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## The Reckless Will: Prison Chaplaincy and the Problem of Mara Salvatrucha

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The phone call was rushed, near frantic. From inside one of Guatemala's maximum security prisons, a known gang leader pleaded with Pastor Morales via cell phone to do something: to contact the press, to notify a human rights office, to intervene. A member of the transnational gang circuit known as Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, this prisoner (whom I will call Gustavo) explained to Pastor Morales that he was being transferred to El Pavoncito—a different maximum security prison that houses members of Barrio Dieciocho, or the 18th Street Gang. These two gangs, MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang, each boast tens of thousands of members throughout the Americas, from Calgary to Quito. Many are former soldiers, with extensive combat experience in some of Central America's longest and bloodiest civil wars. In Guatemala, they smuggle drugs, participate in human trafficking, and control prison systems, all while state officials offer failed responses to their growing threat. More immediate to Gustavo's

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phone call, the two gangs are also rivals—for turf, for contracts, for respect. Pastor Morales, a Pentecostal minister and part-time prison chaplain, understood immediately the stakes of Gustavo’s transfer. As many would comment later, such a move from one prison population to another “es igual a la pena de muerte” (is the same as a death sentence).

Although Pastor Morales called whoever would listen, bringing both a municipal judge and Gustavo’s mother to the prison gates, Gustavo entered El Pavoncito a little before 4:00 a.m. with four other members of MS-13. Prison officials placed these five men into a “secure” cell for their own protection, but their presence in the general prison population sparked a riot that culminated around 6:30 a.m. At this early hour, a mob of prisoners broke into Gustavo’s cell, ripping the door off its hinges. They dragged him and his fellow MS-13 members into the prison yard and, one by one, decapitated them.<sup>1</sup> With night turning to day, with sunlight revealing what only darkness could permit, Gustavo’s head sat on a pike while the prisoners set his body on fire. Later, during an interview, only days after images of Gustavo’s severed head circled the World Wide Web, the director of Guatemala’s central morgue reflected aloud to me: “It’s not like scissors cutting through paper, you know. Decapitation is tedious work [*trabajo tedioso*], a sweaty kind of labor [*laborioso*].” For effect, the director ran his fingers across his own cervical vertebrae, demonstrating and appreciating the physicality of it all.

In contrast to such a clinical appraisal, Pastor Morales focused, perhaps predictably, not on Gustavo’s broken body but on his soul. He mourned Gustavo as an unfinished work, noting that he, the pastor, knew “what an incredible thing was happening in Gustavo’s heart.” With the cadence of a eulogy, Pastor Morales explained: “On the outside he was incredibly intimidating, with . . . scars from stab wounds and bullets. On the inside, I came to love [Gustavo], who became my friend. . . . In private, away from the piercing eyes of his other homies, it was easy to note his softening heart. During a Bible study, Gustavo turned to me to whisper: ‘It’s great to feel such a deep presence of the Lord here with the homies today.’” Amid such violent corporeality, Pastor Morales’s grief remained trained on Gustavo’s heart, his softening inner world, his ability to *feel* the Lord’s presence, in the words of Gustavo, *deeply*.

1. There is some disagreement over whether members of the 18th Street Gang participated in the killing of these prisoners. The media understand this prison riot as the result of gang warfare. See, e.g., Acuña 2008; Carroll 2008; González and Del Cid 2008; and *Los Angeles Times* 2008. Yet many who are familiar with the prison system contend that members of the 18th Street Gang played only a minor part in the beheadings.

This article lingers on the distance between these two responses, between the director's morbid disbelief and the pastor's ministerial disquiet, to ask how MS-13 has become a problem for Guatemala. By *problem* I mean not whether MS-13 is or is not a problem but how MS-13 has come to be understood as *problematic*—how this transnational gang circuit, per Michel Foucault (1988: 257), has “enter[ed] into the play of the true and false” and how such play “constitutes [MS-13] as an object for thought” (see also Castel 1994). This is a historical, ethnographic question attuned to an ever-shifting relationship among sovereignty, discipline, and governance in but also beyond postwar Guatemala (Foucault 2007: 23); to how authorities define certain persons as problematic; and to the criteria by which certain forms of conduct come to be seen as problematic—as ultimately justifying not just “who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003: 11) but also how it is best to live.

