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Re/membering the Nation: Gaps and Reckoning within Biographical Accounts of Salvadoran Émigrés

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the 1980-1992 Salvadoran civil war, biography and history have become linked, as the Salvadoran state reclaims its dispersed citizenry, and as Salvadorans who emigrated as young children reclaim their own pasts. Such reclaimings compel biographies as part of state neoliberal financial strategies that encourage remitting, but also as collective history projects that challenge injustice. Juxtaposing state narratives, in which war and violence are often elided, with immigrant youths' accounts, which seek accountability, reveals how biographies narrate yet disrupt neoliberal notions of the self. [Keywords: Biography, history, neoliberalism, violence, El Salvador, memory, war]

In this essay, I examine biographical accounts of Salvadorans who emigrated, primarily to the United States, during the 1980-1992 civil war. In so doing, I analyze competing deployments of biography as a means of *eliding* versus *demanding* an accounting for the often violent disconnections that these émigrés experienced. On the one hand, the postwar Salvadoran government, well aware of the economic benefits of émigrés' remittances to family members, publicized biographical accounts of

successful migrants. These accounts represented El Salvador as a parent to which émigrés owed continued loyalty (Baker-Cristales 2004) rather than as a place where neoliberal economic strategies have devastated traditional economic pursuits and have thus led increasing numbers of citizens to migrate (Gammage 2006, Silber 2010). On the other hand, interviews with Salvadorans who were born in El Salvador but who lived the majority of their lives in the United States suggest that these migrants have used biography, both in public testimonials and private encounters, to recover and record historical memory and, in the process, to recuperate their own pasts. Juxtaposing state and émigré efforts to forge reconnection reveals the indispensability of biography to national history, an indispensability in which personal and collective histories can play a highly subversive role.

I use the term “biography” here, rather than “autobiography,” to situate these “war stories” (see also Bowen 2006) within a broader field within which the following circulate: 1) statist celebrations of multiculturalism and difference, 2) Central American oppositional narratives known as *testimonio*, and 3) ethnographically elicited life histories (e.g., Behar 2003). First, as John and Jean Comaroff (2009:28) note, “commodity exchange and the stuff of difference are inflecting each other”; thus, the post-war Salvadoran state promulgated a “neoliberal” notion of Salvadoranness as an essence that links diasporic citizens while also enabling them to progress economically abroad. Treating difference as part of a marketable “skill set” is linked to “‘neoliberalism,’ in which all possible forms of sociality and being are treated as market exchanges” (Urciuoli 2008:212, 1999). Second, in contrast to this neoliberal focus on difference as “background” and a basis for individual success, *testimonio* is a collective project in which the experiences of marginalized groups are recounted in an effort to challenge official histories and to advocate for more just futures (Arias 2001, Rodríguez 2009, Silber 2010, Stephen 1994). The narrative stances taken by Salvadoran youth who seek accountability for past injustices resonate with this tradition. Third, many of the narratives analyzed here were elicited as part of an ethnographic strategy that privileges narrative as a means of understanding the ways that life histories are embedded in social and historical dynamics (Greenhouse 2008). This research strategy treats narratives as both ethnographically “found” and “created” objects.

Émigrés’ biographical narratives necessarily engage the Salvadoran civil war, which “dismembered” in multiple senses. Bodies were literally

severed by bombs, mines, assassination, and torture, even as the nation was divided between the guerrilla and government forces—with civilians all too often caught in the middle (Binford 1996, Byrne 1996, Montgomery 1995, Schwarz 1991).¹ Forced recruitment, roadblocks, and widespread surveillance treated the entire population as suspect and led to a geographic dismemberment of the polity, such that an estimated one-fourth of the population of El Salvador is now outside of the country (Byrne 1996, Dirección General de Atención a la Comunidad en el Exterior 2002).² The Salvadoran civil war also “dismembered” by separating persons and history, such that violence and human rights violations were forgotten or denied by many US and Salvadoran officials from the war’s outset. For example, in 1982, after journalists and the Salvadoran guerrilla forces reported that some 900 civilians had been massacred in El Mozote, US Ambassador Deane Hinton stated, “I certainly cannot confirm such reports nor do I have any reason to believe that they are true” (as quoted in Binford 1996:49). Such official ignorance, a failure to recognize or remember, continued throughout the 1980s and affected the reception of Salvadoran émigrés in the United States. Because the US government was providing military and economic support to the government of El Salvador in its war against guerrilla insurgents, granting safe haven to Salvadorans would have tacitly admitted that a US ally was committing human rights violations. The US State Department, which was required to weigh in on asylum cases, routinely advised INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) district directors to deny Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum cases. These recommendations were generally followed. During the early 1980s, asylum applications filed by Salvadorans and Guatemalans were denied at rates of 97 percent and 99 percent respectively (US Committee for Refugees 1986).

These forms of dismemberment removed lives, bodies, and beings from the time and place they occupied *before*—a time and place characterized, perhaps, by wholeness, unity, or, at the very least, connection. Of course, as Brian Axel (2004) points out, the identification of a key moment, event, or place as an “origin” can occur after the fact. The temporal and spatial gaps that are produced by dismemberment are nonetheless powerful. Not only do they exclude, destroy, hide, and disperse, in addition, they cry out to be overcome.³ Salvadoran activists have used biography to challenge both the erasure of the history of the Salvadoran civil war and the criminalization and devaluing of immigrants in the United

States (Perea 1997; Chavez 2008; Inda 2006; Nevins 2002; Kubrin, Zatz, and Martinez forthcoming). Biography promises to re/member the nation in that such accounts can seemingly traverse the gaps created by dismemberment. Yet, and seemingly paradoxically, war can also be elided within fusions of biography and history, precisely in order to enable reconnection. Thus, the postwar Salvadoran state's depictions of El Salvador as an object of longing largely attempted to move beyond war, situating political violence squarely in the past.⁴ In contrast, for many of the youth interviewed as part of this project, the war erupted as a component of present and future realities.

