

CHAPTER

3

Gym Mobilities Shaping Bodies and Lifting Community at the Edges of San Salvador

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The concept of *mobility* has a dual meaning. In the world of social sciences, mobility refers to a myriad of sociopolitical processes structured by spatial travel, including those implicated in the migration of human bodies. In the world of exercise science and fitness settings, mobility refers to the body's ability to progress through the physical range expected for its joints. In both worlds over time, mobility routines can extend or limit our capacities for future moves, structuring our material reality and, ultimately, place-making. The two meanings of mobility coincide in a community gym at the edges of San Salvador. People (including myself) develop meaningful physical routines that shape our sense of belonging as well as our bodies. As this chapter will explore, the gym represents one of many topographical features within a transnational landscape of confinement and resistance, displacement and migration, which is experienced in daily life and imprinted in embodied norms.

To contribute to this volume on migrant trajectories, I argue that a local gym in El Salvador provides a mundane location to witness multiple dimensions of mobility in the context of transnational diaspora and place-making processes. In so doing, I follow Ahmed et al.'s (2003) rejection of easy dichotomies of grounded/fixed, mobile/detached, presence/absence, and here/there. Specifically, to illustrate how a gym becomes a microcosm of complex global bordering practices that defy such binary modes of think-

ing, I scale back and forth between the body and broader social processes. I develop three metaphors that traverse studies of the North American migration route and the lived experience of a local gym in El Salvador: walls, passports, and sanctuaries. Artifacts that materialize these metaphors, such as concrete barriers, paper documents, and fitness facilities, entangle and elucidate mobilities.

In this chapter I begin by briefly describing my own relationship to these material artifacts, their broader social processes, and people who imbue them with meaning (though all individuals' names are pseudonyms). What follows is a series of autoethnographic observations, based on personal reflections and fieldwork notes. As such, the reader may notice some slippage in the temporality of the argument as I trespass across writing *about* place-making and writing *in* place. Some of the events and relationships recounted in this chapter occurred in the past, others continue into the present. Within this chimeric positionality, occasional confusion in verb tenses feels inevitable and correct rather than grammatical error. After briefly explaining my position within this narrative, I describe the gym's origins within a broader history of displacement. Finally, through a series of vignettes, I explore the resonance of walls, sanctuaries, and passports, drawing from migration studies to discuss the place-making processes visible from the vantage point of the exercise floor.

Autoethnographic Moves

I arrived in Romero community and its neighboring barrio Distrito Italia to study boundaries between street gangs and their role in displacement, but I harnessed the capacity to project my membership in a transnational tribe of "gym bro" to create a place for myself. In 2014, I adopted the hobby of lifting weights as a coping strategy after years of fieldwork on violence along the migration route from El Salvador across Mexico and into the United States, and I brought that hobby with me on many visits back to El Salvador over the years.

Since I began lifting, I have reveled in my capacity to find community anywhere in the world that I wander, using a visual display of my muscles to project identity. If I find a gym, no matter where I travel, people treat me as though I belong there, presumably because I look like I do. In New York City or Mexico City, Lima or Berlin, Verona or Lesbos, I expect coaches to express a look of acknowledgment upon seeing me, visually assessing my strength, and then to inquire about my athletic background.

Despite language barriers, I reply to their inquiries in a shared dialect of fitness jargon that conveys common experience. This shared dialect of

fitness jargon is not a coincidence; it emerges within a transnational mediascape and recent reorganizations of the capitalist political economy that link El Salvador and the United States (Brigden, forthcoming). In both countries, gym slogans and commercialized fitness imagery circulating in popular media often convey racist, ableist, classist, sexist, and heteronormative messages (Brigden, forthcoming). In this context, to be demonstrably “fit” has become a manner of signaling class and character, greeted as both an indicator of discipline and access to leisure (Brigden, forthcoming). Thus, whether I want to be or not, I am implicated in the transmission of practices and ideas that generate both belonging and exclusion.

Of course, the capacity to project my belonging through my physique is fleeting; I am acutely aware that as I age, I cannot continue this performance indefinitely. That moment of identity-loss feels near for me now. However, for a time, I found community in gym spaces around the world, and where a gym was lacking, I built one. In so doing, I had hoped to co-craft an inclusive space for embodied collective joy, thereby subverting commercial fitness values (Argueta and Brigden 2023). My role in this process will be acknowledged in the history of the gym that follows, but elsewhere I develop a decolonial and critical reflection on positionality, the thorny ethics of this intervention, and the potential weaponization of my “fit” body to the detriment of Salvadoran women (see Argueta and Brigden 2023; Brigden 2022).

During my visits in 2017 and 2018, as I began my own amateur career as a powerlifting competitor in the United States, I taught powerlifting to women in San Ramon, Mejicanos, and (across the city in a different barrio) co-ed calisthenics classes in Romero, Tonacatepeque. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the collaboration of the local leadership of the Romero governing council and a partner NGO, I co-designed an open-air facility to minimize contamination potential. In collaboration with the gym manager, I expanded athletic programming during intermittent visits. Informal classes grew to a scholarship program for locals to study wellness-related themes, a trauma-informed body resistance program for mothers and daughters, hosting a visit from Australian trauma-informed kickboxers, and a nonprofit fundraising effort. Thus, beyond simply observing fragmentation and solidarity, I played an integral role in these processes, engaging in the very mobility and social practices that constitute a transnational corridor for people, information, and resources (see Brigden 2018; Brigden 2020; Brigden 2022; and Argueta and Brigden 2023 for reflections on this evolving role).