To focus on the problematization of MS-13 begins, in many ways, with an appreciation for the authority that Pastor Morales wields—an expertise that consistently shouts over (and sometimes down) other possible avenues by which MS-13 could be understood as problematic: for example, the historical, the political, and the economic. Instead of these alternative constructions, charismatic and Pentecostal pastors, such as Morales, make MS-13 into a Christian problem with a Christian solution—for not only men and women of faith in Guatemala but also liberal, democratic, and ostensibly secular security officials throughout the Americas. This faithful framing takes place through the language and practice of what has come to be understood as “gang ministry.” Gang ministry as an emerging genre of pastoral care has become increasingly significant because of a curious loophole in gang membership. While there are a number of reasons that young men and women find themselves ritualistically “beaten into” or “sexed into” the ranks, only two options are available to those who wish to leave MS-13, a group to which they have otherwise pledged their lives.<sup>2</sup> There are only two ways out. One is death. The other is Christian conversion (CCM 2006).<sup>3</sup> Now courted by state officials to augment government attempts at security, charismatic and Pentecostal ministers in Guatemala, El Salvador, and southern California (to name only a few locales) work the streets as well as the confessional to open the hearts of gang members to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. While a sincere conversion

2. To become a member of MS-13, recruits are beaten for thirteen seconds by a group of active MS-13 members. Alternatively, women can be either beaten or “sexed” into MS-13.

3. Death and conversion are the only two ways out of MS-13. In some cliques, however, pregnancy can create a space to negotiate a qualified disaffiliation from MS-13.

does not guarantee a release, and sometimes prompts death itself, gang ministers shepherd “the fallen” to attend services, participate in Christian support groups, and undergo the painful process of tattoo revision and removal—efforts at erasure that gang ministers say invoke Christ’s passion.

This practice of gang ministry, moreover, endows the problem of MS-13 with distinct spatial characteristics. MS-13 as a problem, gang ministers insist, begins *within* each person (with one’s thoughts, attitudes, habits, and sense of self) and can be rectified only through a concerted Christian effort to adjust one’s relationship to one’s own self—to discipline oneself to be a better Christian and, in turn, an active citizen (O’Neill 2009a, 2009b). As one gang minister explained to me: “My objective has always been to spread the word of God, but also to teach gang members good customs and habits, how to be good people, good sons and fathers; how to be good citizens.” This practice of gang ministry shifts the terrain security officials wrestle over from the streets to the self—from material conditions to the vast and unbounded inner chamber that Augustine of Hippo (1961) narrates so vividly in his *Confessions* and that has subsequently inspired so many missionary intimacies.

Gang ministry’s emphasis on Christian inwardness has stuck (and continues to stick) in part because of underfunded postwar Central American governments, a U.S. government long attracted to faith-based initiatives, and North American churches flush with goodwill. Compounded by a growing financial commitment from international aid agencies, and the fact that nearly half of Guatemala’s population is either charismatic or Pentecostal Christian (Pew Forum 2006), gang ministry, with its confessional logic and Christian technologies of self-governance, makes MS-13 the perfect problem through which to see the politics of American security anew. Few circuits of exchange supply such a powerful demonstration of the violence and banality of transnational cultures, linking relatively mundane ministerial efforts to contemporary threads of religion and globalization, the politics of frontiers, borders, and boundaries, and deportation and democratization as embodied practice. This is because Gustavo’s beheading was not merely gratuitous assault; it was conducted in a context of certain soteriologies of self.

By this I mean nothing fancier than the ethnographic fact that the loudest, most observable, most sustained Christian therapy employed by prison chaplains in and beyond the Guatemalan context is self-esteem. This Christian promotion of self-esteem saturates the prison system where Gustavo died; the practice of esteeming the self guides much of what prison chaplains do and say. The idea and promise of self-esteem provide both the pastors and the prisoners with a set of moral coordinates for who they are and, more important, what kind of people they want

to become. In contrast to other available approaches to reform, it is self-esteem that starts in these Christian settings wherein the incarcerated might choose Jesus Christ over MS-13. By way of Christian authorities, but in monuments to modern imaginations, prison chaplains work to esteem the self in the name of security.

With a failed prison system swollen to 170 percent of its capacity (Ungar 2003: 934) and homicide rates that are eleven times what the World Health Organization defines as a crisis (Canadian Red Cross 2006),<sup>4</sup> self-esteem has become a Christian solution to what has steadily become an inwardly placed Christian problem, leading one of Guatemala's more experienced gang ministers to announce in seemingly uncomplicated ways: "The greatest need here is to continue working with gangs, but we also need to support human development [*fortalecer la formación humana*] to recover self-esteem; we need more psychologists than educators here in Guatemala." Amid prison riots, public decapitations, and transnational drug networks, prison chaplains announce with bold clarity that "society must be defended" (Foucault 2003) by way of self-esteem. Christian support groups, moral manuals, testimonials, and bibliotherapy—the practice of narrating one's broken self to oneself—aim to equip incarcerated gang members with the tools necessary to patrol their inner worlds, to esteem their selves, to recognize the moments when they *feel* the Lord's presence *deeply*. The questions addressed in critical response to MS-13 as a Christian problem with a Christian solution are rather straightforward: How has this happened? And to what effect?