My analysis of the biographical accounts of Salvadoran émigrés is based on three sources. First, to understand the ways that biography figures within the postwar Salvadoran state's effort to forge ties with its emigrant citizens, I draw on biographies published on a website that the Salvadoran government designed in the early-to-mid 2000s for Salvadorans living abroad, as well as on public presentations by and interviews with Salvadoran officials. Second, my analysis of youths' biographical accounts derives from interviews conducted between 2006-2010 with 81 one-and-a-half and second generation Salvadoran youth, 40 of whom were in Southern California and 41 of whom had been deported and were interviewed in El Salvador. I also attended events, conferences, and presentations organized by these youth, and interviewed an additional 22 people who work with these youth in some capacity. I met interviewees through college classes, NGOs that provide services to immigrants, and other interviewees. Third, I draw on my prior fieldwork within Central American community organizations that sought legal status for Salvadoran immigrants, as well as on my previous interviews with migrants, community activists, legal service providers, and US and Salvadoran officials involved in formulating policies regarding Salvadorans living in the United States (Coutin 1993, 2000, 2007). This prior work, carried out over the past two decades, provides a historical backdrop for interpreting current accounts.

State Biographies

In the post-war period, the Salvadoran state deployed biographies, among other strategies, as part of a broader effort to reconstitute Salvadorans living abroad as neoliberal subjects. My analysis here focuses on strategies adopted by the conservative ARENA party (Alianza

Republicana Nacionalista), which held the Salvadoran presidency from 1989, when the civil war was still underway, until 2009, when FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) candidate Mauricio Funes was elected. Following the 1992 Salvadoran peace accords, the Salvadoran state adopted neoliberal financial policies consisting of a retraction in government services, a reliance on foreign investment, dollarization, the privatization of government industries, and an expansion of the state security apparatus over time (Silber 2010, Zilberg forthcoming). Some have argued that the Salvadoran state pursued a politics of expulsion that, in essence, relied on the export of labor as a means of securing foreign currency (Gammage 2006). As migrant remittances—which in 2008 alone totaled almost 3.8 billion dollars (Choto 2009)—became key to the Salvadoran economy, Salvadoran officials began to pay more attention to Salvadorans living in the United States, eventually establishing a vice-ministry for Salvadorans Living Abroad (Baker-Cristales 2008). To do so, they had to overcome the legacy of the war, which had generated considerable animosity between the Salvadoran state and the migrant community, particularly among community leaders who had spent the war years denouncing human rights abuses committed by Salvadoran security forces and opposing US military assistance to El Salvador (Baker-Cristales 2008, Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

An example of how the civil war figures within state efforts to forge new relationships is provided by an address that then Salvadoran Vice President Carlos Quintanilla Schmidt presented in Los Angeles in 2002. The occasion was a ceremony to formalize an agreement to provide government matching funds to Salvadoran hometown associations that were involved in development projects in El Salvador. The ceremony was held in the offices of El Rescate, a solidarity and refugee service organization founded during the civil war, and one of the groups through which I met interviewees. The walls of the room that El Rescate used for this event were covered with murals of wartime violence and the names of the dead. Seemingly prompted by this memorial, the vice president commented during his speech,

Yesterday when we were here in El Rescate and I was looking at [the names of] some of the people who had perished during the conflict, it made me have this reflection, which this afternoon I would like to share with you, and of course, these are not unknown names. We

have found there names of some people—I even found the name of my brother’s brother-in-law, who was assassinated some years ago. I should note that the name of my father, who also was assassinated in the year 1980, does not appear. But the names that are missing do not matter, the important thing is that there is a message from those who suffered in El Salvador in the decade of the ‘80s and that now is part of a memory. And it is part of a history that, though it is a tragic history, is one that should not make us look toward the past but rather look to that future that we have in front of us. For that reason I wanted to make this initial reflection, because I believe that it is important that this symbolic act where we are gathered here in El Rescate is proof of how El Salvador has evolved in recent times.⁵

Instead of being a source of division, the civil war was depicted in this speech as a tragic event that all endured. The murals commemorating the war’s martyrs were also redefined as a source of commonality, as even the vice president, who was a member of the right-wing ARENA party, located his own relative’s name in the list of the dead. And, in the process, the war was positioned squarely in the past as a “memory” and as “history,” but not, as in the historical memory projects discussed below, as an event to be commemorated due to its critical content. The lesson of this speech was to not dwell on the past, but rather to move beyond it into the future.⁶ In fact, embassy staff in Washington, DC had told me that one of their goals was to improve the image that people have of El Salvador in order to promote tourism and investment: “When people think of El Salvador,” an official said, “they remember the civil war. Which was 20 years ago. But people don’t realize that. So it is important for us to work on the institutional image.”

