In the After: Anthropological Reflections on Postwar El Salvador

By

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Resumen

Este artículo se basa en la investigación etnográfica longitudinal realizada en Chalatenango, El Salvador y en los Estados Unidos. Ofrece una reflexión antropológica sobre el significado de la posguerra veinte años después de la firma de los Acuerdos de Paz que pusieron fin a la guerra civil salvadoreña. Intenta generar un debate académico sobre la posguerra en El Salvador en relación a la teorización contemporánea sobre el humanitarismo. En particular, baso mi argumento en el trabajo de Didier Fassin (2012). Demuestro que, en el caso salvadoreño, existen proyectos humanitarios enredados con los legados de la revolución. Desarrollo este argumento mediante la exploración de una conferencia en El Salvador, como un momento etnográfico que, en mi opinión, requiere reconsiderar la narrativa sobre la militancia. También ofrezco viñetas etnográficas de Chalatenango de 1993–2012. Mi objetivo es complejizar nuestra comprensión de la temporalidad de las secuelas de la guerra y poner los procesos cotidianos que se van formando en zonas exconflictivas en El Salvador en un nuevo parámetro de discusión.

Abstract

This article builds upon longitudinal and multisited ethnographic research in Chalatenango, El Salvador, and in the United States. It offers a reflection on the meaning of “postwar” 20 years after the signing of peace accords that ended the civil war. It seeks to place a scholarly conversation on postwar El Salvador within contemporary theorizing on humanitarianism. In particular, I build upon the work of Didier Fassin (2012). I demonstrate that for the Salvadoran case, humanitarian projects are entangled with the legacies of the revolution. I develop this argument by exploring an ethnographic moment: a conference held in El Salvador, which, I suggest, asks us to reconsider a narrative of militancy. I also provide ethnographic vignettes of several Chalatecos from...
1993 to 2012. My aim is to complicate our understanding of the temporality of aftermaths and to place everyday processes taking shape in El Salvador’s former war zones within a new scholarly conversation. [El Salvador, conflict, history, politics, gender]

More than 20 years have passed since the signing of United Nations brokered peace accords that ended the Salvadoran civil war (1980–92) between FMLN insurgents and the Salvadoran ARENA government. In former conflict zones, such as northern rural Chalatenango, residents of repopulated communities (embattled, abandoned, and reclaimed by insurgent supporters during the war) inhabit a space of socioeconomic, political, and cultural “postwar.” These have been years of everyday aftermaths, of “posts”—of war, of displacement and migration, and of waxing and waning emergency aid and development projects. There have been two decades of popular, communal, and municipal organizing and expectations of activism, and of capturing the imagination, still too often romantic, of the transformation from revolutionary to citizen. It has been more than 20 years since communities were physically rebuilt by the hard labor of residents, funded by a variety of programs stemming from international development organizations, USAID projects, solidarity groups, Salvadoran government reconstruction monies, and, more recently, remittances. In the everyday of war, and during postwar rebuilding, the protagonists of war have aged and have raised their children from barefoot aid recipients, todos pelados (all naked) as it was often expressed, to mobile-phone-totting young adults, both locally and across borders.

This article builds upon longitudinal research with Chalatecos and an ongoing interest in thinking through what comes after. It is both an analytic and a reflective piece, explicitly engaged with contemporary analyses of humanitarianism that typically do not inform the study of postwar El Salvador. I suggest that the Salvadoran case disrupts what anthropologist Didier Fassin so eloquently elaborates as humanitarian reason (2012)—the moral economy of compassion that characterizes our contemporary period. Specifically, I demonstrate that for the Salvadoran case, humanitarian projects are always already entangled with the legacies of revolutionary structures, social relations, practices, and identities. As a result, humanitarianism’s politics, its definitional focus on urgent, bounded crises and the suffering body, juts up against Chalateco suffering that is “chronic and cumulative” and both personal and structural (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:16). However, it is more complicated than this. As Fassin and others state (Redfield 2013; Theidon 2012), the moral economy of humanitarianism is predicated on the traumatized, modern subject—a subject that my ethnographic research reveals is elided in narratives of war and its aftermath. For trauma creates victims, and
ultimately that troubles the metanarrative of collective action. What happens in that “after” of war, of peace (Moodie 2010), in that “reckoning” or impossibility of “measuring up” or “settling accounts,” as anthropologist Diane Nelson (2009) unravels in the Guatemalan context? What happens if we think through the sequela of trauma, as problematic as the term may be? What happens if we listen to an emerging discourse that reclaims the long arc of revolutionary militancy possible precisely because of a new relationship to trauma, to its recognition?

Below, I develop an analysis of the competing logics of humanitarianism and militancy. To do so, I first provide a brief introduction to the department of Chalatenango and the research I conducted at multiple ethnographic sites with repopulated communities in the mid-1990s and, later, from the turn of the 21st century, with Chalateco immigrants. Second, I situate my argument on humanitarianism within the recent surge of scholarship about postwar El Salvador. The core of the article develops around my methodological return to El Salvador after many years of working on questions of migration in the United States, and several years after the election of the first FMLN president, Mauricio Funes, on March 15, 2009. As a result, I weave a commentary on long-term fieldwork with ethnographic vignettes. I explicitly analyze an ethnographic moment—a historic conference that took place in San Salvador in February 2012—History, Society and Memories: The Armed Conflict on the 20th Anniversary of the Peace Accords—which was organized by the Unit of Investigations about the Salvadoran Civil War (UIGCS) of the Universidad de El Salvador. I then explore new ethnographic data from Chalatenango to think through humanitarian logics, new academic discourses on militant subjects, and the structural and personal suffering of “postwar.” I borrow from Nelson her approach to postwar as a study of “milieu, what is in-between or what circulates,” which “is less about a place than about the deployment and assumption (taking on) of modes of understanding” (2009:xxvii). The conclusion considers the meanings of living in the after for those living everyday through it.