This gym has profoundly changed my research trajectory, generating the questions that inspired this chapter. I moved away from research on gang violence and migration to a focus on applied trauma-informed work and

a study of “fitness” as body politics in El Salvador (Brigden 2022). In this chapter, I provide an autoethnographic reflection based in observations from these moves; it is not an ethnography of Salvadoran worldviews. Instead, this chapter represents a glance through my own participation, as I trespass across realms of community practice and analysis. Therefore, with these vignettes, I make humble knowledge claims, providing a basis for future exploration of gym mobilities (see also Brigden and Vogt 2015 for an example of autoethnographic approach as a starting point for research). Focused on my embodied role in place-making, I complicate (though not obliterate) insider/outsider binaries that often structure ethnographic methods. Acknowledging these complications and situating myself within a transnational corridor as an active participant in a variety of cross-border mobilities begins to de-essentialize “migrants.” Writing autoethnographically within transnational fitness worlds complicates categories of emic/etic understandings, because some of these spaces have been co-created, shaped, and/or reproduced through my own practices alongside my Salvadoran friends and others. In the community gym, I am neither home nor away, neither a true member nor a stranger. Instead, I refocus on the ways locals and foreigners, would-be migrants, people left behind, and other visitors cohabitate through both contested and complimentary mobilities.

Situating the Gym within a History of Displacement

The facility, located next door to a communal building down a dirt path in the small barrio known as Romero, belongs to the local governing council; my nonprofit shared the costs of its construction with a partner NGO. The gym has a rectangular shape with a high tin corrugated roof and cement flooring, enclosed by bars allowing visibility and free flow of air. A small bodega stores equipment under lock and key at night. There are currently no changerooms, but a small garden space remains reserved as a children’s play area to be further developed when we have sufficient resources. Until a recent intensification of police repression in the zone, beginning with the “State of Exception” declared by the Salvadoran government in March 2022, the gym served over forty-five regulars assigned membership cards, and more than thirty people used the space on any given weeknight. Men and women train together, though men slightly outnumbered women. The space houses two squat racks, several barbells and plates, a set of light-weight dumbbells, a few kettlebells, a couple of cable machines, rubber band sets, rings, mats, and a few other fitness items. Those items were insufficient for the numbers of participants, and many people turned to high-intensity interval training (HIIT), calisthenics, or cardio classes when

the weights became scarce due to overcrowding. A gym director oversees the organization of the facility.

The facility sits at the edges of the greater San Salvador metropolitan area, a zone recently incorporated into a sprawling cityscape. This sprawl blurs the boundaries between rural and urban, becoming home to many of the social ills associated with poor city living yet none of the convenience of an easy commute to work. Each neighborhood in this zone grew following successive waves of internal displacement: civil war, a series of natural disasters, and a sudden loss of opportunities in the agricultural economy. The first wave of internally displaced people arrived after a severe earthquake in 1986, and the Italian government collaborated to develop the rehousing project, christened *Distrito Italia* (Ramírez 2011). After another earthquake, in 2001, the project expanded with Spanish government support (Ramírez 2011). An adjacent neighborhood, *La Libertad*, formed as a private, for-profit development project, in which people purchased homes, setting the stage for socioeconomic differences between neighborhoods. In the most recent settlement in the zone, called *Romero*, internally displaced people squatted on the land and won their claim after a legal battle with the support of a transnational coalition of advocates, financed by US-based civil-society partners. In addition to legal support, these partners built dignified housing and a few public spaces for the neighborhood, which draws on well-organized community leadership with deep knowledge of how to access and promote their causes to transnational advocacy networks. However, *Romero's* neighbors, who previously settled the terrain and had been subsistence farming the land that the newcomers occupied, objected to their arrival. Several violent confrontations erupted at the site as they contested the legal claim. This distrust between waves of internally displaced people represents a broader pattern of conflict at the edges of San Salvador (see Hume 2009). However, these neighborhoods nevertheless remain interdependent, with economic trade and kinship ties extending across their territorial boundaries. Despite continuing animosity and recurrent accusations of criminality between neighbors, people have relatives and conduct commerce across the *barrios*.