This strategy of situating the war in the past made it possible for Salvadoran officials to reclaim emigrant citizens as “kin” (*hermanos*), connected to El Salvador by birth, blood, culture, and love of country. A former Minister of Foreign Affairs, for example, characterized Salvadorans living abroad as people who “long to remember their customs, see images of their people, transmit their culture to the children that have been born to them in the United States, in short, they want to remain connected to El Salvador” (Brizuela de Ávila 2003). Similarly, at a conference in Los Angeles in 2007, a Salvadoran Foreign Affairs official working in the area of culture commented that El Salvador had become “a society without borders.”

This official showed a video that featured photographs of cultural celebrations and Salvadoran art exhibits. Each photograph first showed a close-up of the cultural display and then panned outward to reveal the display's location—Italy, Canada, the United States, Australia, and so forth. Such depictions redefined El Salvador not only as an origin point, but also as extending throughout the world via the emigration of Salvadorans. Rather than emphasizing displacement, such imagery stressed connection. Like offspring, émigrés were depicted as being linked to their parent nation through ties of love, kinship, and sacrifice. The notion that such connections could be solidified through, among other things, service to country was part of a broader government initiative to increase El Salvador's competitiveness in the global market. Salvadorans living abroad were seen as sources of remittances, a market for Salvadoran goods (particularly “nostalgic products”), individuals who would use their talents for the good of El Salvador, and tourists who would visit the country.⁷ Therefore, the Salvadoran state had an interest in inculcating a sense of Salvadoran identity among those living abroad and of reincorporating these citizens, albeit at a distance. In so doing, the government participated in the “marketing of ethnic identity” and “the creation of target markets for consumer goods along ethnic lines” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:26, 16).

This focus on recuperating, and in the process, redefining the Salvadoran population living abroad is evident in the “Comunidades” website produced by the Salvadoran Vice-ministry of Foreign Affairs (Viceministerio de Relaciones Exteriores para los Salvadoreños el Exterior n.d.) for the consumption of Salvadorans living abroad. This website featured information about consular services, development in El Salvador, transporting donated goods through Customs, tourism, purchasing a home in El Salvador, and business opportunities. The site's weekly virtual magazine, entitled *Comunidad en Acción*, or Community in Action, hosted stories about Ministry events, donations on the part of hometown associations, cultural celebrations organized by Salvadorans living abroad, and the achievements of talented émigrés throughout the world. Stories about Salvadorans living abroad generally touted their successes in art, business, literature, and community service. For example, the January 2003 issue featured stories about a Salvadoran sculptor living in France, a Salvadoran artist (also living in France) who had won first prize in an international art contest, and a woman of Salvadoran and Italian descent who had won an Italian beauty contest (see Revista Virtual 2003a, 2003b,

2003c). The biographical accounts that appeared in such stories generally either left the reason that the protagonist came to be living abroad unstated, or depicted emigration as a matter of personal choice. In the stories cited above, the sculptor left El Salvador because his father was Guatemalan and then was drawn to France in order to study art. The artist moved to France after falling in love with a French teacher, and the beauty contestant moved to Europe in order to study. Such accounts elided histories of the civil war and depicted Salvadoranness as a basis for success. The sculptor, for instance, is quoted as saying that his art reflected Central American and Mayan influences (Revista Virtual 2003c). When asked what message she would like to send to Salvadorans in the world, the beauty contestant replied “We always must feel proud of our country, and even though persistently there is one or another difficulty, I know that we are going to progress, as invariably we have done!” (Revista Virtual 2003b).

The five-part series, “Salvadorans with a History in the United States of America” also exemplifies the understandings of history that are at work within these state biographical accounts (Revista Virtual 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e). This series drew on Spanish-language newspapers in the United States to excerpt and reproduce “personal histories of Salvadorans who have advanced and stood out in their workplaces and businesses” (Revista Virtual 2002a). Stories discussed a seamstress who had worked for Nancy Reagan (2002a), the owner of several shoe stores (2002a), a California legislator (2002b), two businessmen (2002b, 2002c), an artist (2002d), a chef (2002e), and a student who had received a scholarship (2002e). These accounts focused on individual success. Stories generally identified émigrés’ place of origin in El Salvador, year of emigration, any noteworthy achievements in the United States, and individuals’ Salvadoranness and commitment to bettering the nation of El Salvador. Stories also celebrated protagonists’ commitment to the United States. For instance, one account began, “Oscar Amaya will never forget the day that he arrived in the United States: August 18, 1984. ‘That date is like my second birthday’” (2002c). This biography mentioned the war to emphasize that, in the US, the protagonist was starting from scratch—“He had arrived from El Salvador in all-out war, without documents and by land” (2002c). This statement was therefore similar to another story’s comment that a businessman arrived with “empty pockets” (2002b). Only one story—inspired perhaps by the protagonist’s last name, “Guerra” or “war”—mentioned the civil war in any detail: “In 1979, he saw the war

arrive in his beautiful town. He left the town in time, almost all of his friends died in the war, those who were able to survive did so because they went to the United States" (2002e). Even in this more detailed account, war is something external, which just "arrives." Stories concluded by citing signs of success and good works: "In painful moments such as El Salvador has suffered due to last year's earthquakes, Figueroa organized various activities to raise funds and she arrived in the country [El Salvador] to personally realize the magnitude of the disaster" (2002b). In that they sought to inspire emulation, these stories attempted to generalize protagonists' individual experiences of the American Dream.

