They are inhuman and unfeeling killers who do not fear death. They are youth trying to protect themselves, or maybe just to get some style. They are boys struggling to become men, parasites feeding off collective fear, by-products of consumer capitalism, and souls lost along a path blazing into an ungodly future.<sup>49</sup> In twenty-first-century Guatemala City, the incessant meanings made of the maras and “their” violence are as contradictory and contingent as the disordered order they represent. And taken together, the countless interpretations of what the maras are and what they mean make them into something else entirely: a kaleidoscopic looking glass through which the catastrophic present forms and dissolves and reforms in infinite, inscrutable patterns. Once again, it is “through a glass, darkly.”<sup>50</sup>

#### EXPLAINING VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

Postwar Guatemala City is not alone in being dominated by what Hannah Arendt would call the “all-pervading unpredictability” of violence.<sup>51</sup> In the



MAP 1. Northern Triangle of Central America. Source: Based on a United Nations map of Guatemala, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guatemala\\_location\\_map.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guatemala_location_map.svg).

contemporary world, such spaces are legion.<sup>52</sup> Since the end of the Cold War the “democratic wave” and the triumph of market fundamentalism have been accompanied by a “gradual erasure of received lines between the informal and the illegal, regulation and irregularity, order and organized lawlessness.”<sup>53</sup> In this era marked by renewed ambiguity and increased uncertainty, Latin

American societies in particular have witnessed an unprecedented increase in criminal violence carried out by a revolving cast of shadowy actors.<sup>54</sup>

Nowhere are such ambiguities of power and legitimacy more pronounced than in the Northern Triangle of Central America.<sup>55</sup> The array of local, national, and regional factors creating the conditions for out-of-control violence in Central America today is dizzying in its variety. It includes, to quote just one World Bank study, “rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking, and authoritarian family structures.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, the causes and conditions giving rise to peacetime crime across the region are virtually endless.<sup>57</sup> However, for those who must live and die with the brutal specters haunting urban life, such explanations do not explain much. In fact, the act of pinning down this violence to a discrete set of causes and conditions imposes a false sense of certainty that is itself another kind of violence. It offers a sense of assurance that can only be upheld by the security of distance. When we close that distance, the utility of such easy answers evaporates.

Perhaps this is why the most nuanced scholarship on the region’s struggle with insecurity has long been riddled with doubt. In neighboring El Salvador, Ellen Moodie uses the term *unknowing* to capture how those living in the midst of postwar violence struggle with the uncertainties of everyday crime and insecurity and recall the ordered violence of war with fitful nostalgia.<sup>58</sup> For Honduras, Jon Horne Carter flags how silence and elision—leaving the violent realities of everyday life “unsaid”—has become a collective survival strategy for residents of insecure zones of Tegucigalpa.<sup>59</sup> For postconflict Guatemala, Linda Green demonstrates how fearful silence surrounds survivors’ memories of civil war atrocity,<sup>60</sup> and Diane Nelson hones in on how life for the poor and marginalized is a struggle with duplicity—a sense of being repeatedly “duped”—by the failed promises of a failed revolution, by two-faced politicians in the present, and by the postwar order itself.<sup>61</sup> These analyses focus on the production of and struggle with uncertainty through discourse, anchored in what Michael Taussig might call the “epistemic murk”<sup>62</sup> of life in the midst of extreme violence and precarity.<sup>63</sup>

By honing in on the synthesis of symbolic meanings and their expressions in the physical world, I go through and beyond the discursive and epistemic to draw out the destabilizing psychological, emotional, and visceral impacts of living with the specter of extreme peacetime violence. My approach begins

