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Horacio N. Roque Ramírez
University of California

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In Transnational Distance: Translocal Gay Immigrant Salvadoran Lives in Los Angeles

Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



IN TRANSNATIONAL DISTANCE:

TRANSLOCAL GAY IMMIGRANT SALVADORAN LIVES IN LOS ANGELES

Horacio N. Roque Ramírez
University of California

As we approach the closing of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we take transnational relations for granted. Latinos and Latinas in the United States, especially those only one generation removed from immigrant families, live day in and day out the realities, challenges, and opportunities of transnational existence. When we email our friends in Mexico or Honduras in the daytime from our school library or in the middle of the night from our school dormitory rooms, or when we send our monthly \$50, \$100, or \$200 remesas (remittances) to our blood families in El Salvador or Colombia, we are transnational global citizens reshaping the nation state, shifting the meanings of culture and identity, and participating in new economic relations of opportunity and survival. Always mediated by the meanings our class position, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexuality have both “here” and “there,” the transnationalities we make as we email, wire money, and support our families in at least two locations are vibrant new formations of cultural identity. The border crossings we do virtually, monetarily, and physically take us to new spaces for both collective and individual identification. In these new spatial relations, sexuality and erotic desires find new planes for meanings and possibilities.

“In the distance” speaks to the separation and connections between two or more sites or locations. In this essay I address the

transnational space between El Salvador and Los Angeles, but also the distances between two individuals, the broad transnational continuum of “Salvadoranness” or Salvadoran identity alongside a public gay identity. As I argue, that distance does not require two geographically distant places, what we assume the transnational entails, but what can take form in a relatively contained region (such as Los Angeles, or even the space of a neighborhood or a nightclub). In these different locations, quite close or very far away from each other physically, distance can be quite structured, as is the case when a gay *salvadoreño* may not be able to be close to his family in El Salvador because of economic limitations or legal status. But distance can also be seen as necessary; the same gay *salvadoreño* may actually benefit from or prefer the distance (with or without economic or legal factors structuring it), in that he is able to live his individual life more fully—in terms of erotic or sexual expression—away from the family and its demands and expectations. Based on ethnographic, oral history, informal conversations, and participant observation research between 2002 and 2003, this essay discusses different forms of transnational distance in the lives of gay immigrant Salvadoran men in Los Angeles. My discussion builds on scholarship on sexual migrations, Salvadoran transnationalism, and LGBT/“queer” studies broadly defined. First I discuss the foundational work of the late gay Chicano sociologist Lionel Cantú, Jr. (1965-2002) on gay Mexican immigrant men, and its relationship

to gay Salvadoran immigrant life in Los Angeles. I then address several features of transnationalism and globalization as they relate to gay Salvadoran immigrant men. Third, I focus on the lives of two gay immigrant *salvadoreños*, and conclude with further questions on the relationship among transnationalism, gay sexualities, and gay Latinos.

MEXICAN AND SALVADORAN SEXUAL MIGRATIONS: PUTTING THE BODY BACK ON THE STRUCTURE

Based on his research in the 1990s, Cantú identified four distinct but intersecting factors impacting gay Mexican immigrant communities in Southern California.¹ First, he noted the major demographic changes in the region, the consistent increase in the number of Latinos, particularly *mexicanos*. After Mexico City, Los Angeles is the city with the greatest number of Mexicans in the world. This ever growing presence of Latinos is important not only for demographic strength, but for what it can mean in terms of political representation but also access to health education and relevant knowledge about HIV and AIDS. This demographic strength also means that we can identify large gay Latino populations in the region.

Secondly, Cantú noted the extensive commodification of queer Latino sexualities, the representational discourses of a hyper-masculinized Latino male gender and sexuality. This commodification takes shape through the hyper-visibility of the prototypical male brown body in mainstream gay magazines; in dance club advertising (fliers announcing “Latin nights”); in media selling cultural events such as pride festivities; and in the internet (“latinboys.com,” “latinjocks.com”). This racialized and sexualized gay advertising takes place at the same time gay Latinos have little other political or cultural representation.² There are hardly any competing discourses to these dominant ones of a Latino “hegemonic masculinity” (in the words of Robert Connell), and these barely make a presence in the public sphere.³ This commodification is directed to all who wish to consume such images or bodies: white, Latino, and all others. A white-owned and controlled nightclub in West Hollywood, the gay “ghetto” in the L. A. region, may translate its English name into Spanish one night of the week to attract Latino patrons, but all those attracted to Latinos (expecting them to be there) may also be part of the mix. So, while commodification takes place regardless of who shows up, there is also the potential for some forms of intra-Latino community (even momentary or sporadic) to take form through these specialized events. Latino-owned and controlled discursive spaces (magazines, fliers) and physical sites (bars and nightclubs) commodify just as much, so it would be erroneous to draw a false binary between “Latino control = positive representation” and “non-Latino control = negative representation” of the gay Latino body in Los Angeles.

