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Reconciling Americas:  
Salvadoran Immigrant Activists and Political Transnationalism

A dissertation submitted in  
partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Arpi Misha Miller

2013



ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reconciling Americas:  
Salvadoran Immigrant Activists and Political Transnationalism

by

Arpi Misha Miller

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Gail Kligman, Co-chair

Professor Roger Waldinger, Co-chair

In the 1980s, a violent civil war in El Salvador led to the mass emigration of over a million Salvadorans, many of whom fled their national territory only to seek refuge in the U.S. – the very country funding the military dictatorship in their homeland. Although many Salvadorans bunkered down in cities like Los Angeles in the years to follow, a cohort of politicized Salvadoran migrants remained entrenched in the struggle in their homeland, supporting the resistance movement there and partnering with North American activists to end U.S. military intervention. This dissertation focuses on one such group of Salvadoran immigrant activists and their quest to “reconcile their Americas,” balancing allegiances to their new hostland and their homeland after the war’s end. Specifically, the dissertation focuses on the activists’ creation of the Salvadoran-American Day festival in Los Angeles, and its institutionalization at the federal level, as a platform for visibility, political change and integration between their two

country contexts. Drawing on over six years of ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, this dissertation teases out the activists' subjective orientation, practical methodology, the constraints and openings for action they encounter, and the costs and benefits they experience in the course of their transnational political work. At a theoretical level, the case study contributes to an understanding of the relationship between processes of immigrant integration and transnationalism. As a narrative, it tells the story of these individuals from their experiences of mass violence in El Salvador to their ambiguous feelings about U.S. citizenship, their eventual embrace of a life lived "in-between," and the long-awaited but complex reconciliation facilitated by the rise of a leftist political power in the homeland.

The dissertation of Arpi Misha Miller is approved.

Susan Bibler Coutin

Rubén Hernández-León

Gail Kligman, Committee Co-chair

Roger Waldinger, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

For my parents, Donald and Lorna Miller

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It has become a common saying in my family that it takes a village to write a dissertation, and that has definitely been the case with the dissertation at hand. I am profoundly grateful to my co-chairs, Roger Waldinger and Gail Kligman, both of whom have believed in this project from the very start. It was in Gail's graduate course on ethnographic field methods that I first began doing fieldwork and interviews with the participants of this study, and, along with the other students in the class, it was with Gail that I learned how to navigate entrée to a fieldsite, how to think about insider-outsider status, and how to transform memos and fieldnotes into the first stages of analysis. Gail has read myriad versions of the chapters in this dissertation in their nascent forms as conference presentations, coursework papers, and a master's thesis. And on the final versions of the chapters, Gail has done a very close read, helping me to think beyond the field of immigration, raising questions about substance and organization, and making suggestions right down to my use of the semicolon. This, in Maya Angelou's words, has at times led me think things like, what do you mean you don't like my semi-colon? "I will never speak to you again. Forever. Goodbye. That is it. Thank you very much!" But in quiet moments of reflection, I have found that Gail's suggestions have always been spot on, and I appreciate both the close attention to the work and her timeliness in turning around comments and encouraging me onward.

Roger Waldinger is the person who formally introduced me to the field of immigration. Roger's vast knowledge of immigration and his habit of reading about the topic well outside the field of sociology, devouring fiction, history and political science, has made him the best kind of mentor – one that orients his students well and then truly enjoys seeing what interesting corners of the subject they will uncover on their own. Roger has seen a kernel of potential in this project, ripe for development, from the very first memos that I sent him, and I can say without hesitation that he has been unfailingly supportive of my efforts to bring the work to this stage. Roger also read every chapter of this dissertation multiple times, always pushing me to see how this case fits into the

bigger picture, and reminding me to specify the context in which the actions I have recorded are occurring. Once, at a conference session on immigration, a senior scholar said to me, “Oh you are Roger’s student? He seems so stern all the time!” Quite the contrary. Roger’s students quickly come to see that he is not only unfailingly supportive of the work but also of the person. As a father of three children to whom he is very devoted, he has encouraged me through all life’s milestones, not only the academic ones. And I continue in awe of his ability to dedicate time to his family while remaining so superhumanly productive.

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genuinely, this work was made possible because of your care. And the last time my in-laws came to visit, I promised them that there would come a time, someday, when I would actually cook for them in lieu of them cooking for me. I look forward to making good on that promise. Thank you to my other mom, Pat, my mother-in-love, for also taking up far more than her fair share of childcare and household maintenance. Knowing that my kids were being loved by grandmothers made me feel better about constantly sneaking off to the basement to write. I am also grateful to my brother Shont, to Katrina, Azure, Jason, Kevin, Amy, Vahe, Herout, and my 94-year-old grandmother who told me, on the eve of the submission of my final draft, that she was praying “that I would be brilliant” in the final stretch. Finally, if my three-year-old son, Liam, was the grand, joyful interruption that arrived just as I was beginning to code my data in earnest, then his little brother, five-month-old Raffi, was the *in utero* muse that motivated me to finish a draft, the whole *enchilada*, before his birth. Reminding me that there is, indeed, life outside of the dissertation, Raffi woke me up every 45 minutes of the last three nights of my work on this manuscript; his way of saying, “Enough already, mom!” Last but not least, in the final stretch when I thought I could not write a single word more, my husband Terry showed up in my office at 11pm with a cup of coffee and a slogan printed in large font reading, “When there is no wind, row.” Terry, your endless childcare and intellectual, spiritual and emotional support carried me through this long haul. I am not sure who is more excited that I am finishing – you, me, our children or our moms. But thank you for bearing with me all the while. I owe you, big time.

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## Introduction: Reconciling Americas

In the 1980s, a violent civil war in El Salvador led to the mass emigration of over a million Salvadorans, many of whom fled national territory only to seek refuge in the very country funding the military dictatorship in their homeland – the United States of America. Nearly thirty years later, in an historic move, the former guerilla entity-turned-political party, the leftist FMLN, won presidential elections in El Salvador for the first time ever in the postwar era. That success was due to a constellation of factors, not the least of which was the ability of Salvadoran immigrant activists in the U.S. to take advantage of the opening created by a newly elected Obama administration and to lobby their representatives to support the democratic process in their homeland. In March, 2009, for the first time in the history of United States-Salvadoran relations, the U.S. embassy in El Salvador made a public declaration of neutrality, vowing to work with whomever the Salvadoran people chose to elect.

Ironically, that year also marked the first time that the activists of the Salvadoran American National Association (SANA) did not organize *El Día del Salvadoreño* – the popular festival they had founded in Los Angeles in 1999.<sup>1</sup> And how paradoxical, indeed. The election of an FMLN president was a moment that Salvadorans everywhere had been talking about for years; a moment that immigrant activists, like the organizers of Salvadoran Day, had been working for their entire lives. In fact, the festival was largely built as a way to intervene in the politics that connect the activists' homeland to their new host country. What more appropriate time, then, to celebrate *El Día del Salvadoreño* in L.A. with the tens of thousands of Salvadoran immigrants who attend each year?

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “Day of the Salvadoran.” *Día del Salvadoreño* is how the holiday continues to be identified in the community, but non-Salvadorans often call it “Salvadoran Day” or “Salvadoran-American Day.”



When the festival began, the immigrant founders of *El Día del Salvadoreño* were but a small group of dedicated community organizers with a creative, risky and fortuitous idea. Not certain where the idea would lead, they commissioned the creation of a life-sized replica statue of El Salvador's Patron Saint – the *Divino Salvador del Mundo* – and brought it by land from San Salvador to Los Angeles in a symbolic pilgrimage that culminated in a small-scale public celebration in L.A. The celebration began as a modest attempt to intervene in a cluster of deeply personal issues. Given their experience of the U.S. supported war in the homeland, the activists sought to reconcile U.S. citizenship and the questions of “loyalty” that such membership raised, helping their kids understand their history and claiming a space of belonging and pride in Los Angeles. They also sought to gain political voice in both El Salvador and the United States, and to work to shift the politics that had historically connected the two countries they called home.

Just a decade later, the festival they created around the migrant patron saint had become one of the largest gatherings of Salvadorans outside El Salvador. Through the organizers' persistent work, the U.S. House of Representatives officially recognized the date, August 6th, as “Salvadoran-American Day” throughout the country. And over the years, the event became a primary stage for local U.S. politicians to interact with their constituents and for political hopefuls from El Salvador's FMLN opposition party, such as the new FMLN president, to address Salvadoran compatriots living in “*el exterior* [outside the country].” The festival also became a launching point for more formal, political lobbying in the U.S. And, over time, many of the event founders transitioned from backstage organizers to public figures within the “transnational” political community.

### **A Chapter of History, A Cohort of Activists**

People dispute the real consequence of the Salvadoran election for the average citizen on the ground in El Salvador. But the significance of a democratically held election in

El Salvador, in which fraud was attempted but largely mitigated, in which everyday people came out of their homes, shed their longtime fears of persecution and voted for the opposition party – and those results were *honored* by both the U.S. and Salvadoran governments – marked a major step in the direction of closure for many Salvadorans spread across the globe. Even for supporters of the rightwing ARENA party, the event could only be seen as a highly significant marker in the country’s national history. And for longtime supporters of the leftwing FLMN, the event led to a level of symbolic closure that even the 1992 Peace Accords, which ended twelve years of grueling war, simply could not deliver.

That closure was felt particularly acutely for Salvadoran immigrant activists living in the “diaspora,” like the Salvadoran Day organizers in Los Angeles. Although some migration to the U.S. had existed in prior decades, the onset of war in the 1980s produced a sudden and massive wave of war migrants. As most migrants do, they followed the tracks of those family members that had left before them, ironically landing in the United States. Among that mass migration was a sizeable cohort of young people, *politicized* through the escalation of repression in El Salvador, introduced to militant resistance there, and further schooled in organizing and activism once in the U.S.

Upon arrival in the U.S., rank and file migrants bunkered down, working primarily for economic and emotional survival as traumatized refugees, unrecognized and undocumented by the U.S. government. But this young cohort, significant in experience and dedication if not numbers and official credentials, settled in migration epicenters like Los Angeles and Washington D.C. and remained entrenched in “the cause.” It could be said that many of them lived in a state of liminality for 30-some years, civically engaged in two countries and always seeking closure to the issues that had provoked the onset of a

continued exodus of Salvadorans from the homeland; the ongoing separation of countless families, including their own.<sup>2</sup>

Slowly but surely these activists were indeed “becoming American.” Their kids were born as U.S. citizens. As families, they were experiencing slow but steady upward mobility. And they were increasingly engaged in U.S. civic culture and local political activism. At the same time, they never ceased to dream about and work for the change that neither war nor peace had delivered in El Salvador. In fact, from the earliest days of their migration until the election of the FMLN in 2009, one could say that they spent a majority of their extra time, effort and resources in a two-pronged endeavor, working for recognition and change both in the homeland that pushed them out and in the country that had become their ironic host.

It is not that their bi-national orientation and efforts would now suddenly end with the 2009 election as this chapter of history closed. But the context, both political and psychological, in which they had been operating would indeed shift, as new opportunities for work and collaboration arose and a step towards healing past wounds presented itself. Following the election, immigrant leaders maintained a realistic skepticism about the work ahead and the obstacles that could stymie real change on the ground for compatriots in El Salvador. Many of those happy about the larger change in power were uncertain about this particular candidate and/or the party that backed him.<sup>3</sup> But the opening of a new page allowed immigrant organizers to revisit their priorities within the new context. For some this meant reallocating time to pressing issues in the U.S., such as immigration reform. For

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<sup>2</sup> The term liminality is originally attributed to anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909) but was popularized by Victor Turner in an essay entitled *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1967). It is used here to denote a “middle stage” of ambiguity and lack of closure in the lives of Salvadoran activists living in the U.S.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Salvadoran leftists found themselves on both sides – some supporting the candidate and wary about the party and others lacking trust in the credentials of the candidate while steadfastly supporting the party. These divisions in affiliation will be fleshed out in the Historical Background Chapter.

all those who remained committed to work in El Salvador, they were suddenly faced with a new relationship to the Salvadoran government and the possibility of an enhanced diplomatic role in the U.S., as potential mediators between two government entities that had been historic foes.

At an emotional level, the closing of this chapter of history marked a significant decline in survivors' guilt and a decisive answer to what had become a growing uncertainty about the sacrifices of war and migration.<sup>4</sup> With the democratic defeat of the rightwing party in which the military did not overturn the popular vote – an event unimaginable in the past – the war suddenly appeared to have played an important role in bringing El Salvador to this historic moment. And while the travesty for many surviving Salvadoran activists was that so many brothers and sisters did not live to see the day, they could at least and at last feel that loved ones lost in the war had not died in vain.

Finally, for Salvadoran immigrant leaders fraught with conflicting emotions about their migration to the U.S. and their decision to become U.S. citizens, a new sense of reconciliation about becoming American emerged. Yes, the U.S. had helped to fund the military war machine in El Salvador in the 1980s. The U.S. had denied Salvadorans fleeing that war the dignity of political asylum, legal presence in the host-state or socio-economic support. But, in that moment, it was as U.S. citizens that Salvadoran immigrants were best able to affect the context of this historic event, seizing upon Obama's recent election to lobby the new administration towards a public stance of neutrality in the election in their homeland – something never before accomplished.

Through their creativity and commitment, the creators of *Día del Salvadoreño* and a whole host of Salvadoran immigrant *compañeros* had been part of the change, and that felt

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<sup>4</sup> Survivor's guilt is a term used to describe a combination of symptoms including depression and anxiety which derive from a sense of guilt or culpability for having survived an occurrence of mass fatality (war, natural disaster, genocide) wherein loved ones were killed.

good. Even if only for a moment, the Salvadoran activists could at last reconcile and make compatible their “Americas” – the Central America of the war and its aftermath and the United States of America that was both enemy and host, repressor and vehicle for change.

### **The ‘Integrative Acts’ of Migrants: Integration from the Perspective of Migrants**

In January of 2004, I sat next to Dora – a former participant in the Salvadoran armed conflict and current community activist in L.A. Gathered together with 50-some Salvadoran immigrants at a banquet in Echo Park, we listened carefully as the FMLN vice-presidential candidate of that year’s election in El Salvador spoke about his vision for the country. As we listened, Dora drew a diagram on a napkin for me. At the top, she wrote in Spanish, “The validation of the anonymous human beings who fought to construct the link.” She underlined the word “link” several times and circled it. This state of “being the link” between countries was the position that she, as a part of the Salvadoran transnational activist cohort, found herself in; the search for validation and recognition of that invisible role was part of what fueled activists to continue to give so much of their time and resources to civic engagement both in the U.S. and El Salvador, she explained.

For the Salvadoran activists that comprise Dora’s link – the cohort of civically engaged individuals described above – America will never be just one thing. Unlike for many native-born U.S. citizens, for whom America is conceptualized as one, powerful country, for these actors America is two vast continents. Moreover, where a person has grown up within those continents, and under what circumstances, drastically changes the *meaning* that the United States of America holds for them. As one immigrant leader put it, “I used to think of [the U.S.] only in terms of its foreign policy.” Another activist explained that under the circumstances of a war largely funded by the U.S. and forced migration, “I did not love [this] America. Why would I?” Even once in the U.S., Salvadorans fleeing the war had to fight hard for recognition and inclusion in the polity, with mixed results.

With migration and time, however, these activists increasingly began to see themselves as a part of the U.S. and the U.S. as part of them. Not only were they becoming more engaged in the society, but also their children were born U.S. citizens. No longer could they think of America, the U.S., without recognizing that their kids helped comprise the polity and the nation. “How could I hate the U.S., without begrudging my own kids,” Werner, a long time activist, once asked?

The meaning of the United States was shifting. “Homeland” had become an increasingly complicated term for the activists. Was home here, or there? How could they make sense of the experiences that spanned these places? How could they become U.S. citizens and watch their children become American without betraying that experience? As importantly, how could they commit to living permanently in the U.S. without losing touch with the struggle for political change in El Salvador that they were born into – the struggle itself being the only consistent “home” they had ever known? In short, how could they reconcile their different Americas?

### Re-envisioning “Integration”

Although their pre-migratory experiences render these activists a more visible case than others, ongoing connections to a country of origin and ambiguous feelings in national identification are neither particular to Salvadoran immigrants nor to activists, per se. Rather, immigration scholars increasingly agree that the ties that connect immigrants in a host country to their country of origin are a “natural” and expected outcome of migration itself (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Waldinger 2011). Media attention often turns towards those cross-border connections only during rare occurrences of *extreme* alienation or conflict, such as 9-11 or the Boston Marathon bombings carried out in 2013. In their aftermath, the cross-border ties of whole immigrant populations and, particularly, activists

and their organizations, fall victim to scrutiny by the host state and often without due cause. This is the case, not only following acts of violence, but anytime an immigrant's host country comes into direct conflict with his or her "homeland" country or region in some regard, raising the question of "loyalties."

Following 9-11, for example, mainstream news articles raised questions about the feelings of ambiguity in cultural identity that exist for Muslims and Middle Easterners in the U.S. Particularly, they pointed to Muslims in the U.S. army as they participate in two wars in the Middle East sometimes against their very own compatriots and brethren.<sup>5</sup> Given his experience of U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador, one SANA leader drew a parallel: "God forbid my children are someday shipped off to fight against their own brothers and sisters in El Salvador!"

But while the policing of immigrant ties has many historical precedents in the U.S., overt conflict and violent acts by immigrants against host state targets or interests are certainly not the norm. Rather, they are extreme and highly uncommon cases that, in sociological terms, serve to *make visible* the more mundane and banal reality of immigrants' cross-border connectivity in practice and identity, as well as everyday processes and pressures that push immigrants to "become national."

Historically, immigration scholars have focused their energies on the latter process. Tellingly, the term "immigrant integration" was created to describe increasing entrenchment in *one place* – namely, the new host country. However, from the perspective of migrants themselves, the term "integration" often invokes a very different and important type of action and sentiment. Rather than integrating or assimilating themselves into one place, immigrants are often reaching across multiple, border-spanning contexts and

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<sup>5</sup> One example touted in the media was that of the mass killing that took place at Fort Hood, Texas in November, 2009, which resulted in 13 fatalities and injured 30. The attack was carried out by U.S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, citing conflicts of interest and allegiance.

experiences as they seek in ways small and large to actively integrate and reconcile two or more country contexts *with* one another.

Episodic moments of extreme conflict aside, this process by which immigrants bring together, balance and reconcile (or “make compatible,” as one important definition of the term implies) the families, loyalties, experiences and responsibilities that span those multiple contexts has traditionally been ignored in the immigration literature, masked by the popular nationalist myth of the U.S. as a “land of immigrants” – not a land of emigrants (Green 2005; Coutin 2007, on El Salvador in particular). It has also been masked by scholars’ longstanding methodological tendency to cut their study and analysis of immigrant populations at the border of the country of reception (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). These twin omissions reinforce one another, over time leading to a conceptual blind spot and, therefore, the development of a grievously limited understanding of the post-migration process both within the social sciences and the society at large.

In reality, after migration to a new country, almost *all* immigrants engage in their own personal negotiation and reconciliation at the level of the household – what we could call a “private, integrative act” with decisions about how much emphasis to place on cultural retention and ongoing connection to the homeland, or how to split resources between family in the U.S. and relatives in the country of origin. For immigrant leaders and activists, negotiating the “here” and “there” and embodying “the link” may be a more contentious, more politicized process – a “public and political integrative act.” This level of integration takes form and is made visible through manifestations such as migrant organizations, public cultural events, organized demonstrations and lobbying efforts – many of which have been historically viewed and analyzed in the social science literature within the context of assimilation or integration in the host country, but almost all of which exist, in part, because of ongoing connection to a “homeland” in practice.



These integrative acts, both public and private, are, in turn, context-bound. They are shaped by a number of factors in the host context such as the political milieu, opportunity structure therein, and the vehicles for mobilization that are both accepted and made available. As importantly, they are shaped by the relationship between countries (or regions) of origin and destination, and the impact that relationship has on the pre-migratory experiences of immigrants, the migration process itself, the level of both social and legal inclusion immigrants experience in the host country (Waldinger 2013a), and the migrants' subjective orientation towards homeland and host. While organizations like the Salvadoran American National Association, and events like *Día del Salvadoreño*, may be seen as constructive interventions in the attempt to reconcile contexts and allegiances (both in the sense of “creating” and being “non-destructive”), more extreme acts such as those carried out by the Boston marathon bombers could be alternately described as a type of failed reconciliation or integration between contexts or, depending on the case, a truly trans-national act that places allegiances beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

### Dissertation Focus

This dissertation takes the integrative acts of migrants (at both a personal and public/political level) as an orienting framework. Like all immigrants, activists such as Dora and Werner are indeed engaged in a constant act of integrating “here” and “there” in personal ways. But they are simultaneously attempting to carry out a more purposive, public expression of that integrative act, working for recognition, voice and change in both contexts, working for an altered political connection between their countries of origin and reception, or simply working to make their host state's politics more compatible with their experiences in the homeland, and vice versa. They do so by creating organizations, events

and institutions in the U.S. – creations whose meaning would be significantly misconstrued without analysis of their cross-border elements.

With this conceptualization of “integration” as a point of departure, this dissertation tells three narrative stories in one. First, I explore the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival in Los Angeles – the context from which it emerges, the ways it is both used and received, and its evolution over time. Here I view the well-accepted festival form not only as an invention of tradition but also as an *intervention* – in this case, one such vehicle through which its immigrant creators attempt to enact this type of political integration between country contexts and across borders. That story and the agency it entails are, in turn, grounded within the structures and constraints of the host state, with multiple pressures impinging on that creative act and shaping the form such a mobilization takes. In this way, the festival, as familiar as it may appear at first glance, provides a concrete lens into deeper dynamics, overlooked in past scholarship, such as the interaction between processes of assimilation and transnationalism.

Secondly, I tell the story of the individual activists that created this particular event, beginning with their wartime and migration experiences, and tracing their trajectory from their postwar dilemmas about membership in the U.S. to their public embrace of a life that “comprises the link.” Here I not only explore their experiences, goals, practical methods for working, and subjective orientation. I also ask questions such as, how does the work itself affect and situate the actors? What results from the attempt to work via the festival form? And to what degree do their integrative acts embed them *in* (or propel *from*) the civic life of the host country?

Third, although (as activists) the main participants in this study are not representative of the larger Salvadoran immigrant population in the U.S., the dissertation also tells a more general story about Salvadoran migration, the activist cadre, and the role

that the connections between host and homeland countries have played in their experiences, past and present.

In order to construct these narratives, I move outside the boundaries of the “site” of the festival described in the opening to this chapter, following the actors as they engage election work in El Salvador and political lobbying throughout the U.S.; as they carry-out more than a decade’s worth of work in quest of political change in both the host and homeland and, specifically, in the relationship between the two. I go deep into the lives of the nearly twenty key participants involved in organizing the festival over the years, while simultaneously recognizing them to be nested within a much larger field of relationships with family members, fellow activists (both rivals and allies), rank and file compatriots, and civic and political leaders in two countries. The integrative acts of my key participants are not isolated efforts but rather occur in constant interaction, both real and imagined, with this larger sphere of individuals and entities. Thus, the voices of this larger community – bound together through interactions of collaboration and contestation – inform my analysis in very important ways.

In theoretical and analytical terms, my study is squarely situated within the immigrant transnationalism and integration literature. That said, I consciously choose to *begin* my study with the ground-up notion of integration from the perspective of the migrant for a number of reasons. Traditional academic concepts in this field are highly loaded terms, often developed from the perspective of an outsider looking in. The integrative acts I describe, whereby migrants bring together, balance and reconcile commitments, relationships and loyalties that run across homeland and host, is instead a concept developed in the course of extended participatory research with the activist cohort in this study. It is a conceptual lens framed from the perspective of my participants themselves – how they view and experience their post-migration processes and dilemmas –

and a lens that both follows them across borders as they live out their lives and that takes their subjective orientations into account.

Starting here allows me to then trace the negotiations between actors that ensue, the successes and failures that the activists experience, and the constraints, openings, priorities and missed opportunities for action that they encounter along the way. This in turn allows me to ask what factors facilitate their work, what forces limit it, and what happens to the actors themselves in the process of working for change. It should be clear from the outset, then, that viewing the work as a set of integrative acts on the part of the activist migrant cadre is a starting point, *not an end*. As will become evident in the chapters that follow, for all the opportunities and benefits that this lifestyle affords, embodying “the link” and working intensely for change in both homeland and host context is an extraordinarily taxing and difficult state to maintain. Multiple pressures within both the home and host context impinge on the immigrants’ work and shape their choices, and a number of unintended consequences emerge in the process. This approach thus brings the view from within the activists’ experience and the view from the outside into dialogue with one another.

I find that some of the most interesting insights into the post-migration process may come not from focusing on the outcomes that my participants, themselves, are fixated on – such as political change in the homeland – but rather from focusing on how they go about their work and what happens to them in the very process of working towards that ground-up integration and change. Moreover, contrary to alarmist perspectives on immigrants’ homeland connections that emerge in times of conflict or heightened nativism (themselves a product of nationalism and nationalist mythology), I find transnationalism to be a common and highly routinized part not only of the post-migration process but also the very process of “becoming American,” particularly for politically engaged immigrant leaders.

This is not to say that many immigrants engage in this level of public and politicized work. Indeed, while these activists share experiences in common with compatriots that attend an event like *Día del Salvadoreño*, they can and should also be seen as a politicized version of their peers. The immigrants that participate in this lifestyle, as a number or percentage of the larger immigrant community, are few. But they are important because, in almost every immigrant population past and present, this subgroup of “transnationals” *will be found*. It will be comprised of a certain type of person, and the work they engage in will have an impact not only on their own lives and those of their families but on the larger community in either the U.S. or the home country at a number of levels and for a variety of reasons explored in the chapters to come.

### **Literature Review: Integration, Transnationalism and Ethnicization**

What does the reader need to know about the immigration literature to better understand the significance of this case study? In an ethnography like this one, I believe in-depth discussion of the implications of the study for a pre-existing intellectual tradition or literature is better situated later in the text, after the reader has some tangible examples upon which to hang otherwise abstract, theoretical concepts. Instead, in what follows, I outline some basic points that will allow the reader to see just the opposite from the outset – namely the implications of these literatures *for my study*, for understanding where and how the study is situated at the nexus of these intellectual traditions.

In the review that follows, I provide a brief overview of scholars’ development of the assimilation/integration and transnationalism paradigms within the social science immigration literature. I also include brief exploration of literature on ethnicization and ethnic mobilization, largely found within the separate but related field of comparative ethnicity – a literature I believe plays a very constructive role in the study of post-migration processes such as those explored in this dissertation. My study also benefits from dialogue

with work on social movements and ritual and symbol. Lamentably, an in-depth review of these fields is not included here, though I engage with some topics therein in the body of the chapters to follow.

### Immigrant Assimilation and Integration

For years, effectively since the birth of the study of immigration in the U.S. and its rapid growth within the Chicago School of sociological study, the assimilation paradigm has reigned supreme. Assimilation or some version thereof has been the go-to concept for scholars attempting to describe and understand immigrant lives and communities. In those studies, scholars largely fixated on questions of “what happens after?” and, specifically, how do immigrants “become like us?” (see origins in Gordon 1964)

Over the decades, the concept of “assimilation” has fallen in and out of a state of disrepute, scholars abandoning it for long periods of time or at least disguising it under different names like integration, incorporation and embedding. As U.S. society came to grips with its own diversity, “assimilation” as a concept was critiqued as a largely nativist, normative mandate for immigrants to shed their ties and cultural traits and merge with a supposedly homogenous, white Anglo-Saxon “mainstream.” Early scholars of assimilation processes became seen not only as studying the lives of immigrants but also assuming that assimilation would, and possibly *should*, happen. They became fixated on how to deal with or explain the “problem” of ethnic retention or cases of “failed assimilation” (see Alba and Nee 2003 for critique).

In the last decade, the assimilation concept has seen a significant revival. Shedding the normative and prescriptive stance once associated with the concept, scholars began to revisit it, focusing not on the shedding of cultural traits but on the diminishing *salience* of ethnicity as a key process through which immigrants join the “mainstream” (ibid). Scholars

in this “new school” of assimilation asserted that some components of the assimilation paradigm are accurate and useful in analyzing the post-migration process. In fact, they asserted, most immigrants in the U.S. from the first big wave of migration *did integrate* into host society institutions, both culturally and structurally; perhaps assimilation should not be thrown out so soon. As a process and perspective, “assimilation” might help scholars understand through what mechanisms this occurred in the last big wave of migration, with what implications for more recent waves, and with what general impact on the immigrants’ quality of life and opportunities in the host context (e.g. Brubaker 2001; Alba and Nee 2003).

The debates surrounding this assimilation literature are numerous and ongoing. As with the past wave of migrants, the main debate centers on scholars’ hypotheses concerning whether and how immigrants will integrate into mainstream institutions (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; 1999). A second set of debates rests on the degree to which a mainstream exists at all, raising the question of “integration into what?” (see Rumbaut 1999; Banton 2001; Favell 2003a). Finally, if assimilation is seen as a decline in the salience of “ethnicity,” scholars question the degree to which such acculturation is an intended or unintended outcome of immigrants’ attempts to “get ahead” (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995; Alba and Nee 2003).

At the core of most of these discussions are debates about the *relationship* between acculturation (cultural assimilation) and structural integration, a question asked since the concepts’ earliest formulations (see Gans 1997; Gordon 1964). For example, does acculturation necessarily *precede* and make possible other forms of integration, as was assumed in the past? Conversely, in some cases, might integration and positive life outcomes occur through some form of ethnic retention instead (Portes and Rumbaut 2001)? Is integration into so-called “mainstream” institutions even necessary for positive life

outcomes, or do alternative institutions exist that can offer comparable opportunities (Portes et. al 1999)? And, finally, flipping the equation on its head, is acculturation itself the *product* of integration and social or economic mobility (Perlmann and Waldinger 1999)?

While many questions in this vein prove useful in understanding the social reality of the post-migration process as it unfolds before us, the assimilation/integration perspective as a whole is still characterized by a number of significant shortcomings. First, assimilation is conceptualized primarily in methodological individualist terms – focusing on the individual and aggregate outcomes of *individual choices* (Alba and Nee 2003) but largely ignoring the role of *concerted and collective efforts* made by immigrants, such as the Salvadoran Day founders, as they publicly contest the barriers to inclusion that they experience, and they collectively and consciously work to claim a place within the host country structures and institutions of power.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, critics assert that some of the more popular, recent renderings of assimilation (such as Alba and Nee's) tend to downplay both the social *and legal* barriers immigrants experience (Waldinger 2013a) as well as the collective demands for inclusion in the society and polity that immigrants organize and enact. In this vein, minute-seeming differences in scholars' language-use matter: do immigrants assimilate *into* the society or are they assimilated *by* the society? While the former puts emphasis on the immigrants themselves, and their choices, the latter word usage places the emphasis on the gate-keeping role of stakeholders who hold the keys to *entrée* in the society and its core institutions.

A second important limitation is the manner in which traditional renderings of assimilation take for granted the cultural origins of immigrants, ignoring how “culture” and

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<sup>6</sup> The work done through the solidarity and sanctuary movements of the 1980s constitutes a key example of the type of concerted efforts migrants and their non-migrant allies to undertake in fighting for legal inclusion. These movements are discussed further in the historical background chapter.



ethnic boundaries are both formulated and politicized in the host context. If assimilation has to do with the decreasing salience of ethnicity in the eyes of the “mainstream,” how should scholars deal with the persistent fact that, while cultural traits are brought with migrants, ethnicity as an identity that is both projected and owned is largely solidified and politicized in the country of reception?

Third, assimilation perspectives are also most often objectivist, precluding analysis of immigrants’ own *experience* of the post-migration process. A more subjective take on this process might reveal complete discord between the perspectives of immigrants and the official rhetoric of state actors surrounding integrative processes, such as naturalization (see Coutin 2003; Bloemraad 2006). Assimilation and integration scholars analyze the degree to which immigrants keep pace with their native born peers on a number of indices, but what about immigrants’ personal views of things like membership, acceptance, belonging, loyalties and national identity?

Without these subjective understandings, analysis of the dilemmas in identification that might accompany integration and, as such, motivate individual and collective action, is precluded. As importantly, ignoring this subjective terrain helps to perpetuate the “nation of immigrants” myth, obscuring the reality of ambiguities in identification, feelings of loyalty, and ongoing attachments and ties to a homeland – practical attachments and private sentiments that formal categories like “citizenship” render invisible.

Finally, this point on subjectivity points to what could be seen as the largest shortcoming of the assimilation/integration paradigm – a limitation that scholars increasingly see as characteristic of the social sciences in general. This is what scholars like Wimmer and Glick Schiller have dubbed “methodological nationalism,” the tendency to take “the nation/state/society [as] the natural social and political form of the modern world” (2002: 302) and to thus analyze social processes (such as those following migration) as

contained *within* those boundaries. As such, all the “messy,” ongoing connections of immigrants to their countries of origin fall out of sight, limiting scholars’ ability to understand the role played by these cross-border connections, actions and imaginings as factors that form a core part of the post-migration process and experience.

As indicated earlier, this shortcoming is both caused and exacerbated by the *popular* nationalist myth of the U.S. as a “land of immigrants.” It is further enabled by a *research design* and methodology that routinely ignore immigrants’ subjective orientations, disregard the spillover of social processes beyond the nation-state, and that, in comparative research, draw on cross-national models that can reduce and thus conflate national ideologies and realities (Favell 2003a).

### Immigrant Transnationalism

Amid the predominance of the assimilation paradigm and the corollary methodological choices, the “immigrant transnationalism” paradigm emerged. While both Kivisto (2001) and Waldinger (2011) remind us that the term has a longer intellectual history and career than most immigration scholars recognize, the earliest concrete conceptualizations of “transnationalism” within the mainstream social science literature on immigration were put forward by anthropologists in the 1990s. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic studies that documented an abundance of empirical connections between immigrants and their homelands, pioneer scholars asserted that the ongoing social, economic and political ties they observed were qualitatively different than those of prior immigrants and thus were not satisfactorily captured through the lens of then-current theories of assimilation and integration (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1995).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas and Znanieki’s (1919) *The Polish peasant in Europe and America: monograph of an immigrant group* is an example of a classic monograph not limited by national blinders.

