

HIP HOP IS NOT DEAD: THE EMERGENCE OF MARA SALVATRUCHA RAP AS A FORM OF MS-13 EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

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This essay asserts that the hip hop culture of the transnational street gang, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), helps to account for how the gang and its members consolidate their identities within their marginalized community. This impoverished and peripheral sector of the population produces a kind of rap whose style of music and lyrics seek to represent a misrepresented and often vilified gang culture. The outside depictions of the gang emanate from film, television and news programs, magazine articles and other kinds of popular media, and they tend to look at the gang's acts of violence without taking into account the dreadful economic and social conditions that would lead teenagers across the Americas to willingly enter this very dangerous environment. In dismissing these origins, such articulations ignore the notion that MS-13 members rely on their gang for money, food, shelter, and a sense of belonging. Mara Salvatrucha rap draws from 80s and 90s West Coast gangsta rap in order to relate their own stories of growing up on the streets and surviving by any means necessary. This gang music reflects violence, poverty, and hardship while also asserting the notion that banding together as a community provides the only real protection from these societal ills. Furthermore, Mara Salvatrucha rap extends beyond the limits of Compton, Watts, or other localized environments, and spreads its narrative past the United States and on to Latin America. The audience hears about life on the streets of El Salvador and in the neighborhoods of Guatemala, in addition to inner city and suburban Los Angeles.

"No Message, Just Reality:" Gangsta Rap and Its Connection to Mara Salvatrucha Rap

In 2006, hip hop veteran Nas recorded a track whose title reflected what many in the rap community had been saying for nearly a decade: hip hop is dead. This may seem like an

unusual proclamation to those who have witnessed the proliferation of hip hop culture and rap on the radio and on music television over the last thirty years. This boom, however, is precisely the reason for the genre's death, in the rapper's opinion. Nas' thoughts on the perceived demise of rap are especially relevant considering his position as one of hip hop's icons. He released his first album, *Illmatic*, in 1994, at a time when rap music still held on to its modest roots. Around the same time, Tupac rapped about his mother coming to visit him in jail after an arrest incited by racial profiling; Public Enemy lyrically battled racist police procedures in some of the most underprivileged neighborhoods in the United States; and The Notorious B.I.G. reminisced how "birthdays were the worst days" since his mother had no money to buy presents. For Nas and many other hip hop artists, the last twenty years have seen a shift from these foundational concerns towards a more superficial set of themes. Today, mainstream rap has largely become a way to boast about monetary gain and material wealth, using toned down language that separates itself from the gritty, rough lyrics associated with the social protest rap of the late 80s and early 90s. Alongside this new superficiality, Nas' criticism of what rap has become lashes out against commercialization, technological over-production, and "studio gangsters," or rappers who claim to be gangsters in the recording of albums, but who themselves came from middle-class, even affluent, upbringings with little or no first-hand knowledge of the violence and misery regularly occurring in the inner city. In his song, "Hip Hop is Dead," Nas asks "what influenced my raps? Stick ups and killings, kidnappings, project buildings, drug dealings." This street narrative has largely changed, moving from "turntables to mp3s, from *Beat Street* [1984 movie about hip hop culture] to commercials on Mickey D's, from gold cables to Jacobs [Marc Jacobs, fashion designer], from plain facials to Botox and face lifts." According to Nas, rap has lost its edge, and it has separated itself from its roots.

Cultural critics outside of the commercial rap industry either tend to agree with Nas or believe that although a slow pulse remains, hip hop is certainly taking its last breathes. Tricia Rose argues that the genre may not be dead, but that "it is gravely ill" (ix). For her, many of the concerns underscored by the Nas song mentioned above contribute in large part to the sickness. She points out that the "commercialized manufacturing of ghetto street life" and "the terms of the commercial mainstream" detract from an artistic expression that once served as "a locally

inspired explosion of exuberance and political energy tethered to the idea of rehabilitating community” (Rose ix, xi). But what if such a community still exists, one that has been all but destroyed by decades of alienation, deportation, exile, and unimaginable violence? And what if this same community produced a kind of hip hop that returned to the idea of neighborhood rehabilitation and unity, not as a means to sell records or promote their brand, but because such rebuilding is necessary in the face of annihilation? In such a situation, the bold claims of running guns, slanging drugs, and protecting your own would less represent a case of constructed braggadocio, and more signify a statement of the very kind of “love of community, creativity, affirmation and resistance” that Rose, Nas, and various others believe are disappearing from contemporary hip hop (Rose ix).

