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Popular Liberation in the Midst of a Peaceful War

El Salvador is a country where conflicts are resolved through the use of violence. Even more so, ideological differences are resolved through militarization. On this essay I seek to explore the symptoms of a polarized society whose grief are deeply rooted in psychosocial trauma. These psychosocial wounds reflect the terror inflicted by state-organized militarization whose attack on the poor and vulnerable sectors of society motivated the formation of revolutionary guerrilla armies. In this regard, liberation psychology could be a transformative tool for understanding the current social conflict in El Salvador, and whence could become a transformative tool for mobilizing collective action. Most importantly, liberation psychology can help create social practices that seek to enhance psychological healing from historical and social trauma, and thus shifting the self-hatred hegemonic mindset of the oppressed to one of self-love and liberatory coexistence.

As a third-generation Salvadoran migrant, the central purpose of this paper is to enact personal recovery from the historical legacy of the malinche¹-complex that was fostered by my ancestors, who turned their back to their sisters and brothers in exchange of economic and political gains. This form of collective self-hatred, or hegemony², as the 20th Century Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci would say, has been externalized in El Salvador during the 1930's indigenous massacres and the Civil War (1980-1992). Despite the 1992 Peace Agreement and process of 'democratization,' the current laws implemented by right-leaning politicians have turned El Salvador into a safe haven for resource extraction, cheap labor, foreign investment and

¹ Malinche was an Aztec woman who helped the Spaniard colonizer Hernan Cortés capture Moctezuma, the then Aztec emperor of Mexico. Read more: *Born in Blood and fire* by John Charles Chasteen

² Hegemony is when oppressed people identify their own good with the good of their oppressors, and help to maintain the status quo rather than revolting.

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privatizations. Such free market practices not only reflect the emergence of neoliberalism (a stage of capitalism), but also the long-lasting legacy of colonial exploitative relations, including colonial thinking. The hegemonic mentality is also reflected in the left-leaning leadership who have bought into the us versus them divide³. By following a chronological sequence of traumatic experiences, I attempt to auto-historicize and heal wounds.

This essay is divided into three sections. First, I present some background on the Civil War, and contextualize the Salvadoran history from a liberation psychology framework. Second, I discuss Salvadoran politics since the 2009 electoral victory of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Finally, I explore solutions and alternatives to the current state of social relations in El Salvador. To be precise, firstly, this essay contextualizes El Salvador's historical 12-year Civil-War (1980-1992), the formation of gangs in the United States and the consolidation of gangs in El Salvador through deportations. Consequently, I analyze the military-industrial complex and its relationships to a revolutionary political setback. Then, I engage in a critical conversation in regard to the 2012 historical dialogue between gangs, followed by the 2014 destabilizing media campaign. Lastly, I share some of the solutions proposed by Salvadorans I met during my field study. The essay ends with alternatives that seek to enact healing from our historical and social trauma(s).

³ In a conversation I had with the Minister of Salvadorans in the Exterior, a left-leaning political actor, she expressed to me her conviction that gangs are terrorist groups, and therefore believes that the police-military-joint civil security strategies are an effective solution to the gang phenomenon. I have had multiple interactions with individuals on the left, usually leaders in their 40's and over, who believe gangs and gang members should be treated punitively. It is only the youth of the party who are proposing holistic programs such as prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and reintegration, but their projects have yet to win popularity.

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History

El Salvador underwent a 12-year Civil-War (1980-1992) between “the repressive US-backed right-wing regime and leftist guerilla⁴, during which the US financed, supplied and trained the security forces that terrorized the civilian population” (Goodfriend, H., 2015). The dead-squad terrorism left a legacy of rape, torture, disappearances, and a normalization of daylight murders. By the time the armed conflict ceased, 75,000 civilians were killed, half a million were internally displaced, and at least 9,000 were disappeared (Portillo, N., 2000, pp. 249).

As a result, hundreds of Salvadorans migrated to the United States in search for peace, security and better lives. Upon their arrival in Los Angeles, California, Salvadorans encountered ethnic discrimination and bullying in schools and in their communities, so they stood up against bullying (Bishop, M., 2016), and it eventually led to the creation of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18 (18ST) as a “self-defense” mechanism (Mijango, R., 2013, p. 4).

Meanwhile, the 1992 Peace Accords were signed to establish a Salvadoran ‘democratic’ system. In that event, two ideologically contending parties were formed: the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Republican National Alliance (ARENA) Party⁵. The Peace Accords gave beginning to a “political reform that democratized the state, limited the power of the right, and opened participatory spaces to the people in matters of national politics” (Document on the Socio-Economic Formation of El Salvador, 2015, p. 11). Notwithstanding, under U.S. President Clinton (1993-2001), US zero-tolerance anti-gang strategies combined with

⁴ During the Civil War there were five major leftist guerrilla groups: Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), National Resistance (RN), Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS), and the Revolutionary Party of Central American workers (PRTC); all of whom united to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—the current party in government (2009-Present).

⁵ The Republican National Alliance (ARENA) Party was founded by Roberto D’aubuisson (father), School of the Americas graduate, who also founded the paramilitary terrorist death squads.