with the observation that the doubt at work here is not merely cognitive, but a structure of feeling that is woven into the built environment and etched upon the body.<sup>64</sup> It is as concrete as the prison walls that fail to quarantine criminals, as sharp as the razor wire slicing through city space, and as visceral as a palpitating heart. And since death is a daily risk, the doubt I am talking about cuts to the quick. This is *mortal* doubt. I mean mortal in two distinct senses. First, it is corporeal and embedded in the flesh; second, it holds within it questions that run the gamut between life and death and thus open onto crises of existential proportions. Such doubt sets the conditions for the confused traffic between terror and the array of reactions people employ to metabolize, confront, and make sense of it. Living with relentless encounters, both real and imagined, with the specter of violent pain and death means engaging in constant calculations and using vague variables to assess the risks of walking out one's door each day. The stakes are ultimately life itself, but they are also the existential and ethical foundations we use to order, make sense of, and live with what counts as reality. These foundations are physical and psychological: the sanctity of the human body, for example, or the perception of certain spaces as safe and others as unsafe. They are institutional: the state and its underworld, the prison walls that separate the incarcerated from the free. And they are ethical and existential, organizing how we think and act: truth and fiction, good and evil, structure and agency, guilt and innocence, life and death. Even under the most secure circumstances, such distinctions are far less clear-cut than common sense would have them be. After all, order and certainty are always built on shaky foundations, always falling apart and being built back up again. And life lived with profound doubt over the terms of everyday survival exposes just how false and fading these apparent foundations can be.

Given these circumstances, one is tempted to deride the certainties derived through the marero as fraudulent and deceitful, mere symptoms of "false consciousness" obscuring the relations of domination and exploitation defining contemporary social orders.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons I wrote this book was to expose the clumsy charades that hide the physical and structural violence of Guatemalan (and global) society behind the tattooed mask of the marero.<sup>66</sup> The point, however, is *not* to label the ways people make sense of violence and insecurity as either true or false, accurate or mistaken. The point is that in this never-ending search for certainty, truth and falsehood matter far less than how the meanings made of the maras induce individuals,

communities, and institutions to act in certain ways. That is, symbolic renderings of the marero have material effects that impact the making of the world, which in turn feed into how people imagine the maras and the violence they represent, and so forth. Caught up in the loops and feedback effects that synthesize the material and symbolic in the messy construction of reality, this meaning making weaves through the social fabric, becomes embedded in the urban landscape, and is pressed into the struggle for power and profit in myriad ways.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, the maras form a key site upon which competing projects to control, order, and dominate Guatemalan society are exposed in all their violent contradictions.

The structure of the book reflects how the promiscuous play between the material and symbolic shapes the struggle for certainty at multiple scales and in diverse spaces. Part 1, “Truths and Fictions,” maps the synthesis of material and symbolic histories in shaping mareros’ lives and collective history. Part 2, “Worlds and Underworlds,” expands out from the maras into the prison system and the city to show how myriad actors—the state, private businesses, and military men, among others—feed and feed off the struggle to impose order on peacetime violence. Finally, part 3, “Spectacle, Structure, and Agency,” explores how the spectacle of gang violence is produced and consumed on national and global scales, making accomplices of distant bystanders and undermining the very possibility of innocence for any of us.

I have written the helter-skelter chains of meaning and material effects into the arc of each chapter. Fantasy and reality weave together in ways that cannot always be pulled apart. However, since giving up on explanation altogether would only lead to losing the thread, I have tried to strike a precarious balance. The chapters conscientiously frame key aspects of the mara phenomenon and peacetime violence in order to guide readers along. These are the bones of the book. In between are the sinews and ligaments. These are short narrative fragments that offer neither analytical frameworks nor attempts at explanation. These narratives perform the entanglement of truths and fictions that is so integral to how meaning is made from and by the maras. They are meant to draw readers directly into the spaces, relationships, and acts of meaning making upon which this book is based.<sup>68</sup> One cannot carry out such research and expect to get out clean, so they also expose the destabilizing ethical encounters that define ethnographic research in the midst of so much violent uncertainty. Altogether, this structure is meant to guide readers into the

confused struggle to draw order out of chaos, wherein readers are free to get lost.