As Tony Mitchell points out in the introduction to his edited volume, *Global Noise*, it may be necessary to look beyond the United States to find this kind of environment—one which proves that hip hop is showing strong signs of life outside of the recording studio (3). Many communities across the Americas today experience similar kinds of social obstacles as those lived by conscious rap pioneers in the 80s and 90s, and likewise, these community members also seek an expressive space in which to represent the difficulty of day-to-day life. Criminalization, racism, poverty, and cyclical incarceration continue to plague the streets of some of the most populated cities in both North and Central America; as such, the expressive desire takes a necessarily urban form. For example, the transnational street gang Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, may extend across dozens of countries in contemporary society, but their origin rests in early 1980s inner city Los Angeles, the breeding ground for a number of classic gangsta rap groups. This article argues that this impoverished and peripheral sector of the population still produces a kind of rap that remains true to those hip hop artists who felt that their style of music and lyrics sought to represent a misunderstood, sometimes ignored, and often vilified gang culture. This gang is demonized in documentaries such as *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* (National Geographic, 2006), in Cary Fukunaga’s film *Sin nombre* (2009), or in the countless television reports and newspaper and magazine articles that have documented the rise of MS-13 over the course of the last two decades. In these and countless other examples, the gang is depicted as blood-thirsty and barbaric, seldom focusing on their

origin, or the social and economic conditions that would force teenagers across the Americas to look to MS-13 as their only hope for survival. In ignoring these critical points of origin, the gang is represented as an agent of chaos and belligerence, whose behavior exists only to upset and even destroy the social order. Mara Salvatrucha hip hop reflects violence, yes, but it also articulates the poverty and hardship that this marginalized community experiences, while also asserting the notion that banding together as a group provides the only real protection from these many societal ills that threaten to wipe them out.

In the same vein as N.W.A., Tupac, and Ice-T, MS-13 rappers talk about life on the streets of El Salvador and in the neighborhoods of Guatemala, in addition to inner city and suburban Los Angeles. And so, the rap produced by Mara Salvatrucha members includes guns, drive-bys, and a defiance of police and other state run authority structures, not in an attempt to seem hard in order to sell more singles, but because such rebellion and illicit behavior has become an integral part of the community rehabilitation process, and more importantly, survival.

The videos that accompany many of the MS-13 rap songs perpetuate the same gang aesthetic started thirty years ago by Los Angeles-based West Coast rappers, and even earlier by Mexican and Chicano gangsters, *cholos* and *pachucos*, whose influence had been felt in Los Angeles since the 1930s. They show cars on hydraulics, added to make the vehicle bounce up and down. The rappers wear different color bandanas, sports jerseys, and sag their jeans well below their waists. Even the construction of the song, from the production side, reflects the influence of West Coast gangsta rap. They use similar beats, and like their Blood and Crip-related musical inspirations, they cannot rely on the expensive technology that Nas so vehemently opposes. Mara Salvatrucha members cannot pay for the expensive equipment, the multi-million dollar recording studios, or any of the other polishing methods that, Nas would argue, make contemporary mainstream rap songs sound artificial. Mara Salvatrucha rap is a grassroots endeavor, raw, mainly because the gang uses the same rudimentary tools that were available to rap performers more than three decades ago.

