RE/MEMBERING THE NATION

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My talk today considers the ways that war figures as both key moment and as a silence within accounts of origin, biography, and national history. The war in question is the 1980-1992 Salvadoran civil conflict, which produced a massive displacement such that one-fourth of the population of El Salvador is now outside of the country. In the aftermath of the civil war, there are senses in which biography and history become linked, as the Salvadoran state seeks to reclaim its dispersed citizenry, and as Salvadorans who emigrated as young children seek to reclaim their own pasts. These reclaimings both address and produce gaps—about violence, sacrifice, and betrayal. For the Salvadoran state, biographies, published as accounts of “talents” developed in the exterior, are key to redeeming the nation, which has been stigmatized by war and gang activity. For émigrés who were born in El Salvador and raised in the United States, knowledge of a history that is simultaneously personal and collective promises to overcome what they describe as the deep ruptures caused by emigration. Émigrés’ accounts are further motivated by a retrospective self-fashioning that is common in the U.S., a sense that individuals need to be able to explain their own becoming (citation). Such histories, however, are elusive, as emigres’ parents’ silences often leave children attempting to piece together partial stories, whispered accounts, and their own dim memories. Further, scholars and activists sometimes downplay the war’s impact on youth. Juxtaposing state narratives, in which war and violence are often elided, with immigrant youths’ accounts of their own histories reveals the ways that biographies disrupt as well as complete national narratives.

Accounts of the Salvadoran civil war suggest that it “dis/membered” in multiple senses. Bodies were literally severed by bombs, mines, assassination, and torture. It was
not uncommon for survivors to encounter hands, heads, or other body parts along roadways, in garbage dumps, and elsewhere. The civil war also divided the Salvadoran nation, as the guerrilla and government forces fought. Communities were broken apart, as the government launched bombing campaigns to drive civilians out of areas of guerrilla control (Binford 1996; Montgomery 1995).\textsuperscript{1} As Byrne (1996, 130) explains, “Applying Mao Zedong’s maxim that guerrillas are like fish swimming in a sea that consists of its civilian base of support, the Salvadoran armed forces and their U.S. advisers adopted a strategy of ‘draining the sea.’” Civilians were also driven out through combatants’ practice of targeting key infrastructure, such as bridges, roads, and electric plants. In a legal sense, such tactics positioned alleged guerrilla sympathizers outside of the Salvadoran citizenry, as individuals who had violated the social contract (by allegedly supporting opposition forces) and who therefore did not deserve basic rights accorded to citizens. The targets of repression were widespread, as the armed forces “equate[d] the government’s critics with the enemy, repressing trade unionists, campesino leaders, opposition politicians, and student protesters with the same or more force than they use[d] on the real insurgents” (Schwarz 1991, 25).\textsuperscript{2} Furthermore, forced recruitment, roadblocks, and widespread surveillance treated the entire population as suspect. These tactics led to a geographic dismemberment of the polity. By 1984, “within El Salvador there were 468,000 displaced people (9.75 percent of the population), 244,000 in Mexico and elsewhere in Central America, and 500,000 more in the United States, for a total of more than 1.2 million displaced and refugees (25 percent of the population)” (Byrne 1996, 115). When peace accords were signed in 1992, Salvadoran community groups in
the United States estimated that there were 1 million Salvadorans in the United States alone (personal communication).  

The Salvadoran civil war also led to dis/membering (as opposed to remembering) in that violence, death, persecution, and human rights violations were forgotten or denied 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, the U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton stated, “I certainly cannot confirm such reports nor do I have any reason to believe that they are true” (quoted in Binford 1996, p. 49). Such official ignorance, a failure to recognize or remember, continued throughout the 1980s and affected the reception of Salvadoran emigres. Because the U.S. 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 U.S. ally was committing human rights violations. The State Department, which was required to weigh in on asylum cases, routinely advised INS 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% and 99% respectively (USCR 1986). At a 1984 Congressional hearing Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams depicted emigration from El Salvador as nothing new, commenting, “El Salvador ... is a country with a history of large-scale illegal immigration to the United States” (House of Representatives 1984, 67). The onset of political violence and persecution coincided with the denial that violence and persecution were occurring.
Dismemberment, whether physical, legal, geographic, or temporal, entails creating distance, a gap or rupture in both space and time. Dismemberment situates lives, bodies, beings, and entities in a *before*, characterized, perhaps, by wholeness, unity, or, at the very least, connection. Of course, the identification of a key moment, event, or place as an “origin” can occur after the fact. As Brian Axel points out there is a sense in which a homeland or origin point comes into being retrospectively, through diaspora. Writing about Khalistani Sikhs, Axel suggests, “Place … has been installed into social practice as a definitive place of origin. Moreover, the production of knowledge of *displacement*, which apparently defines the diaspora as diaspora, effectively collapses that place into a specific category of temporality—an anteriority positioning the homeland … within a time prior to the diaspora’s emergence” (2004:44). The temporal and spatial gaps that are produced by dismemberment are powerful. Not only do they exclude, destroy, hide, and disperse, in addition, they cry out to be overcome. In the social science, 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 (citations). It is also possible, however, that efforts to bridge gaps also constitute and reproduce gaps as gaps in the first place.

