



LEFT BEHIND: Security, Salvation, and the Subject of Prevention

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“It’s not so much that they need me and that they need us, but we need them. We need the people of La Paloma.”¹ An evangelical Christian from Barey, North Carolina, complete with hipster hair and tasteful tattoo, clarified his commitment to the child sponsorship program that his faith-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization facilitates.² Pitched in the name of gang prevention, the program connects North American evangelical Christians with at-risk children in one of postwar Guatemala City’s most violent neighborhoods: La Paloma.³ Along with \$35 a month, sponsors shower the sponsored with handwritten letters, birthday presents, and even the occasional site visit—all to create a context in which these kids might choose God over gangs. The effort is an uphill battle, to be sure. Bullet holes pock La Paloma’s narrow streets as perpetually unemployed men huff paint thinner. Petty theft, extortion, and close-range shootouts also encourage a variety of institutions to disengage with this red zone (*zona roja*).⁴ Located in the very center of the city, at the very bottom of a canyon, La Paloma, by all accounts, is off the grid.⁵ With an estimated 60,000 residents, the neighborhood has no formal economy, public schools, or basic infrastructure. Often described as the largest urban slum in Central America, the Guatemalan National Police rarely enter the area, nor does the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Even with tens of millions of dollars earmarked for gang prevention, USAID program directors insist (without the slightest bit of irony) that La Paloma is too thick with gang activity for them to pursue gang prevention.

A different sensibility places this child sponsorship program directly in the streets of La Paloma as well as on the very frontlines of Central American security.⁶ As Guatemala strains under unprecedented levels of postwar violence, a recognizable shift in anti-gang policy couples a popular (but decidedly ineffective) *mano dura* approach with something recognizably softer.⁷ Make no mistake: the “strong fist” is alive and well. Deportation, incarceration, and execution still stack bodies atop bodies—on tarmacs, in jails, and at morgues. Yet, talk of prevention rather than the penitentiary has become increasingly prominent. Buttressed by the United States’ own commitment to faith-based programming as well as the fact that Guatemala, a once overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country, is now 60 percent Pentecostal and charismatic Christian (Pew Forum 2006; see also O’Neill 2010a), evangelical gang prevention programs answer this growing call by engaging neighborhoods that no other program would enter and experimenting with approaches that no other project would entertain. This is why child sponsorship now coordinates comfortably with an ever-expanding network of house churches, faith-based youth groups, and so-called “play and pray” after school programs.

Based on fieldwork in North Carolina and Guatemala, with child sponsors and sponsored children, this article examines a tightening relationship among salvation, security, and subjectivity. The central interest here is how an evangelical imperative to sponsor at-risk youth locates the question of Central American security at the level of the subject more than the neighborhood, the population, or even society. The net result is what I call the *subject of prevention*: the individual imagined and acted upon by the imperative to prevent (Miller and Rose 1997:1; see also Deleuze 1988:100; Foucault 2005; Rose 1990:213). This “subject of prevention” includes at-risk youths, in all their racialized otherness, but also (and increasingly so) evangelical Christians who self-consciously craft their subjectivities through their participation in gang prevention—as ministers, missionaries, and mentors. Consider the sense of self that child sponsorship affords this Carolinian. “Yes,” he continued, “[the people of La Paloma] need to be liberated from the oppression of poverty, drug abuse, sexual abuse, a lack of education, and opportunity. But I (and we) need to be liberated from materialism, consumerism, narcissism, entitlement, meaningless distractions, and so much more. And our liberation from these things is bound up with the people of La Paloma.” For the sake of security, in the spirit of salvation, child sponsorship makes the work of gang prevention dependent upon the practice of self-cultivation.

Inspired techniques with long Christian histories assemble the subject of prevention one uneven exchange at a time: site visits, letter exchanges, and gifts sent

from afar. This article assesses all three, to detail their productive qualities but also to theorize their effects. A properly assembled subject, this article observes, behaves well. The sponsored child asks the right questions. He writes the perfect letter. She recites a beautiful prayer. This behavior tends to mobilize the compassionate Carolinian, motivating a transfer of resources and opportunities. Yet those children who misbehave, those assembled otherwise, oftentimes get left behind. It is this radical disparity—between those sponsored and those not, between those “needed” and those not—that illuminates the surgically selective nature of Central American security. This article’s conclusion pays particular attention to gang prevention’s selectivity by pairing the work of Gilles Deleuze (1990) with the insights of Christian fiction to assess the politics of being “left behind” (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995).

The uptake of it all is unambiguous. As Christian humanitarianism continues to augment efforts at Central American security, it becomes increasingly obvious that anti-gang efforts across the Americas do not just dominate or manipulate subjects but also mobilize them by linking certain passions and anxieties to the possibility of an alternate future. This shift in technique, in governing, demonstrates how certain evangelical images and expectations structure not just child sponsorship but also one of today’s foundational concepts of international order: security. Today, an evangelical commitment to salvation has become entangled with the geopolitics of Central American security, especially when it comes to gang prevention, linking the activities of transnational criminal networks to the intimate affects of desire, self-worth, and liberation. Indeed, the evangelicalism informing the practice of gang prevention today advances a subtle but nonetheless deeply embedded set of assumptions about security. Again, listen to this Carolinian: “Our relationships with [the people of La Paloma] will liberate them and will liberate us. They need us and we need them.” It is this need, this liberation, that not only constitutes the sponsored child as a privileged site for ethical self-formation but also cuts a place like La Paloma into hundreds of little enclaves of privilege.