Wading into these questions begins with a generally agreed-on history that starts not in Guatemala's maximum security prisons, although that is where this article will certainly return, but in Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> El Salvador's civil war (1980–92) coincided with Guatemala's (1960–96), pushing tens of thousands of Central American refugees to Los Angeles's poorest neighborhoods (Zilberg 2004). Once in Los Angeles, for reasons of belonging and security, Salvadoran migrants formed MS-13 to defend themselves against the city's already well-established

4. Guatemala revamped its penal code in 1994, although all fourteen bills of penal reform have been debated without approval. This said, the country has one of the lowest prison populations in all of the Americas (28 per 100,000) but the highest homicide rate in all of Latin America. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2005 report states that Guatemala had the highest murder rate in all of Latin America, with 70 per 100,000 (Benítez 2009). By contrast, the Canadian Red Cross (2006) estimates 109 per 100,000. Complicating these numbers is the fact that "the average criminal trial lasts for over four years and less than five percent of crimes result in a conviction" (Ungar 2003: 932).

5. This growing literature is built on a narrow base, concretizing certain standard references so much that even passing comments now seem like established facts. For example, one report quotes Wikipedia when discussing MS-13's history (ARIAS 2006: 14).

Asian, African American, and Mexican gangs (De Cesare 2003). Initially modest in reach, MS-13 became a transnational organization in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Against a torched cityscape and a surging Moral Majority, increasingly strict antigang laws met tougher prosecution rates, expanding the legal grounds for deportation to include minor offenses such as shoplifting (IIRIRA 1996; see also De Genova 2007). With these laws, the annual number of deported Central Americans tripled in the late 1990s, rising from 8,057 in 1996 to 24,285 in 2004 (Johnson 2006). In 2007, as the criminalization of Latinos continued to mix with an unwieldy war on terror, the U.S. government deported some seventy-four thousand Central Americans to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Seelke 2008: 7). By casting such a wide net, the United States “successfully” deported an estimated twenty thousand gang members to Central America between 2000 and 2004 (Arana 2005: 102).

However, the immigration laws that deported these gang members also banned U.S. officials from disclosing the criminal backgrounds of the deportees to their home countries (Wallace 2000). With a typical lack of coordination between the U.S. government and Central America’s postwar governments, these deportees met minimum life chances, a heaving drug trade, and a glut of weapons left over from the region’s civil wars (ERIC et al. 2004). Born in Central America but often raised in Los Angeles, the youngest of these deported gang members did not speak Spanish fluently (Ramirez 2004: 1138). They had no family but the gangs, and they had no viable life chances but gang life (Buff 2004). These factors generated the ideal conditions for expansion. More than a decade later, and amid homicide rates that outpace even those of Guatemala’s genocidal civil war (Hinton and O’Neill 2009), MS-13 now boasts more than a hundred thousand members throughout the Americas—a population that continues to grow alongside a hemispheric drug trade. Some 90 percent of the cocaine shipped from the Andes to the United States flows through Central America (Seelke 2008: 3). For this reason, and for many more, members of MS-13 have been arrested as far south as Lima and as far north as Toronto.

What is more, Central American governments, in what can only be understood as arthritic responses to nimble threats, have tended to employ civil war-era tactics of social control, such as the reemergence of paramilitary death squads (ERIC et al. 2004). Meanwhile, the U.S. government confronts MS-13 under the auspices of the newly minted Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. By routinely making unsubstantiated associations between MS-13 and al-Qaeda (e.g., U.S. House of Representatives 2005), by stretching the war on terror to its rhetorical limits, this new division

of Homeland Security has deported Central Americans at an unprecedented clip. The numbers are worth repeating. While it took eight years to triple the number of Central Americans deported annually from the United States from 1996 to 2004, this new division of Homeland Security recently tripled that already bloated number in just eighteen months, from 2006 to 2007 (Seelke 2008: 7).

As each government involved freely admits, efforts at security and governance to date have failed spectacularly to curb the growth and influence of MS-13. This is one reason that state-level security debates throughout the Americas have begun to pair *suppressive* policies—those that favor incarceration and deportation—with more *integrated* efforts at gang prevention, those that synthesize efforts at community policing with youth programs and social services (Reed and Decker 2002; Seelke 2007). The 2007 Mérida Initiative is a \$550 million 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 (Cook et al. 2008). Los Angeles’s new \$168 million Gang Reduction Program, with its own focus on community outreach and the language of empowerment, is yet another example. These efforts at an integrated approach are also why the practice of gang ministry continues to experience increased attention and financial support—for example, why an evangelical pastor heads Los Angeles’s Gang Reduction Program, making the Reverend Jeff Carr the city’s first-ever “gang czar,” and why Central American governments, including Guatemala’s, continue to develop street ministries and prison chaplaincy programs that advance, as Ian Hacking (1986: 222) would say, “new ways to be people.” Borrowing heavily from self-help discourses and the field of cognitive psychology, building atop a neoliberal rhetoric of personal accountability, prison chaplains’ promotion of self-esteem demonstrates how, in the words of Nikolas Rose (1999: 1), “the soul of the citizen has entered directly into political discourse and a practice of government.”<sup>6</sup> This effort generates new techniques for living and dying, novel constructions of citizenship and delin-

6. Neoliberal economic and political reforms implemented in Guatemala beginning in the 1980s included the standard adjustments mandated in many countries via World Bank and International Monetary Fund loan programs: market liberalization, privatization of industry and state services, reductions in public expenditure, and opening to foreign trade. Right-wing dictators and, later, democratically elected leaders aligned with U.S. interests expanded these reforms in the 1990s, a process that continues today with the signing on July 1, 2006, of the Central America Free Trade Agreement. The neoliberal rhetoric of personal accountability, the very one espoused by gang ministers, then, fits nicely with a retreat of state services in postwar Guatemala. For more on neoliberalism in Guatemala, see O’Neill and Thomas in press.

quency, and unexpected formations of security in a decidedly insecure American context.