All these neighborhoods confront socioeconomic marginalization and stigmatization by state, media, and popular associations of the zone with criminality. In practical terms, this stigmatization influences the availability of volunteers and programming in the gym. For example, I contracted with a volunteer yoga instructor to lead trauma-informed seminars, but after a nationally syndicated newspaper ran a story that *Distrito Italia* had been ceded to the gangs, she canceled due to security concerns.¹ As a result, there is currently no yoga class available. This place-stigma is gendered with men frequently coded as threats and thereby rendered vulnerable to po-

lice violence (see Gamlin 2021 on situating gendered urban edgework in neocolonial perspective; on gendered vulnerability and feminism, see also Argueta and Brigden 2023). Periodically, when police presence in the zone becomes intense, the gym closes to avoid encouraging young men to risk travel in the street or gathering in groups, where they might be targeted. For months after the initial declaration of the State of Exception, the gym closed to men and boys. Across the city and country, men from this zone wear their place-stigma with them. One of the gym's volunteers lost his position as a soldier in the Salvadoran military because his superiors discovered that he hails from La Libertad. They warned him to change his address or face investigation for gang ties, and he resigned rather than move from his family home: "Where would I go?" He sometimes helps organize the gym's cleaning teams at night as a volunteer and gives others a ride home on his motorcycle. Other youth face similar labor discrimination if they use their home address on job applications in the capital city.

This place-stigma derives meaning and potency from the Salvadoran crime-fear politics that emerged from wartime displacement and an unfulfilled transition to democracy (Moodie 2010). Contemporary Central American street gangs are cross-border cultural formations, informed by embodied experiences of socioeconomic and political exclusion. For example, the MS gang (which dominates the zone surrounding the gym) is a specter of transnational marginalization, not simply local street conflicts or Salvadoran state-society conflicts (Zilberg 2011). The members of the local gang rarely have transnational experience; few have traveled far from home (even around their own country) as their mobility remains tightly restricted by their rivals and the state. However, the gang is a legacy of the partial integration and mass deportation of Central American refugees from the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s, bringing LA street culture with them (Zilberg 2011). Meanwhile, transnational policy networks adopted US-style hard-on-crime policing tactics with US funding and turned gangs into political boogie men—that is, fear-provoking images weaponized in Salvadoran electoral competition (Moodie 2010; Wolf 2017; Zilberg 2011). In turn, both gang and police violence now motivate continued Salvadoran out-migration (Brigden 2012). Two girls who used the gym fled the community due to separate incidents with gangs; one girl now lives in California with family, and the other received help from friends she met through a human rights delegation to make a new home in Nicaragua. In this sense, the gym sits at the edges of a transnational society forged through decades of displacement, urban exclusion, and international deportation, not just in San Salvador. Meanwhile, a recent wave of police repression will likely motivate more people to flee. Through experiences of displacement, the gym simultaneously occupies the edges of Los Angeles and Managua.

Border Infrastructure

During a recent visit, I woke early to use the gym before sunrise so that I might finish my own lifting rituals before others call upon me to help them. Through the glow of streetlamps and the changing dawn sky, I looked across the dirt road to admire the enormity of a cement wall around the tiny barrio. The gym is nestled within that tiny barrio. In my eyes, the wall represented a material manifestation of both conflict between neighborhoods and their relationship to transnational NGOs that facilitated its construction. I also noticed that the lights at Esperanza's house were already on.² During the dry season, she routinely woke at 3:30 A.M. to try to capture water that might be trickling from the community well through her pipes. The early risers sometimes had a chance to fill their buckets before the day set upon them.

Like the wall, Esperanza's routine reflected local conflicts and transnational relationships. A transnational NGO constructed the community well for Esperanza's walled neighborhood, and when wise local leadership understood that such inequality in resources between barrios was unsustainable, the NGO built a second well, serving people living beyond the wall. Sadly, under longer and stronger dry seasons, this act of good faith exacerbated scarcity, and the new well construction seems to have negatively impacted the vitality of the original well, which might be connected underground. In fact, the gym sits in a microcosm of border dynamics under conditions of climate change (on walling under such conditions, see Miller 2017); environmental pressures play an intensifying role in out-migration for the Central American region (Hallett 2019).

The large cement wall with a metal gate, built by a transnational NGO, sometimes exacerbates tensions between communities in the area. Walls around wealthy Salvadoran communities are standard, unsurprising. Closures of streets in middle-class communities, usually staffed by an armed private security guard, have also proliferated, and became normalized, despite their illegality. However, a wall around a poor community of former squatters is an aberration. Because of its carceral appearance, residents of surrounding neighborhoods nicknamed the Romero community "La Mariona" in reference to a notorious Salvadoran prison. Jokes that liken the neighborhood to a prison demonstrate how the wall marks spatialized difference between neighborhoods. The odd cement structure is a fixed feature, a relic of conflict and unequal access to transnational resources. Despite the permanence and imperviousness of cement, the wall means different things to different people, and these meanings have changed over time. The origin of the wall and its purpose remain disputed.

When I asked community members where the wall came from, one replied, “Perhaps it was a gringo’s idea?” Some locals cited a range of purposes from keeping cattle from trampling gardens (farfetched for that level of expenditure) to fear of the neighbors who had threatened the squatters. Others have noted its importance as a symbol of community. However, when I asked about the wall’s role in keeping out the gangs, local people universally scoffed at the idea. One man succinctly explained, “There is no wall to [that kind of] violence.” For a time, however, the wall served an essential purpose for the safety and well-being of the community: it kept out the soldiers and police. A worsening spiral of extrajudicial killings swept the country since the intensification of Mano Dura (Iron Fist) policing in the early 2000s (Cristosal 2018; HRW 2022). Police abuses run rampant, and a member of a local governing committee in a neighborhood just outside the wall complained that the soldiers had broken into his home to harass him on multiple occasions. That local leader lamented that his neighborhood did not have a wall, because it would benefit their security to keep out the state authorities. Within the wall, community members cited the capacity to keep out soldiers and police among its benefits. Community members also note that, on more than one occasion, the wall has saved homes from traffic collisions when speeding cars on the main road lost control.