Yet, although the influence of gangsta rap is evident, there is an original narrative that comes out through MS-13 lyrics and beats, one expressing a specifically Mara Salvatrucha

reality. In some cases, traditional gangsta rap themes and language are recoded to better fit the MS-13 culture; in others, a new set of symbols are incorporated, pulling from a Mara Salvatrucha language that is also seen in their tattoos and graffiti. Both the influence of, and the break from, gangsta rap results in an in-group form of expression whose main aim is to create a representation of the gang in its own terms, with minimal interpolation, interference or intrusion of non-gang members. MS-13 rap epitomizes a self-representative narrative, where the artists formulate the messages in a way that they, as in-group members, believe best identifies their culture. The following analysis will look at the various ways in which Mara Salvatrucha rap negotiates the creation of this identity through its lyrics and music, in a general sense. More specifically, by focusing on one particular song, “La mara anda suelta” (“Mara Salvatrucha Running Wild”), it will become apparent that a strong autochthonous and self-representative discourse drives this rap music. Hip hop is not dead. It is alive and well, flourishing in one of the most marginalized and feared communities in the world.

“La mara anda suelta:” “Mara Salvatrucha Running Wild” and the Narrative Mobilization of the Mara Nation

While conducting fieldwork in El Salvador and Los Angeles, I first dedicated my time in MS-13 communities to researching the gang’s visual expressive culture, mainly their tattoos and graffiti. And yet, as interested as I was in the ways in which they represented their histories and beliefs in a graphic way, I could not help but notice the important role that music played in their lives. In the months that I spent interviewing gang members, taking pictures of their ink work, and walking through San Salvador neighborhoods looking for MS-13 graffiti, the steady beat of a synthesized bass drum played constantly wherever I went. Of course, this did not come as a surprise. After all, most of the gang members that I spoke with were youngsters, as passionate about their favorite kind of music as any other nineteen year old, anywhere else in the world. What *was* shocking, however, was the kind of hip hop that I overwhelmingly heard. On one hand, whether in Soyapango, El Salvador, or the Pico/Union area of Los Angeles, 90s gangster rap, and performers like Tupac and N.W.A. dominated these gang members’ playlists, either on CD or cassette tape. On the other hand, they also listened to a hip hop that I had not previously

heard. It was in Spanish with English words sprinkled in. The production value of this music was low, making me believe that the songs that they listened to were more underground than the work of more popular, mainstream rap performers. And yet, the message made up for its lack of polish with a strong lyrical quality, tersely and aggressively narrating varying street experiences. (See song and video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSCGaMpSDI0>)

“La mara anda suelta” translates into English as “Mara Salvatrucha Running Wild.” A first listening reaffirms the idea of the modest production values, as the low sound quality of the song stands out. The voices, in places, are muffled and difficult to understand, and the music gives the impression of distance; the beat sounds far off, almost quiet. This is a common West Coast hip hop beat, reminiscent of the Los Angeles, gangsta rap beats heard on albums by artists such as N.W.A., Ice Cube, and Snoop Doggy Dog. West Coast beats are often characterized by a slow, deep bass beat on either side of a quick snare drum beat, repeated in a loop. Bridging these beats, a synthesizer-created violin instrumental weaves in and out, connecting the drum sounds in order to complete the track that the rappers sing over. The music in “La mara anda suelta” follows this pattern closely, and seems almost anachronistic in this day of high-tech beat creators and sampling machines. There are a number of possible reasons why this particular beat-style was chosen. The resemblance to early 90s gangsta rap music could be a way to establish a link to their adopted Southern California neighborhoods and the pride that the rappers have for their own community. After all, Mara Salvatrucha began in Los Angeles in the early 80s, and West Coast rap served as an influence to the rapper’s own formation as an artist. In a rap industry that today still feels the clash between East and West Coast hip hop, using this kind of music and beat highlights the pride felt for the Los Angeles rap-style, and therefore affirms respect for their particular *barrio* (otherwise known as “repping your block”).