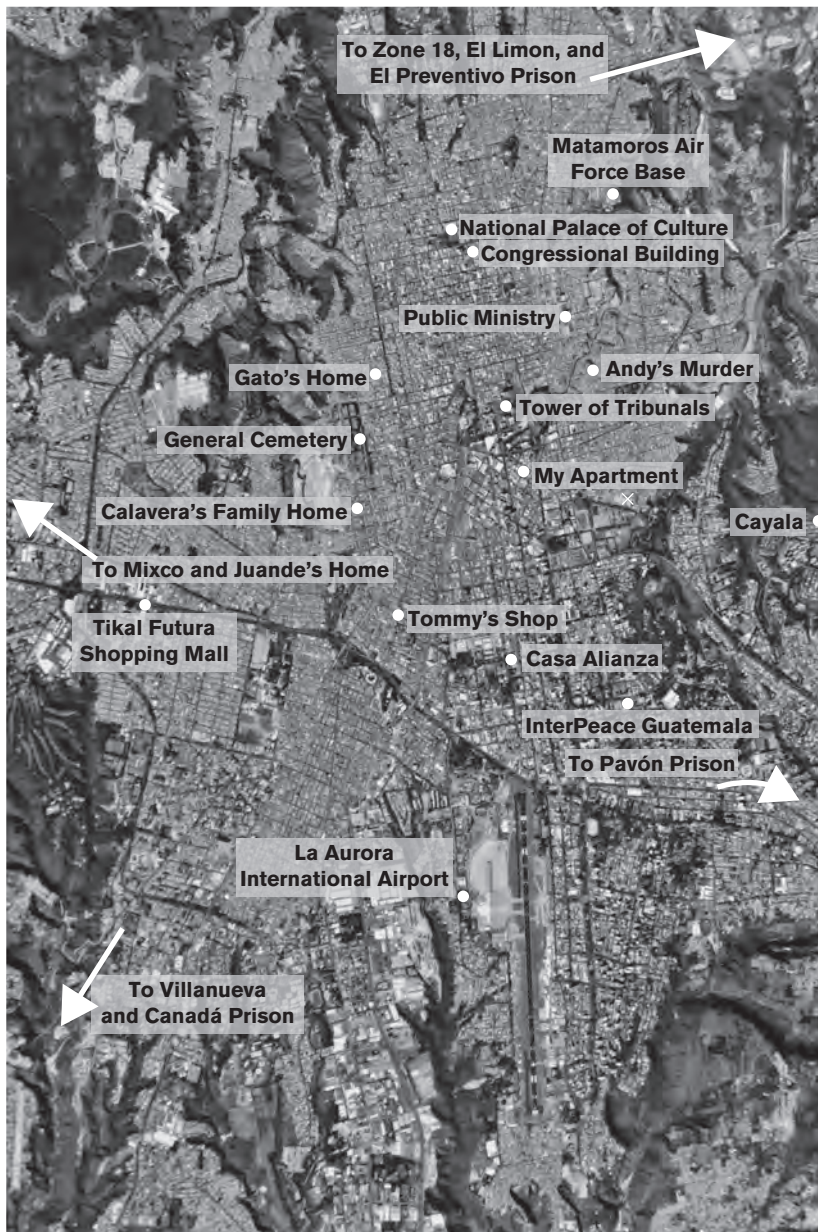
### RUMOR'S REACH

In 2010, when I first landed in Guatemala City, I thought I had come to seek out the “real” marero. That is, I was determined to get as deep as I could into gang networks and tell “authentic” stories from the perspective of gang-involved youth.<sup>69</sup> I dreamed of embedding myself in a gang, as the anthropologist Dennis Rodgers had done in Managua, Nicaragua, a decade earlier.<sup>70</sup> In retrospect, my naïveté and oh-so-gringo hubris were breathtaking. I did, however, manage to make inroads toward my initial goal by linking up with evangelical and secular gang rehabilitation programs based around Guatemala City. Through these groups I became acquainted with a coterie of ex-gang peace workers—former gang members and gang associates cum social workers and pastors—who leveraged their experience in the streets into efforts at “rescuing” gang youth. My relationships with these men and women gave me access to prisons and a few neighborhoods where gangs operated.

Very quickly, however, I gave up on the fantasy of becoming embedded in a gang clique. The situation on the street was far more volatile than I had expected. One tell-tale sign was the failure of gang rehab programs to “save” more than a tiny fraction of the youth they served. For example, in one job-skills training program, funded partly by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), nine out of ten participants dropped out or disappeared before completion, many of them killed by police, rivals, or even their old gangs.

What’s more, while I could gain permission from gang leaders to enter this or that neighborhood on an ad hoc basis, establishing a working relationship with an active gang clique seemed riskier than was worthwhile. The year before I arrived in Guatemala, Christian Poveda, a French filmmaker who had made a documentary about Barrio18 in El Salvador, was gunned down under mysterious circumstances.<sup>71</sup> He had lived and worked with a Barrio18 clique in San Salvador for more than a year and clearly believed he had earned the trust of the very mareros blamed for his murder. His death made international headlines, but typically, no firm explanation ever surfaced. There were plenty of rumors, however.