Within such state biographies, re/membering occurred through the inculcation of national pride, patriotism, and longing, all of which were to be expressed through good works (also celebrated on the Comunidades website), such as the use of particular talents (medicine, art), migrant remittances, and community development projects. This emphasis on émigrés' talents (a section of the Comunidades website was entitled "*talentos*") resonates with neoliberal notions of individuals as made up of skill sets. Instead of being a site of violence and rupture, as in émigrés' accounts, the nation appeared within state-sponsored narratives as having sent its "children" (emigrants) into the world, where their achievements reflected positively on the state and contributed materially to national wellbeing. The state sought to facilitate the expression of Salvadoran cultural identity outside of El Salvador, guide remitting, facilitate the "return" of goods, and acknowledge Salvadorans throughout the world. State-sponsored biographies *realized* national history in that they demonstrated the capacity of Salvadorans, but these narratives did not attempt to create historical *memory* as a critical social project.

Claiming these emigrants as kin, as a source of national pride, deployed biography to *redeem* the nation. Salvadorans thrived in France, Italy, and elsewhere *because of* their Salvadoranness, and therefore prefigured the future of the nation itself. Through the use of kinship terminology, Salvadoranness became an ethnicity, something that was both portable and commodifiable (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Biographical accounts displayed Salvadorans' ability to compete successfully with citizens of other nations, and thus to enable the nation to expand in both achievements and biographical reach. State-sponsored biographies re/membered the nation by reincorporating expatriate citizens, but, in the process, held out a depoliticized model of citizenship. In so doing, biographies produced

another dismemberment: the political violence that many interviewees cited as key to their families emigration largely disappeared. State-sponsored biographies sought to inspire emotional, financial, and patriotic returns from émigrés, and thus avoided the reckoning that, as we shall see, was implied by interviewees' narratives.

Emigrant Accounts

In contrast to such state efforts to construct a neoliberal transnational citizenry, Central American youth who were involved in student activism or working on behalf of immigrants' rights elicited and publicized biographical accounts to counter the dismemberment produced by war, emigration, and marginalization (see also D'Alisera 2002). Interviewees suggested that stories were needed to overcome silences—the “lack of literature that's out there about our generation” or the sense that “a lot of our parents don't want to talk or speak about what happened during the civil war”—an instance of what may be a more widespread pattern in which “those who survive traumatic events...willingly repress much of their experience” (Raj 2000:33).⁸ Such repression of wartime traumas is exacerbated when there is not a full public accounting of the violence.⁹ This was the case in El Salvador, where a 1993 law granted “amnesty” to perpetrators of human rights violations. Furthermore, in the United States, there has not been a full accounting of the reasons for immigration from El Salvador to this country, of US involvement in the Salvadoran civil war, or of the political and legal circumstances that led Salvadorans to be denied asylum here and to experience the social and economic marginalization associated with being undocumented (see Coutin 1993, 2000; Menjívar 2000). For interviewees, biographical accounts promised to fill these gaps by returning speakers to their earlier lives—before emigration, before the Peace Accords, before they became themselves. Such narrative returns held out the possibility of reconnecting speakers to their subsequent selves, quilting fragments of memory into a broader history, one that their generation, and indeed Salvadorans in the United States, would *own* as part of their own cultural production. Such quilting was considered key to recuperation, to re/membering (as in “putting back together”) the past, self, community, and nation. For interviewees, biography had a subversive quality in that it could disrupt received accounts and thus intervene in or re/member history. Understanding the self as a *product* of history also conferred a

potential *agency within* history, the ability to become “conscious” and to take the actions that consciousness implied.

For many of the youth interviewed for this paper, piecing together and telling their life stories was part of a collective project of study and advocacy. In fact, my own interest in studying youths’ life histories grew out of my 2001 encounter with youth who had pending applications for US residency under the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) and who were participating in advocacy efforts on behalf of NACARA applicants. When I told them of my interest in documenting the impacts of NACARA on the lives of applicants, these youth readily agreed to be interviewed. Indeed, one of the strategies discussed at NACARA organizing meetings was videotaping “testimonies” in order to present them to Congressional leaders or to send to a news show such as “Dateline.”

Like the NACARA applicants I encountered in 2001, many of the individuals whom I interviewed between 2006 and 2010 participated in student and community networks that sought to publicize immigrants’ “stories” in order to promote immigration reform and social justice more broadly (see also Aparicio 2007; Brodtkin 2007; Garrod, Kilkenney, and Gómez 2007). Interviewees included members of the California DREAM Network, a coalition of student groups that seeks the passage of the DREAM Act, which would create a path to legalization for undocumented college students (Ábrego 2008). Some interviewees were artists and poets who were involved in a cultural group called EpiCentro (Rodríguez 2009, Chinchilla and Oliva-Alvarado 2007), others were founding members of student organizations devoted to improving Central American students’ access to higher education. Other interviewees had been involved in community organizations, such as the Salvadoran American Legal and Educational Fund, El Rescate, and Salvadoreños en el Mundo, a network that has begun to organize annual conferences on and of the Salvadoran diaspora. Other interviewees had applied for Temporary Protected Status through the Central American Resource Center in Los Angeles, and therefore had connections (as clients) to a community organization. Additionally, I met deportees through CARECEN Internacional and Homies Unidos, two NGOs that worked on behalf of immigrants (in the former case) and gang members (in the latter).