In the case of the Salvadoran diaspora, both Salvadoran territory and the Salvadoran civil war have been construed as a temporal and spatial origin point, and biography, a retrospective accounting of how the self came to be, holds out the promise of return. Biography can re/member the nation in that biographical accounts can seemingly traverse the gaps created by dismemberment, and thus reconnect individuals to
the nation. At the same time, war can be elided within fusions of biography and history precisely in order to enable reconnection. For instance, the Salvadoran government, well aware of the economic benefits of the more than 2.5 billion dollars that emigres send to relatives annually, substitutes a language of *kinship* for accounts of violent expulsion. In so doing, it depicts El Salvador as an object of emigres’ *longing*, as a parent to which emigres owe continued loyalty (Baker-Cristales 2004). This depiction of El Salvador is conveyed through conferences, festivals, speeches, and websites that are sponsored by the Salvadoran government and intended for emigres’ consumption. Although such depictions largely attempt to move beyond war, situating political violence squarely in the past, there are also moments when Salvadoran political parties resuscitate wartime memories for national consumption, either to invoke the spectre of communist subversion or to remind the populace of sacrifices made by martyrs. In contrast, interviews with Salvadorans who were born in El Salvador but who lived the bulk of their lives in the United States suggest a need to recover and record historical memory and, in the process, to recuperate their own pasts. For such interviewees, the war cannot remain in the past but instead erupts as a component of present and future realities. The sense that national history is a somewhat unknown but key element of their own biographies makes El Salvador a place both fascinates and haunts.

**Stories**

Stories of war, violence, and marginalization are elicited and deployed in ways that situate them uneasily between the general to the particular. Social scientists, journalists, activists, artists, and others use accounts of personal experience to identify
broader historical and social processes and patterns, or as illustrations, variations on a
theme, means of accessing human or emotional content that is presumed to be hidden by
more generalized accounts. Stories’ uneasy movement between the general and the
particular is made possible by the assumption that individuals are both unique and
microcosms of society, complete in and of themselves and part of a larger whole (Ochs
and Capps 2001). As Marilyn Strathern notes, in Western cosmologies, “life is
understood in terms of a split between representations (descriptions) of it, and as it really
is” (1985:128). As both biography and history, individuals’ stories produce and attempt
to bridge this gap. Stories of “ordinary people” who may have access to “subjugated
knowledges” are presumed to be even more powerful (Foucault 1975, Favret-Saada
1980). For instance, in the book *Scattered Belongings*, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe uses “the
personal testimonies of ordinary people” to reexamine notions of “Englishness” and
“mixed race” identities (1999:xiii). Similarly, the editors of the collection *Mi Voz, Mi
Vida: Latino College Students Tell their Life Stores* assert, “We conceived this book
because we believed it was important to uncover stories of Latino and Latina students
that are seldom heard” (Garrod, Kilkenny and Gómez 2007:12). As Carol Greenhouse
notes, in the 1980s and 1990s, anthropological research regarding identity flourished,
inspired in part by efforts to recuperate narratives of difference at a time when law had
disallowed race as a “social-analytic” (2008:89).