Prison chaplaincy's promotion of self-esteem in Guatemala's maximum security prisons is one such effort to teach incarcerated gang members "to evaluate and act upon [themselves] so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to" (Cruikshank 1996: 234). Yet this Christian effort is not without context. To assess the practice, one must first appreciate the prison—if only to dislodge self-esteem from its bourgeois North American roots, from middle-class concerns over weight loss and social anxiety, from a largely gendered interest in personal fulfillment and achievement (Illouz 2008).

Guatemalan maximum security prisons, to explain, are not "total institutions," in the words of Erving Goffman (1961), or "super-max" structures, like the ones the anthropologist Lorna A. Rhodes (2004) explores, but "warehouses of violence" (Fleisher 1989). Prison cells designed to house four individuals at a time now hold up to eighteen, and for sentences that sometimes stretch more than fifty years (Ungar 2003). What may first appear as holding cells, dark spaces in which prisoners might linger for a day or two before prison personnel find more appropriate accommodations, are actually where active gang members live until their release or, more likely, their deaths. Overcrowded, with phlegm lining the cell walls, constant noise meets a stunning lack of natural light to form a haunting echo chamber. While Foucault's (1979) analysis of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon continues to resonate as a metaphor for power's entangled relationship with knowledge, it is painfully obvious that in Central American prisons, especially Guatemala's, no one is really watching—and, more important to panopticism, the prisoners know that they have been left alone. Prisoners do not decapitate fellow prisoners without more than just a little lack of oversight. Guards rarely enter the cell blocks that house active gang members, and the incarcerated take advantage of perforated boundaries to traffic a steady flow of drugs, cell phones, and sex workers. In many ways, this is how and why prison chaplains, men and women of faith who range from apocalyptic neo-Pentecostals to mainline charismatic Christians, have become such a valued resource for Guatemalan security officials. With no one watching, these pastors believe that active gang members, through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, can watch themselves—can internalize the panopticon. On the topic of self-esteem, one prison chaplain noted to me: "The purpose of this ministry is to give them a plan for salvation and a way for them to move on with their lives. The goal is for them to form inside of them a kind of self-discipline. The self-discipline to pray, the self-discipline to read, the self-discipline to relate to



people properly.” Self-esteem, as both a Christian practice and a goal, places incarcerated gang members in relationship with themselves, with the goal of converting the fallen into active citizens.

The prison chaplains’ effort is bold, even if it is familiar to the history of American prisons. These institutions have always had a certain religious, even monastic, quality to them. The very language of prison reform is littered with religious imagery: for example, the cell, the penitentiary, and the reformatory (Skotnicki 2000: 2). In the North American context, learned men of faith guided the construction of the modern prison in the early nineteenth century, developing undeniably Christian efforts at moral improvement. The Quakers, who authored Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Prison, argued that exclusive contact with moral administrators could straighten crooked souls. Here the iconic drawing of the kneeling prisoner, the very one that illustrates Foucault’s discussion of Bentham’s panopticon, captures solitary confinement’s Christian dimensions. At the same time, Calvinism inspired New York’s Auburn Prison, which structured moral reform around congregate labor during the day and solitary confinement at night.<sup>7</sup> “That prisoners in perpetual solitary confinement often hanged themselves or battered themselves to death,” Jonathan Franzen (2003: 210) observes, “was attributed to insanity induced by masturbation” (see also Kunzel 2008).

I mention these two prisons not simply because they exist as monuments to a Christian logic, or because they are shining examples of the observation made elsewhere that architecture is a “*moral science*” (Rothman 1971: 83), but because they served as the preeminent models for prison reform in Latin America (Salvatore and Aguirre 1996). The Walnut Street Prison and the Auburn Prison laid the foundation for the very prisons that Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont visited in antebellum America, the sort of prison that, in the words of Tocqueville, “does not break men’s will, but softens, bends, and guides it. It seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much from being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, stifles, and stultifies” (quoted in Modern 2007: 639). This French delegation, the archive tells us, was not alone in its travels. Tocqueville and Beaumont stood shoulder to shoulder with Latin American delegations eager to add prison reform to an increasingly long “liberalization to-do list.” For more than a century an array of Latin American countries, from Brazil (1834) to Cuba (1939), re-created North American prisons brick by brick, with blueprints purchased from afar, with archi-

7. This “method of discipline,” a primary text notes, consisted of “downcast eyes, lockstep marching, absolute silence, supervised work, [and] an unsparing use of the whip” (Bumas 2001: 131).

tects brought by boat, and with the promise of progress standing guard in the very watchtowers they constructed.