Jill, a seasoned NGO worker with a long-standing relationship with the community, retold a tale about the wall: One of the local boys had been running from the soldiers and managed to get inside the gate. When the soldiers demanded entry to track him down, the townspeople pretended to lose the keys. A performance ensued, as they pantomimed a good faith effort to open the barricade for the military. The soldiers became angry and tried to scale the wall but were too fat and slid back down. At this point, Jill shook with laughter. I too smiled at the image of the incompetent soldiers falling, as the humble but clever townspeople watch from safety behind their fence: a stark contrast to the images in my mind from around the globe of stealthy police officers in riot gear who intercept the African migrants attempting to scale Ceuta’s fences or fire rubber bullets at Central American asylum seekers in the dry riverbed in Tijuana. The story subverted the usual power dynamics of borders, and the concrete structure became a prop to this turning of the tables. The story also leveraged fat phobias and body shaming, redirecting a form of symbolic violence often borne by women and redeploying it as a (problematic) weapon against the state.

While I now doubt that the events occurred as told in the legend, the narrative nevertheless constructs an image of the relationship between the state and its citizens that is widely shared between transnational NGO workers and locals. True or not, the legend is a social fact, repeated to express key

identities and a distinct politics. In fact, the legend of the wall represents a very different state-society relationship than the narrative that emerges at the border walls of the nation-state, where structures project sovereign power against a backdrop of globalization (Brown 2010). Racialized and class-discriminatory “crime talk” frequently justifies the construction of gated communities in urban and suburban settings around the globe (Caldeira 2000; Maher 2003, 2004; Maher and Carruthers 2018; Moodie 2010). In this instance, the community members’ “crime talk” narrates the role of an illegitimate state, alongside other meanings of the wall. Within and beyond the wall, stories of extrajudicial assassinations, police beatings, abuses of power, sexual improprieties, threats by authorities, and other humiliations abound, forming part of daily conversations for people of all ages. This crime talk also becomes body talk, as women routinely poke fun of fat cops. For example, late one night, with much laughter, my teenage friend Krissi joked that the extrajudicial killings become disappearances, not murders, because the police are eating the bodies. Her elegant theory also explained their bloated *panzas* (bellies). Legends and fat-shaming jokes about borders and bodies say a great deal about the (un)settling of political authority.

Alas, the wall no longer serves a security purpose. The police eventually broke its lock. Now, nobody even bothers to shut the gate. Nevertheless, the structure memorializes the multiple conflicts that forged these communities as bounded places. Today, Romero’s leaders and their transnational NGO supporters recognize the strategic need for improved relations and benefit-sharing across neighborhoods. Jill’s NGO purchased land and co-sponsored, along with the local governing committee and other supporters, the new well, sharing precious water resources across their boundaries. However, contested politics continue, even when new infrastructure is cast in cement. The gym is also cast in cement with a mission that includes solidarity between neighborhoods, much like the well project. From its charter, the gym welcomes people from all the surrounding neighborhoods, genders, ages, and abilities. Indeed, one of the local leaders involved in construction of the open-air gym facility expressed hope that it might repair the “social fabric.” With this purpose, the space becomes a place of bordering and un/bordering. The neighborhoods it serves share a common fate. They remain tied together socially and economically, though the din of accusations between neighbors sometimes renders these ties as imperceptible as the underground flows that weave together the consequences of dueling community wells.³ The material landscape, mobility practices, and everyday life in the gym become deeply entangled (see also Stasik in this volume, on infrastructures of emplacement). The gym, despite its permanent infrastructure and material emplacement, does not settle or stop such

complex renegotiations, and the wall is still visible from the exercise floor. The open-air gym is located inside the wall while trying to subvert patterns of exclusion.

Local Passports

On one of my early visits to the community, the boys in the street hailed our vehicle. The local gang rarely stops foreign NGO workers, but on occasion they did, at least before the State of Exception. Often, it was a simple security measure, as they inspected vehicles to avoid an ambush from rivals. During a later visit, when questioned about my purpose, I declared that I had a donation for the gym. In response, the leader of the checkpoint politely apologized for the nuisance of stopping my car, waving me through regally. At other times, the boys stopped me to try to sell fruit or cookies for their own eked-out livelihood. The boys sometimes complimented the beauty of the tattoos that adorn my shoulder. However, on the occasion of this early visit, I could only laugh. A boy with a thin t-shirt climbing over an exposed beer belly lounged in a wheelbarrow, passed out. The other two lanky boys, obviously inebriated with bleary red eyes, stood by with shovels. They explained that they repaired the road and asked for a small “collaboration” in exchange for their efforts. I glanced at the patchwork of sizeable potholes in front of the car and giggled sarcastically, “Well done, boys,” but gave them a quarter and a smile. Up to the time of writing, this was the most difficulty I had experienced entering the zone.