For a time, such empirical observations led the scholars to herald “immigrant transnationalism” (the ties that connect migrants “here” and “there”) as the discovery of a novel reality emerging in the face of technological advance and the globalization of capital (Basch et al. 1994; Portes et al. 1999). Some wondered if “transnationalism” as a form of social power might even be an *alternative* to nation-state integration – a competing form of social, political and economic capital powerful enough to sustain immigrants and preclude the necessity of becoming part of any one nation-state (Appadurai 1996; Basch et al. 1994; Faist 2000; Portes et al. 1999; see critique, Favell 2003b).

Since then, thoughtful re-conceptualization frames immigrant transnationalism not as the discovery of something new but rather as a process and a set of practices made visible through a new “way of seeing,” allowing for analysis of connections that have *always been there* but have not been adequately recognized or theorized in the past. Contrary to popular alarmism and mythologies, the ongoing connections of immigrants to their homelands are now viewed as a *routine part* of the post-migration process, just as are processes of assimilation and integration. As Waldinger notes, “to say international migration *is to say* cross-border connections” (2011).

Some scholars suggest it is helpful to view immigrant transnationalism as both a *perspective* and a *practice* (Kivisto, *forthcoming*). As a perspective and conceptual tool for moving along theorization of the post-migration process, and capturing dynamics like those at the very center of this study, the immigrant transnationalism literature is paramount. Over the last decade or more, transnationalism studies have made a very convincing case that immigrant experience *cannot be fully understood* without analysis of the ongoing connections of immigrants to their countries and towns of origin. Not only are the connections of immigrants to their homelands part of the empirical reality and therefore something to be documented. Their omission precludes our ability to understand the

intervention of factors in the host state which either diminish or encourage the perpetuation of those ties; or conversely, the role those homeland ties might play in either competing with or facilitating integration in the host context. Early critics of the transnationalism paradigm go as far as to remind us, quite astutely, that the connection between countries can affect *every facet* of the migration process – from the movement itself, to legal inclusion in the society, to the way migrants organize themselves in the host context and intervene in the home country (Waldinger 2011; 2013a).

That said, many will agree that the study of transnationalism as a *practice* still leaves much to be desired in theoretical rigor and definition. As some scholars have noted from the start, the phenomena under study is ill-named in that the term “transnationalism” conflates states and nations. The connections of migrants to their homelands are neither “across nations,” per se, nor “beyond the nation” (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Fox 2005). Rather, the connections migrants form between their countries of origin and reception are largely *cross-border* ties, and thus, technically, “trans-state.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition, “immigrant transnationalism” as a category of practice suffers from what could be called a conflation effect, whereby *all cross-border ties and activities* are brought together under the same, general rubric. In reality, there are multiple forms of cross-border connection, from mundane and routine but important personal activities (like remitting money to family members and communicating via internet and phone) to collective and concerted efforts (like those of the *Día del Salvadoreño* organizers) (Fitzgerald 2004; Fox 2005; Fitzgerald 2006). Even this latter category of action is highly varied, from philanthropic to political connections, the latter encompassing distinct goals, such as state formation or regime change.

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<sup>8</sup> Given how established the field now is, this is a moot point, but one that continues to merit bearing in mind.

The vast majority of studies that *do* focus on collective efforts at connectivity are cases of what have accurately been called “bilocalism” – that is the village to village connections carried out through organizations like hometown associations (see, for example, Levitt 2001; Smith 2006). Studies of more explicitly political efforts at the level of the nation-state are harder to come by in the current, mainstream literature on immigrant transnationalism, which is not to say they do not exist as Waldinger makes clear in his astute, multidisciplinary, historical review of “emigrant politics” (2013b). This paucity of studies in the mainstream social science literature has important consequences for precisely how we define and delineate “transnationalism” as a concept or process. Omitting the full range of cases, including failed cases (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002), is detrimental to our full understanding of what the phenomenon entails.

Another imbalance has to do with the degree of attention placed on the homeland versus host context. Studies in bilocalism tend to focus *primarily* on the relationships formed between migrants and sending state actors (e.g. RC Smith 2006) in lieu of those formed with host state actors (e.g. MP Smith and Bakker 2008). In related fashion, although scholars have begun to correct for early sloppiness which omitted *theoretical analysis* of the role of states in their studies, as transnationalism scholars have responded, the focus has largely remained on sending or homeland states – how they react to emigrants efforts, how they reach out to their emigrant populations in the homeland. The myriad roles of receiving state actors in repressing, encouraging or circumscribing the efforts of migrants to affect change in their homeland remain highly underdeveloped; a semi-invisible force that shapes the realm of the possible and that, conversely, is sometimes shaped by what immigrants do. Emigrant politics is largely seen as focused on what happens “there” even though the practice is shaped, motivated, enabled and constrained by that which occurs “here.”

Finally, and relatedly, perhaps the most significant shortcoming of early work in the field has been the limited efforts by scholars to adequately locate immigrant transnationalism as a process vis-à-vis already established processes of assimilation and integration (critique in Kivisto 2001; Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). Simultaneity has been a central component of the transnationalism literature since its inception (see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Assimilation and “transnationalism” *coexist*: individuals may engage in a process of integration in the host country while also maintaining ties to their homeland (Fitzgerald 2004; Kivisto 2001; Levitt 2001; Morawska 2004; RC Smith 2006; MP Smith and Bakker 2008).

But analysis of the *actual relationship* and interaction between homeland ties and assimilation or integration remains significantly under-explored, particularly in the realm of political and collective action. Where explored, scholars have tended to focus on how integration into the host state can facilitate homeland-oriented activities (Guarnizo et al 2003; Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2005; Coutin 2003; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998; Guarnizo 2001; Smith 2006; Fitzgerald 2004; Morawska 2004). The opposite dynamic – how homeland commitments and transnational activity may conflict with or even *facilitate* integration into host society institutions – remains highly undeveloped (Karpathakis 1999; MP Smith and Bakker 2008; Miller 2011; Waldinger 2013b)

In recent years, scholars like Roger Waldinger have made an increasingly sharper push for a broader political sociology of the post-migration process that would include analysis of both its cross-border elements and the opposite – the way that nation-states seek to control connectivity and entry into the territory *and* society. We might add the role of the native-born population in pushing for this control, or the way immigrants themselves embody the state and police one another.

Waldinger (2013a) calls for attention not only to the social aspects of the phenomena – something sociologists are good at – but also the political factors that intervene in both processes. Under this research program, both processes could additionally be fleshed out by delineating specific “types” of connections or actions (and noting by *whom* they are undertaken). Secondly, both processes should be analyzed in light of the factors that facilitate *and* delimit them. Some such factors, like “the state,” could even have a dual effect of simultaneously limiting and facilitating both homeland-oriented action and integration (Waldinger 2013b; see chapter four, here).

In Waldinger’s rendering of the migration and post-migration process, there is an *inherent* clash between transnationalism and integration *as processes*. Keeping that built-in tension in mind is important at the macro-level, but I believe it also behooves us to suspend judgment about this clash at the micro-level of migrants’ particular actions and activities, and their consequences. The smaller actions that comprise “transnationalism” and “integration” as processes can be truly quirky bedfellows. This dissertation shows that the actions that cross borders can come into strange confluence with those that reinforce the separateness of nation-states; cross-border activities can serve as mechanisms for integration within the host state; and host state representatives can actually encourage homeland ties, hence the importance of exploring these relationships with attention to the sentiments migrants experience, the concrete, practical actions they carry-out, and the intended and unintended consequences that ensue.

### Ethnicization, Mobilization

Finally, both the immigrant integration/assimilation literature and, particularly, the transnationalism literature have not been brought into adequate dialogue with a third body of work – namely the vast work on ethnicization and mobilization carried out by scholars of

historical and comparative ethnicity. This work flips the assumptions about the cultural origins of migrants and the ties brought with them on its head, focusing instead on processes of invention and innovation, and the collective and concerted actions of both immigrant leaders and state actors in building “identities,” infrastructures, and categories of personhood.

This literature is linked to a broader body of work which explores why and how certain frames or social operators, such as ethnicity, are selected for organization and mobilization in the host context and with what outcomes. Some scholars in this tradition also explore the degree to which an operator, like ethnic mobilization, is actually aimed at “ethnic ends” (Verdery 1993); or to what degree ethnic mobilization is primarily provoked by other types of goals or competition (Brass 1985; Rothschild 1981)? Moreover, what are the consequences of using particular frames? Do social operators like “ethnicity” flatten the self-conceptions and experiences of immigrant populations or ethnic minorities, supplanting other forms of identification such as class? To what degree might those operators constrain or, conversely, facilitate the goals of many immigrant leaders that are working for economic justice, political inclusion and social change (Brubaker 1996; Brubaker and Cooper 2002; Wimmer 2008)?

As with the social movements literature, this body of research has the potential to fill an important gap in the current immigrant transnationalism and integration literature by raising questions about the collective and “mobilization” pieces of immigrant experience. Immigrants engage in homeland politics or contest exclusion in the host country, *but through what means?* Using which vehicles? And with the help of what mobilization frames and narratives (Bernstein 2005)? How do these choices and their efficacy differ under different sets of political and cultural conditions, in different contexts, and with what consequence?



The lack of dialogue between the immigration literature and this alternate body of work is unfortunate, as each could contribute to the other. The literature on ethnicization helps us make sense of how immigrants organize and mobilize themselves after migration. Conversely, the immigrant transnationalism literature augments some ethnicization studies by showing how the choices and actions taken by immigrants and ethnic minorities, particularly (but not only) leaders, are not only motivated by the process of exclusion and integration in the *host* country or “the nation” (e.g. Conzen et al 1992) but are just as often influenced by the actors’ myriad connections and desires to influence or gain voice in “the homeland” (Wimmer 2002).

### **Locating and Specifying the Case Study**

As a case, I believe this dissertation sits naturally at the nexus of the transnationalism and integration paradigms just described, highlighting the importance of holding the two processes in tension. While much of the foci of the SANA leaders’ work can be seen as a classic form of border-crossing “emigrant politics,” my data shows that those endeavors are enabled, shaped and directly affected by factors and work within the host country. As chapter 6 shows, the opposite is true, too; emigrant politics can facilitate integration in the civic and political life of a host country, at least for the immigrant leadership. Moreover, the experiences that determined the immigrants’ precarious legal status and shaped their political orientation and sense of identity once in the U.S. as immigrants have directly to do with connectivity. They are linked to the historical connection between their countries of origin and destination – the United States government’s economic interests in the region and political interventions during the war years and beyond.

While scholars analyze transnationalism and integration as two distinct, often conflicting processes, the migrant actors in this study experience them as wholly connected.

Separation of the ties that connect them to El Salvador and the process and activities that ground them in the U.S. would be viewed as unnatural. When probed, it's hard for them to even think in such terms; their lives cross borders in real and imagined ways almost every day. As the "integrative acts" framework highlights, they experience daily life as a constant negotiation of responsibilities, sentiments and values that span places and are interwoven with one another. And they actively seek to integrate those contexts, drawing on the resources of one to effect change in the other, striving to change the character of the connection between them.

That their lives are lived across contexts does not mean that borders do not matter, nor that we, as scholars, should not seek to delineate and specify the ways some processes cross borders and others promote the separateness of nation-states; quite the contrary. There is a difference between the subjective orientation and goals of migrants and the real forces that impinge on them; a difference between the fiction of the nation-state and the reality of that fiction when it is acted on in practice. I believe this case study serves us well in exploring how, for these actors, operating under a given set of conditions, integration and transnationalism come together and apart.

As hinted above, specifying who these actors are is also important for analysis in that it helps us further pin down the manner in which transnational commitments and integration processes work – and for whom. By the end of the dissertation, the reader will have a much deeper sense of the concrete commitments and orientation of the main participants in the study. But some things are helpful to note from the outset. The dissertation admittedly focuses largely on first and 1.5 generation Salvadoran activists and leaders, making this primarily a cohort and an activist study. That said, as noted above, each chapter also focuses on the relationships and interactions *between* the activists and other entities, such as the rank and file Salvadoran population they wish to mobilize

(Chapters 2 and 3), their own family members and children (Chapter 7), and civic leaders and state actors in El Salvador and the U.S. (Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

Many of the key actors are deeply connected to their hometowns in El Salvador, but in their organizational work they are less focused on bi-localism. Rather, while the target both local and federal level representatives in the U.S., in El Salvador, they tend to work for political change at the federal level, often working directly with FMLN representatives and forming affiliations with business entities or religious leaders in the larger diaspora. In carrying out their political work, often they do not target “here” nor “there” but rather the political and diplomatic connections between the host and homeland countries, picking different mobilization frames to meet the challenges and context of the day – from “symbolic ethnicity” to “human rights” and “democracy” to “anti-imperialism.” Some frames prove more effective than others, some more facilitating and delimiting in different moments.

Moreover, immigrant organizations are largely heterogeneous entities, and immigrant activists – like anyone else – have multiple sets of identifications. This organization, SANA, and these leaders are no different. Because of the character of the government entity the activists support in the homeland, namely the FMLN, many of the participants in this study can be seen not only as trans-statal in their goals (as they push for regime change from a distance) but also “transnational” in a truer sense of the word. Many (but not all) are traditionally Marxist in their ideological orientation and they tend to work in labor or community organizing for their day jobs, with a commitment to workers and the poor and marginalized in general, not just in the U.S. where they earn their paychecks. Those not involved directly in this political work are deeply connected to religious entities whose message goes well beyond nation or state; both revolutionary in their own way. And as a leftist turn and Latin American integration movement continue to build momentum

south of the border, much of their work can be seen as advocating now what was advocated during the war, namely a “hands-off,” “anti-imperialist” stance as regards the United States.

Concomitantly, having campaigned harder for U.S. presidential candidates than most native-born Americans ever will, having walked innumerable precincts in the Los Angeles area, and having called and registered countless voters throughout the U.S., they could also be seen as some of the most dedicated citizens and civic actors the U.S. has seen in recent years. Unquestionably, their presence in the U.S. invigorates the democratic process in lieu of detracting from it. Their ongoing work for immigration reform is focused squarely on inclusion in an established polity, even if their tactics are anti-establishment and grassroots and their understanding of *why* migration exists in the first place is transnational. Finally, their work for political change in El Salvador pushes for a more expansive vision of democracy and, simultaneously, a more restricted notion of national sovereignty. Thus one could say, that with varying degrees of intensity for each individual included in this study, many of these leaders are trans-statal, transnational, and national all at once.

### **Chapter Organization**

Following a section on methods, the narrative journey of this dissertation begins in Chamba’s garage – the parking structure on Commonwealth Avenue that he has managed for more than two decades. This background section brings the reader into the historical context of the study participants, reaching back to the population’s wartime and migration experiences in the 1980s and briefly tracing the history of several waves of activism. Beyond the outward appearance of Chamba – a parking attendant who still struggles with his English – lays a seasoned organizer. We journey into the file cabinets of his home office nook in Jefferson Park to discover the wealth of documented activism found there – activism that is aimed at both the U.S. and El Salvador.

This historical background serves, in particular, to highlight the geo-political connections between Chamba's host and homeland countries, the context of emigration he and fellow migrants experienced in the 1980s, and the corollary context of reception they encountered in the U.S. I also describe the development of a transnational solidarity movement that Central American migrants helped to create and the lifelong, immigrant activist careers it launched. The larger tasks of this chapter are twofold: to provide context for understanding the demographics of the larger Salvadoran immigrant population and to broadly map and delineate the specific political orientation of the Salvadoran immigrant left. Those tasks will help the reader make sense of the composition of the population, its organizational landscape in Los Angeles, and the collaborations and conflicts that appear later in the story. Ultimately, the connectivity between contexts proves invaluable for understanding the experiences of this population in the U.S., both the politicized cohorts and the rank and file.

The next two chapters focus on the festival itself as invention, intervention and a lens into processes of integration and transnationalism. In chapter three, I explore the context out of which SANA and the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival emerged. There, I begin by highlighting the cultural traumas and crises experienced by key leaders as they came to terms with the end of the civil war in El Salvador, the dissolution of the "incubating" transnational solidarity movement they had participated in, and the realization that they would likely stay in the U.S. – a country formerly considered an enemy – forever. This chapter lets the reader into the subjective orientation of these immigrant leaders as they muse on the identities formed around issues of migration, U.S. citizenship, and the commitment to political change, and as they brainstorm on how to actively and constructively intervene in that experience, reconciling U.S. the enemy with U.S. the host; reconciling El Salvador the homeland with the El Salvador that pushed them out.

Ethnic festivals, a common element of immigrant life in the U.S. for decades, are most often seen as displays of “symbolic ethnicity” in the host country – one day a year to wear the shamrock green or, in this case, the blue and white. In this chapter, however, I probe that assumption, questioning the degree to which festivals are created in order to celebrate culture and facilitate integration in the U.S. or whether they are, just as often, an effort to reach back to the homeland as well as intervene in the political orientation of the hostland, integrating two contexts with one another in both emotive and political terms.

In chapter four, I expand on and situate that story. While chapter three focuses largely on the voices of the activists that created *Día del Salvadoreño*, in chapter four I step back and include the perspectives of the larger web of people that come into contact with the festival and its organizers. In the first part of this chapter, I explore how such festivals are received by political, civic and religious leaders in the U.S. and El Salvador. At this macro-level, the event raises few eyebrows, as it is seen as a key political resource for a number of actors pursuing different goals. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the Salvadoran immigrant community itself. Here, the subaltern voices of the rank and file, the less transnationally oriented actors within the organization, and the critiques of rival activists come to the surface.

While the homeland political goals of the organizers are largely supported in the macro political sphere, they can cause conflict at the level of the immigrant population, recreating division where unity was originally sought. A number of irreconcilable tensions emerge – including forces within the host context that encourage cross-border activism and simultaneously seek to delimit and circumscribe that action. The ethnic festival form, which facilitated so much politicking on one level, also traps the organizers, as the masses push back against the political agenda presented through a “cultural” vehicle. Moreover, although the cross-border agenda of organizers is often accepted and even encouraged by

host country politicians, organizers still begin to experience subtle or unintended pressures within the host context to transform their emigrant goals into immigrant goals; to transform their transnational political dreams into culturally encoded manifestations.

In chapter five, I transition with the event organizers from the cultural and civic components of the festival to their larger homeland political goals – goals that spill outside the boundaries of the festival site, thus placing the festival in broader context as just *one* venue in which such integrative acts are carried out. Here I provide a deeper sense of what Dora meant when she called this cohort of immigrant organizers “the link” between contexts. Although some cross-border activities, such as bringing Salvadoran candidates, are launched through the festival, and some are carried out solely in El Salvador, the most effective, large-scale political actions of organizers target the middle ground of diplomacy, focusing on the connection between the state actors in homeland and host. This was true during the Solidarity years and remains true in the present era.

This chapter follows key participants from one election cycle in El Salvador to the next, exploring the obstacles they faced in the first election in 2004 and the ways their strategy was revamped for success in 2009. I show that those obstacles and their dismantling exist because of the “state-ness” of nation-states, not in spite of it, even as the *commitment* to overcome obstacles and the logistical organizing pursued by activists derive from their transnational orientation and cross-border networking. Indeed, over time *Día del Salvadoreño* becomes both a platform and launching point for political work. But in this chapter I show how actors must move beyond the space of the grassroots festival into the mainstream political institutions of the host country to effect change; how they must transition from the “ethnicity” frame of the festival to a narrative constructed around issues of “democracy” and “national sovereignty.” Here, simultaneous integration in the U.S. and

cross-border organizing and networking aid in the activists' goals for political change in El Salvador.

In the final, two, substantive chapters, I step back from the goals of the activists, asking instead how the work affects and situates them. In chapter six, I pose a single question: If so much effort is poured into cross-border activities and work, does this work pull the immigrant actors away from integration in their host country? Put differently, what is the impact of cross-border commitments and activities for the embedding of actors like Werner and Chamba within host country civic and political institutions? Although the work in the homeland definitely competes for time (an issue addressed in chapter seven), my findings in this chapter are somewhat counter-intuitive. In lieu of pulling actors away from the host country, I find that their work for political change in El Salvador can actually have the effect of embedding them deeper into host country civic institutions.

In particular, they gain an incredible level of hostland specific social capital and cultural-political know-how. The commitment to homeland change also works to broaden the organizational and institutional base of Salvadoran American activists living in the U.S. – a base that will likely last into the next generation and beyond. Here, a counterfactual question helps illuminate these findings: what would the organizational infrastructure and skill set of this cohort look like if the activists had abandoned transnational pursuits and poured their energy into paid day jobs and formal education in the U.S. instead?

Finally, in chapter seven, I again take a step inward, bringing us full circle back to some of the cultural crises, collective traumas and moral commitments that I argue gave rise to *El Día del Salvadoreño* in the first place. Drawing on a wider tier of Salvadoran American transnational activists, I probe what it means to participate in this type of work from the perspective of the actors themselves. This chapter is broken into two parts. In part one, I show that the actors derive a deep sense of empowerment and personal



reconciliation from their cross-border activities. For them, transnational activism holds within it a meaning-making component, one that brings some level of personal closure and satisfaction to lives characterized and shaped by displacement, social and political closure. Such work enables a type of deep affective integration and reconciliation between host and homeland contexts in lieu of dissonance and alienation.

Moreover, as per chapter six, the actors derive tangible benefits from their activities above and beyond these emotive elements: they build careers, they gain important skill-sets, social connections and recognition well beyond what their U.S.-based day jobs could otherwise offer. And they build a social world that has a true value-added quality to it. Their lives are transformed and made richer because of the “integrative acts” they engage. That said, these border-crossing activities are not unfettered and their benefits do not come without cost. In the course of their work and commitment, transnational actors experience a number of more complicated emotions and social realities that have received short shrift in mainstream studies. Not only is the position of forming the “invisible link” between contexts sometimes an uncomfortable and risky state of being; despite having dedicated their lives to the work of “in-between,” transnational communities are still rooted in nation-states.

Although they have embraced it, these actors describe their hybrid orientation as something that was imposed upon them precisely through state violence, displacement across borders and legal closure in the host country, not as something they elected in a celebratory rising above the nation-state. Moreover, having committed to a space of “in-between” rather than pouring their efforts into mobility in one place, access and visibility in both country contexts often prove difficult. The actors find they must sacrifice some of the very things that normally “root” and further integrate immigrants in the host context – such as family life, education, and job status and mobility. Still, the activists would not have it

any other way. And many claim they *could* not have it any other way. They agree that giving up their cross-border pursuits would result in a kind of extreme alienation and psychological discord, even as – or perhaps, in part, because – their children are “becoming American.”

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methods and Historical Background**

#### **Methodological Choices and Practices**

In brief, my research methodology for this project is comprised of multiple years of ethnographic participant observation and interviewing. I have been in contact with study participants for over a decade. Formal research involved personal observation and interaction with study participants over the course of seven years, from 2003 to 2009. During that time I observed events, participated in formal meetings and informal gatherings, spent extended time with activists, their families and their contacts in multiple settings, took five separate research trips to El Salvador, and conducted both formal oral histories and informal interviews. This work resulted in over 120 fieldnote files capturing several hundred “events” (further described below), 40 formal multi-hour interviews, 80 informal interviews and directed conversations, and the collection and analysis of dozens of related documents, including embassy cables, participant e-mails, media articles, and participant reflections. Below I flesh out the nuts and bolts of this data collection and analysis.

#### Why ethnography?

Over time, I have become increasingly convinced that ethnography – particularly in-depth participant observation – is the most productive approach to studying the issues and actors at hand. Had I attempted to construct a narrative about the participants and their festival based solely on initial interviews or after observing the key actors for a short period of time, it would have been a very interesting story – one about the struggle for visibility and incorporation in the U.S. and about the desire of event organizers to leave a legacy for

the second generation. But it would not have captured some of the most important elements of these actors' reality. It likely would have been largely contained within the U.S., and specifically Los Angeles, replicating some of the conceptual blinders of past.

The significance of the actors' deep ongoing political connections to the homeland, their desire for visibility and incorporation *there*, and the tensions and negotiations in their border-spanning identities emerged later in the process. Much of the narrative I tell relies upon an understanding of these political commitments and internal conflicts, an understanding of the clandestine nature of the participants' past activism, and the ongoing divisions within the community at present. So too does it rely upon the understanding that much of the work carried out in the U.S., where the actors live, is informed by things that happen elsewhere – both within the larger Salvadoran American activist community and in El Salvador. Like Paul Willis' classic ethnography of working class "lads" in *Learning to Labour* (1977), whose oppositional stances in school are only fully understood by knowing what happens at another, distinct site of practice and experience – namely, the factory shop room floor – the study and understanding of *El Día del Salvadoreño* and its creators, even as they worked *within* the host state, calls for analysis of what is happening at different sites of action.

Ethnography, with its ability to get beyond the performance and self-editing of formal interviews, and with its ability to reveal process and actions as they play out in real time, is well suited to understanding the work these activists do. Ethnography helps expose the context and web of relationships in which the work is carried out and how the work affects and situates the actors along the way. Finally, the method makes visible both the successes and disappointments the participants experience, and reveals how they weigh dilemmas and negotiate around the constraints they encounter through observation of informal and formal strategy meetings.

All that said, life, and particularly activism, is “performative,” too. Interviews conducted following observation of particular events sometimes help to get beneath the bravado and “strategic speak” of activist interactions, revealing the rawer emotions and motivations therein; hence the choice to complement participant observation with strategic interviewing.

### Originating Questions, Timeline and Research Practices

Interesting puzzles in the intermingling of host and homeland connections that emerged in early fieldnotes initially hooked me. I first sought to understand how diverse-seeming entities had come together. How, for example, did the FMLN, the California State Assembly and the Presbyterian Church all come together to share the same spaces through this one organization and event? Over time more subjective dilemmas emerged. How, for example, did such socially conscious migrant leaders reconcile to becoming citizens of a country that was significantly responsible for their forced emigration in the first place? As for the festival, the more I observed, the more apparent it became that *Día del Salvadoreño* was not just an event to be studied in and of itself; it was also a vehicle – a vehicle for other types of work elsewhere, both political and personal. Such questions and curiosities continued to emerge throughout the research process, and I followed them, puzzle by puzzle.

I first met the key actors in this study in 2000, when their migrant patron saint pilgrimage from El Salvador arrived in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles. I read the e-mail reports the pilgrims were sending from Guatemala and Chiapas as they traveled north, and then marched with the crowds that received them outside Dolores Mission Catholic Church – or *Misión Dolores*, as it is known in the community. Together, we processed through the neighborhoods surrounding the church, asking the saint to protect the children and youth of

this *barrio* from pervasive gun violence. Two years later, in the summer of 2002, I accompanied my father as he participated in SANA's first pre-festival political shindig in the Tom Bradley tower of Los Angeles' City Hall.

As I began my Master's work at UCLA that fall, I started to review a handful of early interviews with the key leaders, carried out by researchers at the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture. In the spring of 2003, I contacted SANA leaders and began formal research and participant observation. I continued ethnographic field research until late 2009, with concentrated research periods from 2003 to 2004 and 2007 to 2009. I also conducted periodic follow-up conversations with leaders through 2013, and, after moving out of state, continued to accompany leaders for events whenever I was in the Los Angeles area.

During concentrated fieldwork periods, I regularly attended organization meetings, informal social gatherings, and community events. And I routinely participated in 'go-alongs' (Kusenbach 2003) ranging from mundane errands in Los Angeles to precinct walking, closed door meetings with politicians, electoral work trips in El Salvador, and late night food runs and brainstorming sessions. Throughout the process, I engaged in both observation and participation, learning about transnational activism and civic integration in the very process of working alongside and learning from study participants. Just as often, I learned in the informal process of debriefing from a hard day's work with karaoke, guitar playing, Salvadoran food, stories about "*aquellos días*" [the old days] and collective daydreams of possible futures.

To complement this fieldwork, I carried out both thematic interviews that probed particular issues and overarching oral histories that traced transnational activism from one distinct political and personal era to another – particularly from the clandestine wartime organizing of the 1980s to the current era. Finally, I extended my observations and

interviews beyond the activists themselves, crossing over to their households, their workplaces, and their interactions with the larger public, the competing organizations and the civic and public figures that both contest and assist their work.

Drawing on oral histories interviews and observing the community over the course of a decade allowed me to compile semi-longitudinal data. The scope of this data has proved invaluable, as it has allowed me to trace the arcs of both relationships and events as they have changed over time (Katz 2004, on Extended Case Methods). This, in turn, has allowed for observation of the creation and the demise (or significant evolution) of events like *El Día del Salvadoreño*. And it has permitted observation of the actors as they experience political success and failure, as they undergo personal victories and difficult trials, such as family separations, the success, downward spiral, and even death of children to gun violence.

Studying the key participants over time has also allowed for observation of important splits and changes in the composition of the organization itself. For example, as I re-engaged the work in a concentrated manner in 2007, I observed, interviewed and followed both the long-time organization leaders and “the drop-outs,” continuing to follow these two groupings in tandem. This allowed me to ask why some people leave and some remain, in turn making visible some of the priorities, social dynamics and “members meanings” that I had previously missed (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). The changing composition of the organization tells an important story, a story about the goals and priorities of organization leaders. This strategy also allowed for inclusion of important critiques and perspectives from the drop-outs and subaltern voices within the organization, putting the work of the stay-ons into further perspective.

#### Study Participants and Sites of Data Collection

Although my primary study participants are the 20-some Salvadoran American organizers that have come in and out of the leadership of the Salvadoran American National Association (SANA) over the last decade, as mentioned above, I have attempted to achieve variation in my data through informal interviewing and interaction with a whole separate tier of individuals. Specifically, these actors include organizer's family members, civic, religious, and political contacts, activist "rivals," competitors and critics, the larger public that attends SANA events (including business sponsors and performers, fire marshals, police officers and event volunteers), and the broader FMLN base communities and their leadership in Los Angeles and on the East Coast.

Rather than focus on Salvadoran subgroups and organizations previously studied in ethnographic monographs, such as *El Rescate* and *Carecen*,<sup>9</sup> here I chose to study a "new wave" (post-wartime) organization founded by leaders with a long history of wartime activism. Of the five factions that came together to form the FMLN, the leaders of this organization emanate from the least studied faction in the U.S. context – the *Partido Comunista* (the *PC* or *los ortodoxos*, as the faction is often called). They were the least studied primarily because, historically, they have been smaller and less organized in the U.S. context. Moreover, even though their commitment has traditionally been to electoral change in El Salvador in lieu of armed resistance, with a name like Communist Party, they have had a harder time connecting to potential U.S.-born allies, which includes the category of budding academics.

As other factions in the U.S. have turned to hostland pursuits, the *PC* faction has remained dedicated to political change in El Salvador, making them an interesting case for exploring the balancing of commitments "here" and "there," following citizenship. In a

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<sup>9</sup> The mapping of these organizations is further described in the historical background section to follow.



collaborative sense, studying this grouping adds yet another voice to round out the body of work on the Salvadoran American activist population that already exists. In addition, this dissertation is the first in-depth account of the *Día del Salvadoreño* phenomenon, allowing for exploration of the use of such vehicles for political change.

As for the “sites” of data collection, they have mostly been in the Los Angeles area, but I also travelled to El Salvador with organization leaders in June 2003, March 2004, August 2004, March 2009, and June 2009. On these trips I observed the original *Fiestas Agostinas* and *La Bajada* (transfiguration) upon which *El Día del Salvadoreño* is modelled. I met with the family members and work contacts of organization leaders, followed them into meetings with political representatives at FMLN headquarters, the Mayor’s office, National Assembly, Churches, small business associations, and ARENA’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This also allowed me to converse with some of the activists’ contacts and siblings that chose to stay in El Salvador in lieu of migrating in the 1980s. Finally, I served as an international election monitor for two presidential elections and one presidential inauguration (in 2004 and 2009) alongside my key participants and a whole community of Salvadorans returning to El Salvador to accompany the political process and aid in the work.

Over the course of the research, I compiled 120 fieldnote files in which I recorded meetings, gatherings and events. Each set of fieldnotes might contain a weeklong trip to El Salvador or a weekend-long event or strategic planning meeting, making for many more “events” than there are files. Often these fieldnotes are accompanied by audio or video recording of portions of events and interactions, to facilitate further analysis of things like speeches and group interactions. I also carried out 40 formal, semi-structured interviews with the 20 key actors in my study, sometimes interviewing a single actor 3-4 times as contexts and circumstances changed over the course of the seven years of research. Most of these interviews are well over an hour, often lasting 3-5 hours.

Those formal interviews are complemented with around 80 informal interviews or directed conversations that could be anything from a 10-15 minute conversation to an hour-long brain-picking session carried out with members of the larger community described above. I also draw upon three archival group interviews done from 1999 to 2002, before I was actively studying the group, which are currently housed at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC. And I studied an amateur video of the blessing of the *Divino Salvador* image in the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador before SANA began their pilgrimage in 2000, as well as video taken throughout the pilgrimage by the individuals accompanying it through Guatemala and Mexico.

In addition to interviews and fieldnotes, I compiled some 40 documents including organization financial statements, the texts of state resolutions, songs, poems and personal reflections written by participants, and formal letters written to political contacts or members of the activist community. I also draw on hundreds of e-mail correspondences and Facebook posts, but only downloaded and demarcated those of particular pertinence to an issue at hand. Finally, I draw on relevant, classified U.S. Embassy cables (from El Salvador), released through wikileaks in 2011, and both print and online press articles on a variety of topics; a couple dozen of these deal directly with SANA and *El Día del Salvadoreño* in particular and were published in a range of press outlets, from the main Salvadoran dailies, to the ethnic press in Los Angeles, to mainstream outlets such as the Los Angeles Times.

This data collection resulted in just over 300 primary documents which I stored and organized using the qualitative coding program *Atlas.ti*. Each document (a fieldnote, interview transcript, article, etc.) I then coded thematically, generating twelve main themes, each with 10-30 subcodes under them. *Atlas.ti* served largely as a sorting and organizing mechanism to deal with the unwieldy and diverse data I had collected; I initially used this

program solely as a preliminary form of analysis. From there, I worked my way through the twelve larger themes, using the myriad examples within each subcode to tease out dynamics, processes, supporting examples and counter evidence. These twelve larger categories were then collapsed to loosely comprise the six substantive chapters in this dissertation, with some additional themes that will be used in the next phase of the work.

### Methodological Challenges

Along with the benefits it affords, this type of participant observation and ethnographic study also has its limitations. Halfway into the research process a participant warned me about some new contacts I had made. “Careful,” he said, “they are trying to organize you...” The statement nicely sums up one pervasive dynamic within the Salvadoran organizational left. Leaders live to organize. It also captures the degree to which the researcher is part of the very scene under study; the notion that, just as researchers see participants as a source of information, so too do participants view researchers as both a resource and, sometimes, a burden. That dynamic becomes exceedingly clear when, in the middle of heated debate, a participant turns the camera on the researcher with a “what do *you* think?”; or when in the middle of calling voters to remind them of their polling place, someone pulls out a spare phone, nonchalantly places it in your hand, and continues pacing, selling the importance of getting out the vote.