**Researching Chalatenango’s Postwar**

In the summers of 1993 and 1994, I made my first grant-funded trips to Chalatenango in search of recently retired revolutionaries who had suddenly found themselves targets of international and national development efforts to incorporate excluded and marginalized citizens into the nation and into the productive economy. Indeed, with the signing of the peace accords on January 16, 1992, Chalatenango’s officially demobilized insurgents and community collaborators received a flurry of postwar “reconstruction and development” attention (potable water, electrification, new roads, microcredit programs, cement-block houses, arts and crafts, and cattle, pig, and hen farming aimed at “gendering” development).
I focused on a community in the municipality of Las Vueltas that I call El Rancho. I chose El Rancho because of its refugee and repopulation history (Todd 2010), because of its geographic distance from the departmental capital (just rural enough), and also because of its relationship to international development projects (just enough houses and latrines being rebuilt, international economic projects introduced, electrification still spotty, and women’s projects entering). Finally, I chose El Rancho for its postwar leftist history coupled, most importantly, with just enough postwar organizing troubles. Residents were often less than cheerful community organizers and often refused to participate in community-wide projects, missed meetings, and argued about incoming development aid. The majority of my research took place from 1996 to 1997 (14 months). I conducted participant-observation in El Rancho, tracking the ebbs and flows of NGO-led development projects, grassroots organizing, community crises, and ongoing FMLN mobilizing aimed at transitioning former insurgents into politically active citizens. Trained with an attention to narrative practices, and the talk of everyday life, I also listened to and recorded people’s stories about the past, the present, and their concerns for the future.

Much scholarship and policy has addressed this period, as El Salvador’s “negotiated revolution” (Karl 1992) quickly became the model and success story for how to mediate a civil war. Scholars also explored El Salvador’s aftermath within larger Latin American shifts away from authoritarian regimes to democracies. While an earlier literature was concerned with transitions and then the consolidation of democracy (Mainwaring 1992; O’Donnell et al. 1986), work on El Salvador began to move beyond a focus on electoral politics in an attempt to understand the relationship between peacemaking and democratization (Boyce 2002; Hayner 2001; Popkin 2000).

Indeed, research conducted during the 1990s has led to important work on a period that anthropologist Ellen Moodie cogently discusses as the “aftermath of peace” (2010) in her analysis of the ways in which El Salvador after war is characterized by an anxious and depoliticized uncertainty that resignifies violence discursively into common crime. Elisabeth Wood’s work provides a model for understanding the role of peasant insurgent activism and agrarian processes, indicating how peace was built from below (Wood 2000, 2003). Leigh Binford, too, has long explored wartime processes in a war zone (Morazán) and theorized the binds of collective action (1996, 1998) and postinsurgency (2010). Much of this research has highlighted the role of women in the insurgency and beyond, pointing to their critical and varied role in military-political structures, as well as to the multiple gendered challenges encountered during the postwar period in both urban and rural communities (Kampwirth 2002, 2004; Shayne 2004; Viterna 2006). This gendered perspective is crucial because women accounted for approximately 30
percent of FMLN forces, yet reintegration programs often did not consider or meet their particular needs (Segovia 2009:8, 18).

A generation of scholars, some trained while the peace was new, and others with longer histories in the region have illuminated the resurgence of indigenous politics (Peterson 2007), and national attempts to institute cultures of peace through state-led projects via institutions and commemorative practices (DeLugan 2012). Others have highlighted the struggles of the popular health sector (Smith-Nonini 2010), discussed postwar gendered disillusionment (Silber 2011), offered an interpretation of Salvadoran political shifts in terms of “waves of protest” (Almeida 2008), and mapped out transnational protest and the place of maquilas in neoliberal El Salvador (Brooks 2007).

While much of my early work was concerned with providing a local reading of El Salvador’s national reconstruction, a second phase of research emerged unexpectedly at the turn of the 21st century when residents from El Rancho began to emigrate en masse to the United States. As a UNDP country report makes clear, the municipality of Las Vueltas was altered by this new migration that took off between 2001 and 2004; it was a response to a crisis in the agricultural sector (2005:222). Chalatecos have joined the 1.8 million Salvadorans estimated to live in the United States, who send remittances home and keep the nation afloat.

My ethnographic research with Chalateco migrants intensified between 2006 and 2011 and included focused research trips to the homes of recently arrived Chalatecos in Los Angeles, New Jersey, and the Washington DC metropolitan area. Along with participant-observation, I audiotaped ethnographic interviews. This research, what Robert Smith describes as “grounded ethnographic interviews” (2006:356), builds upon a past research history and shared experiences. I have long thought through these Chalateco journeys in terms of the entanglements of war, popular organizing, and histories of displacement; I have been attentive to the structural exclusions and possibilities of everyday life; and I have built upon the significant and growing literature on the Salvadoran diaspora (Baker-Cristales 2004; Coutin 2007; Mahler 1995; Menjivar 2000; Pederson 2013; Zilberg 2011).

Missing Militancia?