SECURITY

Some 17 murders occur every day in Guatemala.⁸ The average criminal trial lasts more than four years. Less than two percent of crimes result in a conviction (Wilson 2009). “It’s sad to say, but Guatemala is a good place to commit murder,” one international observer remarked, “because you will almost certainly get away with it” (Painter 2007). Transnational gang networks bloat this violent context with the language of *delincuencia*, or delinquency, embedding the problem of Central American security with a personal moral vocabulary—one riddled with words

such as choice, character, and self-discipline (O'Neill and Thomas 2011). Often, however, gang membership is hardly the result of personal choice. Guatemala's civil war (1960–96) coincided with El Salvador's (1980–92), pushing tens of thousands of Central American refugees to Los Angeles's poorest neighborhoods (Zilberg 2011). Once in Los Angeles, these refugees formed gangs to defend themselves against the city's already well-established Asian, African-American, and Mexican gangs (Decesare 2003). Initially modest in reach, the likes of Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 became transnational criminal organizations in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots (Arana 2005). Amid a torched cityscape and a surging Moral Majority, increasingly strict anti-gang laws met tougher prosecution rates, expanding the legal grounds for deportation to include such minor offenses as shoplifting (Buff 2004). With this, the total annual number of deported Central Americans tripled in the late 1990s, rising from 8,057 in 1996 to 24,285 in 2004 (Johnson 2006). And, in 2007, as the criminalization of Latinos continued to mix with an unwieldy War on Terror, the U.S. government deported some 74,000 Central Americans to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Seelke 2008:7). The pace of repatriation quickens even today. President Barack Obama issued more deportations during his first year in office than did President George W. Bush during his last year in office (Hsu and Aizenman 2010).

Central American gangs now boast more than 70,000 members, with impoverished communities such as La Paloma functioning as key sites for gang recruitment. Central American governments, in what can be understood only as arthritic responses to nimble threats, have tended to employ civil war-era tactics of social control, such as mass incarceration and paramilitary death squads. Yet, as each government involved freely admits, strong-fisted approaches to security have failed to curb the growth and influence of Central American gangs (Seelke 2007). This is one reason why security debates throughout the Americas have begun to pair *suppressive* policies—ones that favor incarceration and deportation—with more *integrated* efforts at gang prevention. These synthesize efforts at community policing with youth programs and social services (Seelke 2007). The 2007 Mérida Initiative, for example, is a \$1.3 billion hemispheric effort to bridge a historically contentious relationship between civil society and Central American state agencies, while also bracing otherwise clumsy efforts by the United States to work across borders (Seelke and Finklea 2011). The \$466.5 million Central American Regional Security Initiative, struck in 2008, marks yet another effort with a focus on community outreach and the language of empowerment (Meyer and Seelke 2012). These integrated approaches are ultimately why faith-based projects and

Christian-inflected gang prevention programs continue to experience increased attention and financial support. This is why World Vision sponsors at-risk children in the *favelas* of São Paulo, and why Compassion International does the same in the slums of San Salvador. This is also why a Carolinian directs his 501(c)3 toward the children of La Paloma. An integrated effort at security, each program insists, can secure the Americas one child at a time.

SUBJECTIVITY AND SALVATION

The evangelical impetus to secure is, of course, nothing new. Faith-based initiatives have long trafficked in missional intimacies that inspire, in the spirit of Spivak (1988:297), white Christians to save brown children from red zones. Yet, this specific story largely starts in North America. There, in the early 1980s, middle-class men and women framed their lives as distinct projects of self-cultivation (Illouz 2008). As the liberal gave way to the neoliberal, as Phil Donahue lost out to Oprah Winfrey (Lofton 2011:217), cable and late-night television programming offered new occasions for subjective work, with a host of personalities equipping a new class of consumer to meet the demands of flexible accumulation. Sally Struthers proved iconic, with her most recognizable work coupling middle-class North Americans with desperately poor children from around the world. Pitching child sponsorship as a principled technique for ethical self-formation (Matza 2012), Struthers invited North Americans to exchange vice for virtue. “For about twenty-one dollars,” her commercials for Christian Children’s Fund reasoned, “you can buy an all-day ticket to an amusement park. In Guatemala, for twenty-one dollars a month, you can help a child like Wilma get the clothes she needs to attend school” (CCF 1987). Often straining the ethics of representation, with images of mosquitoes buzzing from lip to nose and then back to lip, Struthers’s commercials offered charitable outlets that not only paid for eyeglasses and bags of rice but that also presented North American consumers with a distinct set of practices that could cultivate moral consciousness, empathy, and (ultimately) self-worth. Writing to, praying for, and thinking about poor children such as Wilma provided North Americans with opportunities to replace conspicuous consumption with “conspicuous compassion” (West 2004).