My friend Gato, a former gang member and social worker in Guatemala City, had worked with Poveda. He told me the filmmaker was murdered for



MAP 2. Guatemala City. Image courtesy of the Earth Science and Remote Sensing Unit, NASA Johnson Space Center. NASA photo ID: ISS022-E-86851. <http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov>.



having betrayed the gang by failing to follow through on promises to provide a portion of the proceeds garnered from the film. “You don’t make promises to the mara that you’re not sure you can keep,” he said. A Salvadoran journalist claimed that pirated copies of the film had made it to El Salvador, exposing the clique to police scrutiny, and that was why they killed Poveda. Others were convinced it was in fact Salvadoran security forces that killed the filmmaker, in order to further demonize the maras.

Whatever the truth, it was rumors such as these swirling about the maras—and about so much of the violence taking place in Guatemala and across the region—that helped to instill in me an inescapable fear. Each time I walked out my door into my relatively tranquil neighborhood in Guatemala City, I would scan the street for anyone “suspicious.” Coming home late at night, every figure silhouetted by the streetlights was a potential thief, murderer, or kidnapper. Of course the real predators would never stand beneath street lamps. And so in vain I stared into the shadows too, and saw things there that were not. I made constant calculations using variables of my own invention to judge which route was “safer” than another, which corner store (*tiendita*) less likely to be marked by thieves, which taxi driver more trustworthy than the next. It was an absurd game of probability without any rules or hard numbers at all, upon which I daily staked my well-being, and perhaps my life.

I was certainly not alone in this charade of creeping paranoia and false assurances. Politicians, the press, law enforcement, and the general populace all feed and feed upon such fearful doubt, and this helps to make any study of criminal violence an exploration of half-truths, unverifiable data, and rumors floating in and out of focus. While homicide counts are easy to come by, the kind of information that really matters—who is being killed and why, for example—is not.<sup>72</sup> “It has become impossible to know who is killing and why because it is always changing,” said the chief prosecutor of Villa Nueva, a sprawling suburb of Guatemala City. “We cannot differentiate between maras, narcotraffickers, and other organized criminal groups.”<sup>73</sup>

Given the immeasurable difficulties of investigating crime in postwar Guatemala, a retreat to cold numbers is not surprising. There are dead bodies in the street; some have been tortured, and many of them have tattoos. Too often these are the only material facts available. Almost everything else is hearsay, including much of the “data” produced by state offices and NGOs.<sup>74</sup> So everyone is subject to a “regime of rumor” under which “everything becomes patchwork; an infrastructure of hidden bricolage floats to social



FIGURE 3. Former Barrio18 member in his quarters in Canada prison, Escuintla, Guatemala. Notice the dolls he keeps for family visits and his self-portrait with his four-year-old daughter.

consciousness like a submerged, stitched together body.”<sup>75</sup> And nowhere is the power of rumor more influential than inside mara networks and the neighborhoods and prisons they inhabit. After all, “rumor is the language of risk,” and gang members face more mortal risk on a daily basis than I (and most probably you) will experience in a lifetime.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that fewer than 20 percent of mareros survive into their twenties. As among any population caught up in constant violence, a Hobbesian state of war, “torture and assassination frequently are rumor materially enacted on other people’s bodies.”<sup>77</sup> During my fieldwork I heard stories of gangsters and gang-involved youths being murdered because of rumors concerning their loyalty, negligence, or some real or imagined slight. Rumors produce dead bodies, and dead bodies produce rumors. Stories bloom from every corpse to explain (away), justify, or otherwise make sense of the death.

Navigating this landscape of risk meant, first of all, finding spaces in which gang-involved individuals felt safe enough to talk with me. Curiously, many chose to meet in fast-food joints—McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Pollo Campero—in the historic zone, a part of the city easily accessible via public transportation. These restaurants tended to be bright, loud, and crowded with middle-class families. Even so, such meetings were difficult to arrange and often fell through. There was only one space where I could rely on relatively secure and consistent access to gang-involved individuals willing to speak with me: prison.