Secondly, this beat may reflect the modest means available to the rapper when producing a song of this nature, one that so blatantly and controversially discusses the Mara Salvatrucha way of life. Contemporary rap relies on very expensive machinery—drum machines, Auto Tune sound processors, complex sound boards, computer equipment, and libraries of thousands of songs from which producers take samples. Perhaps the construction of this

particular song occurred in a way that such equipment was not available. It is also important to note that there is no definitive way of ascertaining the identity of the two rappers on the song. This anonymity is due, in large part, to the fact that the lyricists' affiliation with MS-13 makes them automatic criminals, as well as targets to rival gangs. Turning to a more modern recording studio, with state of the art technology, could incite unwanted exposure to their self-incriminating music, not to mention an escalated cost that perhaps they cannot afford. The risk of arrest or retaliation would force the rapper to resort to alternative, cheaper, and less-exposed forms of recording. This includes a simple drum machine owned by an MS-13 brother, or a vocal recorded into a microphone directly connected to a laptop. In either case, the production value and musical production process must become simplified, and the final track turns out rough and gritty, lacking the polish of a more processed hip hop song.

Additionally, a basic, underwhelming beat draws attention away from the music and focuses the listener's ears onto the lyrics, which appear in full at the end of this article. As the Wu-Tang Clan rapped in their 1997 single "Triumph," "the dumb are mostly intrigued by the drum," implying that a more refined listener should concentrate on the words, and not the beat, in order to fully appreciate the delivered message. The modest beat in "La mara anda suelta" is not the key element of the song; the narrative is. And this narrative is clearly about Mara Salvatrucha. True, the slang and jargon may be difficult to understand for someone not versed in MS-13 terminology, but the references to the gang are not encoded in the symbols and cryptic combinations of signs and images prevalent in Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti. A close analysis of these lyrics demonstrates that this is an overt, and not encrypted, representation of an MS-13 lexicon:

Póngase trucha que ahí vienen los salvas
 Caminando despacio por la cuadra...
 Si joden con la mara les sumen las nalgas...
 La mara para, viola, y controla
 Desde Los Ángeles hasta el penal Mariona...
 Mira, para, ya llegó la mara...
 Somos Mara Salvatrucha

Y a las chavalas las matamos...

In the first set of lines quoted above, “los salvas” stands for a shortened form of the word Salvatrucha. The term “mara” is generic slang for “gang” in Central America, yet the combination of the word “mara” with the word “salvas,” as it appears on the track, clearly indicates a reference to Mara Salvatrucha. Later, the second rapper clearly states “somos Mara Salvatrucha” (“we are Mara Salvatrucha”) eliminating any doubt as to the ambiguity of the word “mara.” The rapper’s affiliation with the gang is clear, as the use of the first-person plural verb form “somos” accentuates this rapper’s membership in the gang. Likewise, all of the cities that are mentioned in the song have a strong Mara Salvatrucha presence:

Desde Los Ángeles hasta el penal Mariona...

Manos arriba Santa Ana

Manos arriba San Salvador

Manos arriba San Miguel

Manos arriba todito El Salvador

For example, the song mentions Los Angeles, California, the gang’s birthplace. Likewise, Santa Ana, El Salvador, is an important city to mention because it is a battleground for the war between Mara Salvatrucha and one of their principal rivals, the 18th Street Gang (la 18). Santa Ana is also the location of Apanteos Jail, the site of one of the worst jail riots in modern history, with MS-13 and la 18 at the center of the violence. The pictures of beheadings and body mutilations that occurred during Apanteos Jail riots have circulated on the internet for the last five years. Additionally, “el penal Mariona” is another Salvadoran prison that holds hundreds of Mara Salvatrucha members from all over Central America. The lyrics also mention San Miguel, El Salvador, where the gang has large cliques and the country’s capital, San Salvador. Besides “repping” MS-13, in other words honoring these cities with Mara Salvatrucha contingencies, listing Los Angeles, Santa Ana, San Miguel, and San Salvador in the lyrics speaks to the transnational nature of the gang. The rapper reinforces the idea that Mara Salvatrucha is not a simple, localized gang, but instead a global organization that controls neighborhoods across all of the Americas.