It was a moving experience to go back to El Salvador in February 2012, to rural Chalatenango and to attend a conference in the capital San Salvador, and the return has left me with juxtaposed images. While I had “seen” El Rancho from afar through my research with migrants as we watched hours of home videos sent from El Salvador, and flipped through numerous photograph albums that depicted communal changes, I was surprised. I was impressed by the play between material changes and those elements, physical and embodied, that appeared familiar. The
ride to El Rancho from the capital of Chalatenango still took about 45 minutes. The road was still a jigsaw of potholes left by the summer rains, despite the availability of municipal funds to repair it. There were many new painted houses—expansive, gated, and with tiled roofs. Many displayed a mixture of architecture—some with colonial columns designed by migrant kin living across the United States. There were also many more personal vehicles. Given my work in the United States, I knew I would find many new homes vacant and waiting. The quiet was palpable.

Later, in my time in the capital, during the seminar “Historia, Sociedad y Memorias,” seeking to open up an academic exchange on analyses of the war, I was struck again, not only by the enormity of the event in terms of the subject matter and the diverse participation, but also by the new questions that Salvadoran and international scholars were asking. I was intrigued by conversations that called for an open and transparent empiricism of the past in order to uncover systematic practices, organizational structures, chains of command, and international alliances and support, and for the need to rethink wartime categories and even chronologies. The terms militante and militancia appeared in the majority of the presentations. Had I missed something?

As political scientist and conference participant Michael Allison reflected shortly after the event, the seminar was historic. Local academics were joined by scholars from Latin America, the United States, and Europe. Quoting Jorge Juárez, one of the key conference organizers, Allison indicates that the seminar was intended to “make known to the public a version [of the war’s history] without passions, without ideology, that presents the simple truth of the facts” (http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/2012228123122975116.html). Ethnographically, I suggest, this is a significant call: it seeks to carve out a space of inquiry that uncovers hidden stories rooted in the war period. It reflects what Nelson develops regarding “the ends of war” in Guatemala, those attempts to find accountability and write against deceit and being “duped” (2009). For example, Alberto Martín Álvarez from the Universidad de Colima discussed new findings on the history of FMLN branches, and Jorge Cáceres Prendes, from the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, presented analysis on student activists and their trajectory to insurgency. Some conference participants called for an excavation of the internal hierarchy of insurgent political-military structures, and the violence perpetrated by the FMLN. Others such as historian Eduardo Rey Tristán highlighted the scholarly gaps regarding right-wing groups, the army, and the formation and space of ARENA.

As I sat in the auditorium of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, I was jostled by the academic conversation and repeated references to militancy. I was reminded of other regional and generational conversations about what anthropologists miss in the field/new questions that frame the field. Interestingly, in reviewing a series of transcripts from the early to mid-1990s from residents in El Rancho, as well as
several interview transcripts with Chalateco migrants in the United States, I cannot find a discourse of militancy or the deployment of the term militante. Rather, during this period, in that context, the narratives I collected reflect an implicit naming and a coded language deployed by the protagonists of various social movements that I argue neutralized the wartime conflation of categories (i.e., lay catechist as synonymous with guerrilla) precisely because this conflation had led to the murder of so many Salvadorans. Terms that circulated included campesino (peasant), compañero (comrade), gente colaboradora (collaborators), gente conciente (people with raised consciousness), gente obediente (obedient people): not militante. I want to clarify. I am not suggesting that “militant” was an irrelevant or singular category. Indeed, as Ralph Sprenkels highlights, the category was deeply linked to clandestine insurgent organizations and thus its use framed by these relationships (2014). It is a discursive shift and its meaning that I wish to explore.

Reading the event ethnographically, a significant outcome of the conference was the subsequent publication of a peer-reviewed special volume, “Memoria y conflicto armado salvadoreño,” of the journal Identidades published by the Dirección Nacional de Investigaciones de la Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia. The special volume was edited by UIGCS and, like the conference, the articles seek to establish new research agendas. Such work supports my argument that we are entering a new moment in the study of what has become a contemporary history of the Salvadoran revolution, often by scholars who were actors in the process.

Take, for example, Ralph Sprenkels’s “La guerra como controversia: una reflexión sobre las secuelas políticas del informe de la Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador.”13 A human rights activist who was involved in the day-to-day work of documenting human rights abuses in Chalatenango for the Truth Commission Report, De La Locura a La Esperanza, Sprenkels reflects that while he found the effort of the commission “valiente e importante” (brave and important), it was also “incompleto y carente de profundidad” (incomplete and lacking depth) (2012:70). Specifically, Sprenkels highlights that the key recommendation to reform the justice system in order to address wartime human rights abuse was not met, which was dramatically evidenced by a widespread amnesty law implemented shortly after the report (2012:72). Sprenkels provocatively argues that the amnesty law in El Salvador did not only have the support of the military and the leadership on the right, but also, tacitly, of the FMLN leadership. This in turn led to confusion and alienation among the Salvadoran human rights organizations—many with deep historical ties to the FMLN (2012:77–78).14 In his discussion of the unintended limitations of the Truth Commission, Sprenkels further points to recent work by historians Rey Tristán and Lazo (2011), who describe postwar El Salvador as following “a model of reconciliation via impunity” that spawns “una reconciliación sin reconciliados” (reconciliation without the reconciled) (Sprenkels 2012:83).