Third, Cantú noted the institutionalization or mainstreaming of both the gay and Chicano movements. Several books have laid out convincing arguments on the growing reliance of queer and Latino visibility and the discourse of rights on consumer capitalism.⁴ This mainstreaming of gay and Chicano or Latino movements facilitates “visibility” and “rights” for some more than for others,

and generally more so for the professional middle class, and for members whose entry into the mainstream is less challenging of the respective status quo. In the gay/lesbian mainstream, white bodies and culture are front and center; in the Latino mainstream, it is the heterosexually framed and assumed bodies of women and men. For those finding themselves in the intersecting silences of these mainstream representations, the challenges for becoming visible are that much greater. Finally, Cantú noted the growth of HIV prevention programs targeting the Latino gay and bisexual men, and the “MSM” (men who have sex with men). While this growth of the HIV industry has taken place in relation to the presence of HIV and AIDS in the lives of these men, one of the consequences has been the inability of most community organizing to take place outside of the ongoing HIV and AIDS epidemics.

Structurally, immigrant *salvadoreños* face similar conditions as those outlined by Cantú for gay *mexicanos*. First, *salvadoreños* are also part of ongoing demographic shift with the rise of a Latino majority. There was an estimated 200,000 strong Salvadoran population in the Los Angeles County by 2000, likely many more

when we account for all of the undocumented.⁵ This strong and growing demographic profile means that gay *salvadoreños* can and do identify one another within their national communities. This simultaneously national and sexual identification takes place in the streets (especially in areas with high concentrations of the population, in the Pico-Union District near Downtown L.A., or since the 1980s in Van Nuys in the San Fernando Valley); in “straight” bars and nightclubs in these same areas where

the negotiation of gender and sexual codes can lead to encounters or ongoing relations; in small neighborhood businesses; and in the dozens of gay bars and nightclubs catering to Latinos throughout the greater L.A. basin.

Secondly, gay *salvadoreños* are part of the commodification of sexuality Latino and non-Latino individuals, businesses, and non-profit agencies profit from. The pleasure industry (bars and nightclubs, sex clubs and bathhouses, sex shops and bookstores, internet sites and video pornography) commodifies through the images in fliers and ads depicting and promising sweaty brown bodies as their products. This multi-million dollar industry is mostly white-owned but employs a diverse population that includes Latinos (gay and not) in most lower-paid positions: bartenders, bar backs, bathhouse cleaning staff, D.J.s, club promoters, and sex workers. Gay *salvadoreños* are also consumers and part of the diverse labor force of sustaining the industry, though they are not necessarily able to maneuver for better working conditions beyond what owners need allow. As one of the most recent gay Latino immigrant populations in this large industry, gay *salvadoreños* encounter more challenges than second- or later-generation gay *mexicanos* or Chicanos with more networks to access better working or professional opportunities.

Third, gay *salvadoreños* too face the mainstreaming of both gay and Latino social movements around rights and citizenship broadly defined. As more recent arrivals to the U.S., Salvadorans have one less social field (that of organized collective protest) to use for

creating identity and visibility to mobilize for better living and working conditions. As Beth Baker-Cristales has argued about the Salvadoran immigrant community in Los Angeles and its transnational ties, by the late 1990s they had “replaced their previous class-based notions of collectivity with national-ethnic forms of social identity. Their conceptualizations of social relations, political change, and collectivity had changed in accordance with the general depoliticization of the public sphere and the attendant ascendancy of consumer culture in El Salvador.”⁶ For a gay *salvadoreño*, then, the rise of consumer culture in both immigrant social identity and a gay one signify a less politically engaged position in Los Angeles and transnationally. Finally, like all Latino gays, gay *salvadoreños* have a relationship to the AIDS service industry, because they too experience the ongoing epidemic. Still, there has yet to be any focused research that takes into consideration immigration and legal status, year of arrival, and

and protecting themselves or their partners. Fourthly, while the gay and Latino movements may have entered the mainstream, the transnational labor movements linking El Salvador and Los Angeles have not expired, and many Salvadoran workers (some gay and lesbian) are active participants therein. Recognizing this facet of a gay or lesbian Salvadoran immigrant suggests that a gay immigrant’s life does not necessarily revolve primarily around her or his sexuality, but around his identity as an immigrant worker in a global city.