Although these places mentioned *do* refer to geographic locations, the rapper does not affirm any kind of political or national loyalty, leaving the impression that the lyrics underscore the gang's separation from such affiliations. It is important that the song mentions the Mariona prison along with all of the cities. Prison typically represents a non-place in terms of nationality, a structure that houses all of those people that have been separated from normative society because of their crimes. In this song, however, the rapper includes and embraces his incarcerated brothers as citizens of his Mara Nation, asking them to hold their hands up high. Therefore, the rappers do not acknowledge these cities and locations because of some sense of national or civic pride, in any political sense, but instead because of the influence and power that the gang asserts in these urban spaces. “Desde Los Ángeles hasta el penal Mariona, claro simón los reyes de la zona;” that is to say, from Los Angeles to Mariona Prison, Mara Salvatrucha is king. In this way, they are showing disdain, even irreverence, towards these geographic, political, and social structures, and the authority figures that best exemplify them. For example, after the initial gunshots that start the track, and the introduction of the beat, a rapper speaks as the song initially progresses. He asks: “¿Qué pasó manita?” (“What happened little hand?”). This may be a reference to the *mano dura* policy of dealing with gangs that has become the law of the land in Central American countries dealing with elevated levels of gang violence. Literally translated as “hard hand,” a more appropriate English equivalent would be “heavy hand,” “strong arm,” or “iron fist.” The *mano dura* approach entails arresting any citizen suspected of having gang links, regardless of the lack of evidence. In order to apprehend these suspects, heavily armed paramilitary troops sweep entire neighborhoods in acts tantamount to urban warfare, often with collateral casualties resulting from the very violent crackdowns. Once arrested, the suspect's legal rights are often suspended, as the trial procedure is expedited in order to get the alleged perpetrators to prison as soon as possible.

The term “*mano dura*” is supposed to instill fear and create apprehension in gang members. Yet, the rapper refers to the program as “*manita*,” stripping the policy of its ominous and somber intended interpretation. The lyrics make fun of the policy by snubbing its alleged importance through the use of the diminutive “-ita” ending. Furthermore, the artist asks, “¿Qué pasó?,” literally “what happened” or “how's it going.” Or to translate the question in a more

colloquial, slang way, the lyricist sarcastically wonders “What happened little hand?” The *mano dura* policy had the initial intention of dramatically curtailing gang activity in Central America, and yet the lyrics of this song clearly indicate that Mara Salvatrucha is still active and influential. The rapper is asking, in a snide register, what happened to the alleged goal of stopping MS-13. He disrespects the effectiveness of this transnational policy and its ability to curb the gang violence that is taking over hundreds of Central American neighborhoods. In the war between the Mara Nation and El Salvador, the rapper impudently asserts, Mara Salvatrucha has the upper hand. Despite their aggressive, anti-gang stance, MS-13’s enemies “se van de espalda.” They turn their backs and run off. “Si joden con la mara les sumen las nalgas,” or “if anyone fucks with Mara Salvatrucha, the gang jump on their asses.” “Si tienes pantalones luego tendrás faldas;” in other words, if you wore pants before challenging Mara Salvatrucha, afterwards you leave wearing a skirt, emasculated.

These lyrics challenge the state program and, in a direct way, the state’s policies towards the gang by sneering at its attempted tough position. The song ridicules the Salvadoran government, essentially calling them weak in the face of Mara Salvatrucha, feminizing them, in a misogynistic slur aimed to accentuate their impotence. This feminization of the gang’s rivals could also come into play with an alternative interpretation of the word *manita*. Perhaps the term is a shortening of the word “hermanita” (little sister). That is to say, the rapper is calling his opponents little girls, a slur that is consistent with the way in which his enemies are characterized throughout the song. Regardless of either interpretation, in this battle and within the context of this song, the artist clearly argues for the superiority of the Mara Nation.