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Reconciliation/Humanitarianism

Reconciliation without the reconciled leads me to think about militancy and the demobilized. Twenty years after, I am curious about embodied practices of denial. Clearly, demobilization required a break, a certain refusal of the past in order to achieve the postwar goal of a full, participative, and just reintegration. What is denied then, and how is it reclaimed? In the early to mid-1990s—Chalatenango with which I am familiar, there was much community organizing built upon past histories of struggle for the purpose of rebuilding and recasting former fighters and supporters into new citizens. Recent work suggests the importance of reexamining this period, in particular for wounded war veterans (Sprenkels 2014). Indeed, in the last few years, organizations of wounded war veterans, such as ALGES (Association of Wounded War Veterans), are increasingly demanding the realization of the rights and reparations that were made possible by the peace process.16

Alexander Segovia, an economist, a key advisor to Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, and the government’s Secretario Técnico, describes the issues in a report for the International Center for Transitional Justice (2009). He argues that transitional justice in El Salvador had two stages. The first stage involved processes of disarmament, demobilization, and (political) reintegration (DDR) in which several aspects of the peace accords were met—most notably the transformation of the FMLN from an insurgent force to a legitimate political party. The second stage took place after the Truth Commission report at which point many peace accords measures were not implemented, such as reparations (2009:24). Segovia asserts that economic and social reintegration did not take place in part because the FMLN and government of El Salvador were weary of pushing for prosecutions and reparations (truth, justice, and benefits), not least because this approach risked “destabilizing” peace and dividing alliances and interests (2009:21, 29).18

Can we think differently about this long postwar and what it tells us about the contemporary moment, which Fassin (2012) so convincingly captures as characterized by humanitarian reason and a global governance that is guided by a moral “politics of compassion” that in fact masks and elides deep inequalities? In comparative contexts marked by political violence (and later disaster), such as Haiti, interventions and democratization are framed in humanitarian terms. Erica Caple James in Democratic Insecurities (2010:1) explores the “links between military and humanitarian interventions” in Haiti’s “ongoing struggles to consolidate democracy and combat insecurity.” These interventions take place within neoliberal economies with the story, familiar in the global south, of NGOs’ complex and complicit position in the aid machinery where their efforts unintentionally reproduce inequalities (2010:7, 15).
Like Moodie’s work on El Salvador, James chronicles the everyday experiences of insecurity (*ensekirite*): “the seemingly random political and criminal violence that ebbed and flowed in waves amid ongoing economic, social, and environmental decline” (2010:8). However, unlike El Salvador, in the humanitarian logic guided by a moral sentiment of compassion, the Haitian case reveals that it is the injured body, the Haitian category of *viktim*, that gets deployed. James explains, “Early in my research many viktim claimed the identity of *militan* (activist). By the end of my work most emphasized the identity of viktim to the exclusion of other identities.” (2010:20). She is bothered by this process, and describes the ways in which citizens lose their political power and become tools in the service of humanitarian markets.

The insecurity and uncertainty, like that in El Salvador, appears to work out differently. Postconflict democratization in El Salvador did not as a rule build upon the category of “victim.” Perhaps it is, as Ralph Sprenkels claims, that human rights activism in postwar El Salvador has not been a major force, in part because of the FMLN’s involvement in both wartime violence and wartime human rights activism that in peace produced complex entanglements of FMLN loyalties across Salvadoran human rights organizations (Sprenkels 2005). Additionally, while the *testimonio* was a critical narrative genre and solidarity tool during the Salvadoran civil war (as throughout much of Central America), it did not produce a circulation of postwar narratives that commodified wartime pain and loss into productive goods, as James demonstrates occurs in Haiti through the production of “trauma portfolios” (2010:29–36, 291). In the intermediate postwar period, while clearly Chalatecos organized their pasts in order to make use of the layered incoming aid from a variety of international and national sources, the language of struggle predominated: the language of “victim” was seldom deployed.

There are of course exceptions, where Salvadoran loss is cast through the language of “victim.” For example, scholars have analyzed the civil society-led building of the Monumento a la Memoria y la Verdad in San Salvador that commemorates the death or disappearance of civilians with the names of 25,000 victims of war (Baker-Cristales 2004; DeLugan 2012). National and international human rights efforts have focused on exposing the truth about the 1981 massacre of 1,000 people at El Mozote in Morazán (Binford 1996). In 2012, President Mauricio Funes publicly apologized (and asked for forgiveness) for the massacre, in an act that officially recognized the government’s role in it. Additionally, in 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, based in Costa Rica, ruled against the Salvadoran government and the long-standing amnesty law for human rights violation during the war. The ruling called upon the Salvadoran government to investigate the massacre at El Mozote and hold perpetrators accountable.

These are significant developments and reframings, and I juxtapose them with an earlier regional language of commemoration. For instance, in 1998, in the town of El Rancho, community organizers wanted to honor their dead. With
donated funds, the community council commissioned and erected a simple cement monument. Etched on the wall are the names of more than 50 individuals (not all names would fit and funds ran out). The plaque, however, does not evoke the language of victim or that of militant. Deaths are portrayed through the language of kinship, loss, and the familiar struggle for liberation. The title reads, “la comunidad en memoria de sus hijos caídos en la lucha por la libertad y justicia social” (The community in memory of our children fallen in the struggle for liberty and social justice). In February 2012, as I walked with a resident in El Rancho, I snapped a picture of the monument. First though, in order to see the names of the dead carved at the bottom of the site, we had to move several slabs of discarded cement, piled up from a recent construction project funded by a migrant abroad.

I do not want to reproduce a tale of Chalateco agency, of the legacies of raised consciousness through participation in peasant movements, liberation theology, labor organizing, and the transformations of resistance, although this arc was present for many and has been well documented. Instead, I borrow Fassin’s periodization: in *Humanitarian Reason* (2012), he offers an expansive reading of our contemporary period through a meticulous analysis of humanitarianism as it operates in France (with migrant and vulnerable populations), and in “paradigmatic cases” of epidemic (South Africa), disaster (Venezuela), and conflict (Palestine). He looks at the ways in which intervention in these spaces “elicits the fantasy of a global moral community that may still be viable and the expectation that solidarity may have redeeming powers” (2012:xii). Fassin unravels the inequalities, contradictions, and hierarchies of valued life that underscore the logic of humanitarianism, and the ways in which this politics of compassion (inequality) also contains a “politics of solidarity” through the recognition of humanity in the other (2012:3).