A new era of evangelical Christianity celebrated this asceticism, framing faith not so much as a religion but rather as a relationship—between you and God, between you and your neighbor, and (most importantly) between you and yourself (Moreton 2009:106). From the Pentecostal to the Presbyterian, from the layman to the life coach, a denominationally diverse set of “morally ambitious Christians” (Elisha 2011) raised its level of expectancy. As a “purpose-driven life” (Warren

2002) slowly came into focus, as millions of Christians committed themselves to becoming a better *you*, charity grew alongside chastity as a way to increase in God's favor. "If you want to live your best life now," megachurch mogul Joel Osteen (2004:227) writes, "you must develop a lifestyle of giving: living to give instead of living to get." This evangelical imperative ultimately put a premium on those charitable organizations that could deliver bite-sized bits of *caritas* to the masses. To its credit, child sponsorship programs delivered these "ordinary affects" (Stewart 2007) in spades. Grainy Polaroids, handwritten notes, and annual report cards brokered hypermediated relationships while at the same time generating significant amounts of money. Today the top five child sponsorship programs manage over \$4 billion in global revenue.⁹ These deep pockets have ultimately allowed the industry not only to take up what Erica Bornstein (2005) has called "the spirit of development" but also to set its sights on Central American security.¹⁰ For \$35 a month, the logic now goes, you can create a context in which Wilma might choose God over gangs. It is a technique, a mode of governing, that tethers security to salvation to subjectivity—that assembles the subject of prevention one transnational exchange at a time.

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF EDEN

Take a short-term mission trip. In La Paloma for a week, with corrugated metal overhead and chickens underfoot, a half-dozen child sponsors sat on the bed of a recent gunshot victim. A gang member attacked her taxi a week earlier, the woman explained, shooting her in the leg while also killing her mother, her sister, and the *taxista*. And although the motive was not (and may never be) clear, what was obvious, at least to the missionary translating this exchange, was that this act of gang violence orphaned children, tore apart already unstable families, and perpetuated cycles of violence. Also obvious was that this shooting was entirely preventable. "If someone would have been by their side," this missionary insisted, "If someone would have been there defending these gang members, being supportive while they were little children suffering traumas, if only someone had loved them and helped them, then they would not be who they are today." She paused to punctuate her next point. "A lack of love causes them to become like monsters that extort, kill, rob, and rape. And only the love of God can heal and prevent." Presence, not absence; love, not hate; affection, not aggression—these practices assemble the subject of prevention.

So too do moments of righteousness: as these child sponsors sat awkwardly on the edge of this bed, with each Carolinian wanting to fade as quietly as possible

into the background, this young lady, this gunshot victim, began to cry. She cried for her sister. She cried for her mother. She wept until a middle-aged man from North Carolina spoke up. Called by the Holy Spirit to testify, to announce the saving grace of Jesus Christ, he proclaimed God's eternal wisdom, describing Him as an omniscient gardener who tends to His flowers from a vantage we can never completely understand. Ultimately making an awkward parallel between pruning and perishing, between the trimming of rose bushes and the murder of this young woman's family, he invited everyone, this woman included, to read her tragedy as an invitation to become stronger Christians. Tears are fine, he conceded, but her future, everyone's future, holds the promise of real happiness—of real salvation. He then prayed aloud for this woman's pain as well as her children. They are the real victims, he stressed, yet they also hold the promise of real happiness—of real salvation.

This sermon, whether timely or tactless, resonates well with the history of North American evangelical Christianity. The virtuous have been staging morality plays in the homes of poor folk for centuries now, offering the unfortunate not so much leading roles in these fictions but rather opportunities to play "the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption [can] be enacted" (Wexler 1992:15). Antebellum literature, for one, drips with these kinds of digressions. Henry David Thoreau (1997:184, 188), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850:71), and Herman Melville (1969:165–172) each place upright men and women in disheveled spaces so that they can lecture to the poor on comparative poverties and spiritual wealth. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* even opens with a so-called poor visit: "It's so dreadful to be poor," sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress" (1872:7). For centuries, throughout the Americas, an evangelical thematic has synchronized material abundance with ritualized piety as well as poverty's material culture with the trappings of delinquency. To control one's urges, to wear that old dress for just one more season, has long distinguished civilization from savagery, deservedness from delinquency.

New here is that a "pilgrim's progress" (Bunyan 1837) now gets coded as security. This not only elevates the reformation of subjectivity over the restoration of society but also prioritizes revelation over results. "It's not really our job or responsibility to get results," reasons one child sponsor. "We just need to go out there and live in obedience to what Jesus wants us to do." This faithfulness is one reason why the existential fallout of these short-term mission trips is not just a financial recommitment to La Paloma but also a moral reordering of child sponsors. "There's just as much darkness in Barey," confessed Susan, a mother of two and

sponsor of one. “Maybe more in Barey than in Guatemala.” Sitting at her formal dining table, already late for her daughter’s tae kwon do class, Susan continued, “They have poverty and oppression in Guatemala, but here we’re blind to the fact that we need God. So our affluence here keeps us from God. It keeps us from knowing our identity in Christ.” Susan sipped tea, adding, “I came back [from La Paloma] a completely different person. I sold my car. I got a little thing, you know. And actually I had a lot of trouble with the house. I came back and I was like ‘I hate my house. I hate it.’” Fidgeting with her tablecloth, fingering a loose end, she confessed, “I did [hate the house] because his face, and seeing where he lived, it just . . . I have thought about him every single day. Every single day since I left. . . .” Susan trailed off.