These students and organizations deployed individual testimonies as part of their advocacy work. For instance, SURGE, a student group at

California State University, Los Angeles, occasionally put out calls for “testimonies” over its list-serv, and, during an act of political theater at the LA City Hall in December of 2007 featured the personal stories of three students who were either undocumented or who supported educational access for undocumented students. Other interviewees were involved in collecting oral histories themselves, as part of a *memoria histórica* (historic memory) project designed to document the history and cultural life of Central Americans (see also Silber 2010). Some had organized or participated in delegations that brought youth to El Salvador to learn more about their own personal histories and the history of the nation. Their accounts of violence and personal suffering were also akin to the legal declarations that are made to truth commissions or human rights organizations, or that are submitted as part of asylum applications.

In seeking to publicize and thus “own” their own history, youth sought a right that those who occupy privileged positions—and who are defined more as “individuals” than as members of ethnic groups (Tsan et al. 2003, Rong and Brown 2002)—might take for granted (cf. Macpherson 1962, Collier et al. 1995). As Karen Brodtkin notes, “Becoming the author of one’s own life is part of becoming a political actor” (2007:14). The exhortation to “tell one’s story” presumes that people “have” stories to tell prior to the moment of narration, which in turn creates a need to *recuperate* the past, to situate memories as part of broader, collective trajectories, to examine the political and social circumstances that surrounded events, and to overcome dismemberment by answering the most fundamental questions posed by interviewees: “Who are we?” and “How did we come to be?” Some interviewees linked “that push to try to want to understand more of my history,” as one interviewee put it, to being “conscious,” that is, to having a critical social and political awareness. Such awareness made their own lives a means of accessing national histories, even as a deepened understanding of national histories were also needed to make sense of their own lives. Thus, one Central American college student told a story in which she commented that she had asked her brother, “Remember when I wrote a paper about Mom?” Upon hearing this comment, it struck me as significant that “Mom”—an individual whose (sometimes hidden or unknown) life history and immigration experiences presumably held keys to youths’ past *and* to national history—could become a paper topic without the need for the student to provide any additional elaboration of the paper’s focus.¹⁰ This desire to understand

the past fueled interviewees' interest in taking Central American Studies courses, founding Central American student groups, and advocating for the creation of cultural, curricular, and organizational space for Central America and Central Americans. While such organizing work certainly was informed by what Urciuoli refers to as colleges' "strategic deployment of diversity" (1999:289, emphasis in original), these students, clubs, and courses refused to be assigned to a depoliticized slot and instead challenged hegemonic narratives of US involvement in Central America. Additionally, such study and activism in turn called for greater exploration of personal history. Interviewees cited authors such as Luis Rodriguez (*Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* [1993]) and Junot Diaz (*Drown* [1996], *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* [2007]) as inspirations for their own narratives. Interviewees thus participated in what Brodtkin refers to as "a political and academic [US] subculture where life history is an important form for constructing and explicating political theory" (2007:49). Treating personal narratives as emblematic of the submerged histories of oppressed groups "speaks truth to power," and thus not only reveals a past but stakes claims regarding more just futures.

Historical Memory

The sense that a knowledge of national history, and particularly of the Salvadoran Civil War, was elusive and yet key to unlocking their own biographies emerged in my interviews with Salvadoran youth who, for the most part, were students, activists, or community organizations' clients (see also Delugan 2010, Duany 2000, Espiritu and Tran 2002, Hintzen 2004). Although they were elicited during interviews, the narratives that I analyze here—and indeed, the decision to participate in an interview—were linked to the advocacy work described above. One interviewee, an electrician who had never attended college, likened being interviewed to marching for TPS (Temporary Protected Status) renewal. For him, telling me of his experiences was a form of collaboration, though he did not share other interviewees' desire for a deeper knowledge of El Salvador.¹¹ Milda Escobar, a 27-year-old college graduate who emigrated to the United States when she was five, did seek such knowledge. Milda complained that those who had immigrated to the United States as adults linked Salvadoranness to war in ways that excluded her generation. She commented, "The older generation denies our existence. They are in denial. To them, we don't

seem Salvadoran. 'We were in the war,' they say. And the implication is, 'How Salvadoran are you, *really*?'” Milda was shocked when, as a college student who belonged to a Central American student organization, she invited a Salvadoran scholar to give a presentation on El Salvador. Milda related, “We were so eager, we asked the speaker, ‘How do young people there deal with the war?’ And do you know what he said? He said, ‘They don’t deal with it, I think. Because they don’t remember it.’”¹²

Milda herself remembered the war vividly, even though she had spent most of her life in the United States. Her family had made a return trip in El Salvador in the late 1980s, and had mistakenly thought that Milda, who was undocumented, would be able to reenter the United States using her student ID. In fact, she had to remain behind with relatives while her family made arrangements for a smuggler to bring her. She recalled that while she was there,

One day, my uncle from my father’s side of the family came to take me someplace, and when I got back, we drove into town, and they stopped us on the main road. “Something has happened.” While we were gone, someone had broken into the house and beaten my grandmother and my cousin, and they had macheted the door. I didn’t know who did it or why or if we just had enemies or if someone thought that we were supporting something. And we had to get out of the house, because our lives were in danger. We had to flee at like 3:00 in the morning or else we would be killed. And this is where my family had always lived. I mean, my great-grandparents were from there!

Milda also said that while she was in El Salvador, her family sometimes attended meetings of the FMLM the rebel organization. For Milda, “it was scary seeing people with weapons.” She said, “I developed a defense mechanism. I used to cross my eyes, so then they would think that I couldn’t see very well, and they wouldn’t take me.”