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the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IRAIRA) resulted in the deportation to El Salvador of thousands of Salvadoran immigrant gang youth (Zilberg, E., 2007), including non-gang affiliated Salvadorans with “legal residency” (Tometi, O., 2016).

Respectively, the mass deportation of the *indeseables*⁶ “provoked the transnationalization of the gang phenomenon” (Mijango, R., 2013, p. 6). As US deportees were (re)introduced⁷ to a “spectre of old and new forms of violence” (Zilberg, E., 2007), they fabricated a shared multilayered traumatic experience, and were introduced into a context of US policing models, organized crime, the incomplete disarmament of a highly militarized society, the emergence of extrajudicial murders of the 1980’s, and changes in the judicial system that favored the existing economic and political interests of the oligarchy (Zilberg, E., 2007).

In spite of the efforts to institutionalize peace, El Salvador “did not resolve the conflicts of social exclusion that were present before, during and post Civil War” (Abrego, A., Personal Communication, 2015). So the arrival of US deportees embodied the “generation suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome” (Anzaldúa, G., et al, 2003, pp. 290) who were left with the historical duty to heal from their own “damaged psyches” (Anzaldúa, G., et al, 2003, pp. 290) without any form of institutional support.

Liberation Psychology

The legacy in El Salvador is that of “collective deterioration” (Martín-Baró, I., 1988, pp. 23) comprised of violent, polarized and deceptive social relations that impact the people’s well-being. One of the most recent events that contributed to a long history of collective deterioration

⁶ Undesirable

⁷ Some of the deportees consisted of born-and-raised Salvadorans, as well as Salvadoran US-born citizens.

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is the Civil War, which can be defined as a “conflicting rupture of society, and the struggle is produced and executed from brother to brother [and sister to sister]” (Martín-Baró, I., 1988, pp. 240). According to Ignacio Martín-Baró⁸, the Civil-War left a psychosocial trauma—a term that gives language to the shared experiences of people in a violent social context. Not that differently, “Psychic trauma is a wound that a difficult experience leaves on the person” (Martín-Baró, I., 1980, pp. 77). Similarly, “Social trauma is the historic process that affects a group of people” (Martín-Baró, I., 1980, pp. 77). And therefore, “psychosocial trauma is a wound [or multiple wounds] caused by the experience of a prolonged war” (Martín-Baró, I., 1980, pp. 77). Psychosocial trauma, however, does “not imply that there is an uniform or common effect for everyone” (Martín-Baró, I., 1980, pp. 77); instead, it implies that the wounds depend on the lived experiences of an individual based on her/his own contextual reality.

Moreover, there are two characteristics to psychosocial trauma. Firstly, the wound(s) have been produced by society, and therefore the root of the wound is in the society and not on the individual. And secondly, “the same nature of the wound feeds and maintains the relationship between the individual and society, and is facilitated by individuals, society and institutions (Martín-Baró, I., 1980, pp. 78). In other words, it is important to understand the Salvadoran Civil-War from an ecological perspective where the individual is affected by a larger system and its set of rules upon society.

⁸ Spain-born Jesuit priest and a social psychologist. He became a citizen of El Salvador where he pioneered liberation psychology. In 1981 he was appointed Vice-rector of the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA). A year later, he was simultaneously directing the Department of Psychology and Education. In 1986, he founded the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP). His work in the IUDOP was a threat to the Salvadoran government, for he was presenting reliable and valid statistical data contradicting the official information. He was murdered in 1989 along five other male Jesuits and two women: the housekeeper and her daughter.

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One of the elements that characterizes *socio-heridas* is polarization. By definition, polarization happens when “contending groups make conscious and systematic efforts to win the sympathy and support of civilians, by which it poses a social existence in terms of unconditional acceptance of some and the total rejection of others, considered as the ‘enemies’” (Martín-Baró, I., 1988, pp. 245). In the context of the Salvadoran Civil-War, civilians, voluntarily or involuntarily, became sympathizers or militants, of one of the two contending armed groups: the FMLN or the US-backed army⁹. Even though there existed two polarized political ideologies about what it means to fight for justice or serve the country, many Salvadorans were found to be at the borderland where they neither sympathized with the guerrillas nor with the army. Instead, these people provided the “basic needs such as water, food, medicine, bathroom. Maybe today the army would pass by someone's house, maybe tomorrow the guerrillas would pass by the same house... But that happened only in the rural areas,” according to Joaquin¹⁰ who in 1981 migrated to the United States for fear of being recruited to either of the armed groups. These civilians who provided logistical support to the armed groups are the gray areas that are often left out in the us/them analysis. By invisibilizing these stories, a dominant polarized narrative was reproduced by which it systematically prevented the individual from realizing that the Civil War only led to the hatred of *mi otro yo* (my other me) between the poor sectors.

Liberation psychology can help us deconstruct the us/them mentality that stems from the historical oppressor-oppressed paradigm. Oppression is the historical production of asymmetric power relations embedded in colonial practices such as hegemony, resource extraction, and a set

⁹ National Police, National Guard and the Treasury Police. All were part of the armed forces of El Salvador.