Finally, like other non-Mexican “Latino minority” populations in Los Angeles, gay *salvadoreños* face invisibility in the context of the Mexican and Chicano majority. This overwhelming *mexicanidad* speaks to those gay *salvadoreños* wanting to and able “to pass” as Mexicans: being a minority within a minority (perhaps even within yet a third minority group: as gay, as Salvadoran-but passing as Mexican-even if

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national origin as they impact Salvadoran gay men at risk of HIV infection. Gay Salvadoran immigrant men are growingly visible in HIV agencies, as clients and workers, including some taking roles of leadership therein, but we still know very little about their specific needs.

Despite these commonalities between Mexican and Salvadoran gay immigrant men, there are significant differences. First, most gay *salvadoreños* arrived as refugees, whether they received this legal recognition from the U.S. government or not. This refugee history may mean that even when they are able to procure the means to return to El Salvador, previous family political history or involvement in the revolution can affect the ability to function transnationally. Disclosing their sexuality can only complicate an already challenging situation in terms of re-entering the national community given the stigmatization of queer sexualities, specifically of “un-manly” behaviors. Secondly, many Salvadoran immigrants experienced firsthand a culture of violence in El Salvador, either during the revolutionary period (as part of the military, as guerrilla forces, or as civilians), or in the aftermath when generalized poverty and a post-war climate of high crime continues to create a sense of civil and social insecurity. This culture of violence manifests itself violently transnationally in the cycles of Salvadoran gang formations in Los Angeles and in El Salvador. But the individual experience of violence also impacts the ability for many gay Salvadoran men to address two dimensions often interconnected: their gay sexuality, that is, in a positive, less stigmatized way, and their alcohol or drug use or abuse.

Thirdly, the legal status for a large proportion of gay *salvadoreños* remains in limbo. They remain under “temporary protected status” or TPS, the federally-given temporary protection from deportation that allows them to work without any political rights. This legal ambivalence creates a sense of insecurity, preventing some from seeking an education, learning English, or making any long-range plans. The insecurity about the future, or worse, a strong sense that the future remains insecure, can add frustration during the individual negotiations gay Salvadoran men make when having sex

a Mexican after all is still a minority group, especially in a gay context). This overwhelming *mexicanidad* is challenging for those retaining strong national ties, keeping social networks transnationally, and wishing for a gay Salvadoran identity. When national, historical, and linguistic cultures of gay *salvadoreños* are not reflected in HIV awareness materials, in magazines targeting gay Latinos (but read “Mexican” given the iconography and terminology privileged), they are simply made invisible. Thus, within gay Latino attempts to make the community visible, non-mexicano Latinos are generally erased.

TRANSNATIONALISM AND GLOBALIZATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Both geopolitical spaces gay immigrant *salvadoreños* experience in Los Angeles and in El Salvador come together through the reality of transnational life more than ever in the context of globalization. Transnationalism for Salvadorans is quite a “national reality” given the degree of exodus the population has experienced, with more than 1.2 out of nearly eight million leaving the country, the majority settling in the U.S. These transnational migrants continue to have impact on El Salvador; their identity in relation to those they left behind in El Salvador has shifted from one of “*hermano lejano*” or “brother abroad” to one of “*hermano mayor*,” literally, the “older brother,” speaking to the economic role immigrants play in keeping the Salvadoran economy afloat.⁷ But what takes place in El Salvador also impacts on the community outside the country. There is the historical immediacy of transnational ties, given that the mass exodus of Salvadorans took place only in the last two decades. The impact of events in El Salvador can revolve around natural disasters (such as earthquakes, whose effects can be quite “unnatural” if we consider governmental incompetence that exacerbates death and suffering). The impacts “there” can also be felt “here” when we consider that many Salvadoran families are de facto transnational: members live on both countries, often in several (in Guatemala and Canada, for example). So, a family medical emergency in any of these countries can have financial and emotional impact everywhere else, and can affect a member’s

decision to migrate from one place to another.