For Milda, the war was not only located in the past, but also was an on-going presence that shaped her life and her own parents’ actions. As a teenager, she said, she “had nightmares, awful dreams. I had self-hate thoughts. I just hated everybody.” Later, she concluded that she was probably suffering from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Her parents sometimes punished her physically, beating her with a belt

or making her kneel on grains of rice, actions which she also believed stemmed from the violence of the civil war. One of her goals in attending college became deciphering this past, a past that she felt her parents' generation had depicted as not really hers. Milda told me, "I was so eager to go there [to college], and to meet people, and to say, 'Tell me! Tell me about the war! Tell me about El Salvador! Because my parents don't want to tell me anything!'"

Milda's sense that the Salvadoran civil war was a key component of her own biography was echoed by other interviewees. Cecilia Guerrero, who also immigrated to the United States as a young child and who had helped to found a Central American student group, saw her family history and El Salvador's history as intertwined. During an interview, she recounted her great-grandparents' dispossession of land in San Miguel through bogus receipts, her parents' experiences of a teacher's strike in 1969, and her desire to question her 90-year-old grandfather about the founding of the Carnival of San Miguel, which has become a national celebration. Like Milda, Cecilia traced her recent life experiences to the civil war. She grew up listening to revolutionary music, she said, and she believed that her father, who was armed during the conflict, suffered from PTSD. Her memories of her own childhood in El Salvador included *curtido* (a Salvadoran food) being sold door to door, but also the darkness under her bed when she hid from gunshots. As a teenager, Cecilia's knowledge of the war and of the Reagan administration's support for Salvadoran authorities led her to feel betrayed by both the United States and El Salvador. She commented, "The most shocking thing is to idealize American values and then learn that the United States supported the School of Americans and the atrocities. I didn't want to unravel that connection. I developed a hatred of El Salvador." At the same time, her knowledge of the civil war was limited. Cecilia related that something terrible had happened within her family, leading her relatives to suffer great pain, but that no one would tell her what it was. "We can ask, but it's traumatizing," she concluded.

Whispered accounts of the war also had a tremendous impact on Sandra Mejillas, a Salvadoran artist who had immigrated to the United States in 1974 at age four and who was in elementary school in the US when the war began. Her parents did not talk to her about the war directly, but she nonetheless overheard conversations, and she knew that one of her uncles was being persecuted. Sandra found that these half-heard conversations worked their way into her dreams, creating nightmares about

war, tanks, and fighting. Although she did not experience the war directly, these not fully understood accounts were deeply disturbing, leading her to view El Salvador as a site of male violence. Even in her 20s, long after the war had ended, she was afraid to return.

Like Milda Escobar, Adrian Arroyo, who had fought in El Salvador and who worked with a Salvadoran NGO, found that the older generation denied his experiences. Adrian worried that a historical amnesia about the civil war had led Central Americans to avoid asking questions that would have identified the historical roots of current social problems, such as gangs that, in his view, grew out of the trauma of war and migration. Adrian remarked, "The vanguard parents are not talking about the civil war. Silence makes guilt, which contributes to the reproduction of violence...We should be asking about our history. We all have problems of identity." Such silences may be linked to what Moodie (2010) describes as a broader process of "unknowing" that is, of forgetting, erasing, or revising histories—of the 1932 *matanza* in which some 30,000 Salvadoran peasants were massacred (Taylor and Vanden 1982), of the brutal and random nature of violence during the civil war, and of social inequality itself (see also Dickson-Gómez 2002, Pedersen forthcoming).

Similarly, Marta Dominguez, a 28-year-old woman who worked at a university in Southern California, and who immigrated to the United States at age eight, traced her own biography not only to Salvadoran but also to US history. For Marta, the Salvadoran Civil War created a disjuncture that could not be crossed, transforming her identity. Such disjunctures are common among children of immigrants (Karakayali 2005, Kim et al. 2003, Louie 2000), but may be exacerbated among those fleeing war. Marta told me:

I wonder when I'm there [in El Salvador] how my life would have been if I would have stayed there...I feel like I was robbed of a different life. Because if there had never been a war or if the US would have never penetrated, you know, El Salvador [and] created a war, many families would not have left and my mom and my dad would have been able to find a job there. I feel like a lot of times, not so much, like, a hatred toward the US but a sentiment like they robbed me of being able to grow up with my parents [because her parents immigrated earlier than she did]. They forced me to this migration experience and all this discrimination that I have to face. Who knows what my

life would have been like in El Salvador? I don't know, maybe I would have been married with kids, you know? Maybe I wouldn't have gotten an education. But maybe I would have, you know? Who knows? So I always wonder...But then if you think about it I wouldn't have wanted that life because I KNOW this now.

For Marta, like Sandra, Adrian, Milda, and Cecilia, the Salvadoran civil war was a temporal and spatial origin, making El Salvador a place that was both feared and yet was key to individual and collective biographies, a time that was both unknown and yet manifest in dreams, nightmares, psyches, and the social landscape. This origin, however, was cut off, giving rise to gaps between the selves that were, that might have been, and that could still develop. These gaps gave rise to the desire for knowledge that would fill or bridge gaps, but also to a fear of what that knowledge might entail—the painful story that Cecilia's family did not want to recount, the whispered conversations that Sandra's parents did not want her to hear.