Thus, the biographical accounts that I analyze here are informed by broader trends
that focus attention on personal narratives. I interviewed Salvadoran youth in Southern
California and individuals who were deported to El Salvador after having grown up in the
United States in order to understand the power and limitations of nation-based categories
of membership. My assumption that such narratives might reveal disjunctures between formal citizenship and other forms of belonging was based, in part, on an interview that I conducted for an earlier project (see Coutin 2007). In 2001, I interviewed Katarina Martínez, a community college student who had a pending application for U.S. residency under the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA). Katarina had immigrated to the United States from El Salvador at the age of six, and, as she had not obtained legal permanent residency, she had not been able leave the United States since that time. Katarina described what struck me as a profound dilemma; namely, how do you tell the story of your life when you cannot remember the beginning and when the end – the outcome of her NACARA application – is not clear? Katarina said:

I'm neither a resident nor a non-alien. Like, going to university, looking at the applications. Well, I can't say that I'm a resident, and I can't say that I'm not a resident. And then, I have no memory. Because I speak to my aunt and everybody [in El Salvador], and I'm like, I don't identify with them either. It's weird. Because I'm thinking of when my mom went back and they took the video camera. And seeing all those things, I'm like, "I don't remember any of that." I don't. And thinking of going back is so terrifying to me, because I don't know that place…. There is nothing here, there is nothing there, it's a strange situation to be in. Because you can't -- "oh, I remember when this --" I don't remember that either. Talking to people I have no, it's like, for a minute you have no identity outside of your house. That's what it feels like sometimes. You're just walking
around, and you're just, you're like invisible to everything else. Everybody else is solid but you're not.

Katarina’s decision to recount this experience was, in a sense, part of a broader effort to circulate stories of immigrants’ lives. I had met Katarina’s sister, Irma, at a community meeting that occurred shortly after the 9/11/01 attacks and that was devoted to strategizing about how to advocate for immigration relief for NARACA applicants now that security concerns had been elevated to a national priority. When I described my interest in documenting the impacts of NACARA legislation on the lives of applicants, Irma and her family readily agreed to participate in an interview. Indeed, one of the strategies that was 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 Katarina, many of the individuals who were interviewed for this project participated in student and community networks that sought to publicize immigrants’ “stories” in order to promote immigration reform and social justice more broadly. Interviewees included members of the California DREAM network, a coalition of student groups that advocated on behalf of undocumented college students and that sought passage of the DREAM act, which would create a path to legalization for undocumented college students (cite Abrego). Some interviewees were artists and poets who were involved in a cultural group called Epicentro, 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 Foundation (SALEF – double check), El
Rescate (a refugee rights organization founded during the Salvadoran civil war), 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. And, I met interviewees who had been deported through CARECEN Internacional and Homies Unidos, two NGOs that work on behalf of immigrants (in the former case) and gang members (in the latter).

These students and organizations deployed individual testimonies in particular ways. For instance, SURGE, a student group at California State University, Los Angeles, occasionally put out calls for “testimonies” over its list-serve, and, during an act of political theatre 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. Such testimonies were an effort to motivate support for passage of the California DREAM act, which would make undocumented students eligible for financial assistance from the state. Telling one’s story in such circumstances is often experienced as empowering. One student organizer recalled the first time that she told her story publicly:

I attended that meeting [of undocumented students]. And I think it was like 12 students, I don’t remember. And they were talking about the next day, that they were going to have a press conference in support of AB-540 [California legislation that permitted certain undocumented students to pay in-state tuition]. And they asked, “Who wants to speak?” So I think by this pointing my life, I had already thought a little bit more about what it is to be undocumented. Because I
had, you know, another younger sister who was going to go through the same thing. I had already thought a lot about it. And so it was very clear to me that this was very unjust. And that there was something like inherently wrong with the fact that I couldn’t go to college. So it was my first meeting, but I had already processed a lot of feelings, so I said, “I want to speak….”

And so I spoke at the press conference, and it was good! Marco Firebaugh was there, the author of AB-540. And so, it was the last days of the campaign, the last months. And AB-540 became law in October 2001. And CHIRLA was the only organization that was able to bring students. And they brought two students. And I was one of those two students who was there when Governor Davis signed it into law.

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. Some interviewees had also 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. In addition to telling stories, such individuals pursued them. Accounts of violence and personal suffering also resonate with the legal declarations that are made to truth commissions or human rights organizations, or that are submitted as part of asylum applications. Public accounts of suffering also resonate with the Latin American tradition of “testimonio” which uses individual stories to exemplify broader historical and social trends (Arias and other citations).