The second rapper in “La mara anda suelta,” who begins his section of the song after the second chorus, extends the display of Mara Salvatrucha pride and victory by way of discussing the armory of weapons available to the gang. He states that the gang has enough guns to compete with the paramilitary groups, as they are “bien armados” with “granadas y cuchillas,” or well-armed against the *mano dura* attacks, boasting grenades and knives. He is ready to attack anyone who moves against his gang, in militaristic fashion, including “el presidente” (“Mi AK-47 no te miente... / Y no me importa si me llevo al presidente”). This is another assault on the political structure that persists beyond the Mara Nation. His AK-47 assault rifle is ready to

“llevar,” or take out anyone who opposes the gang, regardless of political position or presumed authority. Although the definite article “al” designates specificity, *not* naming which president or what country the president governs implies ambiguity, generality. In other words, he would be willing to kill any state head, in any nation, if this person or government intends to confront Mara Salvatrucha.

The first voice earlier affirms this military mentality, rapping “si hay un problema los arregla la escuadra.” The squadron is ready to fix any problem that arises in their neighborhood, presumably ready to use the grenades and other weapons at their disposal. This word, “escuadra,” alludes to an army of MS-13 members organized into squadrons, similar to a military unit, ready to attack anyone and certainly those *mano dura* paramilitary groups who oppose them in their communities. He does not say “clique,” “set,” “clicka,” “mis homies,” or any other form of slang traditionally associated with different Mara Salvatrucha cells. His use of the term “escuadra” is deliberate, insinuating that his own country, the Mara Nation, has its own section of enlisted soldiers ready to spill their blood in defense of their culture.

Indeed, much blood has been spilled in defense of this perceived Mara Nation. But unlike the soldiers in other politically recognized, official countries, MS-13 members do not have a Memorial Day holiday in order to honor their fallen, nor do they have an Arlington National Cemetery in which to bury their heroes. Instead, they must rely on their expressive culture to remember their dead. This is obvious in the many graveyard tattoos and graffiti tags that dominate the bodies of gangsters and the cement walls in the cities in which they live. Mara Salvatrucha rap serves as a similar act of remembrance, where soldiers, community icons, and father figures live on in a memory projected through the lyrics of a song.

For Pater and the Mara Nation: Testimony, Testimonio, MS-13 Rap, and the Act of Remembering

Despite all of the belligerence, the violence, and the murderous imagery, there persists the intrinsic need to express oneself, to relate a Mara Salvatrucha narrative that does not depend on secondary sources for legitimacy. This narrative necessarily manifests itself with a “testimonial” quality that John Hagedorn mentions in his own research on gangsta rap.

Hagedorn asserts that rap is a form of testimony for underclass urban residents and the gangs that flourish in their neighborhoods (98). It is a scarce opportunity for these residents to “tell it like it is,” so to speak, basing their stories on first-hand, witnessed events that many in the out-group are unaware of, or simply do not care about. Rap allows these urban youths to tell their stories, narrate their lives and the history of their community, and persevere in spite of the violence and misery. Rap becomes their means towards durability and permanence in a fleeting and often truncated life (98). Hagedorn uses the term outside of the academic realm of Latin American cultural studies, whose focus on *testimonio* attempts to resolve the problems of expression within communities at the margin. Yet, both the idea of testimony, as Hagedorn posits it, and *testimonio*, in a Latin American cultural studies sense, relate to this rap song, as well as to others centering on Mara Salvatrucha, in that they fulfill the necessity to vent, to let it out, particularly in a society where media and political representations attempt to drown out MS-13 voices with “the prevailing televised images of the city [that] have been incapable of going beyond the sensationalism and gruesomeness of murders, of assaults and armed robberies” (Martín Barbero 27).