Nevertheless, most people assume that violence perpetrated by gang members represents the key challenge to running a gym in the zone. Without a doubt, the gang’s control of the area casts a shadow onto the gym, and its members watch its activities closely; we are careful to avoid insults. However, thus far, disagreements between local neighborhoods and intensified police repression, not the gang itself, have been the major challenges to the continued existence of the gym.

When more young men from nearby barrios entered Romero with excitement over the arrival of fancier equipment and the opening of a new facility, tensions escalated. Some members of Romero’s council decried the gender imbalance, claiming that the influx of male outsiders had frightened local women away from the facility. On one occasion, members of the council wrongly accused a gym volunteer of being a gang member when he sought keys to the facility from a local girl. Rumors about a lack of hygiene in the facility also circulated in the context of the COVID crisis, and several male volunteers, aware of the precarious status of the gym, broke with gender norms to become a cleaning crew at night. Members of the council continu-

ally raise the issue of resegregating the space by gender, with an eye to limiting access to the facility (and neighborhood) for men coming from outside the wall. This local leadership has the capacity to close the gym in response to community outrage or fear, and it does periodically, for example when COVID-19 risks or police attention become acute. To placate outrage and fears about young men from surrounding neighborhoods, the gym manager instituted membership cards that regulate entry.

The cards register names with contact information and membership numbers, verifying identities. Upon each entry to the gym, the card holder signs a log. If questions arise about why a gym-goer has entered the neighborhood, they must provide the membership card. The cards have not resolved anxieties over the gym, but they represent a version of regulated mobility and monitored border crossing. In essence, the community created gym visas, and over time, these tiny, laminated papers redefine territorial belonging and community boundaries, playing an important role in place-making.

On the day of the grand opening, teams of volunteers from the surrounding communities prepared decorations, and streams of brightly colored balloons adorned the gym from floor to ceiling. Foreign visitors and a few Salvadoran guests from the capital arrived in a convoy with easily identifiable vehicles to avoid the gang potentially confusing them with security threats. I made my rounds door to door, personally inviting folks to the party. With an abundance of tamales, cake, and a raffle, the volunteers and I engaged in serious diplomacy. Our presentation included a discussion of our inclusive, body-positive ethos, and we proudly displayed the membership cards. Volunteers, dressed in respectful business attire and looking very much like Mormons, wore lanyards with the cards around their neck. The blue-and-white laminated card had the gym name, the logos of the two NGOs that sponsored the construction, outlines of male and female lifters in the bottom right corner, and a collection of small black-and-white images in the upper right corner, including a flexing male bodybuilder, dumbbell, barbell, plate, and kettlebell, the member's name and membership number inscribed with a date, and a pledge to accept the rules and honor inclusivity in the gym. We later developed an official gym seal for paperwork, and a recent revision of the membership cards in a sharp black-and-green theme looks far more professional, thanks to the efforts of a local graphic designer.

A few weeks after this grand opening, disaster struck. On March 27, 2022, in a dramatic escalation of decades of *Mano Dura*, the regime of President Nayib Bukele declared a "State of Exception" and suspended constitutional protections (HRW 2022). This declaration effectively eliminated the right to legal defense. Meanwhile, the government extended its own

right to surveillance of private communications and increased penalties for those accused of gang membership. The government also initiated massive police and military repression: stopping and searching citizens as they attempt to enter or leave areas stigmatized by reputation for gang activity, effectively locking down some of these neighborhoods, entering homes to interrogate community leaders, and dragging young men onto their knees (and sometimes stripped naked to their underwear) into the street before disappearing them into the prison system. In the targeted neighborhoods, like Distrito Italia, tearful mothers search for their arrested children and proclaim their innocence. Such police actions psychologically compound the deep fear that some Salvadoran citizens already feel as they attempt to move through their cities (Cristosal 2021). On social media, in response to this escalation of violence, the Salvadoran Federation for Body Building (FSFC), affiliated with the government-led National Institute for Sports in El Salvador (INDES), urged its members to take actions to protect themselves, “Bodybuilding athlete, it is a good idea in this exception regime, to carry your federated athlete card” (Facebook, 4/1/22). Gym passports had gone national.

The gym temporarily closed due to these measures. In more normal times, the membership cards provide access. Even under better conditions, however, the cards might unintentionally legitimate the exclusion of non-card holders from the neighborhood. As police repression in the zone redoubled, the card system became increasingly elaborate and interfaced with the state; gym-goers must now trek to a government office downtown to receive a criminal history report that shows no priors, and then provide this official report with a copy of their government-issued identification to receive a gym membership. This contact with the state bureaucratic apparatus is justly terrifying for many people. To assuage these fears and facilitate documentation, the gym sponsored an escorted road trip for this documentation. In so doing, the gym became implicated in the paradox of vulnerability and security that arises in moments of what Horton (2020: 3–6) calls “bureaucratic inscription.”