In related fashion, as Goffman writes, deep rapport with one group of study participants can, in turn, negate access to others, potentially leading to a one-sided rendering of history and communal experience (1974/2001). This is particularly the case when the community is highly fractioned, as are many community organizations, in general, and the Salvadoran American activist cadre in Los Angeles, in particular. There are deep divisions between current-day organizations, divisions which map onto political divisions

from the wartime era, not only between the left and rightwing but also between the five factions that came together to comprise the FMLN. As other longtime scholars of this community have noted (Baker-Cristales 2004:12-14), the mistrust and staunch competition in the community makes it effectively impossible to engage both depth *and* breadth in ethnographic research with these organizations.

Knowing that from very early in the research process, and due to the subject matters at hand, my strategy has been to favor depth over breadth. As described above, the political transnational activism of study participants is a topic whose surface will likely only be scratched through initial interviews. Access to the political meetings of activists, interactions with high-level political leaders, and discussions of both the benefits and the daily underbelly of this type of work involve an enormous amount of trust. As such, I have done my best to mitigate the potential flaws of the method by engaging in a wider range of informal interviews and conversations and by taking on a small handful of key advisors outside the organization (including less politicized community organizers, a couple staunch critics of SANA's work, and several highly politicized individuals who, through their experience, remain atypically neutral within the community). As described above, I also tease out and take seriously in-group differences and the voices of drop-outs to gain broader perspective. And I step back to gain distance, observing and taking as data my own experience and participation in the community (Goffman 1974).

Over the research process, I became known through a variety of labels. Most telling was the way rival organizations addressed and described me. "She is a *schafkista*," one activist outside the organization teased, describing me to a visitor from El Salvador by the name of the former leader of the *PC* faction of the FMLN. "Tell him, no, you are a *leonelista*," another organization member teased back, referring to the evolving leadership of the FMLN in El Salvador. The significance of such labels will make more sense as the reader

progresses through the text, learns about these organizations, and gains an understanding of the divisions therein. But in methodological terms, such labels are a reminder that a researcher's presence is almost always noted, both from within and from the outside. Moreover, when taken *as data*, these interactions further highlight the pervasive competition and sectarian dynamics present within the community, many of which relate to homeland affiliations. Salvadoran Americans, and the Salvadoran American *left*, are far from homogenous, even as many experiences are shared across the subgroups.

Finally, the data collection process has been a long haul, and by necessity (out-of-state moves, the birth of children) I have removed myself from the "field" for chunks of time throughout the research process. In turn, leaders have used this to probe my commitment. Was I 100% committed? Was I willing to lose sleep and suffer at work, to use my meager finances to travel, and to leave my spouse behind to engage in this work? These are the commitments that the activists themselves make. After breaks in data collection and returns to the field, key actors would say things like, "Eh *compañera*, where have you *been*? It's good to see you are back." Sometimes a slight cold shoulder would be presented, until I could earn my in, just as is the case with other Salvadoran activists that temporarily privilege the rest of life over transnational activism.

But the breaks in data collection have been extremely helpful for my analysis, allowing me to step back from the field and scrutinize what I am seeing before going back for further probing. In addition, the pressures from participants to be 100% committed – which has only become visible *because* of these breaks – has taught me key lessons about what it takes to be a transnational activist. Those insights are highly relevant and will be addressed directly in my final chapter, *Transnationalism's Travails*. They point to the level of consistency, strain and sacrifice that secure one's membership in the social circle and that accompany the work – a dynamic analyzed in the social movements literature, but not

adequately addressed in the somewhat celebratory renderings of political transnationalism that exist in much of the immigration literature, or in the romanticized depictions publicly used by activists themselves.

As for language use, interviews and conversations undertaken in the course of the project were carried out in Spanish, English and interesting mixes of the two languages. With each participant, a particular pattern of communication emerged. With one participant, for example, we fell into a pattern where questions were asked in English and responses spoken in Spanish, and we carried on like that without really realizing we were speaking different languages, until we would catch ourselves and laugh about it at the end of the conversation; it worked for us. Also, Salvadoran or Central American-specific slang or *modismos* often proved important in conveying a particular event and its meaning.

In the text that follows, for interview responses spoken in Spanish but where the meaning or feeling is lost in translation, some Spanish words are preserved in the text. In addition, where grammar or word-use was incorrect in a response spoken in English, the original text is preserved. For this reason, translations from Spanish sometimes appear more fluid than their English spoken counterparts, making for a slightly disjointed feeling in the text but preserving the lived reality and character of communication patterns of the participants.

### **Beyond Chamba's Garage: Salvadoran Immigrants and the Activist Cohort in Historical Context**

The first time I talked with Salvador, affectionately known as Chamba by his family and friends, it was in the parking structure where he worked on Commonwealth Avenue in Los Angeles. There, over the years, he had moved up from his original assignment parking cars in the basement, where he would not need English skills in order to interact with the clientele, to managing the whole structure. At the time, a survey or interview might have

captured that Salvador was more civically engaged than the average Salvadoran immigrant in the U.S., but his broken English and his job at the parking lot betrayed the existence of a whole second life – one carved out of his experience of war, migration and thirty years of activism.

When I finally sat down to interview Salvador, we met at his house in Jefferson Park. There in a corner nook between the kitchen and the dining room, Chamba had crafted an office for himself. On the walls were two framed signs – one, the seal of the Salvadoran American National Association with the U.S. and Salvadoran flags woven together, the statue of liberty on one side and the image of the Divine Savior of the World on the other. The other frame held the emblem of SIMA (Society for the betterment of Atiquizaya), Chamba's hometown association. He was a founding director of both organizations. Above his desk was a third frame, this one an 8x11 picture of two *guerilleros* dressed in fatigues, talking. This, Chamba told me, was his wife's cousin who was killed in the civil war en El Salvador, and he keeps it there to remind him to keep working for social change.

Before long, Chamba's second life began to emerge in full, not only in stories, but through intricate documentation; file cabinet drawers full to the brim with archived fliers and newspaper clippings from various organizations and events dating back to the early 1980s. On top of the cabinets were neatly kept boxes and poster boards loaded with photos, one of them with pictures of Nobel laureate, Rigoberta Menchú, others with actor, Martin Sheen, and yet others of Central American refugees, activists, and North American religious leaders engaged in protest. Reaching up, Chamba pulled down yet another photo – this one a gorgeous print with four generations of Salvadoran women all sitting in a row at the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival. The older ones were crying, Chamba pointed out, and the youngest was laughing; a metaphor for the generational experience of Salvadoran migrants, he explained.

What is striking about Chamba's office nook is not only that it is not the office you might associate with a parking garage attendant. Indeed, it looks more like something that would belong to an academic, librarian or historian of sorts. More striking is that the juxtaposition of Chamba's broken English, his day job, and the life which starts after 5pm when he leaves the garage (revealed in file cabinets and boxes), is perfectly emblematic of his experience, and that of a whole cohort of Salvadorans. It is that of a well-educated, socially engaged individual whose youth and livelihood were violently interrupted by a U.S. supported war, followed by undocumented migration. Not only did Chamba experience legal exclusion once in the U.S., and the handicaps of being in a foreign place whose language he did not understand; so too had war taken him away from the political struggle for dignity he was part of in his homeland. But migration provided him a way back in – back into an activist community, back into the homeland, back into an ongoing struggle for justice.

As we settled into our chairs and put aside photos, I pulled out my tape recorder. And then Chamba began. "I never wanted to come to the United States..."

### War and Migration

The twelve year civil war in El Salvador, from 1980-1992, was the culmination of multiple decades of economic and land use changes, growing polarization, and increasing repression as a response to a growth in strategic organizing. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, union leaders, community organizers, and priests met with violent repression at the hands of the military and paramilitary death squads, as they protested and organized against unlivable work conditions, falling wages, and a constant string of dictatorships (Montgomery 1995; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).



Although the majority of migration during this era involved internal and regional migrations, a small stream of migration to the U.S. did exist. Scholars have traced the earliest migrations to the turn of the century, with more sizeable streams in the 1930s and 40s (Menjívar 2000; Cordova 2005; Segura 2010). These latter migrations were largely relatively affluent families who were able to visit attractive destinations such as San Francisco. But by the 1970s, with industrialization and the augmentation of U.S. manufacturing in El Salvador, migration picked up with near 35,000 legally documented Salvadorans in California alone, laying down the tracks and networks of future migrations (Menjívar 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

In the 1970s, three important political events occurred in El Salvador. Two rigged or overturned elections – in 1972 and 1977 -- in which popular candidates were replaced with military leaders led to outrage in the population and massive strikes. Then in 1979, reformists within the military staged a coup. Their hopes to affect any real change were quickly dashed as they came up against the generals still in command, and the majority fled to exile (Montgomery 1995; Coutin and Perla 2012).

By the 1970s, the various revolutionary tendencies that had been percolating since the 1960s (1930s for the communist party) began to solidify into more defined organizations with armed wings and mass, popular projects. By 1980, these groups came together as a coalition, forming the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), named for the revolutionary leader killed during the 1932 peasant uprising known as *La Matanza* in which over 30,000 peasants were killed during their revolt against military dictator, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. The FMLN was comprised of five organizations with armed forces: *Las Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* (FPL-FPL), *Resistencia Nacional* (RN-FARN), *Partido de la Revolución Salvadoreño* (PRS-ERP), *Partido Comunista de*

*El Salvador* (PCS-FAL), and *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (PRTC-PRTC).<sup>10</sup>

By 1980, repression in El Salvador shifted from selective targets – union leaders, progressive religious leaders and student/teacher organizers – to mass repression, culminating in “low intensity warfare” in the early 80s (Montgomery 1995; Baker-Cristales 2004; Cordova 2005). Several poignant events marked those early years, including the assassination of Archbishop Arnulfo Romero, known as the “voice of the voiceless,” in 1980, and the massacre of El Mozote, in which women and children were brutally killed alongside men, in 1981. Seeing bodies piled up on the side of the road was commonplace, and loved ones suspected of dissent began to “disappear.” The early 80s were also marked by an exponential growth in emigration to the U.S., now with major streams to Houston, Washington DC, Boston, and New York, as well as California.

### U.S. Intervention

People tend to equate U.S. intervention in El Salvador with the onset of war in the 1980s, but, in fact, the U.S. had been involved in protecting economic and political interests in the region for decades. As repression grew within the country, Archbishop Romero penned a letter to then President Carter, in the last months of his presidency. In his letter, dated February 17, 1980, he wrote, “In the last few days, news has appeared in the national press that worries me greatly.” Romero continued, “According to the reports, your government is studying the possibility of economic and military support and assistance to the present government junta.” He went on to write that the current junta had shown no capacity to improve the situation in El Salvador, and in fact had resorted to “repressive

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<sup>10</sup> The abbreviations denote the political-military organization name, followed by the initials of the armed forces wings.

violence,” producing “death and injury much greater than under the previous military regime.” Romero then made a special plea:

In these moments, we are living through a grave economic and political crisis in our country, but it is certain that increasingly the people are awakening and organizing and have begun to position themselves to manage and be responsible for the future of El Salvador, as the only ones capable of overcoming the crisis. It would be unjust and deplorable for foreign powers to intervene and frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow.<sup>11</sup>

Just several weeks later, Romero – perhaps the only person that could negotiate a middle ground – was shot and killed, while celebrating mass, in a planned assassination. Instead of heeding Romero’s plea, the Reagan administration did just the opposite, funneling huge amounts of assistance to the Salvadoran military. Initially the plan, which came to be known as KISS, was to “keep it simple, sustainable, small and Salvadoran.” In 1981, General Woerner visited El Salvador and returned with a five year plan. Within that timetable, he assured Congress, the military would be capable of suppressing the guerilla. As Tommy Sue Montgomery writes, dead bodies were more a public relations problem for Reagan (in his need to convince Congress and the U.S. public) than a moral issue (1995: 148-149).

Using a Cold War mentality, the Reagan administration superimposed concerns of communist infiltration and subversion on what was, in many ways, an internal civil war, declaring El Salvador a “vital” site of action – a small but important stage for a global conflict. In 1982, the Reagan administration ignored attempts by the FMLN to reach out and negotiate (Montgomery 1995). Rather, he increased military aid to the Salvadoran military to \$103 million in 1981, \$412 million in 1984, and an average of \$312 annually over the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in von Dosenrode & von Dosenrode-Lynge, 2009: 253-254.

next four years (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). In addition to financial and tactical assistance, observers documented U.S. military personnel on the ground in conflict zones (Montgomery 1995).

As Chamba wrote in Spanish in a letter of reflection on the death of Reagan in 2004, “The Reagan era, for me, my family, my generation, my country, my region, my planet earth [...] was an era of pain and desperation.”<sup>12</sup> He described the reelection of Reagan for his second term and then that of George Bush as years of anguish that “kept alive the pain, as the U.S. population continued to reward [these administrations] for causing pain to the rest of the world.” We are not happy about, nor do we celebrate Reagan’s death, he continued: “Personally, I will always remember his famous 1,000 dollar dinners in the Century Plaza Hotel, just one street behind where I was working at the time in the basement of the parking lot at 1801 Century Park East.”

The twelve year civil war in El Salvador resulted in the death of 75,000 people, with nearly 10,000 “disappeared,” and the dislocation of two million internally and throughout the world – in Central America, the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Europe. A UN Truth Commission attributed 85% of the acts of violence to Salvadoran state agents, and 5% to the FMLN.<sup>13</sup> “What the Reagan administration never calculated, however,” Salvador wrote, “was that the Central Americans affected by the war would search for refuge within the borders of their very own country.” Throughout the 1980s, around a million Salvadorans fled to the U.S. necessitating a creative response by the U.S. government, unwilling to admit they were funding a repressive regime in El Salvador, and by civil society, who, every day, witnessed the disturbing collateral damages of their tax dollars in Central America – a flood

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<sup>12</sup> Direct communication

<sup>13</sup> Figures from a report by the *Comisión de la Verdad Para El Salvador*, entitled [From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador](#) (1993).

of impoverished refugees, arriving by land, highly traumatized, with children in tow, and little but the clothes on their backs.

### The Context(s) of Reception

Although migrants fleeing the war indeed had a well-founded fear of persecution in the homeland, for ten out of the twelve years of war, they were flatly denied refugee status or special protections in the U.S., and, in fact, were subject to aggressive deportation campaigns. The U.S. government found itself in an intractable position – while they recognized that people were fleeing the war en masse, they refused to grant those migrants status on their soil. In 1981, for example, there were 6,116 deaths reported due to political violence (and many “disappeared”) in El Salvador, but of those that applied for asylum once in the U.S. only 2 people were granted status. Meanwhile 3,683 were deported that year alone. Over the course of the 1980s, scholars estimate that only around 2% of applicants received asylum (Menjívar 2000). In 1986, IRCA – the Immigration Reform and Control Act, popularly known as the “amnesty” – was passed, allowing migrants in the U.S. before 1982 a path to citizenship. In 2000, Menjívar estimated that only half the Salvadorans in the U.S. had been there before 1982, meaning that the rest were locked into undocumented status.

But within this very exclusive context of legal and political reception was nested another context of reception – namely the growing solidarity and sanctuary movements, whose aims were to defy U.S. immigration policy, protest U.S. military aid to Central America, accompany vulnerable populations in Central America, and respond to the crisis of mass immigration on the ground in the U.S. (as well as Mexico and Canada). The North Americans involved in the movements included civic activists and religious leaders. As scholars write, these individuals were experiencing a cultural trauma all their own as they encountered the Central Americans who “embodied the human consequences of U.S. policy”

which challenged their sense of morality and self as Americans, human beings, and people of faith. This head-on collision with the impact of U.S. policy pushed many people to act collectively and boldly (Nepstadt 134). And as religious leaders and veterans of prior social movements, the activists had the resources necessary to mobilize a response to the crisis they encountered (Smith, 1996).

While Central Americans were the recipients of aid and social support generated through these movements, behind the scenes they were also the agitators (Gosse 1987; 1996; Perla 2008; Coutin and Perla 2012). Within this broader community of which they served as the face of “*lastima*” (or pain), more politicized migrants were organizing themselves, creating intimate sub-communities of action within the larger movement. They found one another in the public spaces of neighborhoods that became immigrant hubs for Central Americans, organizing themselves in *comités* (or political committees) with direct links to the five particular factions of the FMLN.

Moreover, these politicized Salvadorans were organizing *North Americans*. In the aftermath of the movement, some scholars confounded strategy with reality. But, in fact, as Coutin and Perla (2012) write, politicized migrants and their North American allies engaged a strategy that *necessitated* that the Central Americans remain silent, embracing an *identity* of refugee and victim, and speaking to public audiences about their experience of violence, even as they were often the ones organizing the movement behind the scenes. A number of Salvadoran militants were sent by the FMLN to the U.S., which was considered “the second front of the war,” and those not explicitly sent still comprised the organizing link between the FMLN in El Salvador and North American activists in the U.S. and beyond.

While some see the activism of North Americans in the movement as a response to a “post-Vietnam syndrome,” Van Gosse described the movement as one that grew out of an already established pattern of solidarity that had been built in the decades prior, with

Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Nicaraguans – a pattern that had exposed North Americans to the realities on the ground throughout Latin America (1996). What Central Americans did differently, he asserted, was they learned from the mistakes of sectarianism that eroded prior solidarity movements. Despite the deep divisions between the factions of the FMLN and their Salvadoran contacts in the U.S., the movement was able to maintain the appearance of unity, organizing a “highly structured and tightly integrated movement” (1996: 320).

Salvadoran interviewees strike a middle ground, describing the movement neither as one created and organized by Salvadorans nor as one spawned by North American activists. Rather, they assert it was a true partnership between Central Americans and their North American allies – the former of which had the transnational political connections and the latter of which had knowledge of the U.S. terrain that would enable them to translate strategy into action within the U.S. cultural and political context (Perla 2010).

Just as they had organized in El Salvador, in the U.S., the Salvadoran migrants involved in political committees worked with North Americans to create “popular” organizations – in this context, aid and advocacy organizations – well known by names such as CRECEN, CARECEN, El Rescate and CISPES. But under the surface, this organizational infrastructure mimicked the fault lines of the FMLN itself; each aid or solidarity organization was aligned with a group of migrants from a distinct FMLN faction.<sup>14</sup> The largest and most organized faction in the U.S. context (and El Salvador) was *las FPL*, followed by *Resistencia Nacional (RN)*, which in turn were affiliated with the largest aid organizations, CARECEN and El Rescate/Clinica Romero, respectively. These different factions were held together, in places like Los Angeles, by broader coalitions and collective

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<sup>14</sup> Whether organized as such, or in some cases co-opted

goals, presenting a united front. But under the surface the movement was characterized by intense sectarianism.

### Legacies

The legacy of the war and the solidarity and sanctuary movements is varied. By September of 1990, following the FMLN's final offensive in San Salvador and the killing of six Jesuit priests and their staff at the Central American University (UCA) (by members of the Salvadoran national guard), the El Salvador-focused solidarity organizations were indeed able to stop much of the U.S.'s military aid to the homeland. Coutin and Perla (2012) also cite the impact the Sanctuary and Solidarity movements had on the refugee and legalization process in the U.S. itself.

Collectively, aid and solidarity organizations and their leadership – both North American and Central American – went on to win a number of victories, mostly after the war, including different forms of legal status and deferrals or stays of deportation and removal through Temporary Protected Status, the *ABC* or American Baptist Church case (which resulted in a settlement in 1991), and finally *NACARA*, or the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act in 1997.<sup>15</sup>

The legacy of these years is not only reflected in these outcomes but also in the way the movements organized and shaped activists themselves, resulting in the creation of a dense infrastructure of Central American organizations that still exist in cities like Los Angeles, an extremely skilled cohort of Salvadoran activists with vast knowledge of U.S. political culture and important ties to local politicians and religious leaders, and the

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<sup>15</sup> This phase of organizing, the struggle for legalization, is just mentioned in passing here but merits much further discussion in the next phase of this work. See Coutin's book *Legalizing Moves* (2000) and her 1998 article in *International Migration Review*, entitled "From Refugees to Immigrants: The Legalization Strategies of Salvadoran Immigrants and Activists," for further analysis.



embedding of these organizers in the civic life of the city and the leadership of various types of organizing, including labor and immigrant rights (Miller 2011).

Susan Coutin (2005) breaks the history of Salvadoran activism in Los Angeles into four waves: Solidarity work to end U.S. intervention in El Salvador, Sanctuary work to settle and aid refugees fleeing the crisis, legalization work to provide Central Americans with legal immigration protections in the 1990s, and the most recent wave of activism, marked by an effort to create a vocal constituency in local U.S. politics and to politicize and celebrate ethnicity and culture, mobilizing the larger Salvadoran population. While the key founders of Salvadoran Day participated in all these waves of activism through different organizational affiliations, their *Día del Salvadoreño* mobilization is best seen as fitting squarely into this last wave of organizing.<sup>16</sup>

But research with participants reveals another legacy, namely a *continuity* in the institutional affiliation and identification that underlies the actors' movement through almost all of these distinct waves of activism. The backstage political activism of the 1980s, in particular, created a distinct social world – a particular habitus for participants with a set of insider cultural practices, shared memories, and broadly shared goals for political and economic change in El Salvador. But because of the distinct and *particular* factional affiliations of the activists within this inner circle, this shared habitus is also characterized by a path dependency. There is ongoing competition, mistrust, and division – a fact

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<sup>16</sup> *On one level*, Salvadoran Day can be seen as one in a series of smaller but like developments such as *La Feria Agustina* celebration in Mac Arthur park, the (thus far failed) effort to name a Historic Little Central America, the linking of Los Angeles and San Salvador as Sister Cities, the creation of the “El Salvador Community Corridor” (on Vermont Ave, between 11<sup>th</sup> and Adams), and the naming of the corner of S. Vermont and W. Pico as “Oscar A. Romero Square.” This new type of organizing effort is occurring not just in L.A. but also in cities like New York, D.C., San Francisco and Houston. The degree to which some of these “cultural” developments are cross-border in scope or political orientation, such as is Salvadoran Day, remains to be seen.

reflected in the continued reproduction of rival organizations and events throughout the city over time.

As the unifying cause of the war came to an end, coalitions dissolved, the ghosts of sectarianism – a particular type of *social organization* and affiliation as much as anything – remained. Thus, although the founders and leaders of organizations may no longer profess support for particular political leaders in El Salvador *per se*, they are still socially allied within a particular factional *desendencia*. For example, the organizational “grandchildren” of *las FPL* include organizations such as present-day CARECEN, SANN and SALEF. SANA leaders, on the other hand, can trace their lineage from the *PCS* faction of the FMLN through solidarity organizations like MASPS, AMPES, *Casa Grande* and *Fraternidad Salvadoreña*. These two different “ancestral” factional lines, in turn, have tended to support the two tendencies within the FMLN today, *generally speaking* – namely the reformist tendency embodied in leaders such as FMLN candidates Facundo Guardado (1999), Mauricio Funes (2009) and Oscar Ortiz (VP - 2014), on the one hand, versus Schafik Handál (2004) and Salvador Sánchez Cerén (VP – 2009; 2014), on the other.

Today, the impact of the war, the vast web of migration networks developed in the 1980s, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in El Salvador, dollarization of the economy, stagnating wages, the collapse of agriculture, and high crime rates combine to fuel unabated migration streams to the U.S. – much of it undocumented (see Garni and Weyher 2013 for the impact of some of these forces on migration). Salvadoran sources calculate that at least one in four Salvadorans currently lives outside El Salvador, with 23% of Salvadorans in the U.S. in the Los Angeles, Long Beach, Santa Ana metropolitan area alone. U.S. Census data, on the other hand, shows two million Salvadorans in the U.S., though this is likely a significant underestimate. Salvadorans now comprise the third largest Latino population in the U.S. and the second largest in California (Pew Hispanic Center 2013).

Concentrations continue in California, Texas, New York, Virginia, and Maryland in the U.S., as well as Canada, Australia, Sweden, Italy and Spain.

Compared to the U.S. population in general, and the larger Hispanic population, census data shows Salvadorans to be a struggling population, with only 7% holding a bachelor's degree, 23% living below the official poverty line, and only 40% owning homes (Pew Hispanic Center 2013). Concomitantly, the Salvadoran Central Bank reports annual remittances around 3.5 billion, with 350 million being sent *each month* of the first half of 2013 alone – a huge figure given the socioeconomic profile of this migrant population (*Banco Central de Reserva de El Salvador*).

In sum, the history of the war, legal exclusion, and the solidarity and sanctuary movements in the U.S. combined to create what can be seen as a highly *paradoxical* reality for Salvadorans in Los Angeles. The Salvadoran population is marked by high levels of undocumented and quasi documented status, high indices of poverty and a persistence of negative publicity around crime and transnational Salvadoran gangs. But this reality stands in stark contrast to Salvadorans' notable recognition by civic leaders in Los Angeles and their disproportionate representation in the leadership of local labor unions and community based organizations.

Likewise, the population is characterized by dense cross-border social ties to El Salvador, made visible through myriad hometown associations and money transfers. But both the social and, particularly, political ties, remain highly fragmented, making for a community – both grounded and imagined – that is bound together by a dynamic of collaboration and deep contestation.

In what follows, I move from this impersonal historical account, back into the lives of my study participants, layering this history with the real lived experiences of a cast of characters that include Chamba, Mario F., Werner, Chavelita, Fidel, Boris, Sophia, and JR, to

name just a few. Like Chamba, many of these individuals live a split existence that grows out of their experience of war and migration. On the one hand, they possess a wealth of organizing skills; on the other hand, their lives are still marked by the legacy of forced migration, interrupted educations, and years of liminal status.

As Chamba wrote in the last paragraph of his reflection on Reagan, “I want to make clear that the dreams of immigrants in this land have made the USA possible. And we will continue building this dream, but minute by minute, we are richening it with new and diverse civic struggles, and new and diverse human values.” In the same way that the U.S. government acted on Salvadorans through its historic political and economic connections to their homeland, so too do immigrants like Chamba act back, reconciling their Americas, and working to shape the form and character of that connection between contexts. *How* they attempt to do that, is the subject of the next few chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“Reinventing Ourselves”: Cultural Crisis, Dignity and the Emergence of *El Día del Salvadoreño***

“The moment I jumped the border in the United States, carrying my son, three years old, and my wife when she jumped, she sunk all the way in the mud, and I couldn’t help her because I had my son. And I said in that moment that I was going to live with dignity here in the United States. I don’t know how I’m gonna do it, but I’m gonna live in dignity. And I told that in the City Council one day, that when they proclaim *El Día del Salvadoreño* in the city, I start living with dignity in the country...right here in the United States.”<sup>17</sup>

--Chamba

“We are reinventing ourselves. How are you going to reinvent yourself?”

--Werner

In July of 2000, a small group of Salvadorans crossed the Mexico-U.S border in El Paso, Texas, in a muddy, red pickup truck borrowed from the Anglican Archdiocese of San Salvador. While Werner, the driver, had recently gained U.S. citizenship after twenty years of work and community activism in Los Angeles, and two of his *pasajeros* [passengers] had been granted temporary tourist visas for the trip, in the back of the truck stood a six-foot tall “unauthorized” migrant, clad in a long white robe. After a two-week journey, following the migrant trail from El Salvador to *La Casa del Migrante* in Guatemala, through Chiapas, to the *Basilica de Guadalupe* in Mexico City, the driver and his passengers were transporting this fellow migrant across the border to Los Angeles to be reunited with hundreds of thousands of men, women and children from his homeland. The migrant’s name is *Jesús*, or

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<sup>17</sup> Quote spoken in English. Chamba has told this story a number of times to different audiences. The connection in the story is always the same; it was an “aha!” moment for him – the juxtaposition of a deeply humiliating moment in his forced migration to the dignity of recognition and redemption via *Día del Salvadoreño*. The meaning of dignity, as used here, has a cross-border orientation, fleshed out later in the text.

as many of his *compatriotas* proudly and affectionately call him, *Nuestro Divino Salvador del Mundo* – the patron saint of El Salvador.

This migrant “Divine Savior of the World” is a life-size, wooden replica of the bronze original, donated by the Spanish Crown in recognition of the conquest and founding of San Salvador in 1525. But in contrast to the subtext of conquest and traditional nationalism that mark the donation and use of the original image, its humble brother image was carved from wood by an indigenous Salvadoran artist and was blessed in the Metropolitan Cathedral alongside a pair of migrant tennis shoes, a backpack and a picture of the Salvadoran martyr, Archbishop Romero. From there the image was led in a pilgrimage, visiting the sites of state-sponsored assassinations that occurred during El Salvador’s twelve-year civil war, and culminating in the retracing of the migrant trail from Central America to the U.S.

Following its modest welcoming at Dolores Mission Catholic Church in East Los Angeles in 2000, the replica image continued to “migrate” from church to church in California, a movement that multiplied the image’s following of individual devotees and reinforced and expanded a transnational network of religious and political leaders, activists, churches, and organizations. The replica is also the symbol at the center of the federal holiday described in the introduction – “Salvadoran-American Day” or *El Día del Salvadoreño*, as it continues to be known in the community. Over time, that festival has, in turn, brought together members of the Los Angeles City Council and the California State Assembly, a Congresswoman turned U.S. Secretary of Labor, two of L.A.’s mayors, local religious and community leaders, and an impressive list of politicians from El Salvador – one of whom went on to be elected the first FMLN president in the country’s history.

In what follows, I begin with a snapshot of the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival and the migration of the *Divino Salvador* image within the Los Angeles area. This gives the reader a better sense of what these events look and feel like. I then drop back in time, describing the

general context and life events that gave birth to the festival, and I follow the evolution of the festival from its first enactment in 1999 to its institutionalization at various levels of government. This chapter is meant to be both a descriptive historical account and an exploration of themes touching on collective trauma, cultural crisis, and the invention, resonance, and evolution of an event.

While symbols and festivals such as *Día del Salvadoreño* are most often seen as symbolic cultural celebrations and vehicles for incorporation in an immigrant's host country, here I show the value added in taking a border-crossing view of such events. The depth in Salvador's statement on dignity, which opens the chapter, is likely missed without this view; dignity is not just about recognition and the granting of a civic space for Salvadorans in Los Angeles. Rather, dignity has a more border-spanning significance that has everything to do with the lived connection between host country and homeland. Likewise, *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* and *El Día del Salvadoreño* are neither simply importations nor inventions but rather *interventions* introduced into the organizers' attempts to integrate the personal experiences and communal politics that cross borders.

### **A Snapshot of the "Migrant Christ" in Los Angeles (2002-2009)<sup>18</sup>**

"Who here has never had to worry about healthcare or about money? Who has never been afraid of being accepted? Who here has never been afraid to speak English in public?" There was nodding and a murmur of affirmation in the crowd. We sat in the middle of the street on folding chairs borrowed from the City of Los Angeles. There were some twenty people gathered there under umbrellas, waving away the summer heat; one family leaning against a short chain link fence surrounding a neighboring house. The

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<sup>18</sup> This snapshot of the image and festival in Los Angeles draws on multiple years of observation. I highlight particular moments within the festival by drawing on a specific year's event. Over time, some of the initial patterns have involved, including the location of the event and the role/use of the patron saint image. Those changes are described in later chapters.

woman addressing the crowd was Jennifer, the young resident pastor of the Pico Union Shalom Ministries of the United Methodist Church. She stood behind a small makeshift podium. Behind her a few musicians sat under a canopy with their guitars and equipment. And next to the musicians, facing us in the back of a black pickup truck stood a life-sized statue of Jesus, encased in a glass box.

“By cardboard houses on skid row, under freeway overpasses that smell of urine, in the street where women and children are selling sex, there, there is Jesus,” she continued in Spanish. As this special Sunday morning service drew to a close, Fidel – the community outreach person for the church and a Salvadoran American National Association director – began to play his guitar and sing. Another organizer started the engine of the pickup and slowly, ceremoniously drove the truck towards a vacant lot-turned-community garden on the corner of the closed-off block. The rest of us followed singing and processing behind the truck, until the image was offloaded onto a few sheets of plywood under a canopy in the lot.

The corn grew high on one side, tomatoes, chilies and flowers all around, and amongst them simple wooden crosses planted in recognition of various martyrs – Martin Luther King Jr., César Chávez, Archbishop Romero, and the countless anonymous migrants that have died undertaking the journey to get “inside” the United States. On the loudspeaker Fidel called out to the neighboring businesses on the corner of New Hampshire and Pico: “Come, join us in the festival of friendship!” he said, “There will be music, DJs, and food. Today we are celebrating the very special visit of the *Divino Salvador del Mundo!*”

In a planning meeting less than a week beforehand, eight directors of the Salvadoran American National Association sat in their small office rented for \$300 a month from the Wilshire Presbyterian Church at Oxford and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. “We are going to have the *Divino Salvador* outside at Shalom Ministries,” Fidel explained to fellow organizers, “because the door of the church is too small, and the image will not fit inside.” “Okay, okay,” Guillermo



said, “just remember that we are going to pick up the image at 4:00, because the team at St. Paul’s wants it there by 5:00pm.”

The directors moved through a list of agenda items: where the *Divino Salvador* had been so far, how things had gone, where it was going next. Tasks were assigned out to different organizers. There was discussion of street permits for the procession of the image to Exposition Park for the Salvadoran Day festival. Questions were raised: who is taking care of the invitations for the political kickoff ceremony at City Hall? Why is Mario not at the meeting tonight? One director paused to call him on the cell phone and left a message: “*Aquí estamos todos, ¿Dónde estás?*”<sup>19</sup> The questions continued: Have the visas for the Venezuelan band *Los Guaraguaos* finally been settled? Has the mayor of San Salvador confirmed his flight plans? What is the word on the printed programs?

At this meeting in July, and every year at this time, volunteer directors are full swing into the preparation of the Salvadoran Day festival in Los Angeles. The visit of the *Divino Salvador* to Shalom Ministries is just one of many visits that the image makes in the months leading up to the public festival and re-enactment of the Transfiguration of Jesus, popularly known in El Salvador as *la bajada* (or “the descent”),<sup>20</sup> and now carried out annually at Salvadoran Day on the first Sunday of August. It is not that *la bajada* has been imported to Salvadoran Day but rather that Salvadoran Day has been created around the re-enactment of *la bajada*, a ritual that has been celebrated in the capital city of San Salvador every August 5<sup>th</sup> since 1777.