Yet, it is Fassin’s claim of a discursive shift (with its material legs) that interests me most, and raises questions about how to think through aftermaths. He demonstrates that “people often prefer to speak about suffering and compassion than about interests or justice, legitimizing actions by declaring them to be humanitarian” (2012:3). In this shift, “inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma” (Fassin 2012:6). In an earlier text, Fassin and Rechtman (2009) theorize this idea of trauma that underscores humanitarian reason. They convincingly contextualize it by noting that 20 years ago, we had a different language:

the focus was not so much on trauma as on violence. The talk was of the resistance of fighters rather than the resilience of patients. Those who were being defended were always oppressed, often heroes, never victims. The focus was on understanding not the experience of people’s suffering, but the nature of social movements. No one
thought in terms of psychological care; they campaigned for national liberation movements. (2009:160)

Today, they argue, “the notion of ‘trauma’ has become a general way of expressing the suffering of contemporary society, whether the events it derives from are individual (rape, torture, illness) or collective (genocide, war, disaster)” (2009:19–20).

In this framing, we can all be traumatized, individually and collectively. We can all be victims and thus have access to reparation. Or can we? In the war-torn El Salvador with which I am familiar, in the everyday lives of Salvadoran migrants, this language of trauma did not surface in the same way. When it did come up, in the language of suffering and sacrifice, in the rage toward ongoing economic inequality, among neighbors no less, the postwar critique by leadership was that the rank-and-file collaborator expected a prize for their participation—some sort of indemnification for their sacrificing. This was chastised as a troubling “refugee mentality” that compromised agentive futures. Trauma creates victims, and ultimately that troubles the metanarrative of collective action. Here is the complication. In the ethnographic section that follows, I think about the meanings of this humanitarian logic predicated on traumatized, modern subjects and how indeed “there are more interesting and complicated narratives to tell” about the workings out of aftermath (Theidon 2012:27). What are we to make of El Salvador, caught perhaps between shifting logics. Traumatized victim? Reintegrated/reconciled survivor? Disciplined militant reclaimed?

Intimate Ethnographic Returns

With a hotel-rented mobile phone charged, my 11-year-old son’s knapsack on my back, I waited, anxiously, for Elsy (an old friend/contact/Chalateca research associate) to arrive with the microbus she helped me hire for transport from the capital of San Salvador to the department of Chalatenango. Soon, I heard the familiar low, loud rumble of a dilapidated yet cared for cherry red van, and caught a glimpse of Elsy through the front-seat passenger window. I remembered her taller, straighter. But there she was, still sporting bright-colored pants and top and adorned with plastic dangling earrings. We were both so much older. She was accompanied by Carlitos, her striking, nearly 12-year-old grandson, his hair jet black, spiked with gel and looking so much like his mother when she was a child.

While I have written about the Chalatecos young and old who I first met in the early 1990s, returning to El Rancho and writing once again about their lives feels like an intimate act—their everyday laid bare, exposed. Writing about Elsy has always been complicated, like our friendship. Sociologically, I have interpreted her trajectory as a foil to the expectations of the postwar revolutionary woman, too
quickly forgotten, whose intellectual leftism is not valued, whose body was used, and who exhibits no clear revolutionary bridge of feminism (Shayne 2004). Nevertheless, when needed she would stand tall, without tears for her multiple losses, and deploy the discourse of revolution in a fearless speech of rights, organizing, and the pursuit of a dignified life.

Anthropologists have written eloquently about long-term fieldwork in their field sites and with their original interlocutors. Taggart and Sandstrom (2011), for example, highlight anthropologists’ shifting subjectivities, and how time allows for following theoretical and political economic changes. In this work, the complicated notion of friendship must also be interrogated (see Kirsch 2005). Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria de la Cruz Hernández write collaboratively about the possibilities and contradictions of “friendship, anthropology” that span their 20-year relationship that began when both were 22: Paloma is a non-Roma anthropologist and Liria a Roma wife and mother who takes the anthropologist into her home. They conclude together that “our relationship has been unequal, not because of Paloma’s greater wealth but, rather, because Liria was friend above all while Paloma was always friend and anthropologist” (2012:14). Fran Markowitz, writing poignantly about her longitudinal research in postwar Sarajevo, explains the evolutions of long-term fieldwork, the aging, and shifting commitments and perspectives between researcher and subjects. Indeed, she writes about the intimacy, and the consequences of getting information wrong, of accidental misrepresentation and the act of a public, published apology, which is never quite enough (2011). Thus, I have become hesitant in the ethnographic selections that follow, all these years after, precisely because of the relationships that longitudinal research brings with it. Like Paloma Gay y Blasco, I recognize that I have always been “friend and anthropologist,” whether in promising to visit children in Los Angeles, delivering photographs back to New Jersey, or making that long-distance phone call (or text) to check in.

In this ethnographic section, I spend some time describing the minutia of my reencuentro (reunion) with Elsy. This is an intentional focus on the everyday that can illuminate structural and personal possibilities and suffering (wartime privileged couplings, postwar reconstruction benefits, and migrant kin). It is an intentional focus in a short piece to sketch Elsy’s biography rather than her biological life (the scars of her losses) that Fassin reminds us roots humanitarian logic (2012:254). I was not prepared for the sprawl of Elsy’s new home, which is rustic but with a smooth cement floor, discrete rooms including a kitchen, an indoor bathroom with a flush toilet (still not common in the community), a pila (laundry), three bedrooms, a shop, and an enormous interior living area. Her adult children, all living in the United States, have been discrete. They have a quiet disdain for her new partner from Honduras who has no political history and an ambiguous political positioning. I am careful and constrained in what I share about
her gendered relationship and sexuality, although it sheds light on how Chalatecas of her generation live through the after of war and postwar.