Brought back by idle small talk and memories of past mission trips, nostalgia mixed with observable anxieties about her own security. She said, “A former police officer talked to my women’s [Bible] group about gangs, and what a gang problem there is in Barey.” She sat up in her chair. “And he was saying, ‘You gotta be careful because the people doing your lawns are in gangs. There are gangs all over. You just don’t know it.’” If this was the case, I asked, why did she not sponsor a child in Barey instead of Guatemala? Susan answered,

We have stereotypes in America, and they are mountains to get over. It’s sad because Christ says there will always be the poor among us. . . . But it’s hard to help here. But with Guatemala, you don’t have any of those [stereotypes]. There’s no presumption over why that person is there. And even though this might sound selfish, like I go to help and I get helped, I think child sponsorship can also be the catalyst for a different mindset.

Sponsorship displaces sponsors just enough to keep them on track. Yet, it is this very displacement that disturbs them. Susan whispered, “I went in one house and it was just a dirt floor. [It was a] dirt floor with a dog chained to the wall, bloodied because he had all these bugs. I mean, it was nasty. It was oozing. And the toilet was sitting on the dirt, in the back, over a pipe. [The whole house] smelled like dirt, you know?” This filth, this danger, this difference—it stirs Susan. “I mean, I really did hate my house. I did.” Cast aside by privilege, left pushing a camel through the eye of a needle, the practice of child sponsorship delivers to sponsors, to Susan herself, a clear sense of their place in this world. It is rarely in Barey, North Carolina, or even in Guatemala City, but rather on the outskirts of Eden.

NOT EVEN A BLOT

The prospect of clawing their way back into the Kingdom prompts many to travel to La Paloma, to pray with their sponsored children amid the smell of weed and the crack of gunfire, but it also mobilizes many more to put pen to paper—to write to their sponsored children in the hope of saving a soul perched on the edge of a moral precipice. It is an epistolary engagement, iconic to the industry, driven by an evangelical interest in proper etiquette. “The letter you write,” explains Emily Post (1922), that mistress of middle-class American morals, “is always a mirror which reflects your appearance, taste and character. . . . A sloppy letter, with the writing all pouring into one corner of the page, badly worded, badly spelled, and with unmatched paper and envelope—even possibly a blot—proclaims the sort of person who would have unkempt hair, unclean linen and broken shoe laces.” What Post knew intuitively, a half century after Protestant missionaries first set foot in Guatemala (Garrard-Burnett 1997), a half century before the publication of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1987), was that the terrain of cultural production communicates the quality and character of one’s self. Delinquency is in the details. And it is an attention to these details that has come to manage the practice of gang prevention in La Paloma. From correct grammar to suitable stationery, from appropriate topics of conversation to just the right question, letters exchanged between sponsors and the sponsored discipline the at-risk child.

“It was ridiculous,” the director of child sponsorship complained. “Sponsors would write these wonderful letters. They’d write about their life and their hobbies. And then they’d get a letter back from a 14-year-old kid who should know how to write, and all it says is, ‘Dear sponsor. I love you. Love, your sponsor child.’” These scrawny efforts suggested ungracious subjects. So too did misinterpretations. “I sent a picture of myself, my son, and my daughter some time ago,” a sponsor writes. “You wrote back that I had a beautiful house. We were not in my house in that picture. We were in a conference hall at a wedding.” Lined with gaffes, providing clouded windows into complicated lives, these letters assemble the subject of prevention one missive at a time.

To the director’s credit, child sponsors do write wonderful letters. They are clear, creative, and intimate (without being intrusive). They perform the very sense and sensibility—the very self-restraint—that sponsors want for the children of La Paloma. Driving these letters, in fact, is a vision of domestic bliss motivated by the pleasures of Protestant self-mastery. “On the weekends we usually go for a run,” writes one sponsor. “Tate and Logan ride in a stroller and I push. Mason and I both love to run. It’s one of our favorite things to do. My job right now

is to be mommy to Tate and Logan. I feed them and take them places. I also clean a lot of boys' clothes." Running as recreation, motherhood as profession, and children with places to go—these letters present the children of La Paloma with a distant vision of domesticity. Yet, this is the air that these Carolinians breathe. Professional degrees and six-figure salaries mix with the rise of intentional parenting as well as a new generation of stay-at-home mothers, all to make Barey, North Carolina revolve around the life of children. Take a list of child-centered enterprises that neighbor one of this sponsorship program's most supportive churches. They include: Uptown Kids Toy Store, Children's Academy Daycare, Youthologie, The Little Gym, Klaystation Crafts Studio, Lil' Chef Cooking Studio, and Junior Judo for Jesus, which provides "God-centered resource for training your children three and a half years and older in godliness, Christ-like character, physical fitness and self-defense." Palpable expectations abound.

The children of La Paloma struggle to keep pace. It is simply not obvious how they are supposed to maintain a correspondence with middle-class North Americans. A painfully brief letter sums up this encounter. "Send me a Wii," one child writes—without a please, without a thank you, without any written concern or consideration for his sponsor's family or well-being.¹¹ This request, and letters that revolve around similar requests, upset not simply the sponsor but also program directors who want these letters to be as relational as the evangelical Christianity that now helps structure Central American security. Expected, in fact, is not a Wii wish list but rather a Christian conversation between child and adult—one that couples childhood awe with a mature spirituality. Yet, brief and brash letters routinely reduce the practice of gang prevention to producing the proper letter and, in turn, the proper subject.