Interestingly, for individuals, such deployments of personal stories can create a sense that a “history” is both elusive and something that one owns. The exhortation to
“tell one’s story” presumes that people “have” stories to tell prior to the moment of accounting. This presumption can create 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 return, to overcome dismemberment, and to understand what were the most fundamental questions posed by interviewees: “Who are we?” and “How did we come to be?” Some interviewees linked their desire to recuperate their past, “that push to try to want to understand more of my history” as one interviewee stated, 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 student commented to her brother, “Remember when I wrote a paper about mom?” “Mom” – an individual whose (sometimes hidden or unknown) life history and immigration experiences presumably hold keys to youths’ past and to the nation – can become a paper topic without the need for any additional elaboration. 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. And, such study and such organizing work in turn called for greater exploration of personal history.

Interviewees’ desire to recuperate, situate, and tell their stories suggest that biography has a subversive quality, that it can disrupt received accounts and thus intervene in history. Stories were needed, interviewees suggested, 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.” For interviewees, stories of political violence were situated in a before – before emigration, before the peace accords, before they became themselves. Stories promised to reconnect the before to their subsequent selves, to quilt 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. 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. Such actions might include a return to the nation.

Biographies of Violence

Interviews with Salvadorans who were born in El Salvador but raised in the United States conveyed the sense that a knowledge of national history, and particularly the civil war, was elusive and yet key to unlocking their own biographies. Milda Escobar, a 27-year-old college graduate who emigrated to the United States when she was five complained that those who had immigrated to the United States as adults linked Salvadoraness 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.’”

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 I.D. 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 Frente Farabundo Martí, 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 “had nightmares, awful dreams. I had self-hate thoughts. I just hated everybody.” Later, she concluded that she was probably suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. 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 Guerrera, who also immigrated to the United States as a young child, 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 cortido (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, who immigrated to the United States in 1974 at age four and who therefore was not even in El Salvador during the war years. She recalled that she was in elementary school when the war began. Her parents did not talk to her about it directly, but she nonetheless overheard conversations, and she knew that one of her uncles was being persecuted. Sandra was terrified by a story of a woman who was cut in half due to wearing jeans. She recalled, “I loved to wear jeans, so that was extremely frightening!” 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 twenties, long after the war had ended, she was afraid to return.

Like Milda Escobar, Adrian Arroyo, who had been a child soldier in El Salvador, found that the older generation denied his experiences, doubting that someone his age could have been a combatant. 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.”

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 8, 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. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 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, experienced 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.”

S: And so you believed that and you weren’t scared.

M: 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....

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

M: I think there was, my aunt would say, “They had a little confrontation.”

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

M: 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.”

S: And you followed that advice.
M: 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, for Manuel, the civil war was 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. And, to give additional examples, Enrique Lemus, who I interviewed in El Salvador after he was deported, recounted that, as a child, he and his friends used to climb trees to pick mangos in an area that was near a guerrilla hide-out. He recalled,
We used to see helicopters from the army actually go down. One time we saw an execution when we were on top of the tree…. They put four guys out onto their knees. They had a bag [over their heads.] And they just executed them there. And afterwards, they left on the helicopter, and we got off the tree. We actually went and played with the bodies…. I would look at the blood spilled, and sometimes we would see guts spilled out. Something that a normal 7-year-old kid shouldn’t be watching. But the environment that I was in, it was kind of becoming normal for me to see that.

After he was brought to the United States, Enrique’s mother, who had immigrated earlier, realized that her son had been traumatized and sought psychiatric help. Similarly, Edgar Ramirez, a deportee who had become a gang member in Los Angeles, recounted that as a child, he had seen “buses on fire. Shots everywhere. Headless bodies…. And on the way to school, I saw two or three dead bodies thrown there…. Psychologically, I was traumatized.” Within narratives, past trauma was seen to have produced subsequent effects and thus to explain, for example, why an abuse occurred, why alcoholism was prevalent, why an individual became a gang member, why youth were violent (cite “Hijos de la Guerra”), or why parents would not talk about the war. Such explanations were realizable, 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 longed 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
and Edgar Ramirez had returned, but as deportees. Their experiences suggest the
difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of a complete retracing. Enrique, for example,
reencountered his childhood girlfriend as a stranger who 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 revival.

In addition to the biographies of violence that interviewees circulated, other sorts
of biographies that envisioned other sorts of return were also being produced. I turn now
to the Salvadoran state’s use of emigrant biographies to realize, rather than to decipher,
national history.