This effort at reform proved uneven. Underfunded and overcrowded, with a history of slavery and debt peonage informing the effort (Salvatore and Aguirre 1996: 16), these correctional facilities melted into something far more brutal. Modern prisons became colonial whipping posts. While authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America eventually co-opted these structures in the twentieth century for torture rather than moral reform—for punishment instead of discipline—the jails themselves still hint (architecturally speaking) at a Jacksonian notion that curing criminals means “inculcating in them healthy habits” (Meskell 1999: 852). This is one reason that constructing Bentham’s panopticon in and onto the criminal’s soul can seem so very intuitive for contemporary prison chaplains in Guatemala and that the promise of self-esteem (in all of its psychotheological hybridity) can appear so logical, even when the prison itself has become an absolute carnival.

The internalization of this gaze—the appropriation and performance of governmentality (Foucault 1991)—takes place at the everyday level of ministry, a pastoral care that I shadow for the purposes of fieldwork. These are stretches in the field that can leave one feeling as if at the very bottom of a rabbit hole. Surrounded by thick plumes of weed and *reggaeton*’s thumping bass, punctuated by phone calls received on black-market cellars and propositions made by sex workers, incarcerated gang members made blue with ink—with 18s and 13s tattooed across their faces—sit with prison chaplains once a week. They pose the big missionary problems, such as “Who am I?” (*¿Quién soy?*) and “Why am I the person that I am?” (*¿Por qué soy como soy?*). They riff on biblical stories, such as the parable in which Jesus befriends tax collectors (Luke 18:9–14). Often in a circle, on moldy mattresses or plastic chairs, gang ministers guide the incarcerated to understand, for example, that Jesus ate with tax collectors (Mark 2:16), that he offered tax collectors salvation (Luke 19:9), and that he even chose a tax collector (Matthew) to be one of his twelve disciples (Matt. 9:9).

This parable, at least in principle, resonates with the prisoners, given that *impuestos*, or self-styled taxes, constitute MS-13’s greatest source of income.<sup>8</sup> Bus drivers, shopkeepers, and home owners routinely pay MS-13 considerable

8. This essay is explicitly about how gang ministry frames MS-13 as a problem and not about whether such ministry “works.” Although there are moments in this essay in which I imply that the gang members are in fact disciplined, to provide the necessary evidence to demonstrate how and to what effect these ministers discipline these prisoners is not the focus of this essay.

sums for protection. Some parents even pay a “rape tax” so that their daughters are not violated. These are acts of extortion that the incarcerated manage from jail by way of black-market cell phones, flexing their own brand of punishment while they themselves become subject to new technologies of discipline. In this context gang ministers routinely move the conversation toward something more reflexive, asking aloud whether Jesus would eat with members of MS-13, whether he would offer a member of MS-13 salvation, and whether he would ever consider a member of MS-13 one of his most trusted disciples. As Pastor Allende, a charismatic prison chaplain, often asks, “Would you allow Jesus to join MS-13?” Through this question the pastor works to shift a gang member’s allegiance from MS-13 to Jesus Christ.

This effort takes place through a relatively sleek logic that pivots on original sin as a theological fact and the promise of self-esteem as a modern-day manifestation of grace. Largely authored by Pentecostal and charismatic pastors in southern California and Colorado Springs, but repeated by prison chaplains in Guatemala, the theological therapy goes like this: Men and women join gangs because they have low self-esteem. Active members lean on gangs to provide the emotional support they never received from parents, and they have thus fallen into a delinquent lifestyle while in search of acceptance. Weary, tired, with a deflated sense of self, young men and women use MS-13 to prop up their selves. Their criminal activity and elaborate tattoos evidence an inward struggle between sin and salvation. Prison chaplains, in response to a narrative that they themselves propagate, further suggest that gang members will always be half made—that sin has always strained the human condition—but that Jesus Christ, not MS-13, should buttress each and every person. Pastor Allende narrates this increasingly familiar logic:

Their self-esteem, practically speaking, needs to be raised up, and this is what I try to do through my ministry. From the moment I begin to work with them, I begin to instill in them [the idea] that they are important and that they can become valued members of society. In my own case, I was really mistreated when I was seven or eight years old. I was always told that I wasn’t worth anything [*inútil*] and that I was stupid [*torpe*]. People said stuff like that to me, and those words were just growing in me. And so when I was growing up, I thought that I was worthless and this is why I turned to drugs and alcohol. This is why my self-esteem was so low.

Pastor Allende then performs the very change that he advocates:

Then, when I came to know our Lord Jesus Christ, I got this new idea that each one of us is really valuable. This made me feel like I had more value

myself, and my self-esteem began to increase little by little. So much so that I began to think: I can [*yo puedo*]. I can. I am valuable. I can. I can be a person who doesn't need to rob others and do stuff like that. I can work. I can do something with my life.