"A lot of it," admits the director, "is just looking over their shoulder and making sure that they're doing it right." And look over their shoulder they do. In the office, the children read their translated letters out loud and then reply immediately. With the letter fresh in the child's mind, program officers coach sponsored children in proper penmanship, correct grammar, and appropriate word choice. They also prompt the child to pose some questions of their own. One effort at a correspondence revolved around the seemingly innocuous topic of household pets. The children of La Paloma, coached by program officers, described their own pets, and then asked their sponsors to describe theirs. Dog or cat, male or female, young or old—sponsored children navigated a series of binaries to script a recognizable narrative for an almost un-relatable audience. Sponsors proved more than happy to engage. "My family is doing very well," writes one sponsor. "We've

been busy trying to keep our dog clean because it has been raining a lot here, and he is very white.” The problem is that the vast majority of children in La Paloma do not have pets. Some have guard dogs, but the custom of domesticating a cat or dog for companionship has not yet made its way (in any consistent way) to La Paloma. It is a hiccup that ultimately makes strange a letter that reads: “Dear Sponsor, I tell you that I have a cat and a dog. They’re very caring, and I like to play with them. My dog’s name is Wilson and my cat’s name is Chucho. I like your dog and cat. I say goodbye with many hugs and kisses. Love, Your Sponsored Child.” In what spirit is such a fiction scripted?

The intent, one might venture, is to assemble a subject amenable to the practice of prevention—one that is conveniently distant but appropriately intimate, reassuringly familiar but timelessly foreign, uncomfortably gauche but ultimately responsive. Driven by domestic expectations, this vision of the at-risk youth ultimately contorts the sponsored child into someone who understands how unmatched paper and envelope—even possibly a blot—evidences the sort of person who has unkempt hair, unclean linen, and broken shoelaces. “Just as a neat, precise, evenly written note,” adds Post, “portrays a person of like characteristics.” Again, delinquency is in the details. Or, as Post concludes, “One may read the future of a person by [the] study of his handwriting” (1922:448). Faith-based gang prevention and, in turn, an integrated approach to security follows this adage as well as the morality upon which it rests. And, it does so compulsively—as too do the subjectivities subsumed by the practice of child sponsorship.

HE LOOKS LOST

“There’s a story behind Ronald,” admitted Mary over dinner. Eighteen years old, Mary’s sponsored child, Ronald, is alive, not in a gang, and gainfully employed in Guatemala’s formal economy. He stocks shelves 30 hours a week for a Walmart subsidiary, punching his clock and paying his taxes. Child sponsorship made all the difference, Ronald insists. Those \$35 a month kept him in school, off the streets, and within earshot of ministers, missionaries, and mentors. But so too did an anxiety disorder. “He’s obsessive compulsive [or OCD],” Mary admitted. “It’s a real predicament because it’s so filthy [in La Paloma]. I don’t know how he does it. There’s actually a high suicide rate in children with OCD, especially in areas where cleanliness . . . where being, you know, being in. . . . The ghetto is kind of tough.” Tough it is—for everyone involved. Ronald’s grandmother, who works at an area elementary school, cried on my shoulder, explaining that Ronald’s compulsiveness keeps him indoors for long stretches of time; it sparks seemingly irrational bouts of

anger while also sliding him in and out of depression. He irons his shirts for hours, she wept.

“But we’ve helped him with his OCD,” continued Mary. “We always send him soap, rubber gloves, cleaning stuff, and the uh, whadya call it, hand sanitizers.” Ronald’s compulsiveness even connected the two. “I didn’t know [he has OCD] when I picked him,” explained Mary. “I just saw his picture [online], and you know, and no offense, when you see the cute little girly faces, the little boy faces, and you know, you say, ‘oh, he’s so sweet, she’s so sweet.’ But I felt God, I felt God pulling me, because I thought, well, all the little children are getting [sponsored], but what about these older kids?” Mary ultimately took the road less traveled by selecting a decidedly uncute kid:

Anyway, when we picked him, we didn’t know. ‘Cause when you pick a child, you just pick one, and then you get a bio on them, and when they did. . . . When they did, I understood God’s plan. I am a perfectionist, cleanliness kind of freak in a way, so I knew God led me to him, and not only . . . not only because I felt . . . I looked at his picture, and felt a connection. He needed somebody. Look at his face in that picture. He just looks . . . He just looks . . . lost. He looks lost.

She raised Ronald’s sponsorship photograph up to my face, as if the image would mirror back to me the very existential displacement that Ronald reflects onto her. I admitted to seeing a young man. “But he looks so lost,” Mary insisted.

However lost Ronald looked, finding him proved relatively easy. At first aloof, even distant, Ronald eventually engaged Mary and her husband, providing the two with the emotional means to cultivate their own Christianity while at the same time allowing Ronald to garner some resources. “I wouldn’t have finished school without them,” Ronald confessed. “I just wouldn’t have finished.” We spoke in a Burger King restaurant near his place of work. Throughout the meal, and during every meeting afterward, he exuded appreciation—for his sponsors, for the program, and for the not so simple fact that he never joined a gang. Yet Ronald’s ability to embody the subject of prevention often seemed less of a heroic accomplishment than some kind of pathological inevitability. He ate with fresh napkins, never letting his bare skin touch his own food; he would also excuse himself mid-meal, even mid-conversation, for the washroom. The smell of antibacterial soap often framed our time together. The proof was always in his production. His sponsorship letters were immaculate. The writing never poured into one corner of the page. There was never a smudge—not even a blot. His penmanship and spelling proved as

tirelessly obedient as the pleats in his pants. Easily coded as moral rectitude, as man over mania, Ronald punched his clock and paid his taxes amid unprecedented gang violence. He is a true success by all accounts. “But he paces,” his grandmother wept. “At home he sometimes paces all night.”