Redeeming the Nation

Interestingly, the Salvadoran state has also deployed emigrant biographies as part
of a broader effort to recuperate (and in the process, redefine) the Salvadoran population
living abroad. In particular, the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs has produced a
website that features, among other things, “success stories” of emigrant Salvadorans.
These biographies resemble interviewees’ accounts in certain respects. By emphasizing emigres’ “roots” and Salvadoranness, biographies reconnect emigres with the nation. Further, these accounts’ focus on success echoes social science projects that strive to counter stigmatizing narratives. For instance, the editors of the previously mentioned collection *Mi Voz, Mi Vida: Latino College Studies Tell Their Life Stories* assert, “Missing from the many studies that describe Latino students are the stories of those who have succeeded, who have ‘made it against the odds.’ This book tells some of those stories” (Garrod, Kilkenny and Gómez 2007:13). The Salvadoran government’s project also resonates in some ways with the testimonies circulated by students who were advocating for passage of the DREAM act. Students’ testimonies were also likely to feature successful students whose abilities to develop their talents were curtailed by Immigration policies. Students also sought to publicize their own successes in order to counter the impression that Salvadoran youth (particularly males) were gang members. Founders of a Salvadoran student organization in Southern California told me, “We’re a generation of Salvadorans that have been attacked. Salvadoran youth. You see in the media, like whenever you see Salvadoran youth, it’s always like in the form of mareros, or gang members. So we wanted to counter that image that they’re giving.” Likewise, the Salvadoran state sought to counter stigmatizing depictions of El Salvador. Embassy staff in Washington D.C. 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, they remember the civil war. Which was twenty years ago. But people don’t realize that. So it is important for us to work on the institutional image.”
Overall, however, the Salvadoran state’s deployment of biography contrasts sharply with emigres’ efforts to use biography as a means of exposing social injustice and accessing national history. Within state biographies, re/membering occurs through the inculcation of national pride, patriotism, and longing, all of which are to be expressed through good works (also celebrated on this website), such as the use of particular talents (medicine, art), migrant remittances, and community development projects. Instead of turning to national history to elucidate personal experiences or using the narratives of “ordinary people” to uncover national history in a social sense, these biographies largely elide recent history (particularly the civil war) or invoke a patriotic, nationalist history that harks back to the founding of the Salvadoran nation. Instead of being a site of violence and rupture, as in emigres’ accounts, the nation appears within state-sponsored narratives as a parent that has sent its “children” (emigrants) into the world, where their achievements reflect positively on the state and contribute materially to national well-being. Benevolently, the state seeks to facilitate the expression of Salvadoran cultural identity outside of El Salvador, guide remitting (particularly collective remittances, which are raised by hometown associations for development projects, facilitate the “return” of goods, and acknowledge Salvadorans wherever they are – with the exception of those who returned to El Salvador as failed migrants a.k.a. deportees. State-sponsored biographies realize national history in that they demonstrate the capacity of Salvadorans, but they are not themselves historical, that is, they are not sources of knowledge about history.

These contrasts are evident in the ways that accounts of the civil war figure within the Salvadoran state’s efforts to forge relationships with Salvadorans living abroad. As
migrant remittances, which in 2007 alone totaled almost 3.7 billion dollars, became key to the Salvadoran economy, Salvadoran officials began to pay more attention to Salvadorans living in the United States. Authorities pressured US officials to grant legal status to Salvadorans who were living in this country, and when remedies were created, Salvadoran consulates created a pamphlet to educate Salvadorans about their legal rights and launched outreach efforts to promote benefits such as Temporary Protected Status (see Coutin 2007). Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a Directorate of Attention to the Community Living Abroad (Dirección General a la Comunidad en el Exterior) was established, and in 2004, a corresponding vice-ministry post was created. In addition to creating these specialized positions, under the presidency of Francisco Flores, all Salvadoran government ministries were required to develop a plan for addressing the concerns of Salvadorans who lived abroad in some sense, made the Salvadoran state, much like the Salvadoran populace, transnational. To engage in this work, Salvadoran leaders had to overcome the legacy of the war. To do so, officials depicted the war as a source of commonality, something that all had experienced, and that the nation had to move past.