¹⁰ My dad grew up in the 1970's repression against the popular movements, and migrated to the United States a year after the Civil War officially started. Storytelling-listening is a great therapeutic practice for those who grew up silent in the midst of a repressive government.

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of institutions that favor the dominant class (i.e. patriarchy, the Catholic Church). Therefore, liberation is a relational “process entailing a social rupture in the sense of transforming both the conditions of inequality and oppression, and the institutions and practices producing them” (Montero, M. & Son, C., 2009, p. 1). Moreover, liberation seeks to emancipate the oppressors from their own alienation so they can understand that another world is possible. Similarly, according to Paulo Freire¹¹, the oppressors do not have the liberatory force to liberate the oppressed or themselves from their own alienation, and therefore the historical duty of the oppressed is to “liberate themselves, and liberate the oppressors” (Freire., P. 2011, p. 41).

While liberation can be achieved through dialogue, self-reflection, critiques aimed at the dominant institutions, and on-the-ground practice and/or accompaniment of oppressed communities, it is crucial to acknowledge that liberation is not universal. In fact, liberation is a relational transformative practice which methodologies are unique in different oppressed-oppressor socio-political contexts.

Made in USA

The transnationalization of gangs developed within a neoliberal economic context. In addition to the deportations, Central America and the United States signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2004, and was later implemented in 2006 as the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). CAFTA-DR was modeled after the controversial 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between México, the United States and Canada. Although some may argue free trade agreements are beneficial to

¹¹ Brazilian educator who pioneered popular education—a relational pedagogy that seeks to liberate the oppressed from her/his own oppression through pedagogical means.

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the economic development of Central America and México, however, Dr. Fernando Leiva, Professor in the Latin American and Latino Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, argues that under this neoliberal economic, political and cultural model, countries like México and those in Central America are required to liberalize the market, deregulate government intervention, and privatize public enterprises. And therefore as a consequence, free trade agreements have only exacerbated the living conditions of the poor and working classes in Latin America and anywhere where free trade policies are implemented (Latin American Working Group; Washington Office on Latin America; Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, 2015).

The role of the United States in shaping the history of El Salvador is palpable. The Salvadoran economic elite, in collaboration with United States elites, has promoted a mechanism of “anticipated fear” (Aron, A., 1987, pp. 467) among the Salvadoran people. According to Dr. Adrienne Aron, anticipated fear is to spend a great deal of time and “psychic energy in evaluating and avoiding danger, in a manner that is predictable.” And she continues, “The victims indicate that they have become aware of the most trivial behaviors, such as opening the door to leave, choose a road to go to work or select what they will carry” (Aron, A., 1987, pp. 467). In the context of a struggle for liberation from the economic elite and US imperialists, anticipated fear functions as a destabilizing mechanism that seeks to exaggerate mental representations of an imaginary enemy, infuse an us/them mentality, and utilize the paranoid environment to implement shock-doctrine-like policies.

The internal divisions caused by the *malinche* dominant minority are necessary for maintaining the status quo: a Salvadoran urban elite accompanied by a military-industrial complex through which the demands of global capitalism are met. In the context of anticipated

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fear, many Salvadorans comply to neoliberal and repressive policies simply because they do not have many options to choose from, and because that is what the right-wing-owned mainstream media is indoctrinating. So when the government decides to deploy police and soldiers in the name of civil security, Salvadorans are quick to consent and agree with such repressive policing. Also, in a violent ambience where the risk is more promising than the threat, people “are usually forced to choose without knowing in advance what the consequences will be¹²” (Trepel, C., Fox, C., & Poldrack, R., 2005, pp. 34), so they do not think that their own sons, brothers or fathers can be victims of repressive policing, not just gang members.

Police and Military State

In the midst of US deportations, institutional orphanage and privatizations, many gang members were “forced to return to their country without family support networks were rushed to create cells of their respective gangs in different localities in El Salvador” (Sánchez, O. & Gutiérrez, E., PowerPoint, 2014). Nonetheless, the criminal gang identity was consolidated through the implementation of repressive policies. In 2003, then President Francisco Flores¹³ implemented the Iron Fist policy— “legislation that advocated the immediate imprisonment of gang members, who can be arrested simply for having gang related tattoos” (Hume, M., 2007, p. 739). Ultimately, these US-modeled anti-gang policies led to the criminalization of the youth. In

¹² Read more on prospect theory: “The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature and Values” by Robert Jervins. In short, prospect theory makes significant claims about human nature by pointing to the sources and substance of what it is that provides us with gratification.