Manuel Cañas, who immigrated to the United States in 1986 at age nine and who, at the time of our interview, worked as a baggage handler, experienced what seemed to me to be a different sort of denial. When I asked him whether or not he had been affected by the war, Manuel replied, "I guess where we were, the civil war didn't affect us that much. We didn't hear the rebels and stuff. I do remember that once when I went to a garbage dump that was near where we used to live, I found a hand of a guy sticking out. I didn't make a big deal out of that. I came right back and I told my aunt. To be honest, the town where we were living wasn't really affected by the war." To Manuel, finding a hand in a garbage dump was not particularly significant, not a "big deal." Later in the same interview, Manuel told me that when he had moved to South Central LA, he had been frightened by a drive-by shooting. Manuel remarked, "The funny thing was that I had heard gun shots before in El Salvador, because of the war. But I hadn't been scared, there." Struck by this comment, I asked Manuel about the seeming discrepancy between his claim to not have been affected by the war, and his familiarity with gun shots during the war:

Susan: And you said that before the war didn't really affect your town, and yet you heard gunshots?...Or they were so far away that they didn't scare you?

Manuel: No, sometimes they weren't that far away, but I would go out with my cousins, and my older cousin would tell us, "You know, that's the war, don't be afraid." My older cousin would tell us not to be afraid.

Susan: That's interesting. "That's the war, don't be afraid"? Because to me, that would seem real scary. Your cousin was probably trying to protect you.

Manuel: Yeah, he was. He would say, "Everything's going to be alright."

Susan: And so you believed that and you weren't scared.

Manuel: Mm-hmm. We would continue what we were doing. And then I remember my aunt used to tell us, "Don't go outside! They just killed somebody!" And then for like a week or two weeks, she wouldn't let us go out. There was always somebody...who got killed. Who would be dead, in our little town...

Susan: Was it like death squads? Or were they shot in a battle?

Manuel: I think there was, my aunt would say, "They had a little confrontation."

Susan: So even though the war didn't affect you that much, it still was happening all around you, right?

Manuel: Yes it was. What I would do is try to block it out. I was always in my own little world. That is what my cousin would tell me. My older cousin. "Block it out. It's something that you really can't do anything about."

Susan: And you followed that advice.

Manuel: Yes, I did.

Unlike Milda and Cecilia, who sought knowledge of Salvadoran national history and of the civil war in particular, Manuel sought to forget the war, to "block it out" as he put it, describing deaths, gunshots, finding a hand in a garbage dump, and having to hide from danger as experiences that "didn't affect him much." Manuel may have been basing this claim on his knowledge of others who were affected more severely, who may have fought, been injured or tortured, witnessed the assassination of family members, or even lost their own lives. When violence becomes commonplace, perhaps only the most extraordinary violence is noteworthy. Nonetheless, the civil war served as a point of comparison for the (to him) more unexpected violence that Manuel experienced in the United States.

Furthermore, when, at the beginning of our interview, I asked Manuel how his family had come to the United States, he replied, "My mother immigrated in 1982, because she was part of the rebel group, and she learned that they were going to kill her." Deeply affected or not, Manuel cited the civil war as a component of his family's history.

In these narratives, the civil war was granted an explanatory power in the development of the self. Milda Escobar believed that she suffered from PTSD, Sandra Mejillas had nightmares of tanks, and Marta Dominguez acquired an education in the United States after her family had to flee the war. Politics was at the surface of some of these stories, such as Marta's criticism of the United States for penetrating El Salvador and creating a war, but in many instances, the past was cited in order to understand the present or future (see also Briggs 1985). Within narratives, past trauma was seen to have produced subsequent effects and thus to explain, for example, why abuse occurred, why alcoholism was prevalent, why an individual became a gang member, why youth were violent (Fuchs et al. 2007), or why parents would not talk about the war. Such explanations were available, however, only after the fact, when violence was recounted.

Narratives of violence returned speakers to the nation, both figuratively and literally. Some, such as Milda Escobar, returned on delegations in an attempt to encounter Salvadoran history. Others wanted to go back, but were prevented from doing so by their immigration status. At the time of our interview, Sandra Mejillas had not returned, but she lived with the sense of El Salvador as a traumatic site. Enrique Lemus had returned, but as a deportee. His experiences suggest the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of a complete retracing. Enrique, for example, reencountered his childhood girlfriend as a stranger whom he somehow knew: "And she said, 'So, that's you, right? You left!' She's like, 'Wow! I can't believe I see you again! I thought I'd never see you!' It was very different because I felt the same little emotion that I had for her when I was six, seven years old. It felt warm again. But she had three kids. So, wow, things change! It was kind of exciting to have that little experience of seeing someone you knew, but not knowing who she is." But when he returned to the home of his grandmother, who had raised him, Enrique was almost killed: "That was the main 18th Street [gang] corridor that they have. When I first got there, they put a shotgun to my head and looked at my tattoo." In Enrique's experience, violence literally prevented the "past" from being completely

retraced, even as the pull of the past—his encounter with his former girlfriend—led to an uncanny reliving.

Enrique's experiences and the other narratives discussed here reproduce gaps in a way that demanded reckoning. In seeking to answer the questions, "Who are we and why are we here?" youth sought not only to understand their own histories, but also to subject existing social problems, such as gangs, to social and historical analysis. They sought knowledge of the past not to remain in the past, but rather to *make something* of it, to recuperate its explanatory power, and to recognize the past's *unruly* character. In their accounts, biographical and national histories of violence refused to stay *behind* or *before* and instead re-emerged in ways that were both desired and feared—in beatings, physical punishment, and fears of the unknown and unstated. The unruly character of a past that refuses to stay put disrupts state and other efforts to elide youths' experience of violence.