And yet, “La mara anda suelta” is clearly not *testimonio*. John Beverley’s seminal article, “The Margin at the Center,” localizes *testimonio* within a written context, as “a novel or novella-length narrative in a book form” (25). Unlike “La mara anda suelta,” and its musical contribution to subaltern discourse, there have been a number of Latino-gang-related *testimonios* that take a more traditional, written approach, most notably *No nacimos pa’ semilla: La cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín*, by Alonso Salazar, and Luis J. Rodríguez’s *La vida loca: El testimonio de un pandillero en Los Ángeles*. These texts rely on Beverley’s traditional *testimonio* model where subjects unable to write for themselves relate their stories to an interlocutor who later transcribes the stories into a book. Although they are not written, bound, and printed, tracks such as the one produced by the rapper in “La mara anda suelta” do fall into what Beverley calls “testimonio-like texts” which have existed at the “margin” for decades (25). These forms of discourse represent “in particular those subjects—the child, the ‘native,’ the woman, the insane, the criminal—excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking or writing for themselves” (25). Therefore, although not

specifically *testimonio*, “La mara anda suelta,” and other Mara Salvatrucha rap songs like it, share in the longing for self-expression in an autochthonous and in-group manner, and from the position of marginality. It is logical to connect Beverley’s thoughts on the exclusion of authoritative representation to MS-13 since they are predominantly a community of young people (“the child”), many claim indigenous ethnic roots (“the ‘native’”), they live *la vida loca* (“the insane”), and their illegal activities have been well-documented for two and a half decades (“the criminal”). Accordingly, “La mara anda suelta” desires an “other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Laub 68). This is why, interlaced within all of the violent imagery and threats, the rapper demands that the listener hear what he is saying. The chorus of the song, repeated throughout the track asks, even commands the listener to “fijense / mírenme / óiganme / escúchenme.” The voice wants the listeners to hear him, watch him, pay attention to what he is saying, and above all, he wants them to really listen to his message.

Before all of the rough and aggressive vocals, the main rapper speaks above the beat with an opening dedication to “Pater,” beginning the song with “ésta va para vos hijo de puta. Ojalá que Dios te tenga en la Gloria, papá” (“This song is for you, Pater, son of a bitch. May God keep you in his glory, *papá*”). This track is dedicated to Pater, who the rapper speaks to directly, a probable member of Mara Salvatrucha who lost his life living *la vida loca*. In order to offset the flashes of MS-13 carcasses lying in pools of their own blood, commonly shown in news broadcasts around the world, this song reconstructs the memory of a person who may have otherwise been forgotten, and if not, most certainly vilified for his involvement with Mara Salvatrucha. The rapper addresses “the anguish of one’s memories” by calling to Pater, and by honoring his life in this song. In this way, “La mara anda suelta” “affirms and recognizes” the “realness” of a person lost to this militant and dangerous way of life.

Furthermore, the name “Pater,” most likely a nickname given to the gangster after joining MS-13, draws from the Latin word for “father.” This nomenclature, at once, recalls other terms: *Paterfamilias*, *Pater Noster*, and *padre*. In other words, the dedication honors a fallen Mara Salvatrucha member who was a father figure within the rapper’s own MS-13 community. This is further confirmed when the vocalist calls him “papá,” at the end of his dedication. By

itself, the word “papá” can signify “dude,” “friend,” or “pal.” When combined with the gang name “Pater,” however, the meaning moves from a simple synonym for “buddy” towards a patriarchal, fatherly designation that underscores the fallen comrade’s role in this specific Mara Salvatrucha community. This rapper has lost a father, an important family member who most likely had an enormous amount of influence on the artist, as well as his specific MS-13 clique. This dedication attempts to perpetuate the memory of this key member of the in-group, immortalizing him in a song that now appears on some of the most viewed video websites in the world, including YouTube. Thousands of people can now access “Pater” whenever they want—an act of remembrance that clashes against the fleeting, dehumanizing, and sensationalized “prevailing televised images” of murders and the murdered.