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<sup>19</sup> “We’re all here. Where are you?”

<sup>20</sup> The Transfiguration of Jesus is described in the [Synoptic Gospels](#) (specifically, [Matthew 17:1–9](#), [Mark 9:2–8](#), [Luke 9:28–36](#)) of the New Testament. It is theorized to signify Jesus’ role as the mediator between heaven and earth. “*La Bajada*” is the popular name for the re-enactment of the Transfiguration, as performed annually in San Salvador. The phrase literally means “the descent,” describing the descent of the Jesus figure into a globe, which in turn symbolizes earth, and its divine emergence, depicted by a change from humble garments to a shining white robe.

In El Salvador the somber, religious ritual, wherein the image of the *Divino Salvador* descends into a large globe and then re-emerges dressed in white garments, is complimented by a weeklong secular, national holiday. *La bajada*, or some recognition thereof, is now celebrated simultaneously in numerous churches around the globe where populations of Salvadorans have settled – amongst them Quebec, Washington D.C., Mexico City, and of course, Los Angeles. Los Angeles’ ceremony is the largest celebration outside of San Salvador, at its height drawing a crowd of nearly 80,000 people over the two day festival. In the year 2002, the California State Assembly officially declared August 6<sup>th</sup> to be Salvadoran Day in the State of California; by 2006 the festival had been recognized by the U.S. House of Representatives, albeit with the slightly altered name, “Salvadoran-American Day” (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> “Exposition Park is no longer the place where the museums are,” one interviewee said, “Now it is the place where the Salvadoran thing happens. Not just for us, but for our kids.”

In El Salvador, *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* is carried in a pilgrimage to the site of *la bajada* on the day of the event, but the “migration” of the image from church to church prior to Salvadoran Day is an important U.S.-specific adaptation. The migration allows individuals to receive the *Divino Salvador* in their own congregation – congregations of all denominations. Committees, usually dominated by women, are created in each church to plan out the welcoming ceremony -- organizing everything from the procession and details of the service to food and t-shirt sales.

For the community leaders that brought the replica image to L.A., the migration provides a space for networking with various community leaders through the churches, for spreading publicity about Salvadoran Day, and for disseminating a message: the history of

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<sup>21</sup> Although *la bajada* takes place on August 5<sup>th</sup> in San Salvador, the 6<sup>th</sup> is the civic celebration of the founding of San Salvador; organizers thus decided to import the civic date in lieu of the religious marker.

the original image, the story surrounding the replica's pilgrimage to the U.S., and the importance of remembering the past and staying connected to El Salvador. Within the narrative that has grown up around the 'migrant' Christ, this movement from church to church is symbolic of the movement of Salvadoran refugees seeking sanctuary in the 1980s and 1990s in churches throughout the U.S. "We are trying to connect the dots for people," one organizer said.

The reception of the image differs slightly from church to church. But some themes run through all of the visitations: designated SANA organizers whisk the image away from one congregation and deliver it to the next just before the Sunday service begins. It is greeted by a group of parishioners in the street, welcoming the image with a call and response of "*¡Que viva el Divino Salvador del Mundo! ¡Que viva!*"<sup>22</sup> The image is then muscled out of the truck and guided down the street, around the block, or sometimes just through the parking lot – rolled by SANA organizers and male church volunteers on a small dolly, around potholes, over cracks, climbing large speed bumps. This movement is accompanied by singing and prayers, often led by the priest through a small megaphone. There is sometimes incense and acolytes bearing the cross and torches. Women, dressed in roughly matching outfits, head up the processions with poster-board placards that read "*Bienvenido a Nuestro Divino Salvador del Mundo*"<sup>23</sup> and carrying flags – the U.S. and Salvadoran flags on either side of the image – followed by a trail of flags from all the countries represented within the church congregation. And the sermons at these services usually revolve around the same themes – recognition of the suffering of migrants, of the suffering of the people, Jesus as a friend of the poor, as someone who understands our sacrifices and our pain.

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<sup>22</sup> "Long live the Divine Savior of the World!"

<sup>23</sup> "Welcome to our Divine Savior of the World"

“This is so important for people, because bringing one’s traditions is like bringing a piece of one’s country,” a Chilean nun explained to me after one of the services. “This is a bridge between their country and the United States,” she continued. The *Divino Salvador* is just one of many patron saints that the church has received, she explained. They have also welcomed *El Señor de Los Milagros* of Peru, *El Señor de Esquipulas* from Guatemala, and Argentina’s *Virgen de Lujan*. Because the congregations are mixed, there is often a sharing of information about the respective patron saints and the traditions that accompany them in each country. “What is it?” One youth asked his friend after a service. But others recognize the image instantly. “I have not seen him for twenty years!” a woman exclaimed, covering her mouth with both hands as the image rolled by. At a pit-stop at a restaurant, while transporting the image from one church to the next, a waitress bustled out to the pickup truck, throwing her apron over her face with emotion. “Oh my God, this is the *Divino Salvador del Mundo!*” she exclaimed to her friend, instantly asking organizers if there was a place she could put an offering.

After the services, crowds line up to pay their respects to the image. People pray, cry, touch the glass, kiss it, talk aloud to the image. Some fall to their knees before it, others lift their children, instructing them to touch or kiss the glass and then helping them to make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and chest. After one service, when everyone had filed out of the sanctuary, a woman snuck back in. She took out a kleenex and began wiping the smudge marks off the glass. “*Papi*, what did they do to you?” she asked. Then looking up into the image’s face and clasping her hands together she said, “Thank you for coming here to be with us.” “This is hard,” another woman said to me, choking through tears, “it brings a lot of memories with it.” She left El Salvador in 1972.

Behind the scenes, mid-week meetings at the SANA headquarters grow longer and more intense; organizers are irritable, tired, stressed out. There is no guitar, no singing, less

joking than normal. They arrive at 7:00pm after their day jobs and often do not leave until after midnight. Their families – mostly wives and children – grow frustrated as well. “I tell him, ‘it’s okay’” one wife commented, “I know this is his passion, ‘but just call me so I know where you are!’” Although the organizers spend a lot of time moving through logistical points, much attention is poured into strategy: Which of the City Council members should receive special recognition this year? Has Councilperson X been supportive of the Salvadorans? Is it more strategic for the Mayor of San Salvador to be here for the private kickoff gala with politicians in City Hall or at the public Salvadoran Day event?

“Strategic” goes in several directions here, not just what is strategic in securing connections in the U.S. but also in securing influence for the “correct” Salvadoran politicians, those that will effect change in El Salvador. Disputes and their resolutions are often connected to the past and to Salvadoran politics, their place in the U.S., and vice versa. As meetings spill out of the office into the parking lot, these minor disputes, disagreements and power struggles are battled out.

On the day of the festival, masses of families pour into Exposition Park, starting as early as 10:30am. There they are met by music, dance, food and sponsor booths – amongst them hometown associations and the local chapter of the FMLN. Event sponsors are scrutinized by organizers to make sure they present the “right” message. As one organizer explained, “A guy called from El Salvador, one of the fourteen families [oligarchy]. He said, ‘Eh, how much is the microphone?’ He wanted to sell his mattresses over the loudspeaker. I said, ‘You know what? This is not for sale! Sorry.’”

Initially, musical acts were also screened for content. “We could have anyone perform,” another organizer explained, “but we want [the music] to have the right message, not just music *de fiesta*.” Two thousand and four’s special guest and chosen message was that of *Los Guaraguaos*, a progressive Venezuelan band well known for songs that speak out

against oppression, that champion the struggles of the people, specifically highlighting the Salvadoran struggle, and that criticize U.S. military intervention across the globe. With time, however, organizers have had to accommodate the desires and demographics of their crowd, especially the youth.

The highlight of the afternoon is marked by the arrival of the *Divino Salvador*. In 2003, for example, the image arrived in a pickup truck with “Roy’s Roofing Services” displayed prominently on either door and accompanied by LAPD officers, event organizers, and politicians from California and San Salvador. As the procession approached the park, thousands of festival-goers crowded around the image, pushing in on one another to get a closer look, reaching out to touch it, to take pictures, and hoisting their children up on their shoulders for a better view. From there, the *Divino Salvador* was placed on the festival stage alongside various community organizers, politicians, and religious leaders from different faith traditions who collectively took part in an ecumenical, interfaith mass and a short civic act.

The newly elected Mayor of San Salvador and California State Assemblywoman Montañez exchanged words and recognitions, addressing the crowd with similar messages surrounding migrant rights, Temporary Protected Status, and driver’s licenses for the undocumented.<sup>24</sup> Just eight months later, the two would find themselves standing together again, not in Los Angeles, but rather in San Salvador for the Salvadoran presidential elections.

As always, the civic act was closed that year with the singing of the national anthems. At this point in the afternoon, the crowd was covered in blue and white, having bought t-shirts, headbands and flags from vendors. While the singing of the U.S. National

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<sup>24</sup> Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, is a temporary permission that allows recipients to remain and work legally in the U.S. but not travel home.

Anthem draws little emotion, by contrast the Salvadoran Anthem is sung in a moment of euphoria, not just by attendees, but also by the traditionally leftist event organizers, who stand on the stage with an arm across their chests, heads thrown back to the sky, and tears rolling down cheeks in a demonstration of the salience of national symbols in the new host country. Many of the younger generation stand speechless, perhaps uncertain of the words, but they are juxtaposed with thousands of emotion-filled parents, waving flags and swaying with gusto to the beat of the anthem as they sing, “*Saludemos la patria orgullosos...*”<sup>25</sup>

Once the sun has set, people have eaten, danced a little, sung, visited with family, meandered around the park and paid their individual respects to the *Divino Salvador* (or just taken pictures with it), attendees crowd around the large wooden globe upon which the Jesus figure stands – each year clad in a different brightly colored cloak. The figure is then lowered into the globe until no longer visible, signifying Jesus’ “descent into the world.” Traditionally this is symbolic of the Transfiguration of Christ, but some organizers have theorized it to be symbolic of the continual transfiguration and renewal of the *Pueblo Salvadoreño* [the Salvadoran People]. People hold their breath and a few moments later the image re-emerges in a bright white garment. The re-emergence of the image is met by rounds of call and response: “*¡Que viva el Divino Salvador del Mundo! ¡Que viva! ¡Que viva el pueblo salvadoreño! ¡Que viiiiva! ¡Que viva el pueblo latinoamericano!*”<sup>26</sup>

As a modification on the somber ritual in San Salvador, in Los Angeles the re-emergence of the Christ figure is often accompanied by an impressive display of fireworks, lighting up the sky over the Coliseum. “Hollywood style,” one organizer said. “We weren’t going to do the fireworks because it is an extra cost, and SANA has no money,” he explained. “But my kids have to like this,” he continued. “If we do something that is boring for the kids

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<sup>25</sup> Let us salute the motherland proudly...

<sup>26</sup> “Long live the Divine Savior of the World! Long live the Salvadoran people! Long live the Latin American people!”

born here they'll say, 'Daddy, this is boring.' So we have to mix it, Spanish, Indigenous, Gringo."

### **The Context of Emergence: Collective Trauma, National Liminality and Cultural Crisis**

In chapter two, I provided a general outline of the civil war in El Salvador, and the migration patterns and transnational social movements that followed. Here I begin the section by layering some of those events with the personal experiences of SANA organizers, as they lived that historical reality. These experiences provide background for better understanding the subjective cultural crisis that ensued and provided an impetus for the creation of a new symbolic icon and ethnic festival in Los Angeles.

#### Shaking to the Bone: Collective Trauma

I was grabbing my dad and I was like shaking to the bone and crying. I was terrorized. And my dad, all of us crying. And my uncle was saying, 'Why in the heck did we come? *Why did we come?*' You know...[pause]. And my dad, I remember he made the cross on me and he said, 'Son,' crying, my dad, 'this is the last time we're going to be together, but probably we'll, we'll see each other again.' It was just...I couldn't take it. It was just so painful. He embraced me and hugged me and he protected me with his body, with his back towards the military, just to kind of protect me, to be a shield for me.

–Mario, on personal experiences of the civil war

The violence of El Salvador's twelve-year civil war, and the events leading up to it, are far from an abstraction for the authors and organizers of the events described above. Each individual has a different horror story. As a child Mario was put in front of a firing squad, his father kidnapped and tortured, his younger brother disappeared; at age five, Isabel, the daughter of a colonel, remembers stumbling into an army barracks where she witnessed a row of young men, naked, their backs bloody as they were whipped and tortured; two of Werner's brothers were killed fighting with the FMLN, his family spread



across five countries; Adalila spent parts of her early childhood hiding in the basement of a Unitarian church while her parents sought asylum; JR was held as a political prisoner; Boris survived the bombs and snipers that sent the crowd at Archbishop Romero's funeral scrambling for cover.

For most of the organizers, the decision to flee the violence in El Salvador came suddenly. Some, like Chamba, remember sleeping with their tennis shoes and pants on during their last few months in El Salvador so that they would be ready to run. Regardless of specific allegiances, the whole country was gripped with a *general* context of terror and insecurity, wherein hope for a safe and productive future was constantly called into question. Interviewees describe it as an unspoken "mood," an understanding without words that something was terribly wrong, that nothing was certain, that anyone was next. "I saw bodies on the road," Chamba recalled, "everyone did." Or even if they didn't, they knew they were there.

This was the selective terror utilized by the U.S.-funded Salvadoran military, which left everyone with the fear that one wrong move, one conversation with the wrong person, and they were next. The idea that the government would stop at nothing, would break all the rules of the game, became apparent with the bold-faced assassination of Monseñor Romero in March of 1980. Spoken over and over again at a trial in Fresno for one of the masterminds of the assassination was the phrase, "If they could assassinate Romero and get away with it, they could do anything."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fieldnotes written 9/04 from *Doe v. Saravia*, Fresno, CA. This commentary was repeated not only by witnesses that gave testimony in the trial but was also echoed by Salvadoran observers of the trial in more casual conversations over lunch and in free time. Information on the case is currently catalogued on the website of the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA): <http://www.cja.org/article.php?list=type&type=77>

The migration of Chamba, whose quote about “living with dignity in the U.S.” opens the chapter, is typical of the stories shared by other organizers. Because he was without documents, he, his wife, sister-in-law and three-year-old son were forced to trek from El Salvador to the U.S. by land. He worked along the way when the opportunity arose, carrying bags of fertilizer and people across flooded streets on his shoulders in Chiapas for pocket change. Narrowly escaping deportation and violence by Mexican authorities, he crossed the Mexico-U.S. border, along with his family, by lying in the trunk of a black Cadillac. When they arrived on the U.S. side, they had just enough money left to split a small hamburger amongst the four of them.

When asked if he questioned his decision to flee after realizing the indignities and difficulties he would face in migration and once in the U.S., he replied:

No. Never. I mean, we were sleeping here and still dreaming that we were in El Salvador, and we wanted to flee running all over again. I would dream, ‘No, no, no, what am I doing in El Salvador? They’re going to kill us!’ And when we woke up in the U.S., ‘whew.’ For nothing in the world would we go backwards. I mean, what we faced here was nothing, it was *Disneyland* compared to the dead, to our mutilated friends in El Salvador.

While most organizers agree that fleeing almost anywhere was better than remaining in El Salvador, this did not mean that their departure was without pain. Even for those individuals whose friends and families tried to convince them they could play an important role in aiding the resistance movement from the U.S., the act of leaving was a trauma all its own. “Oh, I just felt....One of the few instances in my life when I have felt a *profound* sense of loss. I was crying all the way up here. I left my friends, I left everything... I left everything...,” one organizer recalled. For many, adding to that difficulty was the emotion of abandonment. Although faced with a stark decision – stay and risk death, or flee – one female activist explains that guilt still runs thick in the Salvadoran, emigrant activist population. And in rare moments of quiet reflection, questions such as Salvador’s rise to the

surface: “But what would have happened if we had all decided to stay and work for change?”<sup>28</sup> For those already enmeshed in organized resistance, part of the trauma was leaving the struggle, the revolutionary movement for change, itself.

The choice to migrate to the United States specifically did not mean that emigrants were without anger and resentment towards the U.S. government, both for supporting the military repression in the homeland and for denying them asylum once in the U.S. Salvador’s view was echoed by many others: “I *never* wanted to come to the United States. What I wanted was to save my life!” Remembering his last few years in El Salvador, Mario asserted, “It was...a total dictatorship, supported and maintained by the United States. And in those conditions we did not love the United States. Why would I want to come to the United States?”

But then, upon arrival, to have their experience of repression officially denied, and to be treated as criminals for attempting to escape and survive, created a discord between personal experience and public representation that was too great to tolerate. “*We knew* we were coming because we were escaping the very same wars that these [U.S.] administrations were supporting down in our countries!” Mario said, explaining the clash between his own lived experience and the official story spun in the U.S. He went on to explain that he had to undergo five years of intensive therapy just to come to terms with living in the U.S. “I was so angry at the United States, not the people, but the administrations that were supportive of murderous governments, really. And then them saying lies up and down... It hurt me so much and it angered me so much.”

#### My Nation was FMLN: Liminality in National Belonging

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<sup>28</sup> Guilt is an important and often unspoken emotion in the community of emigrant activists – one that will be discussed further in the closing chapter to this dissertation, *Transnationalisms Travails*.

One way to channel that frustration, reconcile the loss of loved ones, deal with the emotions of separation from the homeland, and dispel the tensions surrounding residence in the U.S. was to remain involved in the struggle in El Salvador through the intense activism efforts of the solidarity and sanctuary movements. As described in chapter two, this activism became a defining point of the lifeworld of a whole cohort of politicized Salvadoran migrants. Evidence of this involvement not only emerges in the storytelling of individuals, but it is manifest in the border-spanning networks and organizational infrastructure that were formed in those years, still exist, and retain certain factional allegiances, albeit in reinvented and evolving form. For those activists that went on to create *El Día del Salvadoreño*, it is also catalogued in the dozens of original songs written by people like Fidel and Werner, and in the countless boxes of photographs, newspaper clippings and flyers tucked away in office nooks in Isabel and Salvador's homes.

This decade of intense activity, coupled with the U.S.'s continued denial of asylum, created a liminal space between the "here" and "there" wherein organizers were living, and for all intents and purposes were settled, within the U.S., but wherein attention and resources were turned towards events in El Salvador. In a sense, state membership – and both the benefits and tensions surrounding it – were replaced with membership in "the struggle." This is captured in a casual statement made by Werner one day: "When I return to El Salvador, I do not necessarily feel at home. You know, I was very young when I left. All those years I was not living in El Salvador, but I was also not living in the U.S., you see? *My nation was FMLN*. Not so much a territory but an idea."

Discussing the impact of war and the lack of national belonging, one 1.5 generation organizer that fled with his family to Mexico explained:

"I've always felt somehow like an outsider, because, you know, some people rejected me because I sounded Mexican. And for others I wasn't Mexican

enough, right? Cuz my friends in Mexico they always want me to identify with... 'You're Mexican. Stop saying you're Salvadoran. You grew up here, you talk like us, you dance like us.' But my family, some of my *Salvadoran* family does not like the way that I talk. They think that I want to be Mexican. Well, I was born in El Salvador, but I learned to speak in México... what do you expect?"

Ironically, for this young Salvadoran organizer accused of being "too Mexican," the reality of having to flee to Mexico and spend his formative years there before finally migrating to Los Angeles is a distinctly *Salvadoran experience*. Like others, he was deprived of a childhood in El Salvador precisely because of the way the war forcefully dispersed its citizenry across a number of countries.

On so many levels, community was destroyed during the war. Families were physically separated. They were divided by allegiances, whole neighborhoods were annihilated or deserted, and the fabric of trust was ruptured. Sometimes coming to grips with the extent of that destruction came later, upon reunion with family members, like in this moment for Salvador when he first saw his father after many years of separation and suddenly felt he would faint:

In that moment of reunion, *un montón de preguntas* [so many questions]: 'What had happened? What came to pass that I am not close to my father if I love him so much?' And I was asking myself the same thing later [in 1994]: 'What happened to us in El Salvador that our family had to leave [and go] in so many directions -- me living in the U.S., my father in Venezuela. And I felt the same thing again, like I was dizzy. Once again I hugged my dad, already old with gray hair. 'Oh my God, *my daddy*. What happened?'

Once in Los Angeles and other Salvadoran migrant epicenters, however, politicized migrants quickly began to recreate community through the *comités* formed during the solidarity movement. As described in the prior chapter, not only did they connect with North Americans who were willing to take up their cause, behind the scenes of the larger movement, Salvadoran activists were engaged in the intimate sub-communities of the FMLN. There, an active process was occurring. Organizers explained that working together

provided an outlet for destructive emotions, a vehicle for feeling positively engaged, and a community of support from fellow Salvadorans. Explained Salvador, “Fortunately, I found some more family, including Werner and Mario and other people who were with me in the solidarity movement, that I [now] consider my family here in Los Angeles.”

Despite the divisions within the movement, this community was united against a common enemy and through a common task. One could say this larger transnational community was “imagined” both within the U.S. and across borders through the shared mental space of the conflict (Anderson 1991). But, in the U.S., it was also a community deeply grounded in the reality and commonality of dislocation from the homeland and simultaneous exclusion in the host context; bound through the tangible network of organizations and the day-to-day activities and interactions of activists within the movement.

Activists describe this work as healing and empowering; as creating a sense of belonging. In the process of working to meet their goals, the organizers were meeting daily, feeling engaged, working through victimhood towards agency and collective change, feeling a part of something larger than themselves, and remaking family where blood relatives had been lost or separated.<sup>29</sup> Scholars of social movements describe the way that work in a movement recreates family (See Adams, 2003). So too in the Solidarity movement did the organizers come to develop deep trust, loyalty and a family-like bond with fellow organizers, especially within each faction or *comité*, albeit along factional lines.

### We’re Going to Die Here: Hostland Membership and Cultural Crisis

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<sup>29</sup> The role of activism in empowerment and the healing prior trauma is discussed at length in chapter seven.

January 1992 marked the official end of the war in El Salvador, and with it the corollary dissolution of this “imagined” and grounded community that had been built around the struggle. Organizers assert that this shifting reality left a sudden vacuum where more than a decade of intense organizing activity had previously existed. For one, there was little sense of closure. Yes, Peace Accords had been signed in El Salvador, but was there any change? The end of the war gave rise to questions about whether the loss of life, effort, and displacement were worth it. “No one came riding up to the National Palace,” one organizer explained, referring to the fact that many people had died but for all intents and purposes the Salvadoran rightwing was still in power. Meanwhile, as one activist put it, following Peace Accords, it was as if North American allies said, “Ok, El Salvador is solved, now on to Guatemala!”

The movement had created a bubble of sorts, an incubator that allowed Salvadoran activists to remain in that space of *lucha* [struggle], a liminal space without national belonging, between here and there. Now, the bubble was bursting. In her work on activists involved in the Chilean anti-dictatorial movement, Jacqueline Adams describes the sense of disillusionment and alienation experienced when their movement met with success and dissolved (2003). For Salvadoran activists, the pang that accompanied the end of the movement was felt not solely in the inability of the FMLN to take power, but in the meaning that the war’s end had for the social fabric of migrant activists’ daily lives, and for their own identities.

Unlike the participants in Adams’ study, however, the activists described here had to grapple not only with the end of a movement but also with what it meant to be emigrants in a host country that had funded the dictatorship in their homeland and that had, concomitantly, denied them legal inclusion in the society. As SANA organizers describe it, the end of the Solidarity movement led to a “severe identity crisis” on many levels. It was

the breakdown of community, of the energy, agency and sense of purpose fostered there; the collapse of the sheltered, transnational space within which they had been operating mentally and organizationally.

New questions immediately arose, such as whether the migrant population living in the U.S. could or should return to El Salvador. Organizers recall that they were both uncertain about returning to their country of origin and yet conflicted about formal membership in the host state. The thought of officially becoming a part of the society partially responsible for their own displacement, for the destruction of their country, and the loss of their loved ones filled organizers with a tension. “I don’t know if you want me to say this Mario,” Werner said sheepishly one day over errands, “but really I had to kind of convince Mario and Salvador to become citizens.”

“There was a betrayal in it,” he explained. Having lived on both sides of the U.S.’s commitment to democracy, the emigrants explained that they understood firsthand that liberty and justice and “freedom of speech” were potentially only for people living “inside” the United States. And having fled to the U.S. but repeatedly been denied formal membership in the society, even “inside” was understood as something that had to be negotiated; that could be granted or withheld depending on the geopolitics of the day. Citizenship – a formal status viewed from the outside as a deeply desired outcome carried with it informal identity components characterized by difficult emotions of loyalty and betrayal.

After a decade of living in the U.S., however, organizers simultaneously had to face the reality of the fact that they had already put down roots, secured work, married and started families within the host context. Describing the realization, one leader remembers looking around at his family and others and thinking, “Oh my God, we’re going to die here!” Another leader seconded this, explaining the struggle to accept the reality of their



permanence in the host state: “We’re going to live here; we’re probably going to die and be buried here.”

While first generation leaders felt conflicted about formal membership in the U.S., their children had in essence already joined it. Imitating his oldest daughter, Salvador said, “My daughter says to me, ‘I don’t need Spanish; I’m American. *You* need Spanish.” Werner concurred: “What really changed our relationship to this country was not citizenship. It was our kids.” As described in the introduction, Werner asserts that he had previously seen the U.S only in foreign policy terms. “But when my kids started growing up [here] that changed,” he continued, “because I realized that America is now *my children* and Mario’s children.”

Unlike its portrayal in the nationalist rhetoric of the state, in the experience of these migrants, their subjective and affective relationship with and membership in the host state was not actually mediated through citizenship but, rather, through the second generation.<sup>30</sup> The organizers felt compelled to reconcile to the host state because of the way it was embodied in their U.S. born children. The task, then, as Robert Orsi (1999) puts it, was how they could gently orient their children to the past experiences and present concerns of the parent generation; how they could “assimilate [the] children into the parents’ habitus” all the while accepting their kids’ evolution in the new context (1999: 56).

In a sung poem called, *A Mis Hijos* [To My Children], Werner explores this process as simultaneous acceptance, hope and lament:

*Yo tengo dos hijos, cortos en visión, y no saben de dónde vengo ni a donde voy*  
[I have two sons, lacking in vision; they don’t know where I come from or  
where I’m going]  
*Dormidos despiertos por la televisión, inventar realidades solo en su*  
*imaginación*

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<sup>30</sup> This only holds for those that were able/eligible to become citizens, of course.

[Sleeping while awake in front of the television, creating realities only in their imagination]

*Pero son mis hijos, esperanza y redención, y por ellos yo lucho con particular dedicación*

[But they are my kids, my hope and redemption, and I fight for them with particular dedication]<sup>31</sup>

In the refrain he writes that he both cannot *ignorar* [ignore] this reality, nor can he *transladar* [impose] his own experience on the kids. Still, he writes: “my body grows tired, my bones lament.” “I used to want [my kids] to be just like me, to think just like me,” he further explained. “But now I know that they have to claim their own cause. They will not claim El Salvador. They will claim America. And so what is important to me is that they claim it with a sense of *why* it is that we [as a people] are here.”

Already dealing with questions about their own membership in the U.S., this new understanding of “America” as the nation of their children created an even more urgent tension for organizers. Activists like Mario had the acute sense that without an understanding of the relationship between El Salvador and the U.S., without an understanding of how and why their parents came to live in the U.S., future generations of Salvadorans would grow up with a completely discordant orientation to that of their parents. Or, worst case scenario, they could even come to embody the oppressor that displaced and then excluded the parent generation. Explaining his fears further, Mario said, “If [my kids] don’t have a sense of their own history, if they don’t kind of [have] a mirror where they can look at themselves, we run the risk of them becoming the next oppressors.” Given his own experience of U.S. foreign policy, he exclaimed with agitation and urgency, “I can’t afford to do that!”

It was through this line of thinking that organizers, now beginning to accept the reality of their permanence in the U.S., collectively began to discuss how they could

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<sup>31</sup> This is just an excerpt of the longer poem/song.

reconcile, or make compatible, their two understandings of “America” – the “America” of their own lived experience in El Salvador with that of their children, the America of the past with that of the present. As described in the introduction, they were searching for a way to integrate, to reconcile, to redeem and to make sense of their two country contexts: to make El Salvador into a place that would not “maim and kill our families” and the U.S. a place that would not support and fund that type of repression; that would not exclude them.

As a first step, in a conscious and slowly evolving “flip in thinking,” the organizers began to explore the idea that citizenship and civic participation in the host context could provide them a *better* means for addressing the continued problems in the homeland, as well as addressing the U.S. policies that affect the Salvadoran population living in the U.S. and in El Salvador. In short, citizenship might allow organizers to draw upon their displacement – and the position they now found themselves in – to tackle the issues responsible for their displacement in the first place, as well as the varying effects of that displacement for populations both “here” and “there.”

Mario explained this line of thinking, “My goodness. Well it is important that if I’m a citizen, there is a reason behind it. Not only because it enables me to bring my *tia*, my *tio* and all this, no, because I live here, I pay taxes, I rent or I own, and there is a government that runs this place where I live, and I have a vote that counts, and I should exercise this duty!” Protesting the Iraq war in 2003, Mario further explained his duty as a citizen: “You know the world is with the dangers of being blown apart again *by* the United States. We see the same mistakes of past U.S. administrations again and again and again. And *we* that had – *in our own flesh* – have experienced the folly of these policies from these administrations, we are called, as people of conscience, we are called through our testimonies to oppose that immoral, immoral, immoral policy.”

Slowly but surely, this shift in thinking also helped the organizers to begin to come to terms with the seemingly *unnatural imposition of citizenship* – of having to pick one official identification, while having experiences, memories, political loyalties, economic interests, families, and infrastructure that run across the two countries.

In Eyerman’s work on slavery and collective memory, he describes cultural trauma as “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2004: 61). This leads to a “rift” in one’s conception of the self or collectivity and derives from a drastic change in the immediate community, and a shift in the central activities and goals that community embodies. This tear in the intimate social fabric and its daily “doings” forces individuals to rethink their core purpose, their relationship to the larger society around them, and can thus impel a redefinition or reconstitution of both self and community in relation to the whole.

The realities described above – the ending of an era of liminality and activism, the acceptance of permanence and potential citizenship in the U.S., and the Americanization of the next generation – resulted in a moment that can aptly be described as an experience of cultural crisis. Importantly, add to this the haunting feeling that, in El Salvador, the war had ended but the revolution was not over, even as former *compañeros* and activists moved on and turned to new pursuits. The organizers described the moment as one characterized by a deep need for conscious “meaning-making” and “reinvention.” “Who are we?” they asked. “And what is our role here?”

### **Invention and *Intervention*: The Creation of the Migrant Christ and *El Día del Salvadoreño* in Los Angeles**

The previous section provides an understanding of the experiences and subjective orientation of the participants in this study before they became SANA directors and created the festival. The point is not to show a causal link between this line of thinking and the

creation, but to understand the festival as emerging in a particular moment, a moment described by a constellation of factors comprised of external context, personal experience and subjective orientation. This constellation of factors that is cross-border in scope.

As Hobsbawm and Ranger write in their classic text, *The Invention of Tradition*, the creation of festivals and traditions can be viewed as a “symptom,” an external indicator of an internal shift or crisis within the larger social or political world of the actors that would probably otherwise go unnoticed (1983). The invention of tradition calls our attention to and makes visible that shifting context. Perhaps even more fitting for this case, Conzen et al. describe the “invention of ethnicity,” in particular, as a response to a “crisis which challenges the core values” of a population (1992: 17). And Robert Orsi, author of the ethnographic monograph, *The Madonna of 115th street* (1988), describes immigrant rituals like *la bajada* as one mechanism by which to resolve an “existentially and geographically dispersed life” by “creating new possibilities of selfhood” and thus “*rendering oneself recognizable*” (1999: 56, my emphasis). Finally, Abner Cohen (1993) reminds us that a festival can be seen not only as a *reflection* of an existential, political or moral crisis, but that such events also have the power to be an *intervention* within that crisis context.

With an understanding of the moment that migrants like Mario were experiencing in the mid-1990s, the following section details the chronology of invention of *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* as well as the festival that was built around this “migrant Christ.” Importantly, for the main instigators of this creation, the cultural crisis in identification that accompanied citizenship in the U.S. came with an urgent desire to remain connected to and relevant within the politics of a homeland that was no longer actually their “home,” particularly as the social movement that had previously preserved that umbilical cord began to dissolve.

### An Eerie Sense of Normalcy: Stepping into the Void, Searching for a Vehicle

In response to these crises, three of the original event founders began to meet regularly in the early-to-mid 1990s. One of them describes the moment as one in which they were looking around and saying, “y ahora ¿qué?” [and now what]. Salvador and Werner both recall a particular lunch at the Atlacatl Restaurant in Los Angeles where the two of them met to proactively discuss next steps. Soon they invited Mario into the conversation, creating a trio of ideologists that had grown up with a similar set of circumstances, organizing experience and political affiliations. “We used to meet regularly for lunch in a very disciplined way every Thursday by Salvador’s [parking] garage,” Werner remembered. “There were hours, days, years of meetings.”

Discussions at these meetings revolved around the implications of citizenship, the tensions surrounding the second generation, what was happening in El Salvador, and what was happening with Salvadorans in L.A. Pre-existing organizations, born during the solidarity and sanctuary movements, had now shifted gears and were primarily focused on migration issues in the U.S. Other organizations cropped up around matters of education and culture. And a whole host of hometown associations were formed to provide direct aid in the aftermath of the war, creating community at a regional, pueblo-to-pueblo level. But organizers explained that there was an “eerie sense of normalcy” and individuality all around them as they grappled to address the tensions and transitions of the 1990s.

“I remember meeting. Meeting all the time,” Mario recalled. “We were talking about how disconnected everyone was.” Hometown associations were cropping up everywhere, and he, Werner and Salvador were all involved in them; they were even founders. “But this was all one-way, you know? We just give to the community back home and that is it.” Meanwhile, “there was a total lapse of Salvadoran presence culturally in the city [of Los Angeles].”

Collectively, they started to wonder: “Could we create something” that would address these concerns? Salvador kept pushing for an organization that was truly “Salvadoran-American,” and that would allow the population to integrate into the U.S. while still maintaining a connection to El Salvador; that would allow Salvadoran immigrants to be more visible and relevant in both places. The organizers were firm in their own political orientation, but they had the instinct that they both wanted and needed to mobilize a broader population. “We were looking for something that would involve everyone and that would not be in competition with anyone else, with any other event,” said Werner, “Something that would bring people together across the board. We were searching for the right ideology.” In a separate interview Mario explained, “We tried to come up with the single most important issue that would galvanize us [Salvadorans] to come together.”