Thus, the mundane gym membership card draws on and becomes complicit with a long tradition of state surveillance. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the invention of passports made contemporary notions of the nation-state possible, allowing for the documentation of a legal category of nationality tied to territory (Torpey 2000). Such documents legitimate, facilitate, and perpetuate the exclusion of those who lack them (Ahmed et al. 2003: 7). Insofar that the gym cards serve as a passport, we may expect a similar bordering process to unfold around them; they allow gym neighbors to interrogate and differentiate among outsiders. In a context of more mild police repression, the cards also provide a potential

resource for gym-goers questioned by government authorities on the street, sometimes justifying the presence of young men in public. In one reported incident, police allowed a gym volunteer to move through a checkpoint after he showed his card. Gym members hope that the cards document their engagement in a healthy pursuit of wellness, thereby signaling their conformity to norms of discipline and self-improvement. Or at least, some gym-goers (and the national federation of bodybuilders) hope so. As noted by Ordoñez (2020: 210), the “documentary realities” that shape mobilities respond as much to beliefs and rumors (and perhaps, I would add, hopes) as the materiality of the papers.

The fact that the gym receives foreign support seems to buttress its local authority. Mirroring the racialized and class inequalities of the international passport system, which forms part of a broader global mobility regime, gym visas have been unnecessary for white foreign visitors from the Global North, who can move transnationally with a relatively warm welcome. To some extent, foreigners also have a modicum of influence dictating the terms of mobility for others. For example, when the gym first began night programming, the police lurked around the corner, and the young men would wait, sometimes for hours until the police left, to walk home. The police often harass local boys walking after dark in this zone. Acting in my capacity as a powerlifting coach affiliated with the NGO and accompanied by the leader of the community council, I addressed the police at the municipal station. I informed the local chief of my intention of continuing night classes and requested safe passage for my athletes. He expressed surprise that I was sleeping in the zone (presumably because I am foreign) and chagrin that I had not reported my presence for “protection” (as though he could offer such a thing). However, the harassment of the gym-goers ceased for a time after my visit. During the COVID-19 closure of the gym’s indoor facility and my long absence, the police returned to harass young men practicing calisthenics with women on a soccer field at night.

The membership cards are insufficient for safe passage in a situation of heightened security risks. In that context, racialized class/place membership, stigmatized by an association with criminality, trumps documentation and weak NGO legitimation of mobility. Similarly at international borders, despite the façade of impartiality provided by documentation, governments continue to rely upon racialized class markers to accuse some people (occasionally their own citizens) of trespassing (Brigden 2018; Heyman 2009). Around the world, racist and capitalist carceral logics influence both domestic policing in urban environments within nation-states and immigration enforcement at their geographic periphery (Walia 2021). Thus, local boundaries surrounding the gym reflect and refract processes of global ra-

cial apartheid in a myriad of ways, including the limits to and possibilities for access mediated by documents.

The echoes between international and local mobility management points to the need to de-exoticize migration scholarship, noted in the (Drotbohm and Winters this volume). In confronting the everyday indignities of profiling and policing, migrants are not exceptional. Stigmatized urban dwellers around the globe also engage in a struggle to access place, including when they simply try to get fit.

Sanctuary

I knocked on doors. The sun was hot, and I welcomed invitations into shady homes, despite COVID-19 concerns that kept us from hugging. I conducted this outreach because the neighborhoods distrust one other, and the gym serves the entire surrounding area. Because it draws young men from other neighborhoods, the gym is not popular with everyone living nearby it, and when I visited, I attempted to listen and resolve conflicts, addressing concerns as they arose. I began by asking whether the occupants of the house had used the gym, why or why not, and whether they approved of its presence. I invited them to complain to me. I also invited them personally to the gym, reminding them that they are its true owners; the gym belongs to the public, free of charge, and I encouraged them to enjoy movement and their body. Ultimately, I tried to transmit the inclusive ethos that inspired the gym. However, not everyone wanted to hear my body-positive evangelicalism. On more than one occasion that day, people ducked and hid behind their drapes or hurried into a backroom.

People often hide in the same way from the Mormons, who represent a different transnational temple. These similarities do not go unnoticed by gym-goers, who often joke with me about my status as a secular “missionary.” In response, I clasp my hands piously and dramatically admit that I serve the temple of the body. Elsewhere (Argueta and Brigden 2023; Brigden 2020; Brigden 2022), I critically reflect on, rather than joke about, disturbing similarities between my role as gym evangelist and the imperial legacies of missionaries. However, the gym *is* our sanctuary, and for the most die-hard gym volunteers, a sort of religion. They get the joke.

Gyms and churches play similar roles in community. They provide opportunities for social interaction, identity development, structured time, and even cathartic release. The most passionate gym-goers understand fitness as a “lifestyle” beyond the confines of the space (a claim repeated frequently in the gym), complete with a system of values, beliefs, rituals, and rules. Fit-

ness has become one of the world's great secular religions, inspiring faith in the possibility of redemption, practicing ritualistic discipline, involving the worship of icons, and creating a shared sense of belonging among devotees (Hejtmanek 2020; Pronger 2002). Contemporary Americanized fitness trends embody a traditional ideology of Christian devotionalism, in which diet and exercise become the newest means for demonstrating obedience and worthiness of divine love (Griffith 2004: 5). At the community gym, converts to this secular faith offer salvation narratives about discovering lifting and thereby unlocking a "much greater passion."