During this visit, I was based in Elsy’s home and my timing coincided with her grandson’s birthday. While Elsy was putting the party together so that I could attend, she was also focused on having her granddaughter present—little Melisa lives in the municipal seat of Las Vueltas with a paternal grandmother. I had heard from her children in the United States that Elsy rarely has access to Melisa, living just a 15-minute bus ride away, and that she rarely speaks with the child’s mother Alison, now living in New Jersey. My field notes from the 1990s are replete with comments about kin ties and how Alison, Elsy’s last child, the only one with a responsible, present, and loving father, held a privileged position in the family. The silence is dramatic.

For two days, Elsy’s house was a flurry of activity with neighborhood teen girls helping throughout. There were trips to the market in Chalatenango to buy a cake and a piñata, and prepackaged chicken, sliced bread, and cabbage from the grocery store to stew and make into chicken salad sandwiches to serve with coca cola—quite different from the collecting of banana leaves and making of tamales and café de matz (toasted corn coffee). After much negotiation (by mobile phone) between the grandmothers, Carlitos’ cousin Melisa and her paternal grandmother Niña Rosa arrived at the party. The little girl was dressed in a puffy, sky-blue satin dress, hair neatly parted in curly ponytails on the side of her head. Melisa wore a lot of gold: necklace, earrings, and bracelets on each wrist. Niña Rosa made it clear that they could only stay for a short while, and indeed the piñata came out early and before long they left, conspicuously leaving three chicken sandwiches, still wrapped neatly in their napkins.

With the party over, later that night Elsy decided to deliver the sandwiches to Niña Rosa in Las Vueltas, telling me that the sandwiches were left on purpose for fear that the cabbage would make them sick. Because of my visit, a European friend and researcher—with longer ties to El Rancho, Elsy, and neighboring communities—also made it to the party. That night we traveled to Las Vueltas in his borrowed pickup truck: he was making a quick visit to an old friend, Elsy was delivering sandwiches, and I was just observing. We spent a good hour in Niña Rosa’s home, which was larger than Elsy’s, with an impressive pick-up in the driveway.

The conversation contained a litany of complaints: the displacement of Niña Rosa’s kiosk in the center of town, the mismanagement of municipal funds by the FMLN mayor (Elsy’s distant cousin who it is unclear if she voted for), and ongoing development critiques. Specifically, Elsy talked about a tailoring workshop she had received from FOMILENIO. This is not the first sewing training that Elsy has received. In 1993, she spoke with me about attending sewing workshops in Mesa Grande, Honduras. In 1996, I collected a long, detailed, and angry narrative about the injustices of a sewing workshop (not getting enough cloth and reduced pay
for participation), and how she had claimed a revolutionary identity in order to confront the trainer (Silber 2011). How many sewing workshops? Which registers continue or shift? What gets elided?

In this story about FOMILENIO, Elsy concentrated, as she had in similar narratives, on the FOMILENIO staffer who ran the workshop. According to Elsy, all the women were to receive three bolts of cloth as well as a medicine kit. On the last day of the workshop, however, there was no cloth and no medicine: all had been taken back to San Salvador because a project participant had stolen a pair of scissors. I was struck by the 15-year time span between similar workshops and Elsy’s tempered critique. While in the past Elsy had claimed a revolutionary identity, in this case Elsy did not draw upon a discourse of organizing. Her narrative did not confront the FOMILENIO instructor to advocate for herself and her colleagues. She did not claim a revolutionary status.

However, Elsy did articulate a familiar complaint about development aid—those in the aid apparatus use their position, their access to resources, and the supposed beneficiaries like a ladder to get a step ahead. The stolen scissors were returned but no one received cloth. The coda of her story was also interesting and suggests that hierarchy and corruption have been long standing. She reminded us that she had been with a platoon leader during the war, and thus knew well the real circulation of money in times of war, and was aware that she benefitted from it at the time. As an example, she explained that if a platoon leader was given 300 colones to run his troops, he would spend 150 colones and pocket the rest. What I find compelling is the direct critique of FMLN structures and how the framing of her logic opens a more direct or vertical relationship between the FMLN and postwar structures. These are the kinds of stories propelling current investigations of wartime El Salvador (see Sprekels 2014).

Before leaving Niña Rosa’s home, Elsy pointed to the three sandwiches and admonished that they should not go to waste. Months later, she telephoned me with the unexpected news that only eight hours after our visit, another one of Niña Rosa’s young adult daughters started her journey from Las Vueltas to New Jersey. I met this recent migrant in early December 2012, in the New Jersey Salvadoran restaurant owned by her eldest sister—a “migrant entrepreneur” (Pederson 2013).

This return to El Rancho years later has yielded new ethnographic insights into the lives of men and women that are beyond the scope of this article. Some Chalatecos and Chalateca’s everyday has not altered dramatically since the mid-1990s; they still toil over land that does not yield much. A few continue to participate in community organizing and the trickle of projects coming in; others engage in seasonal labor migration or, more recently, build homes commissioned from abroad. Many, of course, are part of a transnational sociocultural and political-economic field in which bodies leave and return—sometimes they are forced; sometimes they move by choice. On one of my last days in El Rancho, I was asked...
if I remembered “el huérfano,” the orphan. I did, but not the particulars of his story. He lived in Los Angeles for a while but could not find his way there and returned to El Rancho, to his partner and his baby girl. Still known as the orphan, how has he embodied that legacy in postwar as a young adult? How much, how many have forgotten?