¹³ Francisco Flores stole \$15 million during his term. The funds were a donation from Japan, and were supposed to be utilized towards development and civil security. After his robbery was announced, he was placed under house arrest, and he was never convicted. Read more: <http://cispes.org/node/8484?language=es>. In 2016 he mysteriously dies out of an ‘arterial obstruction’—a heart disease where fat accumulated in the arteries which leads to a decrease in blood flow. Read more: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/americas/francisco-flores-ex-president-of-el-salvador-dies-at-56.html?_r=0

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fact, Mo Hume argues that the Iron Fist approach “reflects a crisis in El Salvador’s fledgling democracy, since it is indicative of the endurance of a hegemonic political project of exclusion and polarisation in El Salvador” (Hume, M., 2007, p. 739). To make matters worse, consequently after the 2004 Presidential elections, Antonio Saca (2004-2009) launched the Super Iron Fist policy that continued to intensify anti-gang policing with an even greater number of deployed police officers in poor communities. Just like during the Civil War when the soldiers did not recruit in well-off neighborhoods, nowadays the police does no target the youth in well-off neighborhoods. Although one might argue the right-wing-led police and military state embodies control over sectors of society, it is, however, one element of the multifaceted hegemonic apparatus that seeks to control the economically vulnerable to further advance neoliberal projects. So much so that even after removing the physical domination of the militarized police, Salvadorans would still comply to the demands of global capitalism due to the long-lasting legacy of internalized fear.

Simultaneously to building a police-military state, ARENA gave in to export-led growth and began to implement neoliberal policies that opened up the Salvadoran market for cheap labor to meet the high demands of the export processing zones, including sweatshops. It also created the conditions for greater imports instead of focusing on growing the domestic market. For instance, public enterprises such as the telecommunications, electricity and water were privatized, the national currency was sold out to the U.S. dollar, and the homicide rates increased “from 2, 388 in 2003 to 4,367 in 2009” (Sánchez, O. & Gutiérrez, E., PowerPoint, 2014). And even so, ARENA won every presidential election until 2009.

Violence in the midst of Peace

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ARENA “held power for twenty consecutive years in El Salvador, from 1989-2009, and has a documented history of systematic electoral fraud and voter intimidation practices over the years” (CISPES, 2013). Nevertheless, in 2009 the Salvadoran Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) announced a historical victory by the FMLN and the then President Mauricio Funes. This election showed that the people, whose safety was institutionally threatened if they voted for the FMLN, overcame the institutionalized fear of more than 20 years of ARENA’s regime. Before, one of many ARENA’s electoral tactics consisted of fear campaigns threatening that the United States would cut off remittances or deport Salvadorans in the event of a leftist victory (CISPES, 2013). More importantly, the 2009 elections showed that the people were no longer afraid of the dead-squad repressive legacy that could have erupted as a retaliation from the right-wing.

Eagerly on the other hand, the Funes’ administration began to launch several social programs such as the Daily Glass of Milk, supplies and uniforms to students in public schools, pensions for the elderly, Women’s City—a sanctuary ran by and for women—, and free and/or subsidized organic corn seeds to farmers. These social programs clearly sought to provide some of the services Salvadorans previously lacked. Most importantly, these social programs promote government support and social inclusion to vulnerable sectors. Not surprisingly, these projects became a palpable threat to the Salvadoran elite, the private sector¹⁴, ARENA and, of course, the United States’ interest in the region—to maintain puppet governments that would facilitate free-

¹⁴ The National Association of the Private Sector (ANEP).

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trade-like policies, resource extraction projects, and the Monroe doctrine intelligence oversee of historically US-unfriendly countries such as Nicaragua¹⁵.

The United States' active participation in Salvadoran politics have made civil security a crucial aspect of electoral politics. Notwithstanding the social gains launched by the FMLN, “with the arrival of Funes in the executive power, there was a historical exponential growth of soldiers in tasks related to civil security” (Aguilar, J. 2014, p. 90). “In August of 2009, Funes approved the incorporation of 1,760 soldiers... three months later, pressured by public opinion... Funes approved an executive decree under which 2,500 more soldiers were incorporated in tasks related to public security” (Aguilar, J. 2014, p. 90). By the end of 2009, 6,500 soldiers were executing tasks that should have instead been assigned to the National Civil Police.

Dialogue

Transformative discourses that go against the hegemonic mainstream media are not made visible in mainstream television and print news media. As an illustration, On March 9, 2012, members of the MS13 and 18ST¹⁶ presented a demand to dialogue with the Salvadoran government, society, and international actors. The dialogue was led by voceros (spokesmen): Raúl Solorzano (MS13), Raúl Umanzor *alias*¹⁷ El Sirra (MS13), and Carlos Mojica Lechuga *alias* Viejo Lin (Barrio 18); and it was facilitated by the ex-guerrilla Raúl Mijango¹⁸, Monsignor

¹⁵ After the 1934 assassination of a peasant-leader, Augusto César Sandino, the United States supported the Somoza family dictatorships. After 44 years of dictatorial regime, in 1979 Nicaraguans won the revolution and brought political and social change (i.e. land reform, literacy and distribution of wealth).

¹⁶ The 18ST gang has divided into two groups: the 18ST Sureños or 18ST-S, and the 18ST Revolucionarios, or 18ST-R.

¹⁷ ‘Also known as’

¹⁸ Ex-guerrilla combatant of the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), and also a signer of the 1992 Peace Accords.

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Fabio Colindres, and David Munguía Payes who in 2011 served as the Director of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

The dialogue was a great promise to peacemaking in El Salvador. As an illustration, “the homicide rate dropped from 14 murders a day to an average of 5.5 per day” (Mijango, R., 2013, p. 27). But even though the dialogue seemed a peaceful alternative, shortly after its launch the project became politicized and thus became to be known as a “truce” (Serrano, I., 2014; teleSur, 2015; Goodfriend, H., 2015; Reyna, V. et al., 2015; Partlow, J., 2016; teleSur, 2016; Gagne, D., 2016). As a result, the politicization of the dialogue shifted the frame of the narratives told by gang members, and shaped them in a way that made people believe gangs’ intentions were to negotiate political power with the leftist government, and create a more sophisticated organized crime networks similar to the cartels in México.