For example, in 2002, none less than the Salvadoran Vice President Carlos Quintanilla Schmidt traveled to Los Angeles to sign an agreement to provide government matching funds to Salvadoran hometown associations that were involved in development projects in El Salvador. The agreement was signed at a public ceremony in the offices of El Rescate, one of the organizations 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 with the names of those who had died. 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.” The lesson of this speech was to not dwell on the past, but rather to move beyond it into the future.6
Situating the war in the past makes it possible for Salvadoran officials to attempt to reclaim emigrant citizens as “kin” (“hermanos”), connected to El Salvador by birth, blood, culture, and love of country. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, for example, has 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 Avila 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 photos of cultural celebrations and Salvadoran art exhibits. Each photo first showed a close-up of the cultural display and then panned outward to display a subtitle with the location of the event – Italy, Canada, the United States, Australia, and so forth. Such depictions redefine El Salvador not only as origin point but also as having extended itself throughout the world via the emigration of Salvadorans. Rather than emphasizing displacement, such imagery stresses connection. Like offspring, emigres are 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 and sacrifice for country was linked to the efforts to increase El Salvador’s competitiveness in the global market. Emigrants’ potential as a market for Salvadoran exports, investors in Salvadoran businesses, and sources of expertise would only be realized if Salvadoran emigrants continued to identify closely with El Salvador.

Another site in which state depictions of Salvadoran emigres as kin are displayed is the Revista Virtual (Virtual Magazine) published weekly on the Ministry of Foreign
Affairs’ website. The Revista Virtual features stories about Ministry events, donations on the part of hometown associations, cultural celebrations organized by Salvadorans living abroad, and the achievements of talented Salvadorans who have emigrated. Stories about Salvadorans living abroad generally tout their successes in art, business, literature, and community service. For example, the January 2003 issues 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. The biographical accounts that appear in such stories of talented Salvadorans generally either leave unstated the reason that the protagonist came to be living abroad, or depict 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 elide histories of the civil war and thus seek to refashion the nation. El Salvador itself expands as its “sons and daughters” go out into the world, succeed, and express Salvadoran-ness through their successes. The sculptor, for instance, is quoted as saying that his art reflects Central American and Mayan influences, and, when asked what message she would like to send to Salvadorans in the world, the beauty contestant replies “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!”

The five-part series, “Salvadorans with a history in the United States of America” exemplifies the biographical production and erasure of “history.” 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.” Stories focused on a seamstress who had worked for Nancy Reagan, the owner of several shoe stores, a California legislator, two businessmen, an artist, a chef, and a student who had received a scholarship. These accounts focused on individual success, rather than on social history. Stories generally identified the emigres’ place of origin in El Salvador, the 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.’” One biography mentioned the war to emphasize that, in the U.S., the protagonist was starting from scratch -- “He had arrived from El Salvador in all-out war, without documents and by land.” This statement was therefore similar to another story’s comment that a businessman arrived with “empty pockets.” 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.” Even in this more detailed account, war is something external, which just “arrives.” Stories conclude 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.” In that they seek to inspire emulation,
these stories attempt to generalize the personal – protagonists’ realization of the American Dream – instead of using the personal as a means of accessing the general.

Claiming these emigrants as kin, as a source of national pride, deploys biography to *redeem* the nation. Salvadorans thrive in France, Italy and elsewhere *because of* their Salvadoranness, and are therefore prefigure the future of the nation itself. Moreover, the emigrants for whose consumption this website is produced actually were, according to many analyses, key to the nation’s financial future. Biographical accounts redeemed the nation by challenging views of El Salvador as an impoverished or violent place, and 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 which “children” long for and owe continued loyalty to the “parent” nation. In so doing, biographies produced another dis/memberment: the political violence that many interviewees cited as key to their family’s emigration disappeared in these accounts. State-sponsored biographies therefore avoided the reckoning that was implied by interviewees’ narratives, and instead sought to extract or inspire emotional, financial, and patriotic returns from emigres.

**Reckoning**

There is something odd about the Salvadoran state’s deployment of biography as part of a broader effort to incite financial and other returns. In essence, this use of biography suggests that the very people who, as victims of political violence, ought to be the *beneficiaries* of reparations are themselves repairing El Salvador by sending
remittances.7 For the Salvadoran state, which was attempting to strengthen the cultural identities of Salvadorans living abroad, an important goal seemed to be for Salvadorans to conceptualize themselves as part of a diaspora, united by their connection to El Salvador. The 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 – emigres were “hermanos lejanos,” distant brothers whose origin continually was to draw them “back,” but to produce remittances, to make these contributions, they must be an absent presence in national territory. Clearly, there were connections between the state’s cultural work and its economic policies, which sought to maintain remittances and to foster tourism, investment, and markets for Salvadoran goods.