The narrative glosses the self-esteem manual that prison chaplains commonly use with active gang members, a manual that announces:

When people possess high levels of self-esteem, they are able to overcome problems easily and personal problems without difficulty; they are creative, independent, and manage their personal relationships with ease. But to improve our self-esteem, it is important to complete a detailed analysis of what we want to change about ourselves, taking into account those aspects that are susceptible to change.

As part of his ministry, Pastor Allende guides the incarcerated through spiritual exercises that allow them to assess their esteem—to map the parts of their selves that need work, which might include, as per the manual, the “inability to dream,” “anxiety over the future,” and the tendency to “idealize other people.” Faith in Christ guides this introspection, Pastor Allende insists.

Important here is the practice of self-esteem as a Christian technology of self-governance, which I trace closely for the larger project. At no other time does gang ministry as political rationality meet the everyday level of prison life more vividly than when chaplains instruct members of MS-13 to explore their inner worlds for the sake of public security. Also important, however (and possibly more important, given that this article addresses the problem of MS-13 rather than the practice of gang ministry), is a curious slippage in technical registers on which Pastor Allende's ministry rests and how this sustained confusion perpetuates the problem of MS-13.

This slippage begins with material developments rather than theological assumptions, with money rather than conviction. Pastor Allende, to explain, spent two decades running a Christian rehabilitation center for alcoholics and drug addicts in Guatemala City. Having, in his words, perfected the art of “straightening crooked souls” with biblically infused group therapy sessions, Pastor Allende recently expanded his services to include *delincuencia*, or the problem of gang membership. While he speaks passionately about how this ministerial decision is a response to God's ever-growing call to act in this world, Pastor Allende sheepishly admits from time to time that, to address the problems of both his city and his nation, he follows the money, since new streams of funding from the United States Agency for International Development, the U.S. State Department, and

North American churches continue to open up for those ministers able and willing to “rehabilitate” active gang members from a Christian perspective. Given that there are only two ways out of MS-13, and that MS-13 has set the terms for release, a growing number of international funders want to promote Christian conversion—even if their organizations do not self-identify as Christian.

As the critical student of development might anticipate, increased streams of international monies carry with them a range of unintended consequences. From afar, in faith-based and secular development offices, the increasingly obvious (meaning “humane” and “modern”) response to MS-13 is an integrated approach. This is especially the case because the only other response has involved the criminalization of Latinos by way of draconian deportation policies, racist community policing programs throughout Central and North America, and death squads keen on reliving the civil war’s extrajudicial liberties. Yet instead of solving the problem, more money has simply changed the way MS-13 has come to be understood as a problem, not only because gang ministry places Christian conversion at the very center of secular security debates but also because of the ministers who have responded to this windfall. Pastor Allende spent more than two decades training his ministerial craft on the Christian war against alcoholism and drug addiction. Like Pastor Allende, those who are proficient in the language of Christian rehabilitation—those who can respond to these funding programs—are almost exclusively Protestant ministers with both training in and experience with drug and alcohol treatment. The problem, however, is that few have any working knowledge of gang culture. So while Pastor Allende argues convincingly that one cannot separate substance abuse from gang membership—that it is rare that a recovering gang member is not also a recovering alcoholic or a recovering drug addict—this sustained confusion between addiction and gang membership (between substance abuse and *delincuencia*) has certain rhetorical effects. This slippage makes MS-13, in the words of Mariana Valverde (1998), a “disease of the will” and thus frames Jesus Christ as “the divine physician,” ultimately understanding self-esteem as an inoculation for both the soul and society. Prison chaplains, simply put, treat members of MS-13 as if they were addicted to gangs. It is a slippage worth understanding.

In nineteenth-century North America—the very time frame in which missionaries traveled to Latin America to save the “Great Unwashed” (Garrard-Burnett 1997)—alcoholism (much like MS-13 today) became understood as a “disease of the will.” Alcoholism, from this perspective, evidenced an atrophied will, a “palsy of the will” (Valverde 1998: 2), a will that simply could not be governed. This will-centered approach to alcoholism eventually disappeared amid a mind-body

dualism central to liberal imaginations, which consistently divided the human condition into problems of the body (medicine) and problems of the mind (psychology). The will was lost in the shuffle, made unintelligible by advanced medicine, abandoned by psychology, and snubbed by modern philosophy. This said, two discourses have consistently kept the will at the very center of their analytic interests. The first, of course, is much older than the second, though the two are hardly separable these days. They are, first, Christian theologies of the Calvinistic, charismatic kind and, second, self-help discourses (Albanese 2007: 510). Both recognize the will as a tangible force in the world—as both a cause and an effect. Both allot the will certain spatial characteristics as well as ontological status; for both charismatic theology and self-help, the will tends to be both expansive and shadowy, with nooks and crevices that constantly need to be swept clean. For both, the will is something that can be examined, mapped, and calculated as well as strengthened, manipulated, and esteemed.