Transnationality in the everyday lives of gay immigrants revolves around additional dimensions. As time passes, gay immigrants in Los Angeles begin to develop a sense of rootedness in both locations: in El Salvador as their home country, and in Los Angeles as their new home. Rootedness in both suggests flexibility in determining which location will best respond to individual needs, hopes, and opportunities. This negotiation of place revolves around family, work or business opportunities, or the predilection for one place over the other in relation to quality of life. This sense of transnational connection can also happen in relation to sexuality, to gay Salvadoran immigrants' sense of freedom and opportunities for queer kinship. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner explains about Puerto Rican gay and lesbian transnational ties, a globalized activist identity too can form a bridge, in their case, between the island and the U.S.; in this bridging through political work, community organizers interpret both places belonging to them.⁸ Gay *salvadoreños* too can refuse having to choose between one home and another.

Gay immigrant experiences of bridging distances speak to what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "grassroots globalization," or "globalization from below."⁹ The process, he argues, involves democratization efforts across borders, in opposition or at least as alternatives to the means by which global powers seek global control. "Global power" speaks to corporations and the states and transnational alliances such as CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) closely aligned to these. Individuals' efforts from below, on the other hand, such as gay immigrant *salvadoreños* organizing back and forth, are de facto transnational, usually involving a third, often even a fourth party. Gay immigrant *salvadoreños* concerned with gay community and HIV education and AIDS services in El Salvador become involved in a transnational circuit of resources and ideas. A European nation, which has no large Salvadoran population, can fund an NGO (non-governmental agency) conducting HIV education in El Salvador. The NGO in turn taps into global databases for information, resources, and solidarity, including Salvadorans abroad. Globalizing from below in such a transnational frame, gay immigrants thus can stay connected to the homeland, even when privileged discourses (such as "LGBT") travel back and forth without necessarily referring to quite the same sexual expressions and meanings.

The other side of the transnational coin is just as real: while many want a sense of home and struggle to find it in both places, or at the very least in one, others are stuck in the middle with a deep sense of having nowhere to turn. As is the case for those under TPS, the immigrant legal limbo adds much to that sense of insecurity. Several researchers looking at how Salvadoran immigrants experience transnational geographies refer to this situation as "permanent temporariness."¹⁰ The uncertainty of where *salvadoreños* will be in one year or in five, because of state indecisions about granting permanent residency, exacerbates already tense negotiations between demands in El Salvador and in the U.S. These transnational demands prevent Salvadoran immigrants from establishing solid networks of support among themselves. They experience what Cecilia Menjívar aptly refers to as "fragmented ties."¹¹

TWO GAY SALVADOREÑOS: NATIONALITY, INTIMACY, AND SEXUALITY

In this permanent temporariness many gay *salvadoreños* experience, the fragmentation of transnational familial ties is not necessarily always seen in a negative light. Gay *salvadoreños* maneuver their work, social and family lives in different social and sexual geographies. "Francisco" (a pseudonym), for example, who had lived in the U.S. for more than a decade by the time I met him in 2002, was part of a network of gay centroamericanos, all employed in the service industry. Francisco had been living with a gay roommate for years, who eventually moved out but who remained a close friend.¹² Francisco's straight brother, who needed a place to stay, lived in the comfortable apartment Francisco had been renting for years in the Hollywood area. His brother and other family members (including his parents living in El Salvador) "knew" about his life, that he is gay, Francisco said, but it was a knowledge not usually discussed.

Francisco saw an opposition between being with his family (such as at birthday gatherings) and what he called his "lifestyle" (which he literally translated as "*estilo de vida*") and that revolved around his bartending job, the gym, and the social life with his close gay Central American friends). Having migrated from El Salvador after completing some college there, Francisco was a permanent resident, fully bilingual, and physically fit. As the only Latino bartender in an overwhelmingly white gay bar in West Hollywood, his exposed brown body was part of the draw. His part-time employment did not include health insurance, paid vacation, or any extensive breaks during working hours, especially when the bar was at its busiest. When the shift was over, he had relative freedom to socialize with anyone and to drink, bridging labor and leisure within the immediacy of the gay club. Francisco's income, combined hourly wages and good tips, allowed him to maintain a comfortable "lifestyle"; he was able to send name brand clothing to his relatives in El Salvador with regularity without having to go without.