At first, Salvador and Werner tried to push some of their ideas in a pre-existing organization (*Asociacion de Salvadoreños*, ASOSAL) focused on culture, but the ideas did not jibe. Doing something around *la bajada* and *Las Fiestas Agostinas* was seen as too close, both in idea and timing, to the already existing Central American Independence Day Parade. Moreover, because of their history, these organizers were generally seen as political agitators, and were essentially kicked out of the organization. Wondering if they could publicly step out into the vacuum that they sensed and create something all their own, the three organizers began to call together a group of people they had known through the movements, people with vast community experience such as Isabel, Tony, Mario G., Luis, and the Reverend Cañas.

Well aware that the connection between El Salvador and the United States that was so palpable in their own experience could and likely *would* die with the parent generation, the group decided that what was needed was the creation of something permanent and living – a public tradition, a ritual, a forum – that would bring Salvadorans together, that

would create a public space for organizing and civic participation, and that would become a permanent bridge between the U.S. and El Salvador. Perhaps without fully recognizing the implications of their actions, this small handful of organizers was talking about creating a mechanism that could serve as a symbolic link between contexts to be passed on to future generations and that, eventually, could be utilized as a vehicle towards more practical and political ends.

Together in what could be seen as a construction and invention of tradition in the most literal sense, these leftist leaders deliberated over what that mechanism should look like, settling on a religious and national symbol. Mario recalls the collective, creative process:

We were meeting and asking, what kind of event could this be? We were listing events: Independence Day, *Semana Santa*, Christmas festivities. It was Salvador that brought forward the idea of *la bajada*. We all knew about [the *Divino Salvador*], but many of us had not ever seen [*la bajada*], some knew very little. Salvador brought in some Xerox copies from an old encyclopedia that he had found in El Salvador that detailed the history of the *Divino Salvador* and *la bajada*. So we were like all reading this together, we were learning about it ourselves. It seemed like the right way to go, because it captured our history. It is a sad history. The indigenous were killed and then here was this *Divino Salvador* to save everyone. A nation of saviors that destroyed culture and killed people. But that is what we were born of, the *Conquista*, that sad history is *our* history, that is us. The image captures our culture, you know our religiosity, and it bears the name of our nation. We are named after the *Divino Salvador*, Jesus, now El Salvador.

After studying the history of the original event as it occurs in El Salvador, the organizers agreed that both the symbolism and the practical components were promising for several reasons. First of all, August 5<sup>th</sup> – the date of *la bajada* in El Salvador – was seen as a good temporal marker, because it was not in direct competition with any other Central American festivity in California. Secondly, since the next day, August 6<sup>th</sup>, also marked the founding of the city of San Salvador, it was not only a religious marker. It was also civic. Third, while prior immigrant populations had created their own festival days in the U.S., to the



organizers' knowledge there was no specifically "Salvadoran" event. "The Mexicans have *Cinco de Mayo*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Italians [have Columbus Day], the Irish have St. Patrick's Day. What about having our own day?" Mario said, recalling their discussions. Finally, organizers felt that the ritual, and more importantly the symbol, as both a religious and civic or national icon, had the potential to unite the community of Salvadoran Americans rather than divide it.<sup>32</sup>

Although leftists, all the organizers themselves grew up in families that were nominally if not deeply religious; religious culture was an important part of their roots. Moreover, the armed resistance in El Salvador as well as the solidarity and sanctuary movements were closely linked to religious institutions and often drew on a liberation theology worldview. As such, even though some of the key organizers are atheists in intellectual terms, they were able to reconcile their own orientation to the religiosity of their construction. More importantly, the organizers explained, religion is very important to the "*pueblo Salvadoreño*." The symbol had the potential to resonate.

Organizers argued that the symbol goes beyond religion. "It really is not just religious at all. It is national. It is historical. It is carnal. In many ways, it is at the core of the faith of the people," one explained. Another organizer, Boris, added, "Some evangelicals do have a problem with the image, because they see it as idolatry." He continued, "But others, like myself, recognize that the image is historical. That's the thing. And it is tied to the Christian faith in general, because, regardless, it is the Savior."

### There is a Chord We Have Touched Here: Testing the Waters

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<sup>32</sup> The symbol was seen as being capable of uniting people because it did not have a divisive political quality tied to the conflict. Also, as a 'national' symbol, it could be uprooted from its Catholic orientation once in the U.S. thus broadening its appeal and serving to bridge a traditional divide between Catholics and Protestants.

Working through Fidel, a Salvadoran contact who worked at Precious Blood Catholic Church in Los Angeles at the time, SANA inquired into the possibility of holding *la bajada* there and borrowing a statue of Jesus that had been donated to the church by the Filipino congregation. “It was a beautiful statue, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *El Sagrado Corazon*, made of bone,” one organizer recalled. With Fidel’s help, in 1999 the organizers carried out what, in retrospect, can be seen as a trial run of the re-enactment of *la bajada* using this borrowed image. Drawing on connections with religious leaders and community activists formed during the sanctuary movement, they put together an ecumenical mass followed by the enactment of the Transfiguration outside the church. The date also marked the official “coming out” of their nascent organization, the Salvadoran American National Association, or SANA, meaning “healthy,” named by Isabel and brought under the non-profit status of her Multi-Ethnic Peace and Reconciliation Fund (MPRF), which was founded following the 1992 L.A. riots.

This initial event was met by a turnout of about 800 people at the mass and 500 that stayed for the events to follow. As they sang the Salvadoran national anthem, Mario recalled that there was a lot of emotion in the crowd. He and fellow organizers looked at each other and thought, “hmmm, this is...this had some promise. We knew we were on to something. I saw it in people’s eyes. I saw people crying. That told me that there is a chord that we have touched here.”

There were also some lucky accidents along the way. For example, when doing *la bajada* they broke the little finger of the borrowed statue, prompting them to think about the creation of their own image – an exact replica of the *Divino Salvador del Mundo*. Commissioning a replica in the U.S. would cost them some \$3000 that they did not have, so they began looking at possibilities in El Salvador, eventually connecting with a group of Fidel’s friends in Soyapango, who had a small organization called *Equipo Evangelizador*

*Monseñor Romero*. Through these contacts, SANA leaders connected with an indigenous sculptor, Manuel de Jesús Quilizapa from the pueblo of Izalco, who made a beautifully crafted replica of *El Divino Salvador*, standing tall at five feet and eleven inches, for just seven hundred dollars.

### Why Don't You Take the Image by Land? The Birth of a Migrant

As the date for transportation of the image to the U.S. drew near, these same friends from Soyapango made a fateful suggestion: "They pushed us to think about what we were really doing. They suggested that the image be brought in a pilgrimage by land, walking, walking like everyone else, and redeeming that *camino* in the process," one leader remembered. "From the moment that [they] asked us, 'Why don't you take the image by land?' this is when the *pling* [epiphany] occurred. Wow... this is going to be huge..." Salvador said. He continued, "We have learned to trust the wisdom of the *pueblo* and when someone from the *pueblo* makes a recommendation about something, it is important to pay attention, because they are the ones that are living daily with the suffering and the wisdom of being there [in El Salvador]." He continued, "Between ourselves we immediately said, 'This makes sense, and *este volado* [this thing] is going to be symbolic and historic."

From this moment forward, a narrative surrounding the image began to emerge. The image was no longer solely *El Divino Salvador*, patron saint of El Salvador. It was also a *migrant*. "In that moment we all decided that even if we don't have a single penny in our pocket, we're going to do it!" one leader remembered. The symbolism of the image had shifted from an abstraction, a mere vessel, to something more meaningful and personal to the organizers themselves.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For a close parallel, see Tweed (1997). Tweed focuses on a replica of the Cuban patroness, 'Our Lady of Charity' in Miami. Much like with the *Divino Salvador*, the Cuban patroness takes on the

In the next few weeks the organizers began to plan the pilgrimage of the image.<sup>34</sup> And with it, somewhat unconsciously, they began to weave in important pieces of their own history and lives, thus creating a narrative surrounding the image that was a reflection of their own experience. They began, on July 2, 2000, by having the image blessed in the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador by Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle. The team from Soyapango helped to organize the details of the blessing, bringing to the altar (along with the image) items of significance to migrants, such as a pair of black tennis shoes and a backpack – “the only things a migrant takes on the journey to the U.S.” They also brought forward one *colon* [the former Salvadoran currency] to signify the remittances sent home to family members. And finally, they carried a picture of the Salvadoran martyr and hero Archbishop Romero.

As the image was brought forward to be blessed, Salvador recalled that the archbishop was somewhat taken aback. Most people have little handheld images blessed to take with them on the airplane or carry in their backpack, he explained. SANA’s migrant image, on the other hand, had to be rolled in on a dolly, standing taller than the organizers themselves. It appeared life-like: “When [the archbishop] saw it, he said, ‘And this? This is *demasiado bello* [too beautiful]. Who made it?’”<sup>35</sup>

Although Sáenz Lacalle was a conservative catholic archbishop and former member of the *Opus Dei* institution, SANA organizers felt it was important that the image receive an official stamp of approval. Laughing hard after the fact, Salvador recalled the

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identity of her creators; the replica is endowed with the identity of an ‘exile’ as it is brought from Havana to Miami. Also, see Orsi’s classic monograph, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street* (1988).

<sup>34</sup> The pilgrimage included a total of fourteen sites, playing on the Stations of the Cross. But rather than following the final stages in Jesus’ life, these stations represented the stages of war and migration as experienced by Salvadoran refugees.

<sup>35</sup> This after-the-fact storytelling is corroborated by video footage of the blessing in San Salvador.

“contradictions bound up in having an enemy of Archbishop Romero, the opposite current of us, bless the image.”<sup>36</sup> He retold the story with a childlike glee:

*Pero no sabía* [but he didn't know]! And in the official letters we were sending him, we didn't identify ourselves. Afterwards [he must have said], 'Oh my GOD, what the hell I did?' These are the things that *we* know happened, and I'm telling you *porque no todo ha sido facil* [because not everything has been easy]. It hasn't been easy. They [went on to] question the archbishop on television, to ask him why he had blessed a catholic image for people that he didn't even know. Because we transported the image in a pickup that belonged to the Episcopal Church – *¡protestantes!*

Meanwhile, SANA organizers had made the decision to construct the pilgrimage around the sites of some of the most poignant moments in their collective history, namely the sites of assassinations of religious leaders within the country. Mimicking the historical unfolding of the conflict in El Salvador, the pilgrimage began by visiting the tomb of Father Rutilio Grande, assassinated in 1977 for his work organizing peasant farmers through Christian Base Communities.<sup>37</sup> This assassination is seen by many as the seed that radicalized the popular resistance in El Salvador, including the outspoken stance of Archbishop Romero. The pilgrimage then visited the small chapel at the hospital, *La Divina Providencia*, where Romero himself was assassinated in 1980; the assassination site of the four U.S. churchwomen, raped and slain later that year by Salvadoran National Guardsmen; and the chapel at the Central American University, where six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and daughter were killed in 1989 by the elite Atlacatl Battalion of the Salvadoran Army.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, Romero's own journal's show that he also received spiritual direction from Opus Dei priests in the 1970s and advocated for the beatification of the founder of Opus Dei in a letter to Pope Paul VI (Brockman 1989).

<sup>37</sup> In this context, Christian Base Communities (known in Latin American as *las comunidades eclesiales de base*) are autonomous religious groups associated with liberation theology and the organizing of peasants in rural areas.

<sup>38</sup> The five generals and colonels responsible for ordering and covering up the killing of these four churchwomen were all trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas. The Atlacatl Battalion responsible for the Jesuit murders was a rapid-response, counter-insurgency battalion also created at the U.S. School of the Americas, located in Panama at the time.

From there, in addition to visiting Cathedrals throughout El Salvador and Guatemala, the pilgrimage visited the *La Casa del Migrante*, a shelter in Guatemala for Central and South American migrants deported from Mexico and the U.S., *La Catedral de La Paz* in Chiapas, Mexico, *La Basílica de Guadalupe*, home of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, in Mexico City, and finally the *Castillo de Chapultepec*, where Peace Accords were signed between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN in 1992. From there the image crossed the border in El Paso, Texas, “without documents” and was “given refuge” in Dolores Mission Church in East Los Angeles, a traditional sanctuary for refugees and migrants.

### **Transfigurations: The Resonance, Evolution and Institutionalization of Symbol, Event and Organization**

In the prior section I recount the deliberate work that organizers did, as well as the accidents, which together gave form to the image. In what follows, I show how the image began to resonate, growing out of the control of its owners. I also describe the deliberate steps SANA took to make the image and festival reach a wider audience once in Los Angeles.

#### This is Not SANA Doing This: Between Creation and Reception

While the migration of the *Divino Salvador* to the U.S. was personally meaningful to the organizers themselves, what really made it a powerful and successful vessel for the work of integration and mobilization was the reaction it received from others. There was an element of contingency involved in this process, as organizers themselves were surprised and taken aback by what they had worked to create. “It was in the *camino* from El Salvador to L.A. that we began to realize this was going to be huge...out of control,” Werner said, recalling his own reaction to the responses of people around them.

It was in the act of *re-enacting* the organizers' own migration trajectories, and in the response of countless others that in one way or another identified with that trajectory, that the symbol was transformed and began to take on a life quite its own. In essence, the symbol began to grow out of the control of its controllers. Recognizing this fact Werner added, "We realized, hey, this is *not* SANA that's doing this." At the same time, it was precisely *because* of this response that the symbol would go on to become a grounded vehicle, a concrete vessel through which organizers could more formally address the tensions that gave life to the symbol in the first place.

Early on in the pilgrimage people began to relate to the image as a migrant and as a bridge between themselves and their loved ones across borderlands. Waiting for the arrival of the image in Los Angeles, Fidel remembers his father calling from El Salvador: "My father told me that he was following the image everywhere they went in San Salvador. And at the time they hit the border in Chinamas, he was crying. He was asking the divine image, 'Take care of my family in the USA, in Los Angeles. Take care of my son and watch for him.'"

In El Salvador, people began to use the language, one organizer recalled, "They were calling the image the 'Christ of the Migrants,' 'Christ the Protector,' '*El Cristo Mojado*.'" The migration of the image was perhaps especially poignant for family members that cannot travel to the U.S. to visit loved ones "just because they do not have a little piece of paper," a visa. "It was the idea of the connection," Salvador said, "that the image will be reunited with my children. One woman in the Cathedral [in San Salvador] said to me, 'Bueno, since I can't get a visa to go to the U.S., I hope that the image will go and be with my son there.'"

The same was true for people on the other side of the border that cannot travel home because they lack legal status or are under temporary protected status. "One man said to me, I can die now because I see again my *Divino Salvador del Mundo*," Salvador remembered. "Reactions like that break our heart, because people start to cry immediately

when they see it,” another director said. Fidel added to this, “The faces of the people crying, trying to touch it, trying to carry it, trying to put some money, you know, just for the image. A very old lady, she fell down in my church, I think she even broke her arm, but she said, ‘but I am happy, because I see the image and I want to come back.’ The paramedic took her away and she said, ‘I don’t wanna go...’ She was so wanting to see it.”

Throughout the pilgrimage people approached the image, asking for healing and sending blessings to their loved ones in migration or already in the U.S. One connection that organizers themselves had not made was the importance of the pilgrimage for people who had lost a child or loved one somewhere in migration. “People looking for their sons were praying that they be found in the border,” Salvador said. “There are a lot of people that know that their kids have died along the way, in Guatemala, in Mexico, no one knows exactly where. They’ve been disappeared. This was like the *Divino Salvador* raising up the spirit of all these people. This was spontaneous. This happened spontaneously.”

Priests at the Cathedrals visited along the way picked up on this significance, this meaning the symbol held for the people, and further shaped the image’s transformation from patron saint to migrant and political refugee. When the *Divino Salvador* was received in *La Basílica de Guadalupe*, in front of a crowd of several thousand, Don Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, the priest presiding over the mass, connected the image’s visit to that of a migrant, explaining that “the immigrant son, en route to the United States, had stopped first to visit his mother,” *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. He took this opportunity to ask for forgiveness from all the families and countries of people that had died in Mexican territory due to abuses by the authorities.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Don Samuel Ruiz was a catholic priest of the liberation theology tradition that served as a key mediator during the conflict between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Chiapas, Mexico. His diocese primarily served indigenous communities in San Cristóbal de las Casas, where he served as bishop.



### “Once It’s Tradition, It’s Easy”: Making it Official

While priests solidified and re-invigorated the narrative surrounding the image throughout the pilgrimage, and continue to do so through its yearly “internal migrations” and mass at *la bajada* in Los Angeles, politicians also began to take note of the symbol and its potential for mobilization. As the pilgrimage approached the U.S., organizer Isabel, who had significant experience interfacing with politicians during the war years, worked with members of the City Council to have August 6<sup>th</sup> officially proclaimed as *El Día del Salvadoreño* in Los Angeles. This proclamation went through in the summer of 2000 just in time for the arrival of the pilgrimage and the second ritual enactment of *la bajada*, this time carried out with the migrant image.

That year the crowd was so large at Precious Blood that SANA directors were informed by both the priest and the fire marshal that they would have to find a new venue for the event. “Yeah, I kind of lost my job because of that event,” Fidel said, explaining that there were several thousand people there, and it created a problem at the church as the crowd took over the entire street. But that, again, was a providential accident for organizers. Independently, they decided that the church was too constraining and that they needed more of an atmosphere of “*fiesta*.” Being pushed from the church motivated them to work on securing Exposition Park by the Los Angeles Coliseum the next year.

Between 2001 and 2008, the ritual was re-enacted every year at Exposition Park, with the attendance growing by tens of thousands and reaching over 40,000 on a given day for several years in row.<sup>40</sup> And each year, through SANA’s work and that of their political contacts, the August 6<sup>th</sup> proclamation was taken to another level – from a city proclamation in 2000 (introduced by Councilman Nick Pacheco) to county recognition in 2001 (via

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<sup>40</sup> The event continues but has evolved since 2008, with changes in the entities that organize the event and its location. These changes are explored in the chapters to follow.

Supervisor Yvonne Burke) to a statewide proclamation in 2002, introduced by California State Senator Gil Cedillo. Finally after much work to gain 51 signatures to introduce the bill, in July of 2006, Representative Hilda Solís (D-CA-32) (soon to be President Obama's Secretary of Labor) stood before the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States in support of House Resolution 721, which would recognize "Salvadoran-American Day" at the federal level.<sup>41</sup> Speaking on the House floor, she said:

This resolution recognizes the Salvadoran Americans for their hard work, dedication and contributions to our stability and well being [in] the United States. Forty years of internal political turmoil forced thousands and thousands of individuals from the Republic of El Salvador to flee and come to this country. They sought peace and security and a better life in the United States.

In closing, she recognized the hard work of SANA in pushing the resolution forward and the SHARE Foundation for helping to gain the necessary signatures. She reminded her colleagues that "our nation was built by the people from many nations and different backgrounds and cultures." "In fact," she continued, "many of the workers who helped rebuild the Pentagon were of Salvadoran background." The resolution passed without a glitch. *Día del Salvadoreño* events immediately began to spring up across the U.S., and the official declaration of Salvadoran-American Day was covered widely in the U.S. ethnic press as well as in El Salvador. One month later, Hilda Solís was recognized as the Grand Marshall of SANA's celebration in Los Angeles, speaking to an eager crowd in what was arguably the most energetic civic acts since the festival's inception.

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<sup>41</sup> H.Res.720 was endorsed by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Salvadoran American National Association (SANA), and the SHARE Foundation. Fifty-one members of Congress are cosponsors to the "simple resolution" (a resolution passed by one house that does not require presentation to the President and does not have force of law). H.Res.720 was unanimously approved by the House of Representatives after 40 minutes of debate, despite being presented in a moment characterized by anti-immigrant sentiment. At the time, the resolution's author, Hilda Solís, was the only member of Congress of Central American descent.

The official recognition of *Día del Salvadoreño* at various levels of governance has been acutely meaningful to many Salvadorans living in the U.S. “This is a huge honor,” one woman exclaimed. “It’s an honor that the United States government is recognizing the work Salvadorans have contributed to the country.” This meaning is even more acute for the leaders that made it possible. It is the achievement of a lifetime, done on a shoestring budget by a group of grassroots visionaries donating their time voluntarily. “We didn’t have any money [...] we did it without money, people cooperated during the trip, gave us food, housing in Mexico, housing in Guatemala, and we only had \$1500 to bring [the image],” one leader marveled in an interview in 2000. “We tied our belts very tight to do this,” asserted another.

Visiting Chamba’s house one day, he suddenly became emotional and stopped the conversation. He stood and from the top of his file cabinet retrieved a huge framed replica of the statewide proclamation of Salvadoran Day. Flipping over the frame, he pointed to an inscription written to his kids and, with tears in his eyes, said that he had prepared this for them so they will have it when he dies. The official proclamation is not only a desired recognition of the lives and work of Salvadorans living in the U.S., it also makes the festival permanent, giving it life well beyond the lifetimes of its creators. For the organizers, there is power in that permanence. “There are more people that will continue what we started. And when it is tradition, then it’s easy. Because the image is the epicenter of everything and now *El Día del Salvadoreño* is respected officially. Everything else is ‘fiesta,’” he asserted.

### Creating a Space People Were Longing For: Resonance and Multivalency

Initially event organizers were somewhat baffled and pleasantly surprised by the swiftness of their own success. Early in the process Mario shrugged and said, “We seem to have created a space people were longing for!” Even critics and skeptics have admitted that

the event creates a type of collective effervescence that can get under one's skin. "Listen," said one Salvadoran labor organizer. "I am living evidence of this." He admitted that he had never seen the Transfiguration enacted in El Salvador as a child and that he is not one to be moved by anything religious. "[But] when you see *la bajada* in the park, and you see people's faces, the old women crying, everyone together, something happens. It is a transformation. You really cannot turn a blind eye to the power in it, the emotion."

But speaking with attendees at seven consecutive festivals in Los Angeles from 2003-2009, it is clear that the festival and the *Divino Salvador* image have both undergone a number of mutations that increase that salience. These transformations better accommodate the Salvadoran population in the U.S., specifically, adding to the image's universal appeal while still keeping with the priorities of the SANA leaders themselves. As such, over time the image has become multivalent, speaking to people in a number of different ways.

First and foremost, as the creation story highlights, the image has developed from a *patron saint* to a migrant reunited with its people in the U.S. The poignancy of separation and reconnection invoked at the festival cannot be overstated. People are often moved to tears upon seeing the image, as one older woman who shouted as the image passed by, "I have not seen it since 1961!" But even for people that had never seen the image in El Salvador, its presence in Los Angeles speaks to the experience of separation and longing for reconnection within this population.

In her ethnographic research in Texas, Kathleen Sullivan asserts that national, regional and religious differences are often trumped by "the pervasive sense of shared border-crossing memories" (2000: 204). Because a large percentage of Salvadorans have been undocumented at some point, are in the U.S. with Temporary Protected Status, or have family members in one of these positions, the immigration experience is one marked by

painful, ongoing separation from their homeland and families. For example, one young attendee at the festival explained that he is the only member of his family in the U.S. Since he cannot return, he talks with his family by phone at least once a week. They ask him when he'll return, and then his mom cries. It is too hard for him to fight his own tears when she cries, he explained, so he always tells her, "mom, I [have to] call you back."

In a corollary transformation, the image also shifted from a Catholic symbol to a more universal religious, cultural and even humanistic icon. From the time of the pilgrimage in El Salvador, SANA directors very consciously worked towards this transformation. Although the image was blessed in the Catholic Cathedral in San Salvador, it was transported by Werner – a Presbyterian – and two pilgrims sent by the Anglican Archdiocese of El Salvador in a pickup truck donated by the Anglican Bishop, Martín Barahona. Once in the U.S., the image has routinely visited churches and congregations of all denominations. Likewise, the mass that surrounds the ritual enactment of *la bajada* is always ecumenical just as in the days of the solidarity movement, with religious leaders from multiple congregations.

SANA directors were also deliberate in their decision to name the festival the Spanish equivalent of "Day of the Salvadoran(s)," in lieu of making reference to the "Divine Savior." Despite the wild popularity of St. Patrick's Day and the love and devotion that some people have for the image, a *Divino Salvador* Day would have been too limiting, they surmised, making the celebration a religious holiday when it should be civic and cultural as well. To that end, the directors also structured the festival in a way that allows all these diverse components a formal space within the event.

For example, Friday evening typically is marked by an elite, private kickoff ceremony, where volunteers, religious and political leaders from the U.S. and El Salvador are given recognitions and the opportunity to mingle and discuss issues. Saturday and

Sunday's celebrations – as the festival quickly grew into a two-day affair – are marked by music, dance and food. Finally, Sunday afternoon is always set aside for a well-organized *acto cívico*, or civic ceremony, with the presentation of recognitions and awards, announcements about current events, political speeches and the singing of the national anthems. This is followed by an ecumenical mass and *la bajada*.

Somewhat spontaneously, as a response, the events quickly adopted a distinctly “ethnic” or “nationalist” flare, with vendors selling Salvadoran memorabilia, banners, headbands and shirts in the colors of the flag, transforming the crowd into a sea of blue and white by the end of the day. Observing *la bajada* in the homeland together in 2004, Salvador turned to me at one point and said, “Look! Nobody is wearing national colors!” In San Salvador, *la bajada* is a somber affair wherein one is hard pressed to find even a handful of blue and white shirts among the hundreds of thousands of attendees.

Talking with event attendees makes clear that for many people the festival triggers a series of memories, deep nostalgia for the homeland, and a sense of pride in being Salvadoran that they do not necessarily feel on a daily basis within the host context. When interviewed, many first generation immigrants attending the event for the first time are often euphoric, immediately launching into stories from their childhood and their life in El Salvador. Others point to the importance of having a space to celebrate the unique history, situation(s), collective memory and cultural heritage of the Salvadoran population, especially in a city whose Latino population is largely Mexican. As one woman put it: “We talk different, we eat different things, and we have a different recent history. *Somos Salvadoreños pues*” [We are Salvadorans!].

As universal as the image has become on some level, its history lends it a particular political identity – that of an exile. SANA's retracing the sites of assassinations in El Salvador was a conscious effort to make sacred the struggles of the people against the

Salvadoran government. That message, of the image coming to be with the people in lieu of with the rightwing government entities of El Salvador or their satellites in the U.S., was a persistent defining point of this festival, especially in the first ten years. To that end, during SANA has often purposely shunned involvement from the consulate or anyone representing the ARENA government, in their minds, the continuation of the wartime rightwing political agenda.

Although chapter four will make clear that not everyone at the festival shares SANA's political tendencies, the festival and image do often bring shared wartime memories with them, demonstrating just how present the past is for some of the wartime generation of migrants. Following the mass at *La Placita* during the image's pilgrimage in 2006, one woman immediately began to discuss the war. Linking it to the present, she said she just could not understand why people want war in Iraq. It is something so horrible, she said through tears. They just do not understand. As music played, food was served and folkloric dancers began their act, another woman spontaneously began to describe the awful things that happened to her friends and their families – of women stuck on fence posts and men's bodies mutilated, and how many people completely lost their minds.

In addition, a spirit of resistance is often present at the festival. For example, when a band like *Los Guaraguo* performed, the energy was electric. Much of the older generation spent the evening singing, dancing, remembering and enjoying the music in a way they were not allowed to in public in El Salvador during the war years. Event attendees repeatedly reminded me that listening to this music in El Salvador could get you killed. In the new context, reverie about the war era is often present, coupled with a freedom (and geographical and temporal distance) to enjoy what could not be enjoyed previously.

Finally, over time, SANA leaders have also had to adapt the events to accommodate children and youth, many of whom were born in the U.S. Apart from always singing both

the U.S. and Salvadoran national anthems and adorning the stage in flags from both countries, including the second generation has meant providing entertainment like fireworks and children's rides and rethinking the cultural offerings at the event. "We have to create the right context for kids so that they feel ownership, so that they feel like this is their identity too," one organizer said, musing over the difficulty in being inclusive of everyone. "We have to improve the kids' area so they don't get bored," another leader said. "[We don't want them to say] eh daddy, I wanna go home. I don't want to stare at the statue there on top of the world all day!"

Again, this has been a balancing act. In 2004 SANA organizers cut the microphone in the middle of a rap performance because of the subject matter and language being used. Through the grumbling and boos of a huge youth contingent standing and dancing at the base of the stage, Mario spoke into the microphone saying, "Sorry, this is a family event." Later, organizers discussed the issue over the course of several meetings, coming to the conclusion that they had erred; they had to "meet the people where they are." They could pick and choose their battles, but if the youth wanted this style of music, they could not turn it away or they would alienate a key constituency they were trying to attract. Since then young, popular Salvadoran rap and hip hop artists (like *Crooked Stilo* and *Mr. Pelon*)<sup>42</sup> have had primetime performance slots, late in the afternoon and evening on the last and largest day of the festival.

### Inventing a Way In: An Organizational Identity and Credentials

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<sup>42</sup> Crooked Stilo is a hip hop duo, two brothers born in El Salvador and raised in East Los Angeles. Their music combines Latin rhythms and rap and is often bilingual, bringing together Spanish and English in their lyrics. Mr. Pelón is a former soccer player and rap artist from Usulután, El Salvador. He migrated to the U.S. in 2004 and has performed a number of times at *Día del Salvadoreño*.



Finally, the image and festival are not the only things that have experienced a transformation. One could say that their success also marks the evolution of SANA as an organization. These two major achievements provided SANA an institutional identity from the get go. In the years to follow, SANA has used the festival in a very strategic, political manner, at times losing sight of cultural and historical messaging and the poignancy and political nature of the imagery of the migrant Christ itself. These political goals, while always under the surface, were not clearly articulated as the standout priority from the start. The creation of the event was initially characterized by a collective leap of faith, a series of providential accidents, and the notion that if they built it, people would come, and the next steps would become obvious. The organizers had a nagging feeling, an instinct that this space would resonate – a space in which Salvadorans could feel pride in who they are and what their story is.

What the trio of ideologists – Werner, Mario and Salvador – did know from the start, was that no matter how political they had been in their own lives, they needed a symbol that would transcend them and transcend the overt divisions in the community. But along the way, in moments, all of the directors became believers in their own mythology, in the message they presented to the crowd, in part because it reflected elements of their own experience.

The creation process was a highly emotional, personal, grassroots journey undertaken by a group of underdogs who shared a particular political orientation, a lot of organizing experience and social capital, but did not have status or other resources. This was an underappreciated group of activists, said one female outsider to the group, herself an activist. Their particular faction of the FMLN was always being pushed down and “messed with,” she continued. Recognition was something they were not accustomed to. They tended to work behind the scenes. But they were connected, committed and

visionary, she explained. Observation shows that, initially, the SANA leadership was visibly awestruck by the success of its own creation. That does not mean, however, that the key leaders were not acting deliberately and instrumentally in creating a political opening for themselves in Los Angeles and El Salvador, even if they were not sure just how everything would pan out.

When asking about the political potential of the festival back in 2003, Werner said very honestly, “I could tell you anything right now, but I don’t want to do that, because the honest truth is we just don’t know [what it will become]. It is just now happening!” Community leaders present from the earliest conversations, but who chose not to participate in the organization, affirm that there was a political edge to what the directors were doing from the start but in reinvented form. We had to “*cambiar la casete*” [change the tape], one leader explained. “A new vision for a new day!” another asserted.

When asked what other Salvadoran American leaders thought about this new work they were doing in the first couple years, Salvador explained, “We said, look, this is what we are going to do, but nobody believed us! We had been highly political in the life of our community here. And they said, ‘How are these political people from the [FMLN] party that are always accusing us going to be working with this image of Jesus [laughs hard and shrugs]. They didn’t understand!’” Salvador continued:

But I had faith that this could be big. And we feel happy because each year confirms that it is bigger and bigger. The distinct thing is the combination of civics and politics that we put into the event which is what makes it more interesting and not just an ultra-religious thing. There is a little of everything, there is culture, there is civic participation, there is a faith ritual. And this is the only thing we really possess. Our wealth is this: a political wisdom. Because we know from our country, we have had to be political from childhood. *El hambre se hace uno político de volado* [hunger quickly politicizes a person].

Still, the leap of faith had to come first before the image and event could become a civic and political platform. Once it met with success, SANA wasted no time in getting down to politics in both their country contexts.

### **“This is Not Just a Party!” Recognition, Pride, Dignity, Organizing and Politics**

In the previous sections of this chapter, I describe the moment out of which *El Día del Salvadoreño* emerged; how both the event and image were created and received. In this final section, I push the story told thus far one step further, turning from invention to intervention. As Chamba put it in his quote, above, once the event is officially recognized in the host state, “everything else is fiesta.” But that is not exactly true. The context out of which the invention emerged is not a determinant of how that invention will later be used and with what consequence.

Indeed, at a personal level, the events described here have been acutely meaningful to organizers. The success of the event and the official recognition it received lead to a sense of satisfaction and closure to some of the internal tensions and cultural crises that had pushed organizers to create the image in the first place. *Día del Salvadoreño* and the migration of the replica image were not just an importation of pieces of the homeland to their new country. Rather, the pilgrimage and its official recognition retraced and, thus redeemed, their own difficult past – their experience of violence, of displacement and treacherous migration, and the denial by U.S. officials to acknowledge these sufferings, made manifest in legal exclusion in the host state.

In that sense, the enactment of the migration and the success of the events built around *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* have felt like a *personal* intervention in the subjective crises surrounding permanent residence in the United States and separation from the struggle in El Salvador. Moreover, the image and festival have become symbols and carriers

of this narrative not just for the organizers and their own children but also for a larger population. In addition to creating a bridge to El Salvador, the festival can be seen as a political statement on both separation from and reconnection to that homeland; an affirmation of ambiguous membership in the host state; and a way to connect the individual stories of fellow Salvadoran migrants to a larger, collective story, cementing this border-spanning narrative in a more permanent way.

But ending the story there would be a mistake. The festival is not an end in and of itself; its significance is largely linked to *what it allowed leaders to do*. From the festival's inception, SANA leaders have had goals for its civic and political components. After it met with success, the festival became an actual work site and a platform for efforts elsewhere. Event organizers have since used the space to engage in "symbolic politics" that they hope will lead to more tangible projects, to raise consciousness and awareness amongst event attendees, to spread information, and to make connections to and between politicians. As I show in chapter five, they also use the credentials attached to the festival to do other forms of political work outside the festival site itself.