The singularity of Ronald’s pacing and his commitment to pleating helps shed light on the shifting forces that allocate the recognizability of certain persons as amenable to evangelical prevention. Looking lost, for example, as opposed to looking delinquent, is a delicate cultural accomplishment. So too is the ability to feel that someone, like Ronald, looks lost. All of it depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality already established, at least here, by a faith-based 501(c)3 devoted to making legible the intimate contours of both the sponsor and the sponsored through the very language of being either lost or found. The blogs, the photographs, the letters, the trips, the gifts, the money—especially the money—mediate this exchange, framing young men and women in Guatemala as well as well-intentioned evangelical Christians in North Carolina as interrelated projects of self-cultivation.

One observable effect of this mediation is that a certain kind of subject, a subject not unlike Ronald, connects (at times compulsively) with class to embody personal transformation. Polite letters, ironed slacks, and a punctual lifestyle keep young men like Ronald on the grid. “He didn’t have clothes to go interview,” explained Mary, “so we sent him \$100 for him to go out and get clothes for his job interviews.” Ronald happily complied.

“I was with him that day,” mentioned one program director, “he was so excited about picking out new clothes in the store. You just wouldn’t believe it.” Shopping in a solidly middle-class mall, Ronald bought the kind of clothes that made him look as if he lived somewhere other than La Paloma. And this was the point.

“Because the way I understand it,” Mary explained, “if you’ve got an address in La Paloma, it’s hard to get a job down there.” This is true. With less than one-third of the country working within Guatemala’s formal economy (CIEN 2006), with so-called legitimate work difficult to secure for even university graduates, the people of La Paloma often lie about where they live. No one would hire them otherwise. This is why Mary’s gift proved so productive. It allowed Ronald to double-down on the act with a new pair of slacks and a crisp Oxford shirt while at the same time confirming the rejuvenating power of wearing one’s Sunday best. A refined appearance, missionaries have long argued, delivers “a newly embodied

sense of self-worth, taste, and personhood” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986:22). New clothes make the man (O’Neill 2011).

“I’m trying to think of the word,” Mary murmured. “[The program director] used a word [to describe Ronald’s shopping trip], and she said it was, um, a holy moment. She literally used that word; she said it was a holy moment.” Commenting on her own goose bumps, tearing up, Mary continued, “To see him, knowing that he went in that store and picked out anything he wanted. And he got new clothes, and now he has a job!” Mary took a moment. Collecting herself, she continued, “I mean, [La Paloma] is just a group of people like anybody else, just in a condition where we as Americans, or whoever in the world, just say, you know, you’re worthless, you know you’re not worth anything. Gangs are all it’s about, and people breeding children, and children turning into gang members.” Mary shook her head in disgust—because her gift, her \$100, this holy moment, all argued otherwise: all placed Ronald, or better yet, allowed Ronald to place himself, within a certain field of representability. Sponsorship framed Ronald faithfully; it made him legible to those who needed him the most: North American evangelical Christians. Without Mary, Ronald probably would have joined a gang. But without a story like Ronald’s, Mary would never have liberated herself from materialism, consumerism, narcissism, entitlement, meaningless distractions, and so much more. She would never have come to hate her own house.

This is the yield. The practice of evangelical gang prevention permits Mary to change Mary by way of Ronald and, in doing so, provides Ronald with the means to change himself. It is, to borrow the language of philanthrocapitalism, “a win-win” (Bishop and Green 2008). But this whole exchange, this security scheme, pivots on Mary’s need for Ronald. Luckily for Ronald, Mary’s desire piques with every short-term mission trip. The texture teases her every time. “Until you are walking in there,” Mary insisted, “and you are smelling, and hearing, and seeing—you don’t get it at all. Your brain changes. You change gears once you’ve witnessed all of this.” Yet, not everyone is as attentive as Mary, and not everyone proves as supple of a subject as Ronald. This Barey-based 501(c)3 manages some four hundred sponsorships in La Paloma while another 20,000 children from the very same community go without a connection. An understandably small organization, one committed to the quality rather than to the quantity of sponsorships maintained, this faith-based approach to gang prevention nonetheless cuts a place like La Paloma into hundreds of little enclaves of privilege, the spatial contours of which say something

about Central American security today. Some children make connections; they fulfill a need. Others do not; they get left behind.

LEFT BEHIND

“She started dating one of the new gang members,” explained the director of child sponsorship. “He recently got out of prison. Anyway, they asked her to do a couple of errands and she came back without a sufficient amount of money. So her boyfriend’s gang did that awful thing to her.” She, the victim, was fifteen years old. The sister of two sponsored children, the cousin of seven more, she lived a life proximate to prevention. Presents peppered the spaces she crossed—but never her space; letters lined the lives of her loved ones—but never her life. Without a sponsor, without a Mary, this young woman had few holy moments. Instead, like so many others in La Paloma, she lived (and died) completely off the grid. Rarely a minister or a missionary or a mentor wrote to, prayed for, or thought about this young woman in any consistent way. This may be one reason why it came as a shock but not as a surprise when, on October 15, 2011, residents of La Paloma found this young woman in an alleyway—as well as in a trash dump and a ravine. Killed, quartered, and then cast aside, this fifteen-year-old woman quickly entered a field of representability radically different from that of sponsorship. After death, at the point of discovery, she became a number: 62. Her death marked the 62nd time in 2011 that a Guatemalan woman had been murdered, mutilated, and then found in multiple locations (*Prensa Libre* 2011).