Menjívar's work among Salvadorans in San Francisco challenged the assumption that all social ties among immigrants are supportive. This often romanticized notion, Menjívar noted, assumes that in structured conditions of poverty, legal limbo, and cultural alienation, immigrants always use their social ties for mutual support. In fact, quite the opposite is often the case, Menjívar argued, with the structural conditions that informal networks presumably mitigate actually impeding people from assisting one another in times of need.¹³ While immigrants may have the best intentions to support one another in whatever way possible, the reality of their economic situation prevents and frustrates their attempts for communal support.

Gay *salvadoreños* often live in relative poverty, living from check to check, as much as the trappings of a "lifestyle" would make it seem otherwise. Francisco did not live in poverty, and if he had lost his job, he likely would have been able to secure similar employment elsewhere. Within this relative sense of security, he recognized the need to support his fellow gay Central American friends: by giving the car-less rides to and from work, inviting each other for meals, or opening his apartment to any one of them who may need a place to stay momentarily. Francisco cherished the economic independence from his family, yet he re-created supportive kinship (a gay kinship) with the immediate and extended social network with fellow gay Central Americans. This is a kinship which had

other important roles to play around emotional support and cultural affirmation as Central American gay Latino immigrants in the global city.

As Francisco's experience demonstrates, the fragmentation of transnational ties has its specificity for gay immigrant *salvadoreños*. Often placed at an intersection of dislocation, gay *salvadoreños* are often in legal limbo, in culturally and politically marginal positions as gay men struggling to integrate their sexuality, their nationality, and their racial ethnic position in the U.S. either with or away from their blood families. My interviews with gay *salvadoreños* explored the dynamics they continued to juggle: their lives in El Salvador before immigration; the process of migration itself, and often return or circular migrations; life in the U.S., including how to negotiate culture, sexuality, politics; and what they believe the future may hold the longer they stay in the U.S. or the more convinced they become in wanting to return.

I focus now on one of the *salvadoreños* I interviewed, someone whose transnational experience speaks to the permanent temporariness described above. Omar Baños was in his late 20s at the time of the interview, of working poor background from the coastal region of La Libertad in El Salvador. First arriving in the mid-1980s as a result of his father's immigration ties to the U.S., he attended high school and college in L.A. Omar's father's first partner, his stepmother, migrated in the 1970s. She secured the U.S. citizenship that later facilitated Omar's and his father's coming to the U.S. This legal security helped Omar concentrate on school and part-time employment, a security that facilitated his return to El Salvador for two years after college. He has worked in Central American-specific and HIV-specific non-profit agencies in Los Angeles, and in the human rights LGBT organization in San Salvador. Through these experiences, Omar has continuously reflected on his relationship to these multiple locations: as a gay man in El Salvador and in Los Angeles; as a Salvadoran in Los Angeles; and as a Latino immigrant in the U.S. with regular travel back to El Salvador and throughout Latin America.

There are at least two geopolitical spaces Omar has negotiated: Los Angeles, with its multi-national gay Latino immigrant and non-immigrant communities; its expansive cultural and social queer worlds and geographies; and its ongoing AIDS epidemic; and El Salvador, with its post-war opportunities and conditions; its high rates of violence and crime; its economic, cultural, and political ties to the U.S.; and an incipient gay and lesbian human rights movement in the capital. In all these transnational negotiations, with half his blood family there and the other half in the U.S., Omar has searched for community space where he can belong.

Given his extensive social, cultural, and political networks in Los Angeles, and the certainty of his immigrant status as a permanent resident, we would think Omar had fewer obstacles for making community. But when asked whether he believed there was a "gay Salvadoran community" in Los Angeles, he answered with a definitive "no":

Gay Salvadoran [community,] no. I don't feel there's a gay Latino community. Because I don't feel that as a gay Latino, I can go to a place or a neighborhood, or where I can say, yes, all of these people are like me. Well, you have the bars, but that does not constitute a community for me. But instead, [I look for] other places that [are] more open, different. Like community centers, something,

other spaces where one can go and can meet other people like our selves, not just [around] sexuality and sexual orientation. . . . And I don't feel that with Latinos, despite the fact that there exist organizations. What I feel is that they are too nationalist. Yes, I'd say nationalist, mostly Mexican, Chicano.¹⁴

As Cantú observed, the commodification of Latino male sexualities is central in the public discourse of community. The most obvious example, present in Omar's narrative, is the bar. As a social, cultural, and even political site, the bar has played a historical role in the making of lesbian and gay communities, especially for the working class. But the bar, Omar argued, did not constitute community for him, not of the type leading to more collective introspection or longer lasting relations. While the dancing, drinking and sexualizing at the bar can lead to informal networks, they did not provide the more "open spaces" Omar sought as a gay *salvadoreño*.