Reckoning

Deploying biographical narratives within efforts to reconnect Salvadorans living abroad with the nation of El Salvador both avoided and sought reckoning. On the one hand, the Salvadoran state's cultural work deemphasized the civil war to construct Salvadorans living abroad as good sons and daughters of the nation. State biographies thus reproduced the spatial and temporal gap entailed in emigration—émigrés were "*hermanos lejanos*," distant brothers whose origin continually drew them "back" as *an absent presence* in national territory. State-sponsored biographies depicted successful Salvadoran émigrés as the realization of Salvadoran history, and encouraged expatriate citizens to use their goods and talents to benefit El Salvador. The very people who, as victims of political violence, normally would be the *beneficiaries* of reparations were themselves encouraged to "repair" El Salvador by sending remittances.¹³

On the other hand, Salvadoran emigrant youth developed and, in some instances, publicized accounts of their own experiences of political violence as part of efforts to recuperate their own pasts and to create a more just future. The need to produce these narratives derives from multiple sources, including historical memory projects, political advocacy work that relied on publicly narrating stories of affected individuals, and individual desires to uncover history, identify injustice, and bridge disjunctures. In

contrast to the state, youth invoked history to draw attention to injustices and to seek redress, such as acknowledgement, legal recognition, greater respect for human rights, or a voice in government policies. Youths' deployments of biography were *collective actions*, in that these accounts were about more than the individual narrator and were developed in dialogue with mentors and other youth. Their biographies were incited by an unknown, the rupture occasioned by war—emigration, family separation, transformation of the person, the “before” that cannot be reached (or escaped) but that was both desired and feared. This gap is a void, an unknown, an empty space that is difficult to traverse. But the *reproduction* of this gap through biographical accounts is a call for reckoning, in that biographies call attention to the rupture itself, and to all that rupture implies. The “return to origin” that biography promises is therefore *future-oriented* (Nelson 2009). By linking biography and history, seemingly idiosyncratic “facts” of youth's own biography become evidence of their presence within history. Presence in history calls for accountability, for rectifying the omissions that left youth undocumented, temporarily authorized, misrecognized, and supposedly “unaffected” by the civil war. When youth wrote poetry (Chinchilla and Oliva-Alvarado 2007, see also Rodríguez 2009), founded student organizations, published books (Madera et al. 2008), participated in interviews, and publicly recounted their biographies at rallies, they located both memory and membership in the future, not only as origin but also as destination. In so doing, they demanded the opportunity to realize their potential as a generation. ■

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ENDNOTES

¹FMLN forces also committed human rights violations, though these were fewer in number. The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador documented cases of summary executions of mayors, extrajudicial executions, and abductions by FMLN members. This commission nonetheless attributed 85 percent of human rights abuses committed during the civil war to the Armed Forces or to paramilitary death squads (Kaye 1997).

²For additional population estimates, see Aguayo and Fagen 1988, Montes Mozo and García Vasquez 1988, and Ruggles et al. 1985.

³In the social sciences, to note a “gap” in the literature is to suggest that this gap must be filled. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to “closing” gaps between representation and reality, truth and illusion, “law-on-the-books” and “law-in-action,” to give but a few examples (Calavita 2010). Briggs (1985) notes that narratives mediate distinctions between the “before” and the “now,” and do so in ways that leave neither intact.

⁴There are also moments when Salvadoran political parties resuscitate wartime memories for national consumption, either to invoke the specter of communist subversion or to remind the populace of sacrifices made by martyrs.

⁵All translations of Spanish material are the author’s, and pseudonyms have been used for all interviewees.

⁶It is important to note that another use of biography, a damning one, was deployed by the ARENA party during elections periods, that is, the resuscitation of the FMLN as a guerrilla movement, committed to violence and terrorism. ARENA party candidates emphasized FMLN candidates’ biographies in order to suggest that if the FMLN prevailed, history would repeat itself, and the country would fall once more into violence and chaos. In particular, ARENA candidates suggested, the FMLN would allow gangs and criminality to flourish.

⁷Baker-Cristales (2008:358) defines such tactics as “disciplinary-transnational,” in other words “strategies...to control moving bodies by rewarding mobility—extending voting rights to migrants living abroad, transnationalizing political parties to include migrants, granting migrant social entrepreneurs the status of representatives of migrant populations, promoting remittances and migrant investment through monetary and social incentives, and so forth.”

⁸Of course, as Kim Schepple commented to me, it is probably not only that the older generation can’t talk but also that the younger generation can’t hear.

⁹I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing my attention to this connection.

¹⁰Indeed, I myself have assigned undergraduate students the task of interviewing someone about their experiences as an immigrant and, invariably, a number of students write about interviewing their own parents or grandparents.

¹¹Cecilia Menjivar (2002, see also Levitt 2002) points out as well that class differences can be important to whether or not immigrant youth maintain ties with their country of origin. Disadvantaged youth are less likely to be transnational.

¹²On children’s experiences of the Salvadoran Civil War, see Dickson-Gómez 2003.

¹³I thank Bill Maurer for suggesting this line of thinking.

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