The will is also a major dilemma for both charismatic theology and self-help discourses. The work of Augustine, in regard to theology, is probably the most efficient way to make this point. Augustine, when read by way of Calvinism, articulates what is so central to contemporary charismatic and Pentecostal theologies: the idea that sin frustrates the whole of creation and that sinners must make salvation over and against a reckless will. Augustine, that is, understands the soul as a “vast and unbounded inner chamber,” a compartment that the believer must enter to fulfill life’s only real task: to see God. The believer’s rapprochement with God, Augustine insists, involves turning *inward* toward the self and then *upward* toward the glory of God (Cary 2000). Original sin, however, complicates this double movement, this seemingly straightforward negotiation of inner space. Foucault (1994: 181), commenting on Augustine’s characterization of the sexual act, begins to estimate the difficulties that emerge as believers try to will themselves to see God:

Before the Fall, Adam’s body, every part of it, was perfectly obedient to the soul and the will. If Adam wanted to procreate in Paradise, he could do it in the same way and with the same control as he could, for instance, sow seeds in the earth. Every part of his body was like the fingers, which one can control in all their gestures. But what happened with the Fall? Adam lost control of himself. His body, and parts of his body, stopped obeying his commands, revolted against him, and the sexual parts of his body were the first to rise up in this disobedience. The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, due

not to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent.

Like Paul and prescient of John Calvin, Augustine contends that carnal sensations mislead the will away from God, blurring the believer's vision in much the same way that a cataract might distort one's eyesight (Cary 2000: 64). By way of this moral shortsightedness, Augustine notes, we have lost control of ourselves. This is why Pastor Allende and his colleagues in Christ employ techniques such as self-esteem not simply to corral a gang member's delinquent will but also to strengthen that will so that one day he or she might be strong enough to choose Christ over MS-13. Prison chaplains, moreover, advance this logic with self-esteem manuals that have been adapted—sometimes inelegantly—from Christian materials developed for alcoholics in the North American context. These manuals prompt their implied readers, in all of their middle-class whiteness, to assess their level of honesty, count the times they have lied in a given day, and make three goals for the week—goals that will ultimately result in a greater sense of self, a higher level of self-esteem, and a stronger will. Many of these self-help therapies have also been downloaded by prison chaplains from the World Wide Web in seemingly unsystematic ways—therapies taken from Alcoholics Anonymous sit awkwardly alongside biblical passages as well as decontextualized quotes from Dr. Phil. Even the analogical imaginations that structure the actual practice of prison chaplaincy tend to pathologize low self-esteem as a sickness, constantly placing each member of MS-13 at odds with his or her atrophied will. One manual reads, “Low self-esteem is a mortal virus that attacks us, forcing us into a state of total dejection, frustration, and sometimes even suicide.” This analogy is why Pastor Allende could reflect aloud to me about the relationship between his expertise and the prison population he serves:

Who is *the* doctor and surgeon? The answer is Jesus Christ, right? The doctor of all doctors is Jesus Christ. He is the doctor of the soul . . . because we know perfectly well that drugs, alcoholism, and gang membership are only ways for people to escape problems and emptiness. But when we come to Jesus Christ, we know that Jesus Christ will be able to fill this void. He gives us the ability to get stronger, to move on. He helps us get better.

Pastor Allende continues:

And one can also say that the heart is [Christ's] surgical field. When one speaks about Christ's surgical field, one speaks about the heart. The Bible

tells us that it is all about the heart and the word of God. And that within the heart emerges everything that is bad — adultery, robberies, homicides, everything. And so this is where the Lord begins his work.

To extend the metaphor just a little more, the practice of self-esteem would be not only an inoculation but also a scalpel — an instrument that allows pastors like Allende to carve and to cut the soul, to perform a spiritual triage for those members of MS-13 whose own wills have become weak and, at times, paralyzed. This, to use Allende's words, is "the Lord's work," and this, for better or for worse, is how MS-13 has become problematic. A loophole in gang membership — conversion as a way out — has opened up new streams of funding, prompting a specialized cadre of ministers to apply their therapeutic skills to gangs. Relying on the promise of self-esteem, these ministers have placed the problem of MS-13 in the soul rather than on the streets, training an increasing number of eyes on atrophied wills that only the saving grace of Jesus Christ can strengthen.

Yet *how* MS-13 has become a problem is just the first of two guiding questions. The second question is: To what effect? In addressing two (among many) observable effects of gang ministry's inward turn, we return to where we began: with Gustavo and Pastor Morales, with a frantic phone call and a failed effort, with Gustavo's head sitting on a pike while his mother held vigil just beyond the gates. To what effect?