In that Shift

The paths and pasts of Chalatecos are clearly diverse and are interpreted in temporal contexts that ask different sets of questions about negotiated peace, neoliberal economies, and arcs of militancy. Bourgois and Schonberg’s (2009:16) work on homeless heroin injectors offers some insights here in their interest in the suffering that is “chronic and cumulative” and both personal and structural. It is this chronicity, in terms of being “long-lasting and difficult to eradicate,” that gets lost in our contemporary shift to a moral politics of humanitarianism, which by definition is characterized by (bounded) crisis. The vignette above calls for a thinking through of chronicity in aftermaths of shifting terrain. For there are cycles and continuities—Elsy’s sewing workshops, her discourses of complaint, and ongoing community poverty—that are in tension with the ruptures and returns of migrants, which trouble the logic of humanitarian reason.

During the war, calls for humanitarian aid commingled with a solidarity movement that denounced U.S. involvement in El Salvador and rampant human rights abuses. We see this clearly in the work of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), in the sanctuary movement (Coutin 1993), in movements for peace (Smith 1996), in the role of the Central American diaspora in the solidarity movement (Perla 2008), and as well in Sister City projects—although this was a real site of contention in the community of El Rancho because they were never able to establish this relationship. There are of course interesting cases in the last 20 years of projects in El Salvador that are inflected by the contemporary humanitarian discourse and that tend to emerge around crises (earthquakes and hurricanes) and sometimes in the calm of everyday lack. The Salvadoran American Humanitarian Foundation (SAHF), for example, requested aid for 20,000 people affected by torrential rains in October 2011 (Marketwire 2011). Bikes have been donated (Bikes for the World 2012), U.S. teen missionaries have labored to build schools (Riverhead News Review 2012), and individuals blog about their “humanitarian aid trip to El Salvador” (Kibaki’s Korner 2012). Many of these efforts unite medical practice, volunteerism, and humanitarianism (i.e., the Hearts with Hope Foundation) and are not infrequently militarized, as was the case with “Beyond the Horizon 2011 … a 4-month, inter-branch humanitarian exercise” of the U.S. Navy Battalion 28, intended to assist after Hurricane Ida. Meanwhile, there has
been limited academic and policy framing in terms of humanitarianism in El Salvador (Flores Acuña 1995; Pastor and Boyce 1997), although there have been political critiques of humanitarianism “on the cheap”—substandard housing built after earthquakes (Holiday 2005), for example. In another instance, Salvadoran Juan José Dalton, author and son of poet Roque Dalton, writes about a recent visit to El Salvador by President Obama: is the relationship really “imperialismo humanitario?” (2011).

These ethnographic reflections attempt to have us think through what happens in the long “after” of war, when contemporary logics have shifted. Here too, Fassin’s findings are informative. He asserts in terms of other cases of conflict, such as the Palestinian “youth stone thrower,” that he is not interested in understanding the teen’s “true experience of violence, but rather what are the various truth tests to which he is subjected by political authorities and humanitarian organizations, by religious leaders and psychiatrists: What truth are they trying to make him tell, or tell through him?” (2012:202). In this particular case, humanitarian logic transforms young men’s agile, virile bodies of protest into neurotic subjects who wet their beds at night, “substituting the politics of justice proclaimed by the martyr with a politics of compassion that has the sufferer as its object” (2012:211). What truth tests will follow for Chalatecos?

**Last Words/Last Images**

The film *La Palabra en el Bosque* (*The Word in the Woods*) (Consalvi and Gould 2011) closed the Historia, Sociedad y Memorias conference. It was one of the few peopled accounts of the event and it aimed to present the arc of early organizing in Morazán, from the formation of ecclesiastical Christian base communities (CEBs), to armed struggle, to post peace. The film ended with a now-familiar lament of desencanto (disenchantment), with Celina, a protagonist of the film, stating that since the signing of the peace accords, it has been as if a large hat has come down upon them and they have all fallen asleep. When the film concluded, there was silence and many tears. Consalvi (known by his nom de guerre as Santiago, the voice of FMLN Radio Venceremos), the Director of el Museo de la Palabra y el Imagen, stated that in fact, after the cameras stopped, Celina added that what was also left was el bracito (the helping hand). An audience member questioned the value of the academic conference and invoked a call for the need to organize. However, one of the last people to speak captured the audience. He was a young man from Chalatenango who had attended several days of the conference. Amidst tears, and amidst applause, he explained that he had been young in 1980, in primary school when the war started. By 1987 in secondary school he had written a poem in which he dreamed for peace—for a peace he had been told was full of “la felicidad y la
alegría,” something he had not experienced either then, or later with the peace accord. With tears he exclaimed, “todavía no sé lo que es la felicidad y la alegría. ¿Cuando lo sabré?” (I still don’t know happiness and joy. When will I know it?)

I did not hear happiness or joy in Flor’s voice when I called to update her on my trip and report on her son Carlitos. When I visited her six months later in LA, she had already received pictures and video of the party from her mother and had uploaded them on her Facebook page. It has been ten years since she has seen her boy, although she was able to send her U.S.-born daughter to El Salvador with an aunt who has U.S. residency. “Ay, gracias,” she said, when I handed her some photographs. What is there to thank me for? On my last day in El Rancho, I laced up my sneakers and joined Carlitos, a few of his friends, and my European colleague for a soccer match (adults vs. kids) in perhaps the most picturesque place in El Rancho—its expansive soccer field surrounded by views of rolling hills. Carlitos was in full knockoff Barcelona Football Club gear sent by his aunt in New Jersey (his friends were not), new cleats, and had the new soccer ball I had bought him. Elsy video recorded much of the match. It was serious. It was fun, and they won, as I let in that last goal. A returning South American Gringa; a tall European; jubilant, athletic boys: is this happiness in the after?