For Saúl, a volunteer who frequently welcomes others and helps them learn how to lift weights, a sense of strength and muscular progress brings him meaning in life. For him, and others, the activities in the gym represent a path for "a better future, not just for ourselves, but for the community." Anita, another volunteer, explained that "when we go to the gym, we are developing a certain strength, not just physical, but also mental. We are acquiring a lot, a lot of security, more than anything security in our body and how people see us. The changes motivate us each day to be better, to behave better with our family and with the same people with whom we share the gym." Anita, like many other devoted gym-goers, has been "saved" by her devotion to fitness, and she also testifies that lifting weights miraculously cured her chronic ailments including headaches and insomnia. Together, gym-goers worship a fit ideal as a lifepath promising healing and progress, a weaving together of present practice with an anticipated future. This temporal imagining is central to ongoing homemaking (Ahmed et al. 2003: 9). Whether secular or religious, houses of worship can contribute to a sense of belonging in racialized and fragmented urban contexts. Whether secular or religious, these houses of worship can also exclude, shame, and discipline nonconforming bodies.

In this way, gyms and sanctuaries share commonalities. Noticing these echoes, Wacquant (2003: 14) describes a Chicago boxing gym as sanctuary: "Above all, the gym protects one from the street and acts as a buffer against the insecurity of the neighborhood and the pressures of everyday life. In the manner of a *sanctuary*, it offers a cossetted space, closed and reserved, where one can, among like-minded others, shelter oneself from the ordinary miseries of an all-too-ordinary life and from the spells that culture economy of the street hold in store for young men trapped into this place scorned and abandoned by all that is the dark ghetto." In his understanding of "sanctuary," Wacquant emphasizes two characteristics: the capacity to protect those that seek asylum within its walls, and the possibility of sharing community and purpose in life.

However, in practice, sanctuaries never really are, as Wacquant (2003) implies: cossetted or closed; they are never perfectly safe. In the English lan-

guage, the definition of “sanctuary” remains contested: “not a single thing” (Lenard and Madokoro 2021: 3). The word’s usage in Spanish generally refers specifically to a temple where veneration of an icon occurs, and the broader concept would be best translated as *albergue*, *asilo*, or *refugio* rather than *sanctuario* (Delano Alonso 2021: 87). Amparo Marroquín expresses some caution in applying the word in its strict sense to spaces within El Salvador, where “there is no experience of feeling safe or at home” and so many people must flee abroad (cited in Delano Alonso 2021: 87–88). Indeed, the community gym offers no strong protection against violence, surveillance, or economic precarity; it does not stem the flight of Salvadoran refugees, nor can it withstand the pressures of sovereign power, as evidenced by its recent preventative closure under the regime of exception. The gym most closely aligns with the broader conceptualization offered by Vannini et al. (2018: 165), in which “sanctuary encompasses an ethics and a way of life—a means of practicing and embodying expressions of culture.” In this case, fitness represents a lifestyle, identity, and mode of being in the world, and the gym provides the place for its physical expression.

Unsurprisingly then, the gym also competes with churches in the community, offering an alternative sanctuary. At night, the rhythms of the gym’s music vie with a cacophony of no less than six Evangelical Christian sects, singing out of tune and excitedly praising the Lord over loudspeakers. These rival soundscapes seem a fitting metaphor for the way some Christians believe fitness pursuits run counter to their faith and values, as though a focus on the body, and the capitalist materialism that underpins such focus, cannot be in harmony with the celebration of God. Churches periodically accuse Salvadoran gyms of sexualization of bodies. On Facebook, one such congregation warns that “the majority of people who visit gymnasiums dress in little clothing, sweat and do sexual movements under the excuse of exercising” (Iglesia del Final—IFT CentroAmérica, Facebook, 8/8/21). While some gym-goers embrace fitness routines as a practice consistent with Christian values and asceticism, other locals believe, like the online Evangelicals, that the gym stokes sinful vanity and promiscuity. They disapprove of the Lycra pants increasingly favored by young women in the gym, warning that sexual harassment becomes the responsibility of the victim if she attracts the attention in such immodest fitness clothing. When a local gym-bro posted a muscle-pose selfie on Facebook, a religious friend replied with a biblical quote from Timothy 4:8: “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” In contrast, gym-goers often view their fitness rituals as a compliment to their Christian beliefs. They recognize the need to cultivate “body and soul” together, thereby honoring God’s creation. Such justifications echo the “muscular Christianity” of previous

generations and hint at the historical links between American imperialism, sports promotion, and religious missionaries (Putney 2001). Indeed, across the nineteenth century, gyms and churches have both been conduits for neocolonial influence in Central America, justified as means to discipline and civilize unruly racialized populations (Gems 2012). Similarities and rivalry between religious and secular sanctuaries is not a coincidence.