The truce became a political tool by which party members negotiated electoral votes in exchange of band-aid solutions such as prison reforms¹⁹. Although government representatives, civil society, religious leaders, and some FMLN party members were meeting and dialoguing with gang members, their genuine purpose was to bridge the divisions among gangs and unify a collective struggle that called for economic equality. The problem with the truce negotiations relied in that ARENA party members imposed their will in a project that was supposed to be led by and for the Salvadoran poor. So instead of facilitating proper nutrition and medical assistance to prison inmates, or rehabilitation and reintegration programs to the formerly incarcerated, ARENA’s political leadership, alongside mainstream media, continued to disempower gang

¹⁹ In 2016 El Faro news media released a footage that captures one of the 2014 negotiation between the right-wing ARENA members and gang ringleaders from the MS13, 18ST-R and 18ST-S. The talk occurred in the middle of the 2014 presidential campaign, and it clearly showed that the ARENA leadership has met with gang members in multiple occasions. Read more: <http://diariolahuella.com/arena-quedo-al-descubierto-negocio-con-pandillas/>

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members' peacemaking efforts. That is, the truce was counterproductive for social change since it stopped the dialogical relations that could potentially lead to some level of *concientización*—that moment when the Salvadoran and non-gang-affiliated civilians could have realized that the elite's economic and political power are the root of their distress, and not gangs—. So instead of blaming gang members for their own actions, the dialogue could have sparked conversations around the larger structures that create poverty and violence. Ultimately, the oppressed (and oppressors) could have developed an awareness of the psychological and sociopolitical circumstances oppressing them through a dialogical process of *concientización*.

The dialogue, despite all the popular backlash, still had the potential to have a great transformative power. Structural change has to come from the bottom up because only those in the crossfire of poverty, exclusion, gang affiliation, police brutality and militarization (not accounting for racial discrimination, and discrimination against the LGBTQ+²⁰) can organically formulate a transformative analysis about their lived realities. In synthesis, the 'truce' is simply a politicized version of what initially began as a dialogue. Once the 'truce' had been politicized, it could be used as a hegemonic tool to infuse institutional fear to make economic and political ends meet.

Destabilizing Campaign

Despite strengthening the Salvadoran army, the Funes' administration (2009-2014)—with limited funds—launched a “comprehensive policy that tackled issues such as prevention, rehabilitation and treatment under the Safe El Salvador Plan” (Abrego, A., Personal Communication, 2015). Consequently, with another victorious presidential election in 2014,

²⁰ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Allies, Pansexual (LGBTQQIAAP+)

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President Salvador Sánchez-Cerén²¹ (2014-Present) continued to push for the social programs that aim at tackling gang-related crime and violence from the root. However, the dialogue lost popularity and public opinion became angry at Sánchez-Cerén's 'inability' to control the violence. To make matters worse, the right-wing-owned mainstream media²² launched a destabilizing campaign that seeks to discredit the FMLN's legitimacy, and its social programs. The draconian campaign consists of producing daily news report in which gang members, now labeled as terrorists²³, are blamed for the high murder rates. So much so that on January of the present year a Salvadoran police chief leveled accusations against a local newspaper for exaggerating the power of gangs and spreading public fear in its coverage (teleSUR, 2016).

As an illustration, in 2015 the Observatory for the Media found that from January to March there were 818 news reports found in six different newspapers. The researchers found that of those, 521 news (64%) consisted of news that reported violence (i.e. homicides, criminal violence) compared to the 297 news (36%) that reported youth participation (i.e. sports, education). The two leading newspapers for promoting violence are the Prensa Grafica that accounted for 201 (69%) violence news reports, and the Diario de Hoy that accounted for 152 (58%) violence news reports (Observatory for the Media, PowerPoint, 2015). Although El Salvador experiences high levels of violence, these findings suggest that the national media is highlighting and exaggerating cases of violence rather than promoting peace-related news. Perhaps, these dehumanizing and demonizing news reports are scapegoating societal issues to gangs so people are distracted from thinking about other urgent issues such as creating job

²¹ First ex-guerrilla to serve as president.

²² Telecomunicación Salvadoreña (TCS) that runs the TV channels popularly known as the 2-4-6, and the newspapers such as El Diario de Hoy and La Prensa Grafica.

²³ On August, 2015 the Judicial Court declared that gang members will be considered terrorists under the law.

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opportunities, supporting the agricultural sector, and dismantling organized crime. Or perhaps, as stated by the phrase in US media studies, “If it bleeds, it leads,” then the basis for reporting violent news might be driven by capitalistic incentives to attract readers.