The Guatemalan National Police made an appearance. They took some pictures and asked some questions, but they never initiated a full investigation. To date, no arrests have been made. It is an unbelievably brutal, depressingly quotidian fact that tells a number of different stories—of femicide, of postwar impunity, even of structural effacement. The manufactured distance between those sponsored and those not, those “needed” and those not, however, underscores this article’s central claim, that the practice of evangelical gang prevention produces its subject through a series of confessional images and imperatives. It also highlights the fact that gang prevention generates an extractive geography of salvation, of security, that saves some while leaving many more behind. This conclusion is best understood in light of not just Gilles Deleuze’s (1990) insights on postindustrial cartographies of control but also the faith-based fiction of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Their *New York Times* best-selling book series sheds some light on the extractive dimensions of being *Left Behind* (1995).

The young woman, to explain, lived alongside (literally beside) dozens of sponsored boys and girls. She was related to no less than nine of them. She even knew Ronald. They brushed shoulders, shared acquaintances, and even spoke from time to time. Yet, on October 15, 2011, Ronald could be found stocking the shelves of a Walmart subsidiary while neighbors found this young woman in pieces. It is a contrast that could provoke the predictable critique that Christian charity is either imperfect or individualistic. Helping can hurt—but social scientists know this (Ticktin 2011). Christians know this (Corbett and Fikkert 2009). Instead, the distance between these two life stories betrays a spatially significant kind of disparity that the practice of evangelical gang prevention makes possible. Given that ministers, missionaries, and mentors throughout the Americas have long coupled prevention with proximity—by placing young men and women shoulder to shoulder inside churches, schools, factories, prisons, rehabilitation centers, and so on—it is astounding how irrelevant brute proximity (that is, standing shoulder to shoulder) has become to the practice of evangelical gang prevention today. Not only does Mary not need to live next to Ronald to save Ronald, but Ronald’s onetime proximity to this murdered woman also said nothing about either’s relationship to an ever-expanding Central American security apparatus. Providence plucked one out of obscurity, dusted him off, and bought him a fresh pair of slacks; the other got left behind.

Deleuze, a quarter century ago, forecasted the fall of the built-form: the astounding irrelevance of brute proximity. “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt,” he wrote (1990:4). The prison, hospital, factory—environments of enclosure—are in crisis, he insisted. In their stead, fields of perceptibility make individuals legible (or not); they make certain people needed (or not). This shift is significant for Central American security. For while the 19th-century prison constituted individuals as a single body to the advantage of the prison guard, child sponsorship today mobilizes individuals one life story at a time—praying that the at-risk youth as well as the North American evangelical Christian will recognize him or herself in the very subject imagined and acted upon by the imperative to prevent. This effort at control, rather than containment, marks the subjectification of security (O’Neill 2012).

An observable effect of this effort is an extractive geography, one captured by LaHaye and Jenkins’ book series. For the unfamiliar, the *Left Behind* series begins in an airborne Boeing 747. In flight to London, without any warning, select passengers suddenly disappear from their seats. Millions more disappear around the world.

Their bodies vanish. “Harold’s clothes,” the opening chapter narrates, “were in a neat pile on his seat, his glasses and hearing aid on top. The pant legs still hung over the edge and led to his shoes and socks” (22). As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that those who disappeared have met their maker; they are safe with God. Yet, for those left behind, the apocalypse has only just begun. It is a narrative that ultimately explores the emotional texture of the sudden selection of one life over another—of one saved and one not. To their credit, the authors start slowly, with a closed, contained environment. The person in seat 15C disappears, but the person in 15B remains. Harold vanishes, but his wife stays—to rock and to whimper in her seat, to bury her face in her hands. When the plane lands, however, the authors push their trope to its logical conclusion. An unborn baby disappears from the womb of a pregnant woman (47); a groom vanishes while slipping the ring onto his bride’s finger (47).

What connects this fiction to the fact of La Paloma is the dramatic distinction between those sponsored and those not, between those saved and those not. These distinctions typify the spatial contours of Central American security today, revealing a salvific kind of segregation that looks less like a city of walls (Caldeira 2000) or a planet of slums (Davis 2007) than a city of the saved (and not). Certain individuals assume and become subsumed by the subject of gang prevention (and others not). This willingness, as explained above, has much to do with coding compulsiveness as Christian. Yet other reasons remain. In response to my question as to why a young boy named Jefferson does not have a sponsor, the program director explained, “Well, it turns out that Jefferson’s dad beats his mom. But when Jefferson is [home] he [beats his mom] less often because the dad is embarrassed to do it in front of Jefferson. So that’s why he stays home [instead of participating in the program] because he doesn’t want his mom to get beaten.” Willing or not, able or not, the effect is the same. Jefferson has been left behind. But Ronald, by way of Mary, has not. He is connected. It is an extractive kind of outcome. For when evangelical gang prevention programs drill down, “all the way down,” to quote Clifford Geertz (2000), into the life of the subject, to imbricate the subjectification of security into mutually constitutive projects of self-cultivation, what tends to emerge is a bright line between those on the grid and those not—between Ronald and number 62, between seat 15B and seat 15C. This selection can seem serendipitous (“I knew God led me to him,” Mary insisted), but it can also seem sudden, surgical, and senseless (“why did God let this tragedy happen to my poor little girl?” the aunt of number 62 wailed). The ultimate effect leaves many (far too many) to rock and to whimper, to bury their faces in their hands. In the end, what emerges on

the ground, ethnographically speaking, is not just a clear sense that the subject of prevention saves a select few, but also that for those left behind, for young boys like Jefferson, the apocalypse has only just begun.