The first step is one most Salvadorans in the U.S. can agree on – namely, creating a concrete space for pride and recognition for the Salvadoran population in the U.S., and in Los Angeles in particular. In an emotional interview in 2000, when *Día del Salvadoreño* had just been proclaimed at the city level, Chamba said, "This statement is so very important for us. Jesus Christ, the son of God, *El Divino Salvador del Mundo*, made the *same* trip that we made twenty years ago to get inside the United States, and live this history, and pass this history to our future generation." "Oh I love that my daughters and my son don't forget what we passed coming to the United States," he continued. "It was a journey of history, but a journey of love too."

In hindsight, organizers look back, reflect and feel satisfied that they have been active participants in a new, emergent vision of Salvadoran-ness in the U.S., one associated with pride in their historical experience and their culture. Looking around at all the new festivals, cultural events, and upscale dining establishments that have emerged in the last five years, one leader spontaneously said, “Like this [Salvadoran] restaurant here, *púchica*, *me gusta* [damn, I like it]. It is *validating*.” But things were not always that way.

In the earliest interviews, from 2000 to 2003, organizers stressed the complete lack of confidence and identity among the Salvadoran American population at that time, particularly the youth – an assertion echoed by many first generation immigrants interviewed at the festival. Literally, the first step is for people to be able to step out and say, “I’m good. I make a contribution. I have something to offer. I should be recognized and have rights,” Werner said in 2002. He explained that Salvadorans need to begin to stand up and say, “We are visible. We exist!” In 2003, Mario echoed this point: “People want to be recognized for their participation in this society. They want to have an identity. [...] We believe [the festival] will make a difference.” And in 2000, Salvador, too, said, “We believe [our people] will become a *better people* if they have something to feel proud of.”

Part of the challenge of the late 1990s and early 2000s was not just visibility, but transforming the image of Salvadorans in the public eye from negative to positive. Explaining the need to shift Salvadorans’ representation in the media and in the mind of political leaders Mario said, “People ought to know the good we have done as Salvadorans, that we are not only gang members, we are not only prostitutes, you know, that’s NOT Salvadorans. You know, those are SOME Salvadorans!” Moreover, he said, Salvadorans are no longer just “these victims and refugees.” Rather, they are becoming active participants and contributors in the society. Many event attendees corroborate this desire, making

statements such as the following: “It is good that we have these kinds of events so that [non-Salvadorans] see our culture and know that we are good people.”

In an interview in 2003, JR took this analysis a step further. Part of the problem, he explained, is that leaders in the community are not pushing the Salvadoran community to do better:

We are *not* equals yet. We are poor immigrants; we are the persecuted. If we do not give ourselves the self-respect, nothing will change. We are janitors and gardeners and hotel workers and no one is saying to us, ‘What are you doing? You can do better. You should go to college.’ We have to say that to ourselves. We have to expect that from ourselves. It is about expectations.

But a 1.5 generation Salvadoran interviewed in 2008 explained that the simple act of seeing Salvadoran leaders that started in such humble places standing on the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño* alongside important officials, can make a difference for youth:

If you come to one of the events, with that alone a whole new thing starts changing within you. Because you’re like, ‘ohh it’s doable, right?’ Cuz when you learn that Chamba [Salvador] was a public parking attendant running this thing it’s like, ‘whaaat!?’ and I’m just through with college and I don’t know what to do with my life. I’m such a loser, right!? I hope that that will encourage you to be like, ‘hey I can do this thing, right?’ And that’s why I think it was so important that [the organizers’] stories are known, because those are amazing stories.

Organizers assert that part of the lack of pride and confidence in the community is linked *precisely* to a pervasive disconnection from the story of how Salvadorans came to live in the U.S., under what circumstances. “We came to the U.S. because *we had no choice*,” Salvador explained. “The U.S. has hurt a lot of countries, and people need to know that!” another organizer asserted at a strategy meeting. That specific history has played an important role in determining the socioeconomic status and legal struggles that exist within the community.

One goal for the festival is that it will push compatriots, particularly future generations, to own this more critical grasp of history. As described in some of the opening sections to the chapter, the activists want their offspring to question *how it is* that Salvadorans came to inhabit a place like Los Angeles; to claim a history that tells the truth about their parents' displacement from El Salvador and their legal rejection in the U.S.; to construct a narrative that locates these experiences within the context of a tense, historical relationship between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments.

This history also affects the *civismo*, or civic participation, of the larger Salvadoran population in the U.S. in general. Salvadoran immigrants traditionally fear civic and political events, organizers explain, due to their experience in the homeland. The assertion is echoed by many scholars that have studied Salvadoran American communities in the U.S. (see *Baker-Cristales*). This is particularly true of the older, wartime generation. Part of the learning involves seeing that in their new context in the U.S., they will not be persecuted for gathering and organizing themselves. Chamba explained this further:

Salvadorans lost their desire to engage civic participation – I'm not going to say political, because political participation is even more difficult – but rather the desire to participate in groups. There is a lot of fear among us. So, SANA has seen that in this new stage of celebration, and the rescuing of our culture, people little by little are coming out of their hiding places and beginning to participate. [...] Even fearful people begin to ask, 'What is SANA? What are you doing? What is *El Día del Salvadoreño*?' And when they come and see it [...], they come back the next year and bring more people with them...

The sense of pride, being visible and feeling recognized, an understanding of the past, and the birth of a movement towards civic participation and collective gathering are all important components of the festival and goals of its organizers. For organizers and attendees alike, the *Día del Salvadoreño* and the official recognition it has received provides

Salvadorans with an important sentiment of belonging. This is especially salient for a population that has suffered legal exclusion at the hands of the state.

Deep down, however, SANA directors all agree that the circumstances of the Salvadoran population will not change unless there is more organization in the community. A population that mobilizes for events like *Día del Salvadoreño* is different than one that is organized in the fight to demand rights and change in their communities, they continued: “Numbers talk, but organized numbers really talk.” “Without an organized body you cannot really effectively [make] change,” another said. The SANA leaders explain that they have mobilized large numbers, as well as political representatives, but “politicians will only go as far as we push them.” Officials know that while we have an activist tier, the organizers continued, we are not a population well organized around political issues in the homeland or the host context.

Because organizing is a long term goal that takes time and requires full-time paid staff, SANA leaders have instead begun their political work by using the success and turnout at *El Día del Salvadoreño* as a concrete platform for attracting politicians to their event, introducing candidates and issues to the crowd, and attempting to influence electoral politics – on both sides of the border. They do so with a distinctly left-leaning agenda.

In many ways, these particular leaders have been left out – left out of the activist peer group that generally disparaged their orthodox, leftist orientation, and left out by the rightwing politics of the homeland. Moreover, in the U.S., Salvadorans have struggled for recognition of their population as an immigrant group with distinct circumstances and needs. For its organizers, *El Día del Salvadoreño* has created an “in,” a voice, that is hard for these entities to ignore. In 2008, at a meeting with volunteers, leaders celebrated the fact that through the work of organizations like SANA, among others, “we are no longer an unknown or unrecognized population, but one that is making itself visible. People used to



think El Salvador was in Mexico, but *no más*.” “Hey these events have put us on the map!” the same organizer exclaimed in an interview.

The general response to the platform SANA created, and the more than 40,000 attendees that it gives politicians access to, has been predictably strong on both sides of the border. Behind the scenes of the events, one can see how the large turnout at Salvadoran Day works for event organizers in soliciting the support of local U.S. politicians – something that is further explored in the next chapter. To present one brief example of this dynamic here, at a weekly organization planning meeting, SANA directors were visited by a representative of the California Secretary of State. The purpose behind the visit was clear: the representative was visiting organizations that interface with blocks of Latino voters to demonstrate the newest punch card machines and to encourage the active participation of Latino voters in upcoming elections. Having finished his demonstration, the representative was preparing to leave when one organizer mentioned the Salvadoran Day event:

Castro was getting ready to wrap it up when one organizer asked if he knew anything about Salvadoran Day. And then everything changed. As soon as the numbers were out there – and as usual they keep growing, now from 50,000 to 75,000 – Castro’s attention had been caught. The conversation turned to how they could use Salvadoran Day to set up voter registration booths for the November presidential elections. Soon Castro was revealing that the Secretary of State has millions of state dollars to use in this process, that grants will be given to different organizations interested in participating, and that SANA should definitely think about applying. Cards were swapped, information swapped. And I could see that organizers were already thinking towards Salvadoran Day 2005. Mario pointedly asked if the Secretary of State might like to be present at the event and speak to the crowd. Castro seemed to think this was a fantastic idea.

--Excerpt from fieldnotes, 1/14/04

Over the years, Salvadoran Day has allowed SANA to command the attention of U.S. politicians at multiple levels of governance. Although these appearances are largely displays of what are referred to as “symbolic politics,” SANA leaders hope that putting the

crowd of Salvadoran immigrants in touch with their representatives will create one form of accountability for the community; a venue in which they can push particular demands – their own, or that of the larger population.

Importantly, that mobilization capacity of *Día del Salvadoreño* does not end at the border. Salvadoran Day has historically had even *greater* success with visiting Salvadoran politicians. In addition to visits from prior mayors of San Salvador, like Hector Silva and Carlos Rivas Zamora, the event has drawn diplomats such as the Salvadoran Commissioner of Human Rights, Assembly members, a Vice President of the Republic, historic leaders of the FMLN, and presidential candidates.

One can visibly see evidence of many of these connections and the extension of symbolic politics across borders prominently displayed on the walls and websites of government offices and institutions in San Salvador. For example, in the internationally known memorial and museum dedicated to Archbishop Romero there is a Salvadoran Day plaque – a recognition from SANA to Romero for his dedication to justice – and alongside it, a second recognition from the City of Los Angeles, also a product of the organizers' work. As another example, in 2004, in the closing ceremony of *la bajada* and the weeklong *fiestas agostinas* in San Salvador, the Mayor of the city took significant time in his speech to praise SANA for their work in exporting the tradition to Los Angeles. He recognized “the connections between brothers and sisters here and there,” describing the *Divino Salvador* image as a symbolic tie which binds the population together across borders. And following passage of the federal recognition of August 6<sup>th</sup>, the then ARENA-controlled ministry of foreign relations immediately organized a press conference to spread the word about the accomplishment of “*nuestros hermanos en el exterior.*”

Bringing Salvadoran politicians and religious leaders to participate in Salvadoran Day has been one way to keep Salvadorans in Los Angeles in tune with what is happening in

El Salvador. As will be further explored in chapter five, this was clear at the 2003 and 2008 celebrations, in that attendees were reminded of the upcoming elections in El Salvador and were asked to encourage their families and friends still living there to participate in the process actively without fear. But in addition to securing influence for politicians in El Salvador and keeping the U.S.-based Salvadoran population connected with events and leaders there, the invitations to visiting politicians also gain recognition from homeland leaders for the hard work and experiences of the immigrant leadership itself, living in the U.S.

Comprising Dora's "invisible link," as cited in the introduction, means often going unrecognized for the struggles of migration and displacement, hard work in the solidarity movement, tireless sending of remittances to family and friends still in the homeland, and continued work through organizations and hometown associations. *El Día del Salvadoreño* is one event where the presence and contributions of the emigrant population and its leadership simply cannot be ignored. Bringing Salvadoran politicians to the festival and the events surrounding it is one way to solicit acknowledgment of the work of the emigrant population and to create a form of accountability and access through informal feedback and, eventually, more formally institutionalized channels within the Salvadoran government, such as the extension of voting rights.

Finally, in lieu of engaging in separate forms of politicking in the host and homeland context, the platform is also used to bring alternative diplomats from El Salvador into direct dialogue *with* U.S. politicians. This goal of organizers and the means by which it is accomplished will be explored in chapter five at length. Here suffice it to say that organizers seek to counterbalance the historical relationship between U.S. administrations and the Salvadoran rightwing. They do so by working to create an alternative integration between their two country contexts – one that might allow a leftist candidate to rise to power in El

Salvador, one that might prevent a repeat of past events and lead towards what they see as a better reality for Salvadorans living on either side of the border.

Two very brief examples highlight this particular integrative use of the Salvadoran Day platform right from its inception. The first example involves the special guest and grand marshal of the 2003 celebration, the newly elected FMLN mayor from San Salvador. At a planning meeting prior to the event, organizers voiced their concern about the Mayor not being available to attend *both* the public Salvadoran Day event and the private kickoff gala with local politicians that is hosted every year in City Hall.

Although the mayor asserted that he needed to be in San Salvador for the events surrounding *la bajada* there, organizers in Los Angeles insisted that it would be better for him to be in the U.S., making an appearance at Salvadoran Day and making connections with U.S. politicians and the press. The reason cited by organizers was that, with all the negative propaganda they predicted surrounding the FMLN's run for the presidency in 2004, it would be strategic for an FMLN diplomat, such as the mayor, to have solid connections and support from potential allies in the U.S., thus dispelling fears and rumors surrounding the party.<sup>43</sup> In the end, the Mayor did attend both the public and private events, flying directly from San Salvador's parade in the morning to Salvadoran Day in Los Angeles in the afternoon.

The second example involves the California State Assemblywoman that shared the stage with the Mayor at *Día del Salvadoreño*. Eight months later, organizers called on her to be an international observer during the presidential elections in El Salvador. Amidst rampant propaganda spread by the rightwing ARENA party that an FMLN win would lead to the deportation of Salvadoran immigrants living in the U.S. and the blockage of remittance

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<sup>43</sup> Fear and rumors usually surround the FMLN's recent history as a guerrilla organization; while former discourse linked the FMLN to communism and communist nation-states, in the current era this labeling has "evolved" into a rhetoric linking the party and its supporters to "terrorist" organizations and networks.

inflows, the Assemblywoman, joined by fellow U.S. politicians spoke out against these intimidation tactics, correcting the misinformation being spread and assuring Salvadorans that they should vote their conscience.

Referring to this politicking Werner said, “Look, we are not the U.N. and we are not the United States with big money and big guns pushing them to do it. But we are just people that are emerging from, you know, from the concerns that we have to improve ourselves here in this country, but also to improve the life of the country that we left.” While the initial work of the festival was in many ways “symbolic,” over time the space created through the festival has enabled this type of concrete political work – work that has the potential to reconcile organizers’ connections to two country contexts and their ambivalent relationship with both in more tangible ways. As in the introduction, “reconcile” is used here not only to mean “to come to accept” a particular reality, but rather “to render no longer opposed” and “*to make compatible and consistent.*”<sup>44</sup>

## **Discussion**

The threads of political activism touched on in this final section will be picked up for much more extensive exploration in the chapters that follow. For now, suffice to say that understanding the festival as a one-day, nostalgic celebration of culture and diversity in the host context, as such events are often interpreted in the popular press and in many academic analyses as well, misses so much of the actual significance of the ethnic festival. Although many festival attendees go to *Día del Salvadoreño* in order to relax and enjoy traditional music and food, the festival should also be seen as more than a simple importation of culture, a reflection of its creators’ experience, or even an invention of ethnicity and tradition. The festival should also be seen as an intervention in the personal

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<sup>44</sup> Drawn from the American Heritage Dictionary.

experiences of a cohort of activists; and with time and success, a more public and political intervention in the trajectory of the larger population, as festival organizers seek to utilize the vehicle for political recognition of the larger Salvadoran immigrant/emigrant population, as a stage for the promulgation of civic education and particular renderings of history, and a platform for representation, campaigning and lobbying at different levels of government.

Like Salvador's quote on dignity that opens the chapter, that intervention is best understood through a cross-border lens. The official recognition of *Día del Salvadoreño* was meaningful to Chamba not simply because it affirms a sense of belonging in the U.S. The resolution allows him to "live with dignity" because it constitutes a form of recognition and validation of his migration journey, his separation from the homeland, the interruption of his life and relationships there, the loss of loved ones, his initial legal exclusion in the host country, the forced transition from a college student to a parking attendant, and the hand of the U.S. State in all these life altering experiences. As importantly, it provides a method for flipping those experiences on their head, allowing for a small but meaningful intervention in the contexts that gave rise to them; forcing representatives in the U.S. and El Salvador (especially the rightwing) to take note of the visibility and mobilization potential of the exile and emigrant population in the U.S. as a possible force to be reckoned with.

Likewise, at every level of the festival itself, from the context and experiences from which it emerged to the components of the event itself, its resonance and its political uses, we are reminded of the importance of using this "transnational" lens, and guarding against the national blinders that could otherwise limit our analysis. Yes, as the invention of tradition literature aptly notes, *Día del Salvadoreño* emerged from a "problem" and shift within the lifeworld of Salvadoran activists, like Werner and Mario. But for many immigrants, that "problem" is and always has been cross-border in scope.

Over the years, SANA has worked hard to maintain their political edge and orientation, defining themselves in contradistinction to other political tendencies and currents in Los Angeles. The festival has remained a largely grassroots effort of resistance as its organizers have shunned rightwing Salvadoran politicians, tried to keep the messaging and civic participation components intact, refused money from many rightwing business sources and government entities, and kept politics alive and well, continuing their overt support for the FMLN.

Because of this, the festival, which began as “just a crazy idea” and humble brainchild of a small group of exile activists, has been a wild success for them on a number of levels. Controlled by leftists, *Día del Salvadoreño*, has been perhaps the *main* venue for mobilization of the Salvadoran population in the U.S. and for presentation of FMLN candidates in the postwar era. As such, it has been a persistent thorn in the side of the rightwing ARENA government, and their desire to interface with the large emigrant population living in Los Angeles. It has also been an impressive display of mobilization power amongst Salvadoran immigrants, many of them poor and many undocumented, but who seek recognition and representation from mainstream U.S. officials to address the daily struggles confronting their children and their families. Finally, the festival can be seen as a development that has taken the marginalized *PC* or *orthodox* faction of the FMLN that key SANA leaders represent, bringing that faction front and center in the organizational infrastructure in Los Angeles and, more so, within the cross-border infrastructure and political culture that connects El Salvador to its immigrant population in the U.S.

Teasing Chamba one day, a member of a different historical faction in Los Angeles chuckled and conceded, “*Pero que buena idea vos!* [but what a good idea, man...]” Laughing Chamba explained to me later, “*Es que es super ingenioso lo que logramos a hacer de verdad* [The thing is what we were able to accomplish is really genius]!” “Imagine, we were all the

way down here,” Salvador said one day, “and now we are all the way up here,” he said, pointing the top floor the Los Angeles City Hall. “But it took 22 years.” The quote speaks both to the transformation of the individuals involved in this endeavor as well as the gradual but growing recognition of the Salvadoran population in Los Angeles, as both have become increasingly visible in the U.S. and the homeland through grassroots efforts such as these.

As the event has grown, SANA leaders have had to come to terms with the fact that the image and event will eventually grow out of their control. Events bearing the *Día del Salvadoreño* name have emerged throughout the country and even as far as Canada and Australia, and replica *Divino Salvador* images are ever more popular. Initially, leaders sought to tightly manage their own replica image. Said one organizer at a meeting, “We cannot let the image fall into the wrong hands. It is a big responsibility.” But over time, that attitude has shifted a bit. Werner explained, “The celebration will continue to change, there’s no way around it. What we can do is foresee what is coming. It will change with the times, but the four corners will remain – recognition, memory, identity, and civic participation.” On another occasion he said, “Other groups are going to add their *salsa*. We have to be really open to this. Remember the day we were meeting with SANA and Guillermo was getting nervous about the replica images? And I said like, ‘no man, this is good, this is good!’”

This balance between control and relinquishment points to something not discussed thus far in the chapter. Although the festival has been quite successful in mobilizing an ethnic block under the banner of Salvadoran-ness that certainly does not mean it is without contestation or constraint. In many ways, the festival form ethnicizes and superimposes unity over what is in fact a highly divided and fractured emigrant population. As Kubik



writes, they are a population “as different politically as they [are] similar symbolically” (1994: 268).

The framework is salient for a population (the organizers included) whose experience is marked by separation from the homeland and exclusion in the host. In this sense, the collective acts that occur at the festival have deeply political undertones, even without the formal “politicking” that occurs on stage. As Chamba yelled from the stage of the mass in 2013, “Don’t ever forget your historical identity, but more importantly never let go of your sense of *dignity!*”<sup>45</sup> But the organizers also use the framework because ethnic mobilization and cultural events are the models that “work” in the U.S. context, particularly in urban settings characterized by their diverse demographics and multicultural orientation.

In the following chapter, I step back from the perspectives of the organizers described here, nesting those actors within a larger socio-political context and a wider web of actors, which includes the Salvadoran immigrant masses and the civic and political representatives from two country contexts. If chapter three painted the festival as an attempted intervention in the trajectory of the political life of the emigrant/immigrant population, the next chapter takes the festival as a lens – a window into processes of collaboration and contestation.

There, it becomes clear that the goals and political consciousness of the organizers are often not the same as the will and orientation of the masses of attendees. So too does the data raise questions about the U.S.’s own peculiar and particular mode of integrating immigrant populations, and the way that immigrants inhabit those cultural spaces. Is that act a form of subversive political action, or is it one in which dissent is “safely discharged in

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<sup>45</sup> A beautiful illustration of the use of ceremony in instilling a sense of dignity in people is given in Kubik’s analysis of the rise and fall of Solidarity in Poland (1994).

the performance” (Kubik 1994: 245), rendering the politicized festival an empty vessel, the crowd an apolitical population?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Arriving at Symbolic Ethnicity: Collaboration, Contestation, and Constraint at *Día del Salvadoreño*

“I have not yet received an invitation on behalf of the Assemblyman where he has said no.” This California Assembly staffer was shouting over *cumbia* music being broadcast from a stage set up in the middle of Washington Boulevard in Los Angeles. “Three weeks ago we were over at the Oaxacan festival at Normandie Park. Last week I was at the Guatemalan event representing the 48<sup>th</sup> District, and here we are at this [Salvadoran] event. As long as it’s beneficial to District 48 of the Assembly of California, we will be there.”

A large crowd of people, young and old, adorned with blue and white flags, shirts and headbands congregated at the base of the stage. Between music acts, the festival organizers energized the crowd with a call and response of “*Daaaaale Salvadoreño.*” As usual, this year in 2009, the organizers of the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival had put together a program that had something for everyone. There were vendors selling traditional food and Salvadoran gear, and musicians performing both *cumbia* for the older generation and rap for the youth. Later in the day there would be politics, followed by religion – all in the open air of a main boulevard in south L.A.<sup>46</sup>

Later, as the sun began to set, event organizers launched their traditional civic and political program. U.S. State and City representatives addressed the crowd, greeting Salvadorans on their special day. They congratulated the organizers and the crowd for their success in having August 6<sup>th</sup> named Salvadoran-American Day by the U.S. House of Representatives. Standing between the U.S. and Salvadoran flags, they lauded the contributions of the Salvadoran people to the city of Los Angeles and State of California,

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<sup>46</sup> 2009 was the first year that the festival was moved from Exposition Park to Washington Blvd – a notable downgrade, but a more affordable option. As mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation, that year also marked the first year the festival was not organized by SANA alone.

reaffirmed their commitment to the Salvadorans in their district, and pledged to “work together” to make this city a better place for everyone.

As is customary, local U.S. officials then stepped back to make room for the guests of honor from El Salvador. A female representative from the FMLN party came forward, addressing the crowd: “*¡Buenas noches, Los Ángeles!* It’s an honor to be here with you.” She ran through a number of issues the FMLN was tackling in El Salvador, interspersed with shouts of “*que viva EL FMLN* [long live the FMLN]!!!” Some people in the crowd cheered loudly, others stood quietly. From the back of the crowd a lone voice called out in Spanish, “This is not a POLITICAL EVENT. This is a *PUTA FIESTA* [damn festival]!”<sup>47</sup>

Ten months prior, a small group of SANA leaders and organization drop-outs gathered at SANA headquarters late in the evening. Although the six people present at this meeting were logistically important to the organization, over time they had begun to feel increasingly disenfranchised. Unlike the more “elite” leaders – the early founders of the event – who had become largely concerned with the transnational political affairs of the organization, the individuals present here focused more of their time on SANA’s operational and administrative work. They did not have high status political contacts in El Salvador as did some of their colleagues. But they made *Día del Salvadoreño* a reality each year by gathering sponsors, securing the space, and dealing with the complex logistics of the festival and event program.

That evening in October, the concerned and disgruntled organizers gathered their chairs together into a loose circle in the small office at Trinity Episcopal Church. “*SANA está quemada* [SANA has been burned/discredited],” one veteran organizer bluntly announced. The others leaned back and looked at each other’s reactions with raised eyebrows. “*SANA está quemada?*” a younger organizer asked in disbelief. The veteran continued: the

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<sup>47</sup> Audio recordings and fieldnotes, Los Angeles, 8/22/09 and 8/23/09

organization's reputation is becoming tarnished in the community; the core leaders are identified as too involved in [homeland] politics; a lot of people that once loved SANA aren't sure they want to work with the organization anymore.

It was true that, initially, culture and politics had blended seamlessly both at the festival and within the organization. But, over time, undeniable tensions were emerging, from difficulties in organizing the event, to disgruntlement with the content, to several outright political attacks in the ethnic press. The problem, the veteran continued, is that, in addition to the perceived *prepotencia* [arrogance] of the elite leaders in the group, there is an alarming lack of tact. "Leaders from El Salvador come for an event and they say, 'Ok see you at the FMLN event.' Then you look down at the event flyer and the address is SANA's!" "You just can't put your colors out there like that! SANA is becoming *demasiada colorada* [too partisan]," she asserted.

Yes, that is a problem, another organizer interjected, but really only *within* the Salvadoran community. The larger problem, he continued, is that the politicized leaders within the organization are so concerned with the upcoming election in El Salvador that they are dropping the logistical ball here in L.A. altogether. He went on to announce that, as of that week, the leadership had decided that *Día del Salvadoreño* 2009 would be cancelled. The announcement came as a surprise to some of the drop-outs gathered in the room. After all, it would be the first festival following the long-awaited March presidential elections in El Salvador. And with the FMLN in a strong position to clinch the presidency for the first time ever, there could be huge cause for celebration in the diaspora, particularly among the exile population.

The jaded and exhausted organizer continued: I have been working with City Council; Bernard Parks has already given us a permit for the space. But they [the others] say they are not going to do it this year. There is too much *other* work to do. We don't have

enough sponsors. The event is too expensive and, according to them, it simply is not going to happen, he reiterated. The balancing act has gotten too tough. If we want it to happen, he urged, we need to stage a *coup d'état*. If we want to make it happen, we need to “rescatar” [save] both SANA and the festival ourselves!

The organizers mused over these ideas, filled with old, tired patterns of conflict and concern and speckled with some new information. They ran through various scenarios, possibilities and risks. They theorized on what was happening, what had gone wrong, and vented over the ways they had felt burned or frustrated in years past. They all affirmed their personal support for the FMLN but wondered about the perils of mixing culture and politics within the organization and event. Finally, they agreed that they would speak with other SANA leaders about picking up the event themselves in an effort to provide continuity for the community, the institution and themselves.

“People are expecting it. We cannot let them down,” one quiet member of the group finally chimed in. “We’ve worked so hard to build this,” another longtime member lamented. As the meeting came to a close, the veteran organizer stood up, looked at the group and said decisively, “Well, if this thing is for the community, you know you can count on me!”<sup>48</sup>

### **Arriving at Symbolic Ethnicity**

In metro areas like Los Angeles County, “ethnic” festivals such as *Día del Salvadoreño* fill the calendar year. There are those that have reached the big leagues, like federally recognized St. Patrick’s Day and Columbus Day, as well as prominent but more regional events like Chinese New Year and the Armenian Genocide Commemoration. Finally, there are emergent festivals and a host of local gigs and would-be geographical

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<sup>48</sup> Fieldnotes, Los Angeles, 10/24/08.

designations that organizers hope to permanently institutionalize into the U.S. landscape. As the Fire Marshall assigned to *Día del Salvadoreño* in 2008 explained, “Festivals like this one happen *all year long* in California. And all you need to do to know that is check with the Cultural Affairs Department of Los Angeles.”<sup>49</sup>

In his famous piece on Symbolic Ethnicity, Herbert Gans depicts festivals like *Día del Salvadoreño* as symbolic displays of identity put on parade once a year (Gans 1979). Observation of the processes at work at these events and, particularly, behind the scenes at organization meetings certainly reveal the potential for such events to evolve in that direction. But taking symbolic ethnicity as the point of departure can be risky as it masks the important process and pressures by which “ethnic” festivals and events may *become* purely “symbolic” or even “ethnic” – if, indeed, they ever do.

Scholars of comparative ethnicity, for example, focus on festivals as places official histories and cultures are *created* and ethnic solidarity and group identifications are attempted, *made* and contested (Yancey et al. 1976; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Conzen et al. 1992; Verdery 1993; Brubaker 1996). Indeed, if we focus our attention on the emergence and early evolution of festivals like Salvadoran-American Day, we see that ethnic festivals teach us as much about the culture of politics in a given place as they do about the politics of culture (Kubik 1994). Such events are and always have been sites not only for the “celebration of culture” or, even, the creation of ethnic solidarity. As chapter three hints, festivals like *Día del Salvadoreño* are also sites for other types of political action. Festivals provide venues in which politicians interface with their constituents, where immigrant organizers, in turn, make specific and varied demands upon their representatives, and

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<sup>49</sup> Here is an example of the number of festivals in Los Angeles County in 2013: <http://www.culturela.org/events/Festivals/festivalguides/festivals13/2013FestivalGuide-Final.pdf> (accessed 8/7/13).

where the general immigrant population seeks recognition and inclusion, not only for their ethnicity per se, but for their contribution to and membership within the society.

Festivals like *Día del Salvadoreño* are also launching pads for political action that occurs beyond the confines of the festival grounds and beyond the fifteen minute timeslot carved out for the Assemblyman of the 48<sup>th</sup> district to address the crowd. And while mobilizing through the social operator of ethnicity, some of the work that event organizers are engaged in has little to do with ethnicity or culture at all (Verdery 1993; Brass 1985).

Now, as we expand our methodological lens across borders, it becomes clear that ethnic festivals are both local *and* transnational sites. At events like *Día del Salvadoreño*, host and homeland politicians routinely come into the same, shared space. Despite initial blind spots that contained our study of these events within the nation-state; despite initial assumptions within the transnationalism literature that host and home state political actors would inevitably clash in their dealings with the migrant population (Glick-Schiller et al. 1995); despite the occasional (and serious) accusations of dual loyalties hurled at immigrant activists engaged in work in two country contexts (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004), at many ethnic festivals, home and hostland politicians dance seamlessly together, strange partners though they may be.

This is not to say, however, that such events are devoid of conflict, or that U.S. political culture plays no role in subtly circumscribing or watering down the distinctly political and cross-border goals of many immigrant organizers.

### Chapter Focus

In chapter three, I described the invention and institutionalization of *Día del Salvadoreño*, the role and meaning it plays for organizers and attendees, and the general success with which it has met. There, the festival is seen both as an invention and an intervention



deliberately introduced into the trajectory of a group of organizers and the larger population they claim or seek to “represent.”

In this chapter, I focus on the festival as a lens or window into processes of confluence and contestation between a larger set of actors. Specifically, I explore the (un)easy marriage of culture and politics – and host and homeland politics – as they play out on the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño*. Those marriages have a dual quality about them. Sometimes, and from a certain vantage point, they are remarkably, even surprisingly easy. Orthodox FMLN leaders and liberal U.S. establishment representatives stand side-by-side, pledging to work together and joking about their joint jurisdiction of the Salvadoran people. Taken from another perspective, however, the grassroots events, like ethnic festivals, where such marriages are likely to occur, are conflicted from the start.

I should make clear that this chapter is not meant to discredit the points of solidarity and mobilization within the Salvadoran community made in the prior chapter. Rather I seek to complicate the story told there, more closely examining the macro political dynamics present at the festival and simultaneously giving voice to the important fault lines within the Salvadoran population itself. Over time, deep tensions and conflicts rise to the surface of the festival, threatening to divide the community, where the original goal was to unite and mobilize it, threatening to alter the original character of the event or, even, destroy the event altogether.

Gaining a clear understanding of these dynamics involves a peeling of the onion in which deeper insight is acquired through sustained observation of the festival as it develops over a ten year period and by alternating vantage points from analysis of what occurs *within* the Salvadoran population to observations of that population interacting with other important entities in their midst, such as U.S. civic and political leaders, the local chapters of the FMLN and political entities from El Salvador.

The substance that follows in this chapter is broken into three sections. I begin by exploring in further detail the apparent efficacy of Salvadoran Day as a venue and form that caters to the divergent interests at the macro level. As hinted in the final section of the last chapter, at the macro level, the festival performs brilliantly, mobilizing tens of thousands of bodies around highly resonant, unifying symbols and creating a stage for effective political action in both country contexts. So natural seeming and ritualized are the interactions between hostland politicians, homeland representatives and event organizers that the message to organizers seems clear: access to local politics in the U.S. begins with ethnic solidarity and mobilization, no matter the cross-border baggage.

In the second section, I take a large step inward from these macro interaction dynamics to highlight the conflicts and tensions *within* the Salvadoran community itself. While culture and politics, as well as home and hostland concerns, seemed to coexist effortlessly at the inception of the festival, over time irreconcilable differences come to light. These tensions are primarily magnified by the dual frames embodied in the festival as both a national and transnational site. Indeed, the cultural, Salvadoran frame that resonates so well with people, and mobilizes the masses, conflicts with the partisan, political action that such a well-received frame enables organizers and their political contacts to enact, particularly in the homeland.

Thus, the more the festival grows, the better able it is to mobilize a large swath of the Salvadoran American population, and the more effective it becomes as a tool for political change in El Salvador. This, in turn, creates more conflict in the immigrant community. While U.S. political representatives seem little bothered by these tensions, over time, the community and organization begin to feel their weight. Tensions become apparent at multiple levels of analysis within the community – between event organizers and attendees (the masses), between various factions of the Salvadoran political spectrum represented in

Los Angeles, and between the community-oriented versus political actors within the organization itself.