In contrast, the notions of biography and historical memory that were put forward by emigrant youth required a reckoning. Interviewees who emigrated to the United States as young children, in contrast, are all too aware of disjunctures. The displacement that these youth experienced led, in many case, to a desire for knowledge of their own roots, a past that they located in El Salvador. These youth sought answers to the questions, “Who are we and why are we here?” In answering these questions, 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 refuse to stay behind or before and instead re-emerge in ways that are 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 both generational and state efforts to deploy biography in ways that elide youths’ experience of violence.

Diane Nelson’s forthcoming analysis of efforts to calculate reparations in post-war Guatemala sheds light on the reckoning that is entailed in youths’ biographical accounts. Nelson points out that the very notion of a reparation assumes, among other things, the double-entry form of book-keeping, in which monetary and other compensations can be placed in one column, and violence, suffering, and death in another. This notion of book-keeping, she notes, depends on the possibility of arriving at “zero,” a balancing of accounts. And yet, she contends, “zero” is a void, filled with ambiguity and duplicity, in that, as Poovey has pointed out, it depends on “a wholly fictitious number – the number imported not to refer to a transaction but simply to rectify the books” (Poovey, quoted in Nelson 2009:361). Similarly, youths’ deployment of biography produce an excess, perhaps like this fictitious number, in that these accounts are about “more” than the individual narrator. Biographies also are 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 is both desired and feared.

Like “zero,” this gap that incites biography is a void. But in double-entry bookeeping, zero, like the rupture, is what promises reconciliation. Nelson’s discussion of “zero” suggests that the reproduction of this gap through biographical accounts is a form of 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, forthcoming). By linking biography and history, seemingly idiosyncratic “facts” of one’s own biography become evidence of one’s presence within history. Presence in history promises wholeness, an understanding of the self-in-becoming but also calls for accountability, for rectifying the omissions that left youth “off-book” (Nelson forthcoming, p.365), that is, that left them undocumented, temporarily authorized, “out-of-state,” misrecognized, and supposedly “unaffected” by the civil war. Youths’ narrative reproduction of rupture does not suggest there can be a “balance” that “zeroes out” suffering through compensation. Rather, youth sought the opportunity to realize their own potential, as a generation. They wanted to be the excess that excels. To that end, interviewees wrote poetry (citation, see also Rodriguez), founded student organizations, published books (citation), participated in interviews, and publicly recounted their biographies at rallies in support of immigration reform and access to higher education for undocumented students. By using biography to re/member the nation, youth relocated both memory and membership in the future, not only as origin but also as destination. As Nelson notes, “zero, the apparent end of an accounting process – like reckoning the post-war – is also the beginning” (forthcoming:388).

References:


1 Montgomery (1995, 152) writes “Colonel Jorge Adalberto Cruz Reyes, commander of the garrison in San Francisco Gotera, Morazán, justified attacks on civilians by citing the FMLN’s presence in an area: ‘Civilians who don’t want to cooperate leave the area and those who remain are collaborating.’ A few months later, Colonel Sigfrido Ochoa, who at the time was commander of the base at El Pariso, Chalatenango, told a Mexican reporter, ‘I can massively bomb the red zones because only subversives live in them’.”

2 FMLN forces also committed human rights violations, though these were fewer in number. The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador (1993) documented cases of summary executions of mayors, extrajudicial executions, and abductions by FMLN members. The FMLN also reportedly engaged in forced recruitment and forced requisition of food and other material goods. The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador nonetheless attributed 85% of human rights abuses committed during the civil war to the Armed Forces or to paramilitary death squads (Kaye 1997).
3 For additional population estimates, see Aguayo and Fagen 1988, Montes Mozo and García Vasquez 1988, and Ruggles et al 1985.

4 Pseudonyms are used for interviewees throughout.
5 All translations of Spanish material are the author’s.
6 It is important to note that another use of biography, a damning one, is deployed by the Salvadoran state during elections periods, that is, the resuscitation of the FMLN as a guerrilla movement, committed to violence and terrorism. ARENA party candidates emphasize FMLN candidates’ biographies in order to suggest that if the FMLN prevails, history will repeat itself, and the country will fall once more into violence and chaos. In particular, ARENA candidates suggest, the FMLN will allow gangs and criminality to flourish.
7 I thank Bill Maurer for suggesting this line of thinking.