ABSTRACT

In North Carolina, a faith-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization facilitates a child sponsorship program that connects North American evangelical Christians with at-risk children in one of postwar Guatemala City's most violent neighborhoods: La Paloma. Pitched in the name of gang prevention, child sponsors help create a context in which these Guatemalan kids might choose God over gangs. Based on fieldwork in North Carolina and in Guatemala, with both sponsors and the sponsored, this article explores how child sponsorship makes the work of gang prevention dependent on the work of self-cultivation. It is an ethnographic approach attuned to what this article understands as the subject of prevention, that is, the individual imagined and acted upon by the imperative to prevent. This includes at-risk youths, in all their racialized otherness, but also (and increasingly so) North American evangelicals who self-consciously craft their subjectivities through their participation in gang prevention. The subject of prevention's observable outcome is a kind of segregation with its own spatial logic. The practice of evangelical gang prevention ultimately produces an observable kind of inequality that says something about the surgically selective nature of Central American security today. Some Guatemalan youth connect with North Americans. Others get left behind. [evangelical Christianity, subjectivity, security, child sponsorship, Guatemala, North Carolina, gangs]

NOTES

1. This article draws on extended fieldwork across a variety of church settings in North Carolina (2011) as well as Guatemala City (2006–2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012). Fieldwork was supported by the Wenner Gren Foundation (2006–2007, 2010–12), the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation (2010–12), the Open Society Foundation (2011–13), the Social Science Research Council (2011–13), and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada: Research Development Initiative (2010–12) and Standard Research Grant (2010–13), as well as institutional grants from Stanford University, Indiana University, Bloomington, and the University of Toronto. I presented versions of this article at: the University of Chicago Department of Anthropology Monday Colloquium; the Yale University Department of Religious Studies Faculty Seminar; the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Young Scholars of American Religion Workshop; the Faith in Security Workshop at the University of Toronto's Monk School for Global Affairs; the Social Science Research Council and Open Society Foundation Drugs, Democracy, and Security Workshop at la Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá, Colombia); the University of Utrecht Centre for the Humanities' Post-Secularism Workshop; the National University of Singapore's Transnational Cities Workshop; the University of Toronto's Re(Placing) the City Workshop; as well as the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in San Francisco, California. Special thanks to Benjamin Fogarty, Rebecca Bartel, Victoria Nguyen, and Basit Kareem Iqbal for research and editorial assistance as well as to those who read drafts of this article at one stage or another: Lalaie Ameeriari, Simon Coleman, Pamela Klassen, Kathryn Lofton, Tomas Matza, Ramah McKay, Bruce O'Neill, Elaine A. Peña, Robert Samet, and Austin Zeiderman. Finally, great credit must go to the

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All interviews cited in this article result from the author's fieldwork conducted in North Carolina and Guatemala City.

2. Evangelical Christianity is an umbrella term that encompasses Pentecostal, charismatic, and neo-Pentecostal Christianities. All three are characterized by personal conversion, evangelization, belief in the Bible's authority, and the understanding that Jesus Christ's crucifixion was a sacrifice made on behalf of humanity's fallen nature (Bebbington 1989).
3. I have changed the names of neighborhoods throughout this study. Barey, North Carolina, and La Paloma are pseudonyms. Those whom I interviewed also remain anonymous or are cited by pseudonym. In some cases certain details (insignificant to the analysis) have been changed to further protect my informants.
4. "Red Zone," or *zona roja*, describes areas most affected by violence. In the case of Guatemala City, *zona roja* is a term often associated with areas troubled by gang-related violence and extreme poverty.
5. Approximately one-fourth of the nearly two-and-a-half-million people residing in Guatemala City live in "precarious settlements." These are "neighborhoods built with fragile materials such as cardboard, tin, or, in the best of cases, cement blocks" (Murphy 2004:64).
6. Central American security refers to a regional rather than state-based approach to anti-gang programs (Organization of American States 2010).
7. *Mano dura*, or "strong fist," refers to aggressive anti-gang tactics that focus on police enforcement and repressive reforms of judicial and penal processes.
8. The discussion of postwar Guatemala in this section is a revised and updated version of a more extended discussion in O'Neill 2010b as well as O'Neill and Thomas 2011.
9. The 2009–10 global operating budgets of the five largest child sponsorship programs yield a figure over \$4 billion. The 2009–10 global operating budget of World Vision Inc. and Affiliates is \$2.58 billion (KPMG 2010d), of Save the Children \$1.3 billion (KPMG 2010c), of ChildFund International \$8.3 million (KPMG 2010a), of Plan International \$7.25 million (Plan International, Inc. 2010), and of Compassion International \$5.07 million (KPMG 2010b).
10. In *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*, Mark Duffield (2007:viii, 216–217) rightly reads development as a technology of security that is central to liberal forms of governance.
11. Wii is a seventh-generation video game console released by Nintendo on November 19, 2006.

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