In the final section, I take a step back again, placing these findings in the larger hostland political culture. The internal tensions described above threaten to diminish the political efficacy of the festival both in homeland and hostland political affairs. This political “dampening effect” is further exacerbated by two important but subtle pressures inherent in the way immigrant politics are carried out in the U.S. Indeed, the success of an event such as *Día del Salvadoreño* is partly made possible in the first place because of the U.S.’s professed pluralistic culture, especially in cities like Los Angeles. Within the everyday workings of that culture, however, there are contradictions and limits on action made visible by using the festival as a site for analysis over time. While homeland connections are encouraged on one level, event organizers also experience subtle and sometimes unintended demands to simultaneously “democratize” their homeland political goals and culturally encode their civic participation – pressures which threaten to drain the substantive content of the event and challenge the goals and work of the event creators.

### **A Marriage Made in America: The Macro Political Culture at *Día del Salvadoreño***

Someone called and asked like, ‘Can I talk to the Salvadoran that works there? I was given your name by somebody. Is it true that you’re Salvadoran?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Okay *mijo [son]* then you can help me with this.’ ‘With what?’ ‘Day of the Salvadoran.’ And that’s how we started working. And I was like, ‘This is crazy [Senator] Gil. I don’t know if we can help them or not!’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because they said they are a non-profit, but they are super political and they want to do a *church event in the park!*’ ‘Ok, go scoop it up!’ he said to me”

– Salvadoran Intern, California State Senate

What was striking about *Día del Salvadoreño*’s inception is that it was met with success on all fronts and marked by almost no overt conflict, except for competition from

other left-of-center Salvadoran organizations. If anything, the largest tensions revolved around the number of different political entities that wanted “in” – a situation that SANA organizers had to debate and mitigate.

Event organizers joke that, like their own migration experience, when the Divine Savior image was brought across the border, it was met with severe harassment by border patrol officers who literally wanted to “break the Jesus open” to see if there were drugs inside. Just three years later, once the image was in the U.S. and the star of a burgeoning ethnic festival, it received accompaniment from 75 Los Angeles Police Department officers, who worked together to clear Highway 101 during the image’s approach to Exposition Park – no questions asked. Not only did the image and festival resonate with the larger Salvadoran population far beyond what organizers had predicted. Political actors in both the U.S. and El Salvador – even former political enemies – clamored to share the stage with *El Colocho* [the curly haired one], as event organizers affectionately call the life-sized Jesus image.

### Organizers and the Masses

Talking with event attendees at seven consecutive festivals from 2002-2009 makes it clear that rank-and-file Salvadorans relate to the event on a number of levels. Some people attend just to hear a little music, meet with friends and eat traditional foods. But, as discussed in chapter three, many attendees say they are moved both by the fact that this is a specifically *Salvadoran* festival, which speaks to the nuances of Salvadoran experiences past and present, and because it speaks to the condition of immigration more generally. The festival provides a space of belonging for a dislocated population that has experienced a lack of inclusion and recognition for their plight in both the homeland and the host.

For the event organizers themselves – as Salvadorans, immigrants and political strategists – the festival platform “works” for them on a number of levels. Indeed, as I show in the final section of the last chapter, knowing that the event has been permanently institutionalized into the cultural and political landscape of the host context brings a sense of satisfaction and closure to these leaders’ experience. They are both pleased to have been participants in the emergent, positive vision of Salvadoran-ness in the U.S. and hopeful that the festival will push compatriots to think more critically about their collective history.

Beyond fomenting a pride-filled identity movement and constructing an alternative historical narrative, *Día del Salvadoreño* is also one way to respond to the social closure Salvadorans have experienced in the U.S. over the years by literally “inventing a way in,” and forcing their representatives and the larger public (in El Salvador and the U.S.) to “see” them. As one organizer put it, we’re saying, “We’re here, we exist.” From the festival’s inception, the organizers talked about the festival in politicized terms not just as a fiesta but as a “vehicle,” a “platform” and a “container” where, as one founder put it, they “could get to the civic piece, organize around immigrant rights, labor rights, and assert our bi-nationalism.”<sup>50</sup>

Ending the story there, however, presents a partial reality and does gross injustice to the festival, its organizers and their critics. Some initial interviews ended with these talking points, all of which extended observation shows are not just “smoke and mirrors.” But as the historical background chapter makes clear, the initial founders of the organization and event are also deeply politicized individuals, with a long history of involvement in the sanctuary and solidarity movements, and with family members who were deeply entrenched in the armed struggle in El Salvador during the war.

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<sup>50</sup> From early interviews done in 2002 and 2003, Los Angeles and archival materials from the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC recorded in 2000 and 2001

Following the war, as other Salvadoran leaders in the U.S. turned to new pursuits, some breaking ties with the FMLN altogether, SANA founders remained deeply committed to aiding the FMLN in its transition from a clandestine organization to a legal political party. From the inception of *Día del Salvadoreño*, the founders had unspoken political goals for their organization, such as raising awareness about conditions in El Salvador, supporting the growth and development of the FMLN as the main, political counterweight to the ARENA party in the new era of democracy, and influencing U.S. involvement in the country.<sup>51</sup>

While initially, cultural and local political goals, such as claiming a civic space for Salvadorans in L.A., took precedence, as the festival built power, the politicized leaders within the organization quickly shifted attention from local to transnational political goals – goals that are not always shared by others in the community. Still, despite these specific, highly politicized goals, the festival continued to work on multiple levels for the larger crowd as well as for organizers, as both rallied around the festival and the image of the *Divino Salvador del Mundo*, even if with some shared goals and some very different goals and ends in mind. For politicians, both Salvadoran and U.S. officials, this shared usage of the festival platform is even clearer – a form of political codependence, explored further below.

### Civic and Political Leaders

As chapter three relates, the festival has mobilized a number of mainstream politicians. But over the years, SANA has also hosted more divisive opposition figures, like the former *Partido Comunista's* Schafik Handal and current Vice President (and FMLN presidential candidate for 2014), Salvador Sánchez Cerén. “This is, like, in your face, you

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<sup>51</sup> These initial goals are confirmed by current directors of the organization as well as people invited to participate in the organization from its inception, but who either dropped out early on or declined the invitation after initial meetings.

know. Boom, I organized the military operations that killed U.S. persons but here I am in your face. Maaan, you gotta be sensitive!" One staffer for a U.S. politician, supportive of SANA's work but sometimes wary, complained about bringing former FMLN *comandantes*. Certainly, the risks of engaging in political action that U.S. officials view as unpatriotic or un-American are conditional and real. This was certainly clear with the "hearings" (aka "witch hunts") on Muslim and Arab organizations carried out by the U.S. Homeland Security Council in the aftermath of 9-11. It was similarly clear for Salvadorans in the 1980s, when solidarity movement leaders and the organizations they created were routinely targeted by the FBI (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

But even when the particular partisan goals of organizations are viewed as acceptable by mainstream legislators, scholars writing on the politics of transnationalism have still theorized a dynamic of conflict between home and host state officials, as home state actors seek to "ethnicize" immigrant populations, and thus create affective, cross-border ties, while hostland actors work to "nationalize" them (Glick-Schiller et al. 1995). *El Día del Salvadoreño* highlights that ethnicizing the population is not just a task for homeland politicians. Rather, host country representatives share in this act; if they seek to nationalize their immigrant populations, in a place like L.A., they do so precisely through the politicization of ethnicity and culture as organizing and assimilating forms. In addition, the festival shows that, under mundane conditions, the cross-border politics that play out at such festivals are of little concern to U.S. political actors, particularly for representatives at the local level. Instead, what is striking is the level of cross-border comradery and political codependence that such festivals make visible.

For example, within the grounds *Día del Salvadoreño*, U.S. and Salvadoran politicians share the stage, engaging in a "back-patting" type interaction of banter, recognition and exchange. As one former mayor of San Salvador recounted about an interaction with Los

Angeles' Mayor Hahn in the U.S. in 2004, "The mayor of Los Angeles said to me, 'You may be powerful, but I am more powerful. You only have 500,000 Salvadorans in your city. I have 900,000!'" Some of these connections are then taken to the next level, as representatives meet later behind closed doors, giving one another formal certificates of thanks and recognition. U.S. representatives take diplomatic trips with SANA (and other) organizations to visit politicians in El Salvador that they have previously met in L.A. And some representatives from both countries go on to work together to accomplish joint-efforts like the "Sister City" initiative that now connects Los Angeles to San Salvador.

Asked whether their bosses see themselves as engaged in a form of international relations at these events, or even really notice these cross-border connections, several staffers asserted that U.S. officials focus on the politics of the locality, not on the trans-state goals and aims of the immigrant population and its organizers. One staffer for a California Assemblyman responded, "It's more about the folks [the Assemblyman] is growing a relationship with. Those [immigrant] leaders have reached out to him. He knows them on a first-name basis and, just like any relationship, when we've had to call upon them, they've been there. And he'll continue to be here for them." He continued, "But the concentration is not so much international. It's more about Los Angeles and the State of California. Salvadorans are the second largest Latino population not only in L.A. but in the State of California, and he's not going to ignore that."

Another longtime staffer responded:

I just don't think they care that much. They see a well-organized group, just like the *fraternidades, las federaciones* [of Mexico]. They got a big event here. They are well organized. Yeah, so they do some charitable work back in Mexico. They send some money, they build a school. [One Senator] has gone to El Salvador with SANA. So he knows the implications. He's seen what they do, right? But he's the exception. The mayor has some staffers that get it, cuz that is their job - to keep track of who's fighting with who now. 'No Antonio



you can't go into this thing because right now they're fighting with so and so.' But that's it. Antonio will still get in the car, take the picture and then, 'Ok I took care of a Salvadoran event today. Let me go to the next one!' And that's it.

The lack of attention put into the transnational linkages of the event by U.S. representatives can also be seen in the way that politicians attend rival events (rival in their homeland political orientation, that is) almost back-to-back, without thinking twice. This was the case when Los Angeles' mayor made an appearance at *Día del Salvadoreño* and then promptly reported for duty at *La Feria Agustina* across town. Rather, attending these types of events is just part of the job, interns affirm. And it is through such events that officials and their staffers build relationships with community leaders and with their larger constituents.

Asked if there is something special about SANA that has made the organization so successful in turning out politicians, another political intern said, "In order to make it really worth it to come out to these events, there has to be some political message in it, some organizing tactic." You have to make it political, he explained, describing the way political representatives are introduced and given a chance to interact with the crowd. He continued, "SANA always makes it political." Another staffer qualified this, adding that numbers speak louder than words: "[Going to these things] is just part of the job. It's normal. The unique thing about *Día del Salvadoreño*," he asserted, "is that it is huge. It's only second to the Mexican Independence Parade and that has been taking place for 60 years. So in the few years that they have made this thing happen with their resources and limitations... it's HUGE. And maybe the 'electeds' don't know it yet but we do... their staff members know and we're watching."

The political comradery – or one might say "mutual using," "coincidence of interest," or "political codependence" – witnessed at the festival exists not only *between* "electeds" from the two different country contexts but also between the event organizers and their

invited political guests. In exchange for providing political representatives with a stage from which to address the crowds, immigrant organizers are able to raise their own public profile through association. They begin to create a social network of people in “high places” that they can later pressure on issues that are important to them and to their community when the moment arises. In essence, they begin building a set of relationships that can segue to other projects.<sup>52</sup>

Organizations also receive material support from U.S. elected officials through in-kind donations or advocacy on their behalf. The importance of this resource cannot be understated; sometimes it can mean the difference between being able to host an event that year and having to cancel it. In 2009, the year disgruntled directors met behind closed doors to discuss the fate of *Día del Salvadoreño*, SANA organizers ran through their baseline costs for the festival: \$15,000 for the park space alone, at least \$6,000 for equipment rentals, and almost \$2,000 each for insurance, trash service, and portable toilets. Since the representatives of the corresponding district did not have enough discretionary funds to pay for the park that year (or were not willing to) the festival would simply have to be canceled.

The reverse dependence is also true. Just as immigrant leaders rely on these representatives for support, so too must “electeds” rely upon the organizational infrastructure in the immigrant community in order to reach a larger audience. This is as true for U.S. politicians as it is for Salvadoran officials – both of whom must wade through competitive factions of immigrant leaders and their organizations, often without truly understanding the lay of the land. Just as the transnational connections of immigrant organizers have not stopped U.S. officials from attending and supporting the events in L.A., neither have the particular political orientations of immigrant leaders *necessarily* stopped

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<sup>52</sup> Examples of this are detailed in chapter five.

homeland political actors from reaching out to those leaders, as they attempt to interface with the larger audience of emigrants.

“We are building an umbrella so big,” one SANA leader said, “that people will have to get under it or be nowhere at all!” In many ways, his statement is true. In the post-war era, Salvadoran officials from the rightwing ARENA party made an art of reaching out to their former political enemies – the successful immigrant organizers of the solidarity movement who, at the time, directed the most relevant Salvadoran organizations in L.A. and elsewhere (see also Landolt *et al.* 1999; Popkin 2003; Baker-Cristales 2008).

At first, this outreach deeply bothered SANA organizers. “This is the same government that was responsible for killing and mutilating our families!” one organizer exclaimed in 2003, visibly agitated. Another explained that what the immigrant leadership is facing is no less than an attempt by the Salvadoran government to “rip off the fruits” of their many years of organizing, their many years of creating an infrastructure, connecting to U.S. political and civic leaders, and gaining the trust of the larger immigrant population (see also Baker-Cristales, 2008).<sup>53</sup> The rightwing Salvadoran politicians draw on their common “Salvadoran-ness” to connect to the expatriate community, manipulating the nostalgia of the people to win them over: “Oh I remember this and here is the beer. I remember that and here is the soda!” They call us the “*hermano lejano* [distant brother]” another explained, but we will not forget that we were actually the “*hermano expulsado* [expulsed brother].”

This dynamic of outreach puts immigrant organizers in the U.S. in an awkward position, as most of them are left leaning, and all of them are in dire need of funds to run their organizations and events in the postwar era. Sometimes the funding offers are not through the Salvadoran government directly, but through the wealthiest families in El

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<sup>53</sup> An interesting collection of papers was presented in 2011 at a workshop hosted at the New School called, “To Promote and to Protect? Sending States and Diasporas in Comparative Perspective.” Participants found that the trend of increased homeland outreach held across cases and continents. Papers from the workshop are currently under review for a special issue.

Salvador, those who immigrant organizers claim have always been associated with the most repressive Salvadoran governments. Such families seek to expand the market for their products, engaging in a bi-national business model. Responding to a wealthy businessman who wanted to put a replica of the image in the back lot behind his business, Mario explained that he said, “Look man, you’re not going to put ‘the Jesus’ in your business. ‘The Jesus’ is not for sale!” Mario went on to recount that the guy then asked if he could at least put “a banner on the Jesus” at one of the Salvadoran Day events.

The fear SANA leaders expressed in the first years they hosted *Día del Salvadoreño* was that, one after another, their fellow leftwing organizations were being “bought out,” either through direct initiatives from the Salvadoran government, through the consulate or the government-funded *Casa de Cultura*, or through such businesses. At one meeting SANA leaders discussed an offer of support coming from rightwing entities. Ultimately, they decided they could not take it. A leader later explained that decision: “I said, ‘You know what? We are in need, but we are not for sale!’” “It’s hard for us because we are in this kind of lonely vision,” said another organizer. “We don’t really have the luxury to say no [to money or support], but we have to.”

In contrast, the *Feria Agostina*, a festival across town in MacArthur Park, traditionally had a different orientation. It was initiated by ARENA supporter and representative, Victor Hercules, but was then taken over by the community organization *El Rescate* [in 2004]. Although *El Rescate* is an historic solidarity organization and leans left, they have not made a practice of having FMLN-LA present at the event or inviting candidates. They also always feature a booth for the consulate, no matter who is in power in El Salvador, and they often have large rightwing- operated businesses as sponsors, such as the airline carrier TACA.

One hope SANA held was that a shift in power in El Salvador might create more openings and support for organizations and events like theirs. Said Salvador, dreaming one day:

We dream of having our festival projected live in San Salvador during events there, or being highlighted live on television. But, you know, it all depends on the elections. Everything depends on the elections. If the FMLN wins, then everything is open to us. But if ARENA remains in power, everything remains closed. They won't want to project our festival there, not when we've been supporting who we've been supporting. I mean, we have chosen who we want to support and those that we don't; we haven't invited them to be part of the celebration. Our message and what is happening here might be threatening to them. They wouldn't want the masses there watching it.

Indeed, what is striking, however, is precisely that this has *not* been the case. The Salvadoran rightwing has repeatedly touted the work and creations of the *hermanos en el exterior* no matter their political orientation, even as they have attempted to co-opt the infrastructures those “brothers” have worked so hard to create (Baker Cristales 2008).

Rightwing Salvadoran leaders are not the only ones reaching out to the immigrant population in the U.S. The left is just as likely to reach out. And though they are more steeped in knowledge about the infrastructure of organizations and who their “enemies” and their allies might be, they are just as reliant upon that infrastructure. As further described in chapter five, while the local chapters of the FMLN created in the U.S. provide one direct venue for party officials, their audience is small – an audience of believers. For this reason, when historical opposition figures, like Schafik Handal, visited *Día del Salvadoreño* in the past, they encouraged SANA to continue their work, mobilizing a wider swath of the public and working to build a more politicized and civically conscious population engaged in work in both country contexts.

#### Coincidences of Interests; Ethnic Means, Political Ends

The myriad actors drawn to festivals like Salvadoran Day – the crowd, the organizers, Salvadoran politicians and U.S. “electeds” – indeed have different aims and goals in mind. Just comparing the rhetoric of politicians from El Salvador’s two major political parties, these substantive differences are clear. When the Salvadoran Vice President (ARENA) visited Los Angeles in 2002, he exclaimed that “the well-being of Salvadorans in the U.S. is in our [national] interest,” and for that reason he was in L.A. making a push for an extension of Salvadorans’ Temporary Protected Status.

Six years later, presidential candidate, Mauricio Funes (FMLN), chastised that line of thinking. He shamed ARENA for reaching out to migrants and reaping the benefits of immigrants’ remittances, while keeping the immigrant population in a state of legal limbo, giving them no political representation in El Salvador, and doing nothing to change the conditions that cause migration and necessitate remittances in the first place. Speaking from the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño* on August 2008, he recognized that Salvadorans had left their homeland not for pleasure but because they could not earn a decent wage or support their families.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their different political orientations, however, these Salvadoran officials are engaged in a similar act of “bounding” the Salvadoran American population around a common ethnicity (or in their language, “nation,” as in the “trans-nation”) – an exercise also shared by event organizers, attendees, and U.S. representatives. The ethnic festival as a form, and ethnicity as both a discourse and container for social organization, effectively mobilizes this diverse, bi-national set of actors. There is something in the framework for everyone. It resonates at an affective level for organizers and the rank and file, whose experience is one of separation from and nostalgia for the homeland as well as nation-and-ethnicity-based exclusion and discrimination in the hostland (see Wimmer, 2008). But its

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<sup>54</sup> This dynamic, and this speech in particular, is further discussed in chapter five.

mobilization potential also provides an effective container and platform for political action aimed at the homeland and host. Thus, whatever the individual goals of these different actors may be, the path they travel is the same – a communally enacted ethnicization of the diverse Salvadoran-American population, often for what could be seen as “non-ethnic” ends.

In the case of *Día del Salvadoreño* this dynamic makes for some ironic images: the former guerilla *comandante*, and leader of the Communist Party of El Salvador, in the same hall, posing for pictures alongside mainstream U.S. electeds; Salvadoran rightwing politicians reaching out to the immigrant leaders that organized funds and bodies against them during the war; or even the woman kneeling before the *Divino Salvador* image praying, while political candidates reach over her to shake hands with the crowd.

No matter the irony, one of the implications of the data presented in this first section is that despite what the literature predicts about home and host state clashes, in practice, the ethnic festival is a readily accepted and welcome form that brings all these sets of actors together and, at an important level, “works” for everyone. Each set of actors is there for a different reason, but the ethnicity frame and the festival form create a resonant, effective container for mobilization, and overt conflicts between home and hostland politicians – or between politicized event organizers and host-state actors – fail to materialize. This dynamic is not unique to the Salvadoran case; it is true at similar “ethnic” events across the U.S.

That said, the existence of this spontaneous *communitas* at festivals does not mean that such events are devoid of conflict; quite the contrary.<sup>55</sup> In the following section, I shift gears, taking a step *inward* to explore the impact of the distinct but shared uses of the festival *within* the Salvadoran immigrant community. There, the dual frames of host and homeland and culture and politics that are embodied in *Día del Salvadoreño* and work so

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<sup>55</sup> See Victor Turner on *communitas* and ritual (1969).

well for organizers at the macro level indeed cause deep tension and conflict within the larger population.

### **No Umbrella Big Enough: Conflict and Contestation within the Salvadoran Imm/Emigrant Community**

“Sin ningún otro color más que el azul y blanco somos cachimbones.”  
[Without any color beyond blue and white, we are beautiful]<sup>56</sup>  
--Salvadoran community member

“See, we have unity on domestic issues, but on El Salvador there will always be sectarianism.” –longtime Salvadoran activist and poet (informal interview, 2008)

When it comes to ethnic identity and work that needs to be done within the U.S. context, Salvadorans across the political spectrum tend to agree. Yet, like many ethnic festivals, *Día del Salvadoreño* is both a national and a “transnational” site, and a venue in which both the celebration of culture and politicking are carried out. The bodies mobilized by event organizers in the U.S. towards ends that everyone can agree on – heritage, pride, civic participation, political rights and recognition in the new context – are also mobilized towards partisan political goals in the homeland. That dual orientation creates a tension.

Given the history of SANA’s leadership, it would be hard to imagine otherwise. Their political uses of the festival reflect the specific experiences and orientation of this activist, exile sub-population. As the historical background section in Chapter 2 makes clear, their U.S.-based work has *always* been tied to work in the homeland in some capacity. Indeed, the whole infrastructure of Los Angeles-based Salvadoran civic organizations, in general, from the Solidarity era to present, has been largely characterized by this “transnational” orientation. Not only has this group of immigrant activists taken it as a mission to work to change the political contexts that led to their own exodus; becoming U.S.

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<sup>56</sup> This quote is taken from a discussion/argument on a facebook page dedicated to the Salvadoran diaspora. *Cachimbón* is slang for “excellent” or “beautiful.” The quote captures a common sentiment in the community: united as Salvadorans we are better off than divided by color (meaning political party) or tendency.



citizen has afforded them new leverage to lobby the U.S. government – a method for trying to tip the balance of political power in their homeland, as is explored further in the next chapter. For them, “being Salvadoran-American” is dealing with issues in both their country contexts and understanding how the two are linked. Although the invention of the festival was prompted by a shift in the community in the 1990s, the organizers’ political uses of the festival can be seen a continuation of past priorities, albeit in reinvented form.

In a quote cited in the previous section, one SANA director explained their choice of using a pan-Salvadoran frame as “creating an umbrella so big, [everyone] will have to get under it, or be nowhere at all.” While the breadth of that “umbrella,” which is meant to encompass and bring together the whole Salvadoran emigrant population, has been part of the organizers’ political success, when it comes to community dynamics, it is also part of the problem. The coexistence of these two frames – the Salvadoran, “cultural” frame that facilitates unity and mass mobilization across borders and the partisan political frame – function well in the political arena(s). But at the community level, those dual frames quite literally put the festival and the population in attendance at odds with itself. Homeland politics begin to tear at the fabric of unification that a festival like *Día del Salvadoreño* purports to create.

#### Homeland Conflict within the Immigrant, Salvadoran Left

Homeland politics, particularly within a post-war population, is divisive to say the least. In Los Angeles, this dynamic of division is readily apparent at the level of organizations. Since the Salvadoran-American left (almost all former solidarity and sanctuary activists) dominates the civic sphere of the immigrant population, these divisions are as obvious between factions of the left itself as between the Salvadoran right and left. Although the leaders of various organizations have worked together on many joint efforts,

they remain divided by ideology and affiliation. As described in chapter two, their disagreements emanate from significant differences in ideas about political change in El Salvador and historic affiliation with differing factions of the FMLN during the war. Over time, each experience of conflict with others and collaboration with the like-minded seems to cement the differences more, despite similar goals.

In the current era, the divisions between organizations are further magnified by competition for scarce resources. Each organization or NGO seeks to create a niche for survival and works to become “the point of reference” of the immigrant population in the host country, seeking to spearhead relationships with and resources from political actors both from the U.S. and El Salvador. As such, in many ways U.S. and Salvadoran state actors need not “police” the trans-state actions of Salvadoran activists. Rather, activists tend to police one another’s partisan political goals, often creating rival, replica “Salvadoran” events, in lieu of working together; sometimes overtly sabotaging or co-opting the work of others. While some leaders within the community view this as strength, with competition fueling a denser organizational infrastructure, other activists view it as a pathology which hampers the ability of this extraordinarily skilled cohort to effect meaningful change in the host and homeland.

Such divisions are apparent even in moments of “success.” In 2009, when the FMLN won its first presidential victory ever, Salvadoran emigrant activists from Los Angeles returned to El Salvador for the inauguration or *Toma de Posesion*. There, in the days before and after the big event, the key Salvadoran-American organizations hosted not one-joint gala in San Salvador but four or five different events – each divided along ideological and organizational lines. As soon as one event was announced, another quickly followed suit. Event organizers interviewed after-the-fact were disappointed that the new president-elect, Mauricio Funes, did not make an appearance at their events – evidence to some that the

president uses the emigrant population when convenient but is unwilling to really address its concerns. Arguably, however, one well-organized, jointly orchestrated event by the Salvadoran emigrant/exile community would have made for a more compelling draw.<sup>57</sup>

The opening quote to this section, on domestic unity and homeland sectarianism, comes from a solidarity era organizer, activist and artist. Gathered with fellow activists at a funeral for Salvador's son, Chambita, who was killed in 2004, she motioned with her hand to the leaders of the competing factions. As they gathered there in unison to pay their respects, the activist indicated that some things "bring us together" and some things will always divide (informal conversations, 10/04).

Less politicized community organizers concur. One organizer who was not involved in the solidarity movement affirmed that "the competition started with the factions of the FMLN in El Salvador and it continues today. All these organizations are competing instead of working together." Even some very committed activists who were central to the efforts of the solidarity movement grow tired of the dynamic at times. Criticizing his own *compañeros*, one such activist (historically affiliated with *las FPL*) reflected, "You know, we sit around talking and wasting time for hours, fighting about whether or not people should have the vote *en el exterior* [ex-patriot vote]. Meanwhile people are dying of hunger in El Salvador. It is a total disconnect" (informal conversations, 11/08).

These divisions within the larger Salvadoran community are magnified when examined through the eyes of different generations. The older generation of activists – those already in the U.S. when younger solidarity activists arrived – affirm that the dynamic has always existed. Chavelita, popularly known as the "grandmother" of the Salvadoran community asserted that when they worked together for legal status for Salvadorans in the U.S. in the 1980s and 90s, there was some fighting, but they were mostly all on the same

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<sup>57</sup> Fieldnotes, San Salvador, May 28 - June 3, 2009

page across the factions and the generations. But on homeland issues, there was constant infighting: “I was able to be like someone from the outside looking in [and] see how they would bicker amongst themselves for their ideologies or whatever. I used to find it a waste of time to what we were trying to accomplish.” Unfortunately, she continued, “It will never end” (formal interview, 1/04).

Second generation community organizers also grow frustrated by this conflict amongst the immigrant leadership, linking the present dynamic to a past that veteran leaders cannot let go of and that second generation activists feel they will never be given access to. “I can tell you this,” one second generation activist (who has worked with multiple organizations) asserted in a private interview. “A lot of the younger U.S. born or U.S. grown and trained Salvadorans are sick and tired of this. And they are out of this movement until the current leaders get out of it, because it’s poisoning. Honestly, we are just waiting for them to get out!” He continued, “They don’t let us [take leadership] because we don’t want to align with any [homeland faction] ... they say, ‘We fought for it. We died for it. We bled for it. The hell you want to be part of it.’ [...] And I totally get it. I get why people are so devoted to their line of thinking.” He continued, “[The second generation] comes from a much more sanitized movement in the sense that they are not as heavily impacted by the tragedies of the past.” Nonetheless, it is frustrating, he said. When asked where his generation would put their attention once in leadership roles, “Salvadoreños in the U.S. Not so much focused on El Salvador. No” (formal interview, 11/08).

That said, it must be noted that there is also a population of young, highly skilled 1.5 and second generation activists who have grown up within the fold of the FMLN and remain committed to the ideologies and general orientation shared by veteran organizers. In the case of SANA, the younger generation of politicized activists, all women (and all of whom joined the organization from 2007 forward), has a deep connection to the FMLN through a

family history of engagement and militancy. Unlike their less entrenched fellow youth, they remain very connected to the party in the U.S and in El Salvador, demonstrating that there is significant diversity in the perspectives of 1.5 and second generation activists, and that old divisions may not “die” with the first generation as many have predicted.

Still, critics across the board, from within and outside the organization, and from a mix of generations, question whether the factioning of the activist community on homeland commitments affects the efficacy of political work carried out *both* in El Salvador and in the U.S. When asked what changes he would most like to see within the activist community, another (non-SANA) second generation leader and political hopeful said, ““What I’d *most* like to see is unification between all the organizations in our community.” Speaking from behind the stage at *Día del Salvadoreño* in 2009, he continued, “Like today, we’re having this event here; we’re having one in MacArthur Park ... what if one day we can sell out the Coliseum ... bring everyone to the table” (informal interview, 8/09).

A young Salvadoran political intern points to the irony of this division dynamic as it played out in the actual creation of *Día del Salvadoreño*. Explaining the work done to accomplish the state-level proclamation of Salvadoran Day in 2002, he said, “The proclamation was very simple. It was not that complex to do. The *inner* fighting was the complicated thing, right? With all the organizations that wanted it to be, that didn’t want it to be, that wanted to block it.” He went on to explain that the U.S. politicians were onboard. It was the leaders of other Salvadoran-American organizations that warned him, ““don’t get involved with [SANA]. It’s bad for your political future. They are the orthodox of the FMLN. They are communists. They are the PC [Communist Party]. What the hell is wrong with you, man? Are you a communist?!” He explained that he responded, “I don’t care who they are. They do good work. I’ll help them just like I’m helping you.” He continued, “See everyone

was trying to take ownership of things and work only in things that were ideologically aligned with them” (11/08).

Asked if the leftwing affiliations of event organizers raise a red flag for U.S. politicians, no pun intended, interns again point away from the concerns of state representatives and towards the internal policing of the immigrant left:

“It doesn’t concern [the U.S. politicians] that much. It becomes a problem when *we make it a problem*. When you have people like [Salvadoran American Organizer X] going around and telling [representatives], ‘Bla bla bla ...’ and they’re like, ‘oh, I didn’t *know that*... oh, yeahhh, I don’t want a picture with a guy who later is going come out that he blew out some train in El Salvador. No I’m going to run for governor, the first *Latino* governor. No, I cannot afford that.’ *Then* that has an effect. Then they’re like, ‘yeah I’ll come to the event but *lejesitos* [from a distance]. And other [leaders] abuse that to get closer.”

Responding to the critiques and accusations of other factions, a *Día del Salvadoreño* organizer, now retired and living in El Salvador, said, “We’re not afraid if people say, ‘Ooo, there are the communists!’ What is the problem? We are engaging in a project that is about civic engagement, politics and faith. We have no reason to hide who we are!” He went on to emphasize the irony of these claims of extremism from his perspective: it was the *Partido Comunista*, and specifically Schafik Handal (who he considered a leader and role model), that advocated political change in El Salvador through the electoral process; yet these other factions, who staunchly advocated taking up arms, are now calling us extremists!

Another SANA founder placed support of the FMLN into the larger political context, saying there is no center in Salvadoran politics, either you are rightwing or you are FMLN, period. He continued, “Here in the U.S. people know damn well that there is no alternative in a two-party system. Alternative votes are votes lost from one or the other mainline

candidates!" The same goes for El Salvador, he said, so, yes, in the U.S. we support the Democrats and in El Salvador we support the work of the FMLN.<sup>58</sup>

### Competition between the Left and Right

Of course these conflicts also exist between activists of the Salvadoran political right and the leftwing in the U.S. In 2008, when SANA brought FMLN presidential candidate, Mauricio Funes, to *Día del Salvadoreño* for the second time, around forty ARENA supporters mobilized a small-scale protest. Dressed in ARENA gear, they arrived at the festival as a group, hoping to make their presence known. Having been debriefed on the security issues surrounding Funes' visit as a presidential candidate, California State Police officers (with a nudge from event organizers) prohibited the protestors from entering the festival. "There is not a problem [now], but there are tensions, and there is going to be a big problem if those [ARENA] guys go in there," one police officer explained in an informal interview. He continued, "We can see that they are not going in there just to enjoy their families but to instigate a little bit. [And] this is our job, to make sure problems don't *begin*."

The ARENA protestors, on the other hand, explained that that they were a "good party" with "good relationships with the U.S. government." A leader of the group continued, "Inside the festival, people are wearing shirts with FMLN, so why can't we wear these [ARENA] shirts. This is a *Salvadoran* festival. We just came to enjoy it, but they won't let us in there." He continued, "And we are the party that stopped the communists from taking

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<sup>58</sup> Important to note that this perspective glosses over the factioning within the FMLN and the internal tussles for power from which some of the above criticism derives. El Salvador is largely a two party state, but there has been enormous contestation, past and present, between political tendencies within the FMLN party.

over! We have a good relationship with the government here, with Republicans *and* Democrats!”<sup>59</sup>

One day later, Héctor Hugo Herrera, the rightwing ARENA-appointed Salvadoran Consul General in Los Angeles published a scathing critique of the events in the ethnic press. Using the “Salvadoran” and universal appeal of the festival to push back against SANA’s use of the festival towards partisan political change in El Salvador, he criticized SANA for their “immaturity,” insisting that if the festival is truly for everyone, ARENA protestors should be afforded their place at the festival. Or, he questioned, is it that SANA uses its open invitation to all Salvadorans as a cover to protect them from creating problems with the IRS, because they are indeed using funds from a community event to sponsor a particular political party (Herrera 2008)?

Individuals within the festival grounds that day immediately pushed back, jeering ARENA supporters and cheering loudly when California State Officers denied the protestors entry. In the following days, youtube videos and the blogosphere were filled with commentary representing both sides of the conflict as well as a significant third party of people that were “disappointed” and “embarrassed” about the conflict altogether and felt that politics had no place at a festival dedicated to celebrating *El Divino Salvador del Mundo*. Had the event been an FMLN event, the protest and corollary commentary may not have gained much momentum. But as critics emphasized, *Día del Salvadoreño* was advertised as a “Salvadoran” event, and yet ARENA supporters were excluded due to political affiliation, even while the FMLN presidential candidate was a key guest of honor at the event.