Not one of the existing gay bars in L. A. has a majority-Central American, much less Salvadoran population. But this condition of invisibility is not exclusive to gay social and cultural life. Omar also found Central American invisibility in formal gay organizations, namely HIV agencies. Many of these agencies create semi-public spaces for gay Latino visibility, usually in the form of discussion groups in relation to AIDS. These struggles or challenges are seen (and constructed) as one in the same for all members of the "gay Latino community," regardless of national, class, or immigration status. Again, by privileging a visibility based on Mexican culture and history, these non-profit projects simultaneously render invisible non-Mexican gay Latinos.

Community building for Omar also revolved around the interpersonal relationships he could shape with other gay Latinos, *salvadoreños* or not. Related to this goal again was the question of commodification, or, the gay "lifestyle." While he sought relationships with others for collective reflection, many of Omar's gay Latino friends placed emphasis on fashionable consumer goods, the trappings for "the lifestyle": cars, clothing, cologne, etc. Comparing his experience in Los Angeles to those he had had in South America while working with gay men and HIV there, and with those he left behind in El Salvador, Omar focused on levels of intimacy:

Everything is very materialistic, very plastic, very superficial [in the U.S.]. . . . And here I do have that closeness, that intimacy, that depth with people, but they are very few; you can't do that with just any one. While over there [in El Salvador] you do have that. You can do that more easily with any one. Here it's more difficult. And that's why, on that level, it's better to live life there.¹⁵

The quality of social relationships was enough, Omar believed, to make him consider moving back at some point. Such a return would not take place, he noted, before furthering his education, recognizing the challenges for living a comfortable life economically in El Salvador.

There was a sense of disjunction between himself and a community he wanted to belong to in Omar's narrative. He felt the closeness and intimacy he wished for with gay Latinos was challenging given the sexual charge often present when first meeting a fellow Latino:

It's more difficult with Latinos. It's easier to establish something like that, with more depth, with a white guy, for me, than with another Latino, here [in the U.S.]. One thing: if you get close to someone for talking, he thinks that it's for sex. It's like, every time you're interested in meeting me, it's because you wanna fuck me or you want me to fuck you [laughter]. That's been my experience also. "No, I want to meet you because you look like an intelligent person, but obviously, if you're telling me that, maybe you're not [intelligent]." . . . It's the same thing. Everything turns sexual.¹⁶

This sexual charge among gay Latinos, Omar clarified, was not something to avoid entirely. Sexuality and pleasure, after all, were also at the center for establishing ties. But for him, sex overly burdened the prospects for building or not building relationships in a broader sense.