The first effect is that prison chaplaincy's production and promotion of self-esteem in the very prison system where Gustavo died marks a novel relationship between space and security. By a relationship between space and security, I mean something other than the prevalence of "gates" (Low 2003) and "walls" (Caldeira 2000) in and beyond the Americas, something less material but no less tangible than efforts at "securing" (O'Neill and Thomas in press) or even "disembedding" (Rodgers 2004) the city through new modes of segregation (Sassen 2001) and the neoliberal privatization of security forces (Ferguson 2006). By the spatialization of security, I mean that a uniquely private, historically contingent space takes shape within explicitly Pentecostal and charismatic efforts at gang ministry. Located somewhere between desire and the will, this inward terrain is an ever-insecure space forever hitched to a theological anthropology that prompts the believer to enter the *inner* world of the self before gazing *upward* at the divine (Cary 2000: 63–76; Taylor 1992: 127–42). Pastor Morales's ministerial relationship with Gustavo, for example, and his concern for Gustavo's heart amid a dynamic flow of bodies and terror, evidences a mode of Christian governance that polices the soul instead of the streets, "extending [a range of security officials]



away from political institutions and economic relations” and “towards the terrain of the self” (Cruikshank 1996: 236; see also O’Neill 2010). Public concern gets mapped onto rather private spaces.

The second effect, related to the first, addresses the politics of visibility while also saying something about the sovereign’s relationship to Christian efforts at self-governance. Foucault, we might remember, begins *Discipline and Punish* with two narratives. The first is a graphic retelling of the 1757 execution of a man, Damiens, who was stripped, tortured, and quartered for the crime of regicide. “This last operation,” Foucault’s (1979: 3) sources note, “was very long, because the horses used were not accustomed to drawing; consequently, instead of four, six were needed; and when they did not suffice, they were forced, in order to cut off the wretch’s thighs, to sever the sinew and to hack at the joints.” Foucault (1979: 6) then contrasts this public execution with a decidedly boring prison schedule from the mid-nineteenth century: “At the first drum roll, the prisoners must rise and dress in silence. . . . At the second drum roll, they must be dressed and make their beds. At the third, they must line-up and proceed to the chapel for Morning Prayer. There is a five minute interval between each drum roll.”

Tragically, a prison riot in Guatemala allowed this article’s opening vignette to parallel Foucault’s own introduction to *Discipline and Punish*. Both Damiens and Gustavo suffered spectacular deaths—in front of crowds, for the sake of order, and within earshot of loved ones. In light of Damiens’s botched quartering, the aside that the director of Guatemala’s central morgue made to me now appears timeless. To paraphrase: dismemberment has never been like scissors cutting through paper; it has always been tedious work, a sweaty kind of labor. Moreover, nineteenth-century efforts at prison reform, with their rigid schedules and moral intentions, seem uncannily familiar to Pastor Morales’s own work, even if the language of self-help remains a more recent phenomenon.

However, Foucault’s first vignette gives way to his second. His is a genealogical argument tethered less to an idea of historical progress than to the possibility of change, of breaks in “the order of things” (Foucault 1971). For Foucault, the archive reveals the emergence of disciplinary forms that unfold primarily at the level of the state—a noticeable shift from body to soul. But as his essay “Governmentality” (Foucault 1991) stresses, this shift is not one of succession, from the body to the soul, but one of blending together, an ever-shifting relationship among sovereignty, discipline, and governance (Moore 2005: 29). MS-13 and its ministries evidence as much. In postwar Guatemala, punishment as spectacle coincides with mundane efforts at reforming the prisoner from the inside out. The

only difference is that nonstate actors now do the work of the state. Freelancing charismatic and Pentecostal ministers funded by international aid organizations secure the self, while members of Barrio Dieciocho execute members of MS-13, and vice versa. The only thing that the Guatemalan government seems to provide is a theater for this moral drama, meaning the prison.<sup>9</sup>

Yet this new relationship between space and security, this inward turn by way of gang ministry, tends to obfuscate the place of the body with a mounting concern for the soul. Growing interest and support for gang ministry, increased optimism over incarcerated gang members' ability to watch themselves, blur the corporality of it all as well as the fact that no one is watching. Prisoners, as I have already mentioned, do not decapitate fellow prisoners without more than just a little lack of oversight. So as the language of security throughout the Americas continues to lean toward the terrain of the self, celebrating so-called integrated approaches as opposed to a history of suppressive antigang policies, it is important to keep in mind the cultural work that such a shift accomplishes. While certainly not a zero-sum game, the emergence of the self as a viable terrain on which to secure the Americas does distract, even if it does not displace, a concern for the historical and material conditions that have contributed to the rise of MS-13—as well as an empathetic cry for those men and women “green-lighted” (marked for death) amid all of this talk of the self. In fact, although a human rights case could be made against those who ordered Gustavo's transfer, and charges brought against those who moved these men from one prison to another, prison chaplains, along with Central American and North American governments, tend to remain concerned for Gustavo's heart—even at the expense of his body. This, to borrow the language (but probably not the logic) of Pastors Morales and Allende, is the sin worth exposing (Stern 1998).

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