The “hegemonic oligarchic press” (Perla, H. as quoted in teleSUR, 2016) is causing popular discontent against the FMLN. So much so that in the summer of 2015, Juan²⁴, a taxi driver, expressed to me, “If they [FMLN] do not want to undergo a soft coup, then they have to work well. We are outraged. I voted for the FMLN, for the commander of the guerrillas, but he has given us his back.” Similarly, Pedro²⁵, also a taxi driver, expressed to me, “The people expected change under Cerén. But we are disappointed to have voted for Cerén, one regrets having given him the vote.” These conversations show how the working class is reproducing the right-wing’s destabilizing discourses. And although the people I spoke to are aware of the media’s destabilizing campaign, the power of the media seems to facilitate “changes in the way humans communicate and ‘communicatively construct their world’” (Block, E., 2013, p. 261). There are haunting memories of an invisible enemy in a historically traumatized society, so the role of the media is to fill in the gaps and determine who the enemy is: gangs.

Peace in the Midst of Repression

2015 became “the most violent year in many years” (Abrego, A., Personal Communication, 2015). Remarkably, only in 2015 we see an eruption of a social conflict between the National Civil Police and gang members, so much so that by the end of the year “some 50 police officers and soldiers have been assassinated” (Goodfriend, H., 2015).

²⁴ Pseudonym. Read more: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-supreme-court-labels-street-gangs-as-terrorist-groups>

²⁵ pseudonym

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Conversely, in response to popular discontent, the Sánchez-Cerén administration resorted to repressive anti-gang policies as part of the 2016 Congress approval of \$750 million aid to the Central America's Northern Triangle under the Alliance for Prosperity²⁶. As a result, In April 2016 at least 1,000 soldiers were deployed²⁷ (BBC News, 2016) under the impression that gang members are now hiding in rural communities (also communities that are rich in natural resources).

As a matter of fact, environmental activists believe that the soldiers will generate fear and repress popular movements if the latter opposed to transnational development projects²⁸. Similarly, human rights defenders are convinced that militarizing communities is only leading to the violation of human rights, not just those of gang members, but also of innocent civilians (Beltrán Girón, J., 2016). This idea gets well captured in a recent conversation I had with Magdalena Hernández, a leader in the Airport Workers Union of El Salvador. Magdalena expressed her concern with the recent anti-terrorist law²⁹ passed on August 2015, “Only the MS comprise of 70 thousand members... and then who is next? Who is left is the common civilian, and that is when human rights are violated... the anti-terrorist law is attacking popular

²⁶ The Alliance for Prosperity Plan consists of “security, human capital, generate conditions and strengthen the institutions (i.e. combat corruption),” as expressed by the Salvadoran Chancellor Hugo Martínez. Read more ‘U.S. Increases Central America Aid, But It’s No Blank Check’ by WOLA, 2016 report.

²⁷ See more: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36098486?SThisFB>

²⁸ Since 2007, many Latin American police have been trained at the US’s International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, the police version of the infamous School of the Americas. Additionally, the US has supported the creation and deployment of many new joint military-police units in the name of counter-drug efforts. This is particularly worrying because the communities that are most affected by the military-police paradigm are poor communities, as well as communities who are actively resisting natural resource extraction by transnational corporations.

²⁹ El Salvador’s judicial branch declared gangs to be considered terrorist groups soon after a one-week bus halt allegedly caused by gang threat to kill bus drivers. However, there is still an unspoken possibility that, perhaps, the ‘public’ transportation owners plotted the bus halt as a response to the government’s newly public transportation services called SITRAMSS.

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movements.” In fact, some of the dangers of the Alliance for Prosperity, or as Vice-President Joe-Biden called it ‘the Plan Colombia for Central America,’ are, ironically, the violations of human rights³⁰ at the expense of public security, and ‘peace’.

Method

Participants

My research consisted of random and convenience sampling. My target population was college-aged at four different universities in El Salvador: University of El Salvador (UES), Central American University “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA), José Matías Delgado University (UJMD), and the Superior School of Economy and Business (ESEN). My research goal was to understand how the media framing of gang members influence popular attitudes. What perceptions do they have of these gang members? What stereotypes have they internalized about who is in a gang? What kind of solutions do these peers envision for this violent social problem?

Materials

My survey instrument was modeled after the original survey “Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders” (CATSO), that examined attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes of sex offenders (Church, et al. 2007), see appendix A. My survey questions were altered so as to effectively investigate the attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes that college-aged students have about gang members, see appendix D.

³⁰ In 2015 there were 276 confrontations between the police and gangs resulting in 350 deaths of which 281 were allegedly gang members and 17 were police officers (Reyna, V., Personal Communication, 2016). There have been cases of extrajudicial killings committed by the police, soldiers, and dead squads. Last year in March, eight men were killed in a confrontation with the police. In August of 2015, five 18ST members were shot to death in a confrontation with the police. Early in 2016 four men were killed in a confrontation with the police of which one of them was only thirteen years old.

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Procedure

I visited four different universities in El Salvador to identify a wide-ranging sample of college-aged students that cross different economic and political backgrounds. For example, University of El Salvador (UES) was one of my field sites, and it was the largest public institution in the country. In contrast, I also collected data at one of the elite institutions at the Superior University of Economy and Business (ESEN). Then, I divided up the school into departments to get a wide range of students. For example, at the UES I divided the school into its nine departments. Then, I randomly recruited 12-13 students at each department to sum up to 100 surveys.