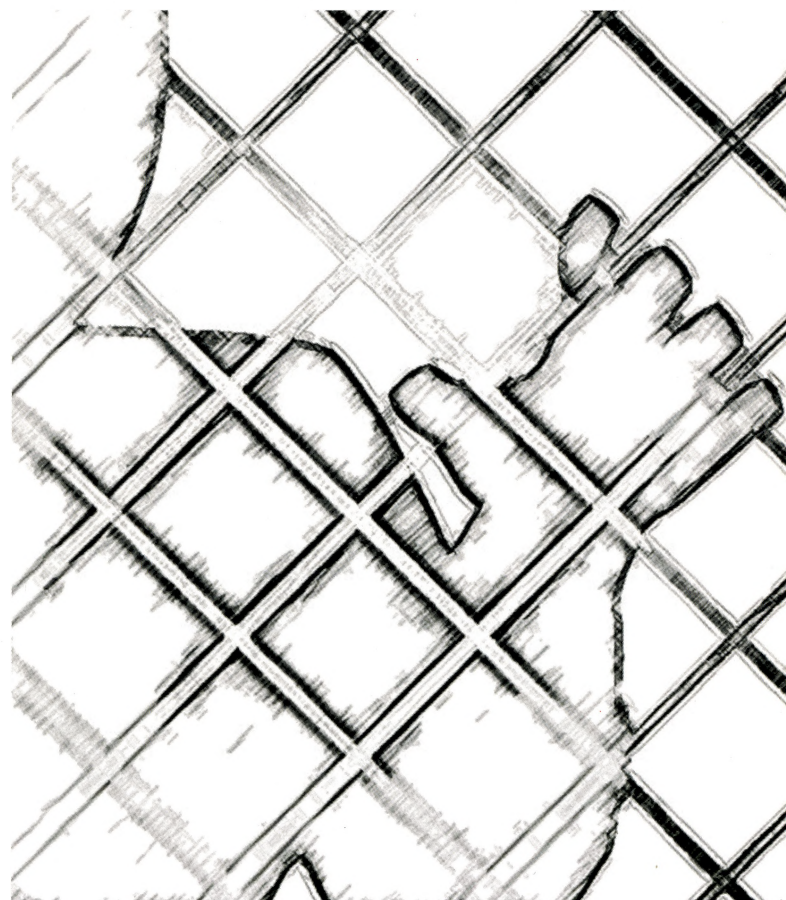
Let me turn now briefly to the idea of "necessary distance," what I believe Francisco's life suggests in his experience of wanting to be at least somewhat removed from the immediate family unit. Omar related the story of a social encounter he had at a popular white-owned but Latino-majority gay nightclub. One night there, he ran into the gay brother of a close friend of his in El Salvador. Even though Omar had never been close to his friend's brother, he had always suspected that he too was gay. Hoping to establish even informal dialogue with him, if only for that moment in the context of the gay Latino club, Omar approached his friend's brother. His friend's brother, not interested in reciprocating Omar's friendship, could not dismiss him since he realized that someone from his hometown had recognized him in this public gay space. Concerned that Omar might talk with others they both knew about their brief encounter there, he asked Omar not to discuss it, especially with the brother. While he ventured occasionally into the gay Latino club scene, he explained, he was not "out" to anyone linked to his family in El Salvador or L.A. Meeting Omar by chance in a club with thousands of other gay Latinos disrupted the necessary distance he had carefully secured in these transnational spaces.

This discussion about the bar and the nightclub and friendships takes us back to Francisco's experiences. For Omar, the bar or nightclub was a possible destination on weekends, some times in the middle of the work week. But it was just that: a place to break from work, to see some acquaintances with regularity, to dance or catch up with friends, and a place to meet potential lovers. He also described it as a place that did not constitute community, but that was transitory. For Francisco, on the other hand, given that the bar was also his worksite, it was a place where he could and did develop extended social networks, including with non-Latinos. It was a site he could enter anytime and establish new social ties, one he could use to strengthen those he already had. For example, Francisco brought a fellow Central American immigrant friend into the bar as a bar back, facilitating a job for him while his friend made up his mind whether he would return to Guatemala. In Guatemala, he was close to finishing his engineering degree before deciding that he wanted to try his luck in the U.S. for at least a few years. The bar, then, which for some appears to be only an escape or a means for social life, can be for gay immigrants a critical place for maintaining queer kinship long-term and settling in the city. This discussion about the role of gay bars and nightclubs, and the experience of working therein in Francisco's example, speaks to the difference between ties and networks. Generally speaking, "ties" are connections or forms of attachment; even when these are blood

based, as Menjívar noted in her study, they should not be assumed to function as primordial and permanent means of support. Networks, on the other hand, entail more engaging webs or circuits of relations (social, economic). The gay (Latino) bar and nightclub can facilitate networks that go beyond being (just) physical spaces to experience multiple ties to culture (through music and dance). For Francisco and those close to him, sharing the bar as a worksite and place for congregation after work, the bar was part of their network of support: emotional and economic, but also cultural in that these are gay *centroamericanos* coming together purposefully to be with one another, including in white-dominant gay clubs where we may not expect these formations to take place.

CONCLUSION

"Transnational" gay immigrant Salvadorans straddle multiple, often competing sites for identification and community life. As suggested by Omar's experience about the necessary distance he encountered between gay *salvadoreños* in a dance club, geographic proximity can actually betray the diasporic space that many privilege for having relative ease to live their sexuality. Depending on time of arrival in the U.S., class standing, and individual expressions of gender and sexuality, gay Salvadoran immigrants do not represent one distinct "diasporic deviancy," to use anthropologist Martin Manalansan's term.¹⁷ As Manalansan notes, there's plenty of nostalgia, memory work and individual re-positioning in negotiating the space of transnationality between home country and a place like the U.S., given its ongoing post- and neo-colonial relation with our home countries. Although I have not privileged this facet in this discussion, the notion of "deviancy" is also necessary for understanding gay Salvadoran immigrant life. To varying degrees, homophobic stigma and heterosexism are quite present in their ongoing negotiations of self and community as they relate to the blood family, at work, and the Spanish language



media they consume to say in touch with “home.”