I am not quite sure what the answer is. I do know that my last moments in El Salvador, before boarding the plane at the International Airport, suggest a shift of some kind. On my way to the gate, I passed a mural dedicated to Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, martyred symbol of the poor. Beside it was a plaque that quoted President Funes, dated January 16, 2010, 18 years after the signing of the peace accords. Speaking in the name of the Salvadoran state, Funes asks for forgiveness for the crimes and violations during the armed conflict, hoping that this forgiveness will serve to grant dignity to the “victims,” “que ayude a aliviar su dolor y a sanar sus heridas” (to help alleviate their pain and heal their wounds), in order to build peace and construct a future with hope. Perhaps, the emerging discursive move that invokes militancy comes out of a public naming of the victim and a resulting tension. It remains to be seen how this works out in places like El Rancho. However, as the historic trial in neighboring Guatemala of former dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt for the crime of genocide indicates, this is an extraordinary moment to think through Central American possibilities, because the “wall of impunity” (part of that negotiated peace) has finally cracked.26

Notes

1FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) was comprised of five political and armed forces. It officially became a political party with the peace accords. ARENA (National Republican Alliance) was the ruling party of the government of El Salvador during the negotiated peace and until March 2009.
2 This is what Salvadorans call people who live in Chalatenango.

3 Unidad de Investigaciones Sobre la Guerra Civil Salvadoreña (UIGCS) is based at the Instituto de Estudios Históricos Antropológicos y Arqueológicos at the Universidad de El Salvador; it is an interdisciplinary group with an international working group component. See http://www.ues.edu.sv/iehaa/ (last accessed January 31, 2013).

4 I thank Leigh Binford for the push to clarify the debates and assumptions surrounding the literature on transitions to democracy and to explore how this work differs from the field of transitional justice.

5 Elsewhere I have worked explicitly on a gendered reading of postwar Chalatenango. See Silber 2011, chapter 7 for a review of the literature on gendered processes.

6 Maquila refers to the export-oriented garment sector. This is not intended as an exhaustive list.

7 The Pew Research Center cites the 2010 Census showing that Salvadorans are the fourth largest population of Hispanic origin residing in the United States. See http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/06/27/hispanics-of-salvadoran-origin-in-the-united-states-2010/.

8 This is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature, which is beyond the scope of this article.

9 See also Ralph Sprenkels’s blog: http://revolucionrevisitada.blogspot.com/, as well as Fernando de Dios: http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/cparchivo/especiales/analisis-historia-de-la-guerra-muchopor-conocer. Titles and specific topics of the conference included: “Relaciones urbano-rurales en la insurgencia salvadoreña” (Sprenkels); “Del Partido a la Guerilla: los orígenes de las Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí” (Álvarez); “Datos Sobre Archivo General de la Nación” (Ponce and Campos). My bibliographic research also indicates an increase in recent doctoral dissertations.

10 Personal communication with a North American colleague who spent the late 1980s and most of the 1990s in El Salvador supports my findings on the silence around the category militancia in the early postwar period. She also said that during the war, many North Americans like herself were organized with a branch of the FMLN, often at first without even knowing it.

11 As established by the Truth Commission, 95% of wartime human rights violations were attributed to the military and paramilitary forces, and 5% to the FMLN.

12 Here, I am thinking of the powerful response by William Roseberry (1995) to Orin Starn’s critique of scholarship in the Andes that “missed” the revolution (1991). Similar critiques were made about Guatemala and missing the genocide.

13 War as controversy: a reflection on the political aftermath of the report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador.

14 I thank Ralph Sprenkels for this clarification.

15 ALGES emerged in 1997 and defined itself as an association of “gremial, humanitario, democrático y sin fines de lucro.” (an organization characterized as a union, humanitarian, democratic, and not for profit). While at first it comprised FMLN and civil society war wounded, in 1998 it grew to include the war wounded of the armed forces. See http://www.alges.org.sv/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=13&Itemid=62.

16 See, for example, news reporting by CISPES at http://www.cispes.org/blog/civil-war-veterans-pressure-administration-for-improved-benefits/.

17 Segovia reminds us that transitional justice was not a framework deployed during the peace process. However, he argues that several aspects of the peace accords meet the criteria for transitional justice (2009:6, 23). For definitions and frameworks of transitional justice, see ICTJ at http://ictj.org/about/transitional-justice.

18 Segovia also highlights that reintegration via agriculture was compromised because of “a profound structural crisis since the late 1970s” (2009:18). Silber (2011) details the challenges to this reintegration in the everyday.
See the note above regarding women’s participation. Also note and recall the on-going human rights work of organizations such as Las Dignas, and the institutionalized forwarding of women’s rights via ISDEMU. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify this point.

I thank Leigh Binford for pushing me to think through the spaces where the category “victim” is deployed. The El Mozote case is particularly relevant, as Binford suggests, because of the multiple processes of victimization: the survivors who lost kin and community as they lived with on-going wartime threat; and the victimized, as the state denied the massacre while simultaneously commemorating the patriotic death of the Atlacatl commander (Domingo Monterrossa) responsible for the massacre.

For example, see a series of articles in the journal Anthropology and Humanism, vol. 36, issue 1.

See Boellstorff et al. (2012) for virtual ethnographic methods.

See the FOMILENIO website at http://www.mca.gob.sv/. This is a large development program from the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation. Projects in El Salvador range from education to highway construction.


References Cited