The prison became a primary fieldwork site as well as a key institutional space for understanding the production of violence well beyond prison walls. To ensure I could get to prison whenever I wanted, I became a “facilitator of projects” with gang-rehab organizations. On a few days each week for more than a year I participated in community-building exercises with groups of incarcerated ex-mareros and other convicts. Through this constant contact, I slowly developed a network of gang-involved men willing to open their lives to me. Many of the stories you will read in this book were recounted in prison yards, recorded on a voice recorder smuggled in my underwear through the prison gates and hidden from prying eyes beneath a trucker cap placed carefully between myself and the narrator. Over the years I have come to count several of these men as friends, and they have invited me to meet their families, which in turn gave me access to new street networks that included the few women whose voices also appear here.<sup>78</sup>

When I wasn’t in prison, I was pursuing contacts and information on the other side of the law. My aim was to collect, *Rashomon*-like, as wide a variety of perspectives on gangs and criminal violence as possible. To carry this off, I had to assume many roles and manage a schizophrenic existence. I tagged along with pastors in parishes of gang-dominated neighborhoods. I spent weeks in police precincts, occasionally accompanying police raids on criminal safe houses. I got journalist gigs in order to get a press pass and access to government hearings. I built an archive of newspaper, radio, and television reports of allegedly gang-related crimes. I spent months sitting through somnambulant eight-hour extortion and homicide hearings and pursuing coffee dates with judges and prosecutors. And so on. By moving back and forth between sustained conversations with gang-involved men and digging into the representations of gangs and gangsters in the press and in everyday conversation, I came to understand how mareros themselves incorporate—self-consciously or not—the

phantasmagoric image the maras strike before the public eye. That is, gangs play a part in forging their symbolic power and are in turn forged by it.

Clearly I had to be careful crisscrossing the blurred divide between the state and its underworld. I always introduced myself as a scholar/writer, emphasizing my interest in life histories and personal perspectives while eschewing direct questions about particular criminal activities. Hewing to the “outsider” role—one with no stake in the clumsy struggle between law and outlaw—was the best way I knew to preserve my safety and that of those who spoke with me. But after a year in the field I too was pulled into the vortex of vicious, sometimes deadly rumor circulating in and beyond the prisons. It happened at a conference in San Salvador while I was talking to a respected crime journalist. For months I had tried to track him down, and I asked him if he would give me an interview or at least have a drink with me and exchange notes.

After a long, calculating look, he replied, “Before I talk to you, I have to know one thing. Are you Interpol?” I laughed, but he went on. “I have heard that you are working for Interpol, passing them the information that you get. Is this true?”

“No!” I exclaimed, perhaps a bit more forcefully than I meant to. I wanted to seem nonchalant—“How ridiculous!”—but I could hear my pulse throbbing in my ears, and my mind was racing—flipping through all the people I knew whom he might have spoken to, all my gatekeepers, friends, and informants. Who would have said such a thing? Who was this journalist? Whom would he have talked to? Though I was able to clear up the rumor after returning to Guatemala—and no one, thankfully, got hurt because of it—the episode was an important lesson. In utter ignorance, I had been recast by rumor into the role of a transnational cop. That this role was entirely invented—to my knowledge Interpol doesn’t have agents in the field anywhere in Guatemala—mattered far less than the fact that this was how some of those I interacted with in prison chose to make sense of me. The consequences of my entanglement with these webs of rumor and suspicion could have been far, far worse.

Given how precarious the situation could be, and because informants and opportunities to enter prisons or mara-dominated zones could arise and disappear very quickly, I had to jump down every rabbit hole I found. Such was my “research plan.” Slowly, my network of friends and contacts grew beyond gangsters to include police, prosecutors, human rights activists, prison directors, social workers, taxi drivers, church pastors, journalists, and many

others. Over the years I have done my best to keep in touch with this network, though many of my gang-involved contacts and friends have disappeared. There are few avenues by which to escape the violence of gang life. In their desperation to find a different way to live, some became protected witnesses in high-profile murder cases, evangelical converts, antiviolence activists, freelance hitmen, or drug addicts. Some still survive in prison or eke out a living on the street, while others have been killed by the police, their rivals, or their old gangs. It may be true that they were once perpetrators of the violence to which they fell victim. But as you will see, the violence for which the maras speak, or are made to speak, has a way of conscripting into its ranks all sorts of unexpected accomplices, erstwhile and otherwise.