Besides deliberate community projects to bring individuals together around concrete goals such as cultural performance, writing, or HIV support, a “gay Salvadoran immigrant community” can be quite an intangible formation. Writing about Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles, Norma Chinchilla and Nora Hamilton refer to them as an “elusive community”: while the majority left their country out of economic, political, and social unrest, few came explicitly in the search for “community,” what was usually destroyed in the homeland and in transit.¹⁸ Once in Los Angeles, the fragmentation caused by the context of arrival prevented most Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants from making distinct national communities. This transnational membership is even more elusive when we consider the challenges gay sexuality poses for social membership as gay Salvadoran immigrants.

Gay Latinos have been part of Los Angeles history at least as far back as the 1950s and most likely much longer than that. A small gay network of gay guatemaltecos, for example, made Los Angeles their destination in the early 1960s, speaking to the need to explore the sexual and gendered dimension of Latin American immigrations, Central American ones included.¹⁹ Gay Salvadoran immigrants are part of that broad historical map of multi-racial, multi-national and multi-gendered gay L.A. But their experiences expand the map considerably and in crucial ways. They move it beyond the regional and national queer imaginary, making it transnational, and more complicated and exciting than the generally white one suggested by what little scholarship on gay Los Angeles has found. Lastly, I would argue that gay salvadoreños make transnationality come alive, with all of its challenges, but in more credible ways than the marketing of “lifestyles” could ever hope for.

NOTES

¹ Lionel Cantú, Jr., “Border Crossings: Mexican Men and the Sexuality of Migration” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1999).

² Cantú explored the commodification of Mexican sexualities in the queer tourist industry, arguing that transnational ties between Mexicans in the U.S. and in Mexico become part of this transnational circulation of discourses, bodies, labor, and profit. While this scenario has not developed in El Salvador given the relative insignificance of its tourism on a global scale, it has been the experience for Costa Rica, Brazil, and Mexico, among others. See “*De Ambiente: Queer Tourism and the Shifting Boundaries of Mexican Male Sexualities*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, nos. 1-2 (2002) 139-166.

³ Robert Connell, *Masculinities: Knowledge, Power, and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of A People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁵ David E. Hayes-Bautista, Delmy Iñiguez, Paul Hsu, Lucette Soza, and Aíde Pérez, “Salvadoran-Americans: A Profile” (Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Latino Health & Culture, Department of Medicine, UCLA, 2001) 1.

⁶ Beth Baker-Cristales, “Salvadoran Transformations: Class Consciousness and Ethnic Identity in a Transnational Milieu,” *Latin American Perspectives* 31, no. 5, issue 138, September 2004, 15-33.

⁷ Patricia Landolt, Lilian Autler, and Sonia Baires, “From Hermano Lejano to Hermano Mayor: the Dialectics of Salvadoran Transnationalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 1999) 291.

⁸ Frances Negrón-Muntaner. “When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian: Meditations on ‘Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican’,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999) 523.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 3.

¹⁰ Adrian J. Bailey, Richard A. Wright, Alison Mountz, and Ines M. Miyares, “(Re)Producing Salvadoran Transnational Geographies,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 1 (2002), 138.

¹¹ Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹² “Francisco,” interview with author, audio tape recording, Los Angeles, 1 March 2002.

¹³ Menjivar.

¹⁴ Omar Baños, interview with author, audio tape recording, Los Angeles, 2 September 2002.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “Diasporic Deviants/Divas: How Filipino Gay Transmigrants ‘Play with the World’,” in Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press) 183-203.

¹⁸ Nora Hamilton and Norma Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) 219.

¹⁹ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) 282-283.

HORACIO N. ROQUE RAMÍREZ’ writing has appeared in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (April 2003) and *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* (Spring 2007). His forthcoming book is entitled, *Memories of Desire: An Oral History from Queer Latino San Francisco, 1960s-1990s*. He teaches in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UC Santa Barbara.

To contact: roqueramirez@chicst.ucsb.edu -- www.chicst.ucsb.edu