Through random and convenience sampling, the students were asked to fill out the 9-scale demographics questionnaire, See appendix B. My experiment aimed to influence the students' short-term perception about gang members, so I asked the student to read one of three news articles: a news report that blames gangs for 541 deaths in a month (fear), a news report about a former gang member who works at a bakery and attends church (human rights), or the informational report about turtle's shells formation (neutral), See appendix C.

Finally, each student filled out a 25pt Likert scale questionnaire that seeks to assess the students' perceptions, opinions and attitudes about gang members, See appendix D. The students responded to 25 short statements. For example, "Young people become gang members because they are poor," and "You cannot trust a member of a gang, even if he is already rehabilitated." Their answer options ranged from 1 to 6 (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree).

I anticipated students will have more negative attitudes towards gang members after they have been exposed to the 'fear' treatment compared to those who read the 'human rights' and

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‘neutral’ articles. I also anticipated that students from the University of El Salvador (UES) reported less aggressive and negative attitudes towards gang members compared to the ESEN: the most expensive institution where its students probably live in well-off neighborhoods who, because of their socioeconomic and geographical alienation, have yet to be exposed to and humanize gang members.

I also took 25 pages of fieldnotes that recorded the conversations and interactions I had with college students, professors, community members, and people I randomly met on the streets such as newspaper sellers and a hair salon owner. The solution section of this essay is based on my fieldnotes.

Results

By running an ANOVA, I found empathy was significantly correlated with exposure to the Fear treatment ($F = 3.399$, $p = .034$). For students who were exposed to the Fear condition, the mean was 17.69 ($SD = 5.13$, $N = 133$), which was significantly lower than the mean for the students who were exposed to the Humanizing condition (Mean = 19.22, $SD = 4.74$, $N = 126$). My findings indicate people tend to show less empathy for gang members when they are triggered with demonizing news reports. Although my research seeks to investigate the attitudes of college-aged students about gang members, my findings indicate that a next direction should be to understand gang members’ perceptions and attitudes about the media’s representation of them, and if they internalize negative messages about them, as the college students do.

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Solutions

During my field study in El Salvador in 2015, I initiated conversations with people I randomly met in regard to civil security, since it seemed to be the major concerning social issue, or at least that what was promoted in the news. I asked questions such as, “what do you think is the main problem in the country?” and “What do you think are the solutions to x issue/problem?”

A philosophy graduate student at the University of Central America (UCA) believes that the solution to gangs consists of an education reform and support for the youth. This solution was shared by an anthropology undergraduate student at the UCA, and also by an undergraduate student at the University of El Salvador (UES). In like manner, a group of FMLN sympathizers who I met at a welcoming and celebratory event for the Cuban Five³¹, told me that a core solution to gangs is to offer higher education and jobs for the youth.

Furthermore, a woman who owns a small beauty salon believes that the solution to gangs is to open up industries and companies for domestic consumption and for the products to be exported. She added that most gang members are jailed doing nothing, so these industries should take advantage of them and put them to work. On a different day, a taxi driver told me he believes that the government should create jobs. In the contrary to what other people think, he believes the solution does not rely on repressive policing. Yet, these solutions do not seem to be in everyone’s radar. Furthermore, during one of my visits to the Superior School of Economy and Business, one student expressed to me, “Gangs would not exist if we lived under the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez regime.” The Martínez regime was responsible for massacring

³¹Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero, Ramón Labañino, Fernando González, and René González are five Cubans who were arrested in September 1998 and later convicted in Miami of conspiracy to commit espionage.

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more than 30,000 innocent indigenous in 1932 under the impression that they were communists. Other students expressed to me that some people believe that "both rival gangs should be enclosed at the national soccer stadium, and then we should give them guns so they kill each other." The latter shows how some Salvadorans believe that social conflicts are resolved through militarization, and more violence—a reflection of the deep historical traumas that we have yet to heal from

Moreover, the main societal issues that most people I spoke to seem to agree are: lack of education, unemployment, and health. To start with, a taxi driver believed in an education reform, and that we should treat the youth with patience and love. He also expressed Salvadorans behave defensively because of the societal issues they have to deal with. I believe that a peacemaking Salvadoran government should invest in popular therapy³² sessions so the people can learn how to understand themselves and their psychological grief in relation to historical and social structures. The therapy sessions can include healing circles, indigenous dance and rituals, music and arts. Moreover, two anthropology undergraduate students at the University of Central America expressed that violence has been normalized. This psychological phenomenon has resulted in an anticipated fear pathology as a survival mechanism (i.e. thinking about what might happen if they ride the bus). Moreover, they agreed that economic inequality greatly contributes to many of the social issues. In fact, according to Ernesto³³, El Salvador has “multiple realities within one reality,” or a poor-rich paradigm.

³²The therapist's goal must be to accompany the 'client.' By doing so, the traditional 'expert-client' dynamic is deconstructed so both (or multiple parties) can engage in a therapeutic relationship of mutual trust, and co-reflection with the ultimate purpose of liberation.