### The Masses: Clashes between “Culture” and Politics

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<sup>59</sup> Direct interviews with and observation of ARENA supporters and California State officers, fieldnotes and interviews (Exposition Park, 8/3/08)



As hinted above, tensions are also present among the larger crowds that attend *Día del Salvadoreño* each year. There, the conflict is as much a general tension between the festival as a cultural versus a political event as it is about specific clashes in homeland commitments. The former dynamic is encapsulated in that “lone” voice yelling to event organizers that this is not a political event but a “*puta fiesta*,” as described in the introduction. Some of the women who sell food at the event concurred, one stating emphatically that “no one wants to hear all the politics. The families are bothered by it.” Other attendees explain that they have been “taught” to be apolitical through their experience of the war; and yet others blame the FMLN for prolonged violence during the war. Being involved with the FMLN during that time was seen by some as bad – bad for your survival, bad for your family, bad then and bad now, they explain.

Over time, these critiques of the politics practiced at the festival have grown. But that voice is strongly countered by a population of event attendees who may not be organization or community leaders but are highly politicized through their personal experiences of war and migration. Each year at the festival, there is a sizeable island of red FMLN shirts floating through the crowd of blue and white. More importantly, many people that do not directly “put their colors out there” lean towards the general priorities and issues raised by the FMLN. Tellingly, when ARENA protestors tried to enter the festival in 2008, most of festival goers that yelled to ARENA supporters “*FUERA! FUERA! FUERA [Out]!*” and cheered victoriously as the ARENA crowd retreated were not dressed in FMLN red, but rather were clad in nationalistic blue and white.

For many, there is a general reclaiming of the nation and of patriotism for the leftwing that has been shunned from state politics in the past. In informal interviews, members of the crowd repeatedly explain that they are frustrated with the migration dynamic, something they say the ARENA government has done little to address. They are

tired of seeing family members leave El Salvador, and they lament the intolerable living conditions that forced them to leave their hometown years before. For many such people the FMLN is seen as the party of the people, the party that has historically stood with the poor.

Over time, the clashes between the unity-producing, cultural elements of the festival and the more divisive practice of homeland politics have both quietly and very visibly come to a head. Behind closed doors, individuals working to attain corporate sponsors for the festival worry that these tensions have impacted sponsorship and support of the festival. One such leader asserted that some business sponsors and local politicians have begun to say, "You know what, I love SANA, but they are just getting too controversial for us. We're not sure we can align ourselves with them."<sup>60</sup> Likewise several of the churches that once participated in the pilgrimage of the *Divino Salvador* image through Los Angeles began to bow out of participation after the first few years, both because of the politics at the festival and, importantly, because political tensions *within* the organization have made their interactions with churches and their lay leaders sloppy and inefficient.<sup>61</sup> Finally, several SANA organizers claim they were later denied participation or work in other organizations and events because they were publically associated with SANA and *Día del Salvadoreño*, making them "too political" (informal interviews, 10/22/08).

In addition to these subtle clashes, volunteers in both 2007 and 2008 complained heartily that the imbalance of attention put into politics in the homeland caused the practical workings of the festival to fall short in the hostland. They felt the personal effects of this lack of care and attention as they worked all day but said they were not thanked, fed or even given free parking at the venue by SANA leaders. For some, they said this lowered

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<sup>60</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/22/08

<sup>61</sup> This was explained as being due to a lack of attention that results from an imbalance of attention, with too much time put into political issues in El Salvador, and carelessness as regards the religious components of the festival.

their incentive to help again. Inefficiency in fundraising in 2008, again deriving from an imbalance in attention to the festival operations versus the homeland politics it enables, also led the organization to ask for “entrance fee” donations from event attendees – something that proved to be a significant turnoff to families given the inflated cost of food within the festival grounds and the tradition of the event being a free event, open to the public.<sup>62</sup>

Despite these quietly mounting, backstage tensions, the festival’s success grew exponentially from 1999 to 2008. Ironically, the more successful the event became over the years, the better vehicle it served presenting candidates from El Salvador, reaching a climax in 2006, 2007 and 2008. This success, coinciding with upcoming presidential elections in El Salvador, in turn encouraged more political work, which simultaneously caused the tensions between “culture” and “politics” to grow and become more visible. This dynamic could not have been clearer than in 2008, arguably the event’s most successful *political* year to date and the last year that SANA organized the festival alone. That year, as candidate Funes shared the stage with the *Divino Salvador del Mundo*, these conflicting “pulls” came clearly into view. The following is an excerpt from fieldnotes of that year’s festival, drawn both from direct observation of events in real time and later scrutiny of recorded materials:

The mass was pushed back due to delays in the arrival of the candidate, the sound people grew annoyed with the delays and cut the microphones for the mass, and literally by the time the mass could begin, no one could hear a word. “*No se oye! [We can’t hear you],*” the people were yelling as religious leaders performed their parts. Getting the candidate [Funes] onto the stage where the altar was created a huge commotion, with all his security team – a huge distraction. And because of the security following the mass, no one could actually get to the altar to touch the image, pray, give their offering as they have done in all the prior years. Co-honoree Ana Sol Gutiérrez from the Maryland General Assembly, the highest ranking Salvadoran official in the U.S., likewise could not get *off* the stage. She had to be lifted down by men in the front row. All the directors were understandably preoccupied taking

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<sup>62</sup> Fieldnotes, Volunteer Meeting 7/28/08 and *Día del Salvadoreño* 8/2/08 and 8/3/08.

care of the candidate; meanwhile the Assemblywoman just wandered off into the crowd alone, without security or accompaniment. “I can’t come all this way and not eat a *pupusa*,” she said to me. And off she went to buy her little *pupusa* by herself. One elderly man summed it up, yelling at me fiercely, “What happened!?! The mass! We could not hear! No fireworks this year! What happened?! This was embarrassing, it was embarrassing!” He said the last part over and over, shaking his head.<sup>63</sup>

Talking with people following the event one young, female volunteer offered her analysis:

“There was all this security and attention for the [political] candidate, but for the savior [*Divino Salvador del Mundo*], there was nothing.” The daughter of a SANA director agreed:

“The candidate was much bigger than the *Divino Salvador* this year, and that was a problem.” Director Fidel, whose family routinely volunteers their time to prepare the mass further lamented, “We [SANA] had been building this platform [partly so] the FMLN will win in El Salvador and now we have that platform. But we are hurting the people, and hurting the image, and the volunteers, and the people that are trying to sell something in their little booth, all for that political thing. I think there will be a new president in El Salvador, and for everyone *eso está bien*. We have built lots of power with this event, but now the people are getting offended.”<sup>64</sup>

### Tensions within the Organization

Importantly, many of the tensions described above can also clearly be seen playing out *within* SANA itself, making the organization a microcosm of the priorities and positions heard in the larger community. Critics of SANA on both the left and right, such as the consul general above, have argued that the organization is only a front for the FMLN and the whole event is purely a vehicle for homeland political change. Ten years of observation show that such an assertion is far too simplistic. Indeed, the organization leans left, but even the most

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<sup>63</sup> Excerpt from Fieldnotes, Los Angeles, August 3, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Informal Interviews 8/09 and Fieldnotes, 8/04/09

militant FMLN supporters within the organization have also been deeply invested in the pan-Salvadoran and U.S.-based elements of the festival at some point. Moreover, historically, there has been a whole tier of directors within the organization who are primarily dedicated to making connections with U.S. representatives and focusing on U.S. based cultural issues. SANA, like many immigrant organizations, is a multilayered entity with various cliques of directors embodying different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes clashing sets of priorities.

Although all the directors in the organization support the FMLN, the dividing line lies more between those leaders whose *primary work* and goals are political change and those who are engaged with the cultural, administrative and operational elements of the festival. That division is overlaid on another: a primary focus on homeland issues versus a focus on work with the Salvadoran-American, Central American and larger Latino immigrant population in the U.S.

The more “political” camp self-defines (and is defined by others) as *fmlnistas* and *militantes* [militants] of the party, with a history of strict affiliation with the orthodox faction of the FMLN. Their goals have always been oriented towards change in the homeland, although they are also very engaged with electoral politics and union organizing in the U.S. The community-based organizers, in contrast, support the FMLN but self-define more as community activists and *romeristas*, or supporters of the teachings of Archbishop Romero. Their history of involvement with the FMLN and the solidarity movement is more generalized, often affiliated with religious work, as opposed to highly entrenched in one organization or faction. They are primarily interested in developing the cultural and community-based elements of the organization and festival, and they are more directly connected to local, U.S. politicians and civic leaders than high-ranking advisors and leaders of the FMLN in El Salvador.

While a snapshot of the organization at any moment in time might not capture these tensions, sustained study shows the development of increasingly entrenched camps within the organization and increasing tensions surrounding the goals and impact of the festival. That rift has grown larger over time, as the success of the festival has facilitated higher level political work in El Salvador.

Following the events of 2008, one community-based leader expressed both his support for the left and his simultaneous exasperation with the tensions within the organization: “We are *all* happy if the FMLN wins in El Salvador! This is not a struggle just of the last 20 years. This is all of our lives. We have been working for change in El Salvador *all our lives*. And the FMLN has been the group that has been most on the side of the poor.” But he continued, “The question is, do I have to be a member of the FMLN to be part of this festival? Because I am a church guy. I am trying to do this *Divino Salvador* thing for the Salvadoran people. And we are getting a lot of conflict here” (informal interview, 10/08).

Other organizers have stressed their general discomfort with the mixing of culture and politics. At a board of directors meeting in 2008, one organizer asserted that “people come to *Día del Salvadoreño* because they want to experience a cultural event, not a political event.” A member of the opposing camp shot this perspective down immediately, saying, “Everything we do is political, so why even talk about it?” In a private gathering, another former leader complained that “*no se mezcla manzanas con naranjas* [you don’t mix apples and oranges]!” She went on to say that you can have a separate “forum” for the political elements. Or, she said, if you are into homeland politics, don’t just come out and say it; be more subtle in bringing candidates. That is how we created solidarity organizations in the 1980s, and why they were so effective, she asserted. “I personally raised [a lot of money]

for the guerrilla!" she said, "but nobody in the larger community knows that; they don't even know me as a political person!"<sup>65</sup>

Several leaders from other factions and Salvadoran organizations in L.A. second this position, asserting that it is ok for SANA to be politically engaged, but they don't have to go "announcing it to everyone." "Like our organization," one woman explained, "We are very clear where we stand politically. We know we are working for the poor and the marginalized, but we are not going to be overtly political about it." Her *compañero*, another solidarity era leader concurred: "This is how we worked during the war. There was subtly and tact. You didn't just put your colors out there" (see also Gosse 1995; Coutin and Perla 2012). Another leader echoed this, saying, "You don't have to go announcing who was the founder of this or that, or even whose idea it was. You don't go announcing your colors; you work to get people in solidarity with you on the *issues*." "We learned to do that in the [war era]; we needed the solidarity," she continued, "because who were we?! Who was going to pay attention to us? We were '*ilegales*.' We didn't have a vote!"

In discussing how to pragmatically address the conflicts between culture and politics, some SANA leaders suggest separating the various elements of the event: "The *Divino Salvador* is being forced out of the popular religion sphere. The mass should be moved to a church," one leader said. Another community organizer agreed: "I think we should do the mass at a church instead of the park and divorce the two completely." The son of another organizer suggested that the *political* part of the festival should be contained in the reception done in City Hall the night before the festival, instead of having it spill into the public program in the park the next day.

But that would defeat the whole purpose, others in the organization respond. "This is not only about partying! SANA is not only about throwing a party every year for the

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<sup>65</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/11/08, 10/16/08, 10/22/08, 10/24/08

*Salvadoreños*. We are serious [...] about building power.” In El Salvador, “Politics was death, voting for the wrong candidate was death.” The festival is partly about teaching people to not be ashamed of asserting their political will and participating in democracy in the U.S. or El Salvador, they explain, no matter whether the party they are cheering for is considered leftwing or not.

Part of the work of the festival is to raise awareness about the real issues plaguing El Salvador, understand their political and economic roots, and introduce the people to different perspectives, through political actors and civic leaders, and organize ourselves so our voices will be made heard, they explain. “You see, we have been *taught* to be ashamed of who we are. We are people full of shame,” a politicized SANA leader reflected, explaining that the FMLN continues to be seen as illegitimate when, in fact, it is a legal political party that offers some solutions in El Salvador that ARENA has failed to provide. It is true, “*tiene razon*,” one of the community-based organizers admitted in the aftermath of the FMLN’s 2009 presidential win, “We are all *rojo [red]* on the inside. But we have been taught to be afraid of that.”

### Personal Vendettas or Deeper Fault Lines?

While it would be easy to become bogged down with all this contestation and infighting – viewing conflicts simply as personal rifts and vendettas – years of observation show that such an approach misses the mark. Indeed, community organizations are often known for their abrasive, internal politics. And over time the clashes and conflicts between rival organizations, within organizations like SANA, and among the masses can solidify into a set of vendettas, stereotypes, and hurt feelings that take on a life of their own. Layered upon initial divisions within organizations are repeated feelings of being “unappreciated,” or excluded, and increasingly one-dimensional ideas about the true goals and priorities of



opposing camps. Personal histories of the war years and involvement in the solidarity movement, as well as class and status, also tend to solidify differences. This is true because political work involves time-tested trust and taken-for-granted members meanings, developed over years of working in similar pursuits. And, higher paying jobs with more flexibility facilitate one's ability to travel and to be truly transnational *in practice*.

Over time, certain code words are readily associated with different cliques and perspectives. For example, within the organization, community-based organizers see themselves as "always left out of the inner circle of [political] power and decision-making," as one person put it. The political clique is seen as always having "secret meetings." On the other hand, the political actors see the community clique as "ineffective" and "uncommitted." And observation shows that the less they feel included, the more they self-select out of participation in particular pursuits. Over time, the work of each side becomes almost invisible to the opposing clique. "What do they actually do!?" community organizers are often heard asking. "I am out there sweating my shirt [*sudando la camiseta*], and they are posing for pictures!" an organizer exclaimed following one *Día del Salvadoreño* celebration. Conversely, sitting in the airport in Mexico City, following an important and difficult election monitoring mission in El Salvador, a member of the inner political clique batted away the idea of some individuals being excluded. Speaking of the same organizer who was "sweating his shirt," he asked, "If he is truly committed, then why is he not here right now?"

Some of the most analytic comments on the topic have come from the quietest individuals. In a moment of reflection following *Día del Salvadoreño* 2009, one organization drop-out said, "We need to understand ourselves. We need to understand why some have come; why some have gone and some have stayed. We need to be honest with ourselves." The more superficial question of "why can't they just get along?" often heard from outside

observers – or the oft repeated internal stereotypes about one camp or the other being “ineffective” or “exclusionary” – miss the crucial subtext that guides these divisions.

Data shows that, first and foremost, the splits both within the organization and in the larger community have to do with clashes in homeland orientation and, as importantly with mounting tensions between the unifying, cultural elements of the festival and its political components, particularly as pertain to the homeland. Although the organizers can structure the festival in a particular way, the reception of those decisions and the ways in which the symbols and imagery at the festival resonate within the larger crowd cannot be controlled, often revealing stark differences between the instrumental political goals of the event leadership and its reception in the eyes of masses.

The more severe those ruptures between the leaders that organize the different components become, and the more the crowd expresses their opinion, the harder it is for organizers to jointly weave together a relatively seamless tapestry of culture and politics as they did initially. Conflicts and inefficiencies pull the two elements out of balance, visible problems in the workings of the festival arise, and the masses begin to weigh-in with their critiques, threatening both the fate of the event and its efficacy on all fronts.

This picture stands in stark contrast to the back-patting, efficiency and general *communitas* described both in the prior chapter and the first section of this chapter, which details the macro-political dynamics present and the collaborations that ensue between diversely-oriented immigrant leaders, the crowds and politicians. Chapter three captures an important dynamic present at the festival – a true feeling of solidarity, togetherness and pride among the Salvadoran-Americans there. Painting a picture of conflict alone would be highly inaccurate. Likewise, the first section of *this* chapter details the ease with which organizers and political actors from both countries rally around the festival form, each using it towards separate, successful ends with few overt displays of conflict. Indeed, both

of these dynamics exist, but they only tell part of the story. Taking a step inward to explore the interactions and tensions *within* the emigrant community that derive from the organizers' use of the cultural event for overtly political ends, and observing the evolution of these dynamics over time, fills out our understanding of the festival, the organization, and both the ease and conflict associated with political integration and transnational action.

In the final section, I add one more layer of analysis, focusing on the interplay of host and homeland politics, culture and politics, from yet another angle. In the prior sections, I asserted that under mundane conditions surprisingly little conflict exists between the transnational goals of the event organizers and the host state political actors that they work with; rather, homeland politics are more often "policed" from within. In what follows, I take a step back once more to explore two of the more subtle, hostland political pressures exerted upon the work event organizers seek to do.

These constraints have less to do with any direct disapproval by state actors about the specific attachments of transnational organizers and more to do with the general political culture in the U.S., particularly as it pertains to immigrant politics. These pressures are dynamic in that host state political actors and the immigrant community jointly participate in their enactment. Taken together with the myriad tensions and conflicts over homeland politics felt *within* the immigrant community, these institutional pressures threaten to alter the character of the event, hampering the initial civic and political goals the organizers had in mind, and pushing the activities that take place at the event from a more deeply politicized version of Salvadoran-ness to a more symbolic one.

### **A Festival but No Green Card: Political Neutrality and Cultural Encoding in the Hostland**

"A Certain Way You Do Things": Neutrality in Homeland Politics

The creation of *Día del Salvadoreño* occurred in a particular moment – one defined by a number of questions about allegiances and identity. Becoming citizens of the country that had been partially responsible for their displacement from El Salvador was no walk in the park for many SANA leaders, emotionally and psychologically speaking. But *Día del Salvadoreño* served as a creative intervention in that experience – a way to draw upon their new position as U.S. citizens to gain voice and to address some of the factors in the U.S. and in the homeland that were responsible for that displacement in the first place. Given the leftist political orientation of organization leaders, it is striking just how much they have been able to accomplish through the festival. Still, over time, there are limitations, or at least pressure, on what they can do – limitations imposed by the conflict within the Salvadoran American community, described above, and by constraints within the culture of politics of the hostland context itself.

For example, one significant irony of the festival's evolution is that the more successful it became, the more pressure organizers faced to “democratize” the homeland politics that are enacted within that space. The incident with ARENA protestors, demonstrates that pressure. *Día del Salvadoreño* is a “Salvadoran” event and holiday. As such, protestors argue, it should be a place where both ARENA and FMLN government officials and candidates can access and address the Salvadoran immigrant population. The general director of ARENA in Los Angeles explained this critique to the press, stating “If the event had been organized by the FMLN, I understand. But if it is organized by SANA, which is a non-profit organization, it should be apolitical” (Díaz, 2008a). As noted, the Salvadoran Consul General in Los Angeles also utilized the ethnic press to scold SANA, lambasting them for their exclusionary practices and their immaturity.

This pressure to democratize the homeland politics at the festival emanates not only from the Salvadoran competition, but also from within the U.S. political establishment. As

chapter five will make clear, the goals of Salvadoran activists can come under direct attack from conservative U.S. politicians, especially around election time in the homeland. But constraints come from more liberal U.S. actors, as well, through a well-intentioned push to be inclusive. This pressure to include the Salvadoran rightwing at events like *Día del Salvadoreño* is subtle and, at times, even unintentional. It is part of a broader culture of politics and diplomacy that accompanies the ethnicity framework event organizers use. It also derives from hostland actors' belief in the U.S. as a place shaped by democratic values.

For example, once SANA had created Salvadoran Day and was working to institutionalize the festival at the state level, rightwing Salvadoran politicians became interested in being party to the process. The California State political intern that worked on the formal recognition of the event explained:

Once we started hosting FMLN officials [through *Día del Salvadoreño*], the [ARENA] Vice President of El Salvador came directly to [the CA State Senator]. SANA wasn't happy about this, but I explained, whether or not you like it, the Senator is going to do this. He's not going to refuse a Vice President's request to host him, right? And the Senator represented the Salvadoran community at the time.

Even though the State Senator and his staffers were largely sympathetic to the leftwing politics of SANA organizers, there was both prestige in hosting a high-ranking official and a diplomatic duty to honor his request and allow him to be part of this Salvadoran landmark accomplishment – namely the institutionalization of *Día del Salvadoreño* at the state level.

Lamentably for the leftwing organizers, the staffer explained, the rightwing politicians from El Salvador “fit in” better with the political culture of the U.S., making their inclusion in political events easier. When the Vice President came, for example, the intern explained: “he walked into the Chambers, he did not look down, he knew how to do it, spoke English, had studied here, had a nice little suit, and those guys watching him in [California

State] chambers had nothing on this guy.” When FMLN officials came, on the other hand, he explained, “It was like, ‘shit, we need to have a workshop.’ It was just totally external stuff, right?” he explained, describing the differences in dress, in manner of speaking and in political culture. “I have nothing to say about what they do elsewhere, but here [in the U.S.] you gotta come and do xyz,” stressing the way things are done in the U.S.

Salvadoran insiders to the political process in the U.S. assert that fitting into this diplomatic political culture is part of how you enter the “big leagues” in U.S. politics.

Asserting that there is strategy in being inclusive, the intern continued:

The Ambassador to El Salvador in D.C. wants to come and meet with SANA. Why? Not because of me. Not because of the directors. Because of Day of the Salvadoran. It put them on the map. And so [Salvadoran officials] want to capitalize on that. They want to take over. They want to steal it. As uncomfortable as this may feel, let him come! You wanted to get to the big leagues. We’re here! We’re arriving, *barely* arriving. Welcome [the other side]. Showcase the fact that they came to your board of directors meeting. ‘Cuz now this gives you credibility.

“TA-TA-TA-TA-TA!” he said, imitating the uproar in reaction from the disgruntled event organizers. “The Salvadoran government coming to you doesn’t give you credibility? ‘Course it does. Maybe not to your eyes, but to the eyes of the establishment that you want to be part of - the U.S. political system - it does!” He continued, “If we’re trying to build this organization that represents all Salvadorans, if we’re trying to become this political entity that is influential and has credibility, then we cannot be one-sided. We need to be that organization that will engage the right, that official party, even though we’re [all the way] over here. This is what takes you to the next level. Without it, you’re not going to get there.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Note that this point of view misses that organizations, like SANA, are often more concerned about credibility in the home country, with contacts there, than in the host state.

Other organizers that have been engaged in community work for decades have also internalized this way of thinking, hence the admonition by one longtime Salvadoran activist that “you simply cannot put your colors out there too much.” Although she personally backed the last two FMLN presidential candidates “one hundred percent,” she explained that there is “a certain way you do things.” Being overtly partisan in homeland orientation can be a turnoff in U.S. political terms. It has to be about the issues, not the party colors, and it has to be inclusive. SANA is becoming too partisan, she has repeatedly warned, and this will definitely harm their political future in the U.S.

On one level, the organizers themselves understand the power in this type of democratization and inclusion even if it feels extremely difficult to engage. For example, in 2002, they reluctantly hosted both the Salvadoran Vice President, representing ARENA, and a historic leader of the opposition, former guerilla *comandante* Schafik Handal. “Bringing these two main forces, main players from politics in El Salvador is very spooky. You know, they went through a civil war, and probably it’s not going to be a very diplomatic environment,” one leader said of the meeting in Los Angeles City Hall. He went on to say that this is definitely “a departure from another era of politicians in El Salvador – [for them] to see [immigrant leaders in] California and the United States as a source of development, a source of a relationship politically, economically, culturally,” in lieu of seeing them as a political enemy.

There is a feeling of control and mediation that goes along with being the host to both friend and foe; in being the mediators and point of reference for homeland politicians of all tendencies that wish to engage their emigrant population. Yet, behind the scenes, SANA organizers struggle to interact with a rightwing that they still associate with the disappearance and killing of their fathers, brothers and cousins. A short time after this event, SANA organizers were invited to a dinner reception with the Vice President in El

Salvador. Fidel recounted that, even though his *compañeros* told him he was acting strange and inappropriately, he simply could not accept any of the fancy food he was offered that night. He explained that every time he looked at it and remembered where he was, he felt like he would vomit. “Mario is like that, too,” Chamba said of a fellow organizer. “He almost cannot be in the same room as them. The trauma is *demasiado pesado* [too heavy, too great].” Learning how to deal with this new dynamic of engaging both homeland parties in the name of diplomacy is something that organizers admit they are still working on.

SANA is not the only Salvadoran organization that has felt this pressure in the post-war era. *Salvadoreños en el Mundo*, which puts on an annual convention pulling together many sectors of the Salvadoran population to discuss issues important in the home and hostland, faced criticism and internal conflict for hosting Mauricio Funes in 2007, right after he had been named the official FMLN presidential candidate. A number of key directors, including the president of the organization, retired just weeks before the convention in Los Angeles, greatly affecting the turnout of the event, which was based at the Los Angeles Convention Center. In a public statement, the president explained that the positions of certain members had “ruined our vision [as an organization] to maintain a neutral stance” regarding the politics of the homeland.<sup>67</sup>

In all these cases, cited above, the message presented by the political establishment in the U.S. as well as critics within the immigrant community is that it is acceptable to be involved in politics in the homeland, but it must be done in a “democratic” or inclusive manner, which in this case means involving all homeland perspectives and affiliations or none. For immigrant organizers like many of the SANA leaders, however, there is something extremely unsavory in this pressure to be inclusive. Viewed from within a

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<sup>67</sup> A recounting of the polemics regarding this case and interviews were retrieved at the following site on 10/10/12: [http://diasporasalvadorena.blogspot.com/2007\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://diasporasalvadorena.blogspot.com/2007_10_01_archive.html)



national, U.S. frame, opening the festival and both the political and the civic space it provides to the Salvadoran right and left can be seen as a democratization of sorts. Bringing the parties together, letting them debate and address the emigrant population, and then allowing the larger population to make judgments of its own seems like a perfectly reasonable request.

But viewing the issue from the trans-state perspective within which organizers operate, giving the dominant rightwing one more stage from which to act – and in this case access to the emigrant population – tips an already heavily weighted balance of power even further to the right. The rightwing still controls the main media channels and the vast majority of wealth in El Salvador. And, following the signing of peace accords, between 1992 and 2009, the rightwing continued to have a stronghold on power, particularly at the executive level. Perhaps more importantly for organizers, in the 1980s, these individuals and their fellow cohort of migrants were effectively pushed out of El Salvador by the rightwing for political reasons – a rightwing that the U.S. government colluded with then and continues to favor today. Given their cross-border perspective, there is something ironic in telling these grassroots organizers they must be “inclusive” or “democratic” when dealing with homeland politics *within* the boundaries of the U.S., even while, outside national territory, the U.S. still feels free to influence the political process of their homeland.<sup>68</sup>

As traumatic as war and migration have been for the organizers, one serendipitous side-effect of that forced migration is that living in the U.S. has provided emigrant activists who voted with their feet an effective platform from which to work for political change in

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<sup>68</sup> This influence is discussed extensively in the following chapter.

the homeland.<sup>69</sup> “Power here is power there,” as organizers put it. If successful, however, pressure to universalize and “democratize” the stage and the organizations that immigrant leaders have worked so hard to create in the U.S. effectively takes that power away from them, compelling them to take up a position that their very personal experience of war defies, and that works against everything they have been working *for* in the last 30 years, representing a deep structural tension for organizers.

“Because That Is What Is Socially Acceptable”: Ethnicity and Cultural Encoding

In addition to the pressure to “democratize,” a second and related pressure that emanates from the hostland political context is what could be called “cultural encoding” – the pressure to wrap the political goals of immigrant organizations in “ethnic” and cultural packaging. As one colleague put it, it is as though culture is the honey and politics the medicine; culture makes it a lot easier for the politics to go down. Or, as someone else put it, a little bit of homeland politicking is fine, as long as it is “wrapped with a blue and white bow [...] here, have a *pupusa* and dance a little *cumbia* while you are at it!” But in fact, that mixing has been precisely part of the solution and the problem for organizers.

The pressure – and the decision – to culturally encode the civic and political work of immigrants may indeed have to do with perceptions about the rhetoric and mobilization frames hostland civic and political actors are most comfortable with. But that comfort, in turn, likely stems from the very culture of *how* immigrant populations are integrated within the civic life of the hostland, particularly in the metropolitan centers where they are most likely to migrate. The data in this chapter shows that in places like Los Angeles, integration into the civic life and landscape of the city occurs through ethnicization – the creation and politicization of ethnicity – not through a shedding of homeland ties and cultural identity.

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<sup>69</sup> This is what Roger Waldinger describes as the benefit of the “stateness” of host states for emigrant dissidents and exiles.

Rather, it is the *political* identity of organizers that is inadvertently encouraged and simultaneously undergoes the pressures of acculturation.

From the start, event organizers have understood this and been intentional participants in this process of merging culture and politics, both due to practical considerations and because they believe in the power of the cultural components. The festival form and the ethnicity frame are not only great mobilization vehicles precisely because they are accepted ways of working in the host context; they fit into a formal and accepted repertoire. In addition, culture and ethnicity *are indeed salient* for the immigrant population because of their experience of nostalgia, physical separation from a homeland and the relatives contained therein, and nationality-based exclusion and discrimination, not to mention competition, within the host country.

For SANA organizers, this salience, plus other more “instrumental” considerations likely influenced the decision to use an ethnicity frame and the festival form for political work in lieu of a more overtly political or revolutionary framework. First, as indicated throughout the chapter, they rightly calculated that mobilization of a large swath of the population would be much easier through a cultural versus political form (such as the local chapter of the FMLN). The totality of the immigrant population would feel both included and motivated to show up, U.S. politicians and civic leaders, not to mention their Salvadoran counterparts, would feel both comfortable with the idiom and motivated because of the opportunity to interact with their constituents. Generally speaking, the turnout would be much broader and larger.

On another level, the choice was genuinely philosophical and heartfelt, making instrumental explanations too one-sided. Indeed, from the start, organizers felt the pang of both separation and exclusion. And they felt strongly that the Salvadoran American population, including their own kids, was losing its cultural and historical bearings as

integration occurred in the U.S. Particularly given the history of this exile cohort, organizers felt that Salvadorans must have real knowledge and pride in their history, a sense of who they are and where they come from, before they will mobilize to demand rights and change in any lasting way in either the U.S. or El Salvador.

Third, this mode of working, what I call “layered organizations,” had a precedent. As described in the historical background chapter, creating multiply layered, transnational organizations that have some aims in the U.S. and other aims in El Salvador, and that have both social and political aims, was part of the culture of how work was carried out during the solidarity era. Moreover, having backstage political organisms with popular, mass projects attached to them was part of the culture of how the FMLN operated *in El Salvador* during the war. During the solidarity movement, that culture was imported to the U.S. as Salvadoran refugees formed “popular” aid organizations that, behind the scenes, were organized by political committees.

As one critic, deeply involved in the movement of the 1980s, put it, “public, cultural projects have always been created or used in service of politics in El Salvador.” “This is arrogant,” he continued, grasping the problematic results, but missing the impetus and power in the use of symbols. “The projects involve a lot of people, and how can one assume that the people want anything to do with politics?” Emphasizing the history of the war and the ensuing movements, another leader explained, by our experience “we are a clandestine culture.” The creation of duality in organizations was a conscious choice in the 1980s. Organizers chose to operate from within a “safe space,” and in that era, because direct political assistance to the FMLN in the home and host was viewed as a threat; better to work under the frame of human rights and democracy, with refugees providing a compelling narrative and visible symbol. The legacy of layered organizations remains today, but now

*Día del Salvadoreños'* public narrative is one of diversity and cultural appreciation – a “safe space” within the current cultural and political milieu.

While all these factors played a role in the decision-making, when probed about the use of the festival in early interviews done in 2003 and 2004, event organizers pointed more simply to practicality. The pre-existence and acceptance of the festival form as viewed by the U.S. political establishment facilitated their ability to institutionalize their own event and get to work. As noted, one organizer explained that, in practical terms, they needed a “container” that would allow them to “get to the civic piece, to organize around rights, to assert our bi-nationalism.” He further explained the decision: “The festival day is a civic model and [politicians] cannot say yes to one group, ‘you can have your day,’ and no to another. And we knew that.” Another organizer put it more bluntly: “We started [this work] with culture and ‘identity’ because that is what is socially acceptable. [And] there are funds for culture.” In short, ethnic festivals are a well-established and accepted way of engaging both immigrant and emigrant politics in the U.S. Saint Patrick’s Day, Columbus Day, and Cinco de Mayo came first, gaining popular favor, before paving the road for *Día del Salvadoreño*.

Organizers are constantly involved in this balancing act, one that attempts to take advantage of the spaces and forms available to them within the host context without losing site of their larger goals. They also recognize that they *consciously* participate in the encoding of their goals for social and political change into “cultural” packaging, in part, due to this internalization of what is perceived to be “acceptable” in the eyes of the host state. A poignant example of this occurred during the events surrounding the performance of the Venezuelan Band, *Los Guaraguaos*, at Salvadoran Day – mentioned in chapter three. Band members were to receive a special recognition from the City of Los Angeles for their commitment to justice, via the Salvadoran Day organizers. The band was specifically invited

by organizers because its criticism of past U.S. foreign policy (in song lyrics) was seen as directly applicable to the onset of the war in Iraq.<sup>70</sup>

At a weekly meeting prior to the event, one organizer raised concerns about how the recognition would be interpreted by U.S. politicians. The dialogue between organizers shifted from (a) an insistence on integrating this piece of their past with their present reality, to (b) the ways in which the event could be packaged as non-threatening to U.S. politicians. Explicit mention was made of the fact that in the U.S., unlike in El Salvador, no one would “kill them” for appreciating this music. In fact, “[freedom of expression] is a *right* in this country. We can have freedom of expression,” one organizer reminded the group. Besides, “The governments of the U.S. have committed *a lot* of errors... and many people here don’t know it,” another added. In the end organizers settled on a way in which they could frame the recognition for the band as “that *thing* of interchange of culture.” “I don’t see this as a threat,” one organizer said in an attempt to convince fellow organizers. “We are adding texture to the diversity of this country!”

What the interaction so clearly demonstrates is the organizers’ desire to draw on their experiences of war and repression in El Salvador and to create awareness about U.S. military involvement there and elsewhere – a key political goal and integrative act. But the interaction also demonstrates how this desire interfaces with the organizers’ internalization of that which is deemed as “threatening” in their new host context, namely politics, and that which is deemed acceptable and appropriate, namely the channels