Of course, no sanctuary, neither Catholic migrant shelters nor the gym, neither religious nor secular, is an inviolable space, exempt from politics. Sanctuaries generate cross-cutting vulnerabilities and visibilities for the people who shelter within them, as people congregate, and sensitive information circulates within and beyond their walls (Angulo-Passel 2022; Balaguera 2018; Brigden 2018a; Brigden 2018b; Doering-White 2018). Discipline is not left at the door of sanctuary, whether church, gym, or migrant shelter. Continual gatekeeping, security imperatives, and trespassing characterize these spaces, and the threat of raids and reimposition of sovereign power haunts them. In the church-dominated sanctuary movement of the 1980s, volunteers sometimes unwittingly reinforced power asymmetries by reproducing gendered discourses about who deserved protection (Coutin 1993: 126–27). Like shelters in the migration corridor across Mexico today, the gym becomes a potential site for surveillance (i.e., a site to extract information or project images of virtuous youth), watched by gang members and community leaders, and potentially targeted by police. Aware of this surveillance from multiple powerful actors, gym management (like shelter staff) often acts preemptively to comply with their pressures and rules, creating complex dynamics of complicity and care (see Doering-White 2018 on shelter staff). In the case of the gym, this includes COVID-19 protocols, prohibiting reggaeton, rigorous registration of members, some regulation of gender norms, and taking care that participants represent an image of moral propriety. In the context of transnational diaspora and repressive policing, a comparison between gyms and churches challenges oversimplified notions of “sanctuary,” highlighting the ambiguities of place-making processes.

Lifting Community?

Having come of age in Southern California, I know both a bit about the migration route and my way around a gym. As I trespass across borders to study these places, my own body has become a conduit for a transnational fitness imaginary, read and interpreted by the people I encounter. Admittedly, I inhabit a privileged body. As a white US citizen, I experience the racialized terrain that connects Los Angeles with San Salvador from a

different vantage point in the global apartheid system than my community partners do. As an athletic cisgender woman with socioeconomic advantages, I experience the ableist, fat-phobic terrain of the gym from a position of relative comfort. Recognizing the inequalities that both structure my embodiment and are structured by it, autoethnographic exercises offer clues to contradictions, gaps, and unexpected resonances across migration studies.

For example, after leading classes on Tuesday nights at the gym, I slept in a spare bedroom in the house of an elderly woman, who despite her slight build, stooped posture, and sunken eyes remained extraordinarily active and vigorous during the harvest season. She scoffed at my frailty when I told her I couldn't sleep in the heat of the enclosed cement room without a fan. The vacant bed had belonged to her teenage granddaughter, who previously trained in the gym. The bright, athletic girl, who must have inherited some of her grandmother's spirit, fled north to join her mother and siblings in Los Angeles, not far from where my own sister lives. Meanwhile, her room and belongings remained untouched, even the COVID masks still hung from the dresser, swaying gently in the breeze from my imported fan. Their presence reminded me that she had left suddenly, like several other gym members. Her friends and neighbors prayed for her arrival during the clandestine journey to the United States. With tears, they relived the memory of waiting for word of her safe passage, telling me of the terror of letting her go. After raising her from birth, her beloved grandmother then lived alone. I laid awake in her bed thinking about the many injustices and inequities that made my homestay possible, and how she lived so near to my own former home. While I understood that she would confront restrictions on her movements across LA, due to immigration policing and socioeconomic hardship, perhaps preventing her from pursuing a fitness hobby, I also wondered: Maybe she will go to a gym I know? It will never be trading places, and our absence/presence in fitness spaces on either side of national borders will always be marked by deep inequalities.

From those gently swaying COVID masks to laminated gym cards to steel barbells, material things embody our many (im)mobilities. In my previous work on transnational migration, I described the "route terrain" connecting El Salvador across Mexico through the United States as "objects, ranging from messages scribbled on the walls of shelters to scattered water bottles and altars in the desert, molded by daily social activity that thereby becomes part of the material culture of *El Camino* (the migrant trail)"; as people improvise upon them, these objects weave the landscape of migration into a place within the social imagination (Brigden 2018: 35–37). Migration scholars have long understood the importance of material traces to human movement (e.g., Brigden 2018a; Brigden 2018b; De León 2015; Doering-White 2018; Yi-Neumann, et al. 2022). From that literature, we

know that the traces left behind by migrants' footsteps and the items that people choose to carry on their journeys bear witness to border crossings. Such traces left behind provide information to police and other migrants that both constrains and facilitates mobility (Brigden 2018). In a meaningful way, the gym is yet another artifact of that route terrain.

Thus, seemingly mundane spaces, such as a gym, are powerful platforms to understand these multiple dimensions of im/mobility. Indeed, a “vernacularization of borders” perspective draws our attention place-making and boundary practices far from international borders (Cooper, Perkins, and Rumford 2014). From this perspective, we see that the gym sits in a neighborhood at multiple contested edges of an unequal, gendered, and racialized transnational landscape. It is a site of symbolic violence, transmitted in both stigmatizing criminal media narratives and a fitspo mediascape that marginalizes some bodies, but not others. It is a blind spot in academic work on the politics of boundary-making, dismissed as a recreational space and relegated to the fringes of academic disciplines; fitness spaces seem, at first glance, marginal to politics. However, we exercise many mobilities in the gym.

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NOTES

1. See <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/plan-control-territorial-el-salvador-distrito-italia-abandonado-a-voluntad-de-la-ms13/904449/2021/>.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. For an elaboration of metaphors of underground fluidity at the US-Mexico border, see Rosas (2012).

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