³³ Pseudonym, undergraduate student at the UCA

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Furthermore, a group of FMLN sympathizers who I met at the University of El Salvador provided a comprehensive analysis about an even more alarming issue in the country: the top-to-bottom organized crime clouded by yellow journalism. They proposed that in order to move forward, the government has to offer higher education and employment opportunities.

Notwithstanding, there were two thought-provoking themes that I noticed people would reference in our conversations. First, an institutional silence, and secondly, a capitalist hegemony. To illustrate, when a group of students inside a classroom were asked about their opinions in regard to the gang phenomenon, they began to respond in a popcorn style—full of ideas and debate—. In a blink of an eye the space turned as dynamic as it could get: the voices of both women and men were loud and present. I observed that the youth need spaces where they can talk about gangs, their root causes and possible solutions, instead of just sweeping the issue under the rug and ignoring it. However, their collective silence might be a survival mechanism so people do not freak out by the real issues, such as the prevailing economic inequality that led to the 1980's armed conflict. Institutionalized silence seems to foster *desconocimiento*—“being overwhelmed by reality and not wanting to confront it” (Anzaldúa, G., 2012, pp. 277). In short, the legacy of repression has left an institutionalized unwillingness to see or speak, which is also reflected in a gang slogan, ‘Ver, Oír y Callar.’

Healing Socio-Heridas

In the context of the Salvadoran historical traumas, there are not uniform healing strategies that could facilitate liberation for all. As an illustration, Salvadorans have had to adapt

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to new structures such as transnational families³⁴, and thus one can argue that collective healing also entails transborder practices. In fact, healing can be defined as finding closure from haunting memories of hurtful events, while regenerating energy that frees the wounded and allows her or him to build empowering relationships built upon mutual trust, learning, reflection and action. There can be multiple ways of healing such as therapy, mobilizing to celebrate, protect, and demand rights, or decolonizing practices that challenge our internalized biases.

As a matter of fact, education and health are important elements to our lives. Particularly, an education that encourages self-redefinition through artistic expression. The purpose of self-redefinition is to create a counter-hegemonic narrative; so instead of letting our self-esteem be dictated and put down by others, Salvadorans can begin to take ownership of their present and future by reconstructing our collective identity. Further, an element to self-redefinition is the practice of re-membering³⁵ a hurtful history, and thus in the process we would be counteracting institutionalized amnesia. So in the context of a capitalist hegemony, re-membering plays a key role in healing and resistance—which hold the clues to liberation.

Similarly, according to Paulo Freire, the oppressed and the oppressors should be literate, and to be literate is to have the ability to write one's life, as an actor and witness of her or his own history—to write one's history and biography, and to take ownership over one's existence. For example, in 2013 two Salvadoran human right organizations: Foundation of Studies for the Application of the Law (FESPAD) and the Christians for Peace (CRISPAZ) funded a project that took place inside a prison. The facilitators held poetry sessions with 18ST members, and

³⁴ See more on “Sacrificing Families: Navigating Law, Labor and Love Across Borders” by the Salvadoran intellectual Leisy J. Abrego.

³⁵ The queer Chicana Feminist writer, Gloria Anzaldúa, presents a strategy for decolonization: “see[ing]” paintings to activate the “imagining processes,” remember injustice, and “reenact the trauma.” She further elaborates with, “After being split, dismembered, or torn apart la persona has to pull herself together, re-member and reconstruct herself” (pp. 278-279). See book “The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader” edited by AnaLouise Keating.

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proceeded to publish a poetry book titled ‘Behind the Masks of a Gangster.’ The inmates, in an attempt to understand and construct their reality, wrote a poem called ‘What We Wish to Understand.’ The poem poses questions such as: “Why do our parents neglect us and leave us in perdition on the streets?” “Why does the system try to bury us instead of provide support to get ahead?” “Why are we so grumpy?” “Why do we harm the people?” “Why do we sink instead of seeking a way out?”. By posing these questions, the inmates attempt to understand their relationship to their institutions—a powerful decolonizing tool that exercises the mind to think differently about ourselves from the hegemonic mainstream discourse. And even though reflection is simply a thought process, it could potentially lead to a transformative process of reflection-action-reflection where the thoughts become actions that seek to alter one’s current state of oppression.

The liberation of gang members from their internalized oppression is also the liberation of the civilians who believe violence should be used against gangs. In like manner, their liberation goes hand in hand with the emancipation of the ruling class from their malinche complex. As utopian as it may sound, one can dream that a transformed society and a new world are possible, regardless of the current globally intertwined state of affairs that promote nothing but resource extraction, exploitation, and psychological warfare. In the process of writing this essay, I seek to heal from my historical and social wounds. In the process of reading this essay, one can heal from our internalized biases and inherited privilege. Similarly, we all inherited a historical responsibility to promote liberation within ourselves, or as Paulo Freire put it: *Nadie libera a nadie, ni nadie se libera solo. Los hombres [y mujeres] se liberan en comunión.*³⁶ One

³⁶ See book “La pedagogía del Oprimido (The Pedagogy of the Oppressed)” by Paulo Freire

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can only hope with strong convictions that love for humanity will prevail, and will bring the liberation of oppressed communities worldwide.

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