Conclusions

“La mara anda suelta” represents a distinctly Mara Salvatrucha narrative that originates directly from the MS-13 culture, one that does not allow itself to take a secondary role to a more official, authoritative depiction. Although both out-group and in-group representations of the gang may share in violence, crime, and death, the rap recorded in the Mara Salvatrucha community attempts a completely different message than the kind diffused by the media. They are not just a street gang. They are not a bunch of kids with guns looking to terrorize the world for the sake of urban and social destruction. Both rappers in the song indicate that they have a distinct aim with their violence. They are first and foremost a family, with father figures and influential members who inspire and motivate their actions. Secondly, they are an army, trained, armed, and primed for battle when any threat from the out-group arises. Sick and tired of losing their culture and kin, they are willing to defend this family, and the Mara Nation, in any way possible. This is their life, in their own words. And so, hip hop is not dead. We just need to know where to look.

Appendix**Lyrics for “La mara anda suelta”**

Pa’ que respeten hijos de puta.

Te dije que iba a hacer esta canción, hijo de puta.

¿Qué pasó “manita”?

Tranquilo.

“Pater”, esta va para vos hijo de puta.

Ojalá que Dios te tenga en la Gloria, papá.

Fíjense, mírenme, díganme, escúchenme.

Porque la mara anda suelta.

Póngase trucha que ahí vienen los salvas

Caminando despacio por la cuadra.

Sus enemigos se van de espalda

Y si hay un problema los arregla la escuadra.

Calma, calma, calma.

Si joden con la mara les sumen las nalgas.

Calma, calma, calma.

Si tienes pantalones luego tendrás faldas.

La mara para, viola y controla desde Los Ángeles hasta el penal Mariona.

Claro simón los reyes de la zona,

Y el que no lo piense así que me pele la mona.

Manos arriba Santa Ana.

Manos arriba San Salvador.

Manos arriba San Miguel.

Manos arriba todito El Salvador.

Fíjense, mírenme, óiganme, escúchenme, cuídense.

¿Sabes por qué?

Porque la mara anda suelta.

Mira, para, ya llegó la mara.

¿Dónde están esas chavalas que no dan la cara?

La cosa es simple y sencilla:

En esta tienda no se espía.

Estamos bien armados con trabuco, granadas y cuchillas,

Y ondillas.

Somos Mara Salvatrucha

Y a las chavalas las matamos.

Y la jura controlamos.

Si se pasan por los homeboy los tumbamos.

Mi AK-47 no te miente

Por traer la panocha en la frente.

Y no me importa si me llevo al presidente.

Porque con las dos letras no se juega ni se miente.

¿Quién dijo miedo?

“Mara Salvatrucha Running Wild”

(Translated by Patricia Arroyo-Calderón, Alejandro Jacky and Steven Tobin)

Respect, sons of a bitches.

I told you I was gonna write this song, son of a bitch.

What happened, “little hand”?

Take it easy.

This song is for you, Pater, son of a bitch.

May God keep you in his glory, *papá*.

Pay attention, look at me, tell me, listen to me.

Because Mara Salvatrucha is running wild.

Liven up, Mara Salvatrucha is coming,
Walking slowly down the block.
Their enemies turn their backs and run off.
The squadron is ready to fix any problem.
Keep calm, calm, calm.
If anyone fucks with Mara Salvatrucha, the gang jumps on their asses.
Keep calm, calm, calm.
If you wore pants before, afterwards you leave wearing a skirt.
The gang stops, rapes, and controls
From Los Angeles to Mariona Prison.
Mara Salvatrucha is king,
And if anyone disagrees, they can jerk me off.
Hold 'em high Santa Ana.
Hold 'em high San Salvador.
Hold 'em high San Miguel.
Hold 'em high all of El Salvador.
Pay attention, look at me, hear me, listen to me, watch out.
You know why?
Because Mara Salvatrucha is running wild.

Look, stop, the gang is here.
Where are all those pussies not willing to show their faces hiding?
It's clear and simple:
In here we don't stand for snitches.
We are well armed with guns, grenades, and knives,
And slingshots.
We are Mara Salvatrucha
And we kill the pussies.

And we control the police.
 If they mess around with the *homeboys*, we take them down.
 My AK-47 does not lie
 If you front like a pussy.
 And I don't care if I kill the president.
 'Cause you don't fool around or lie to the MS.
 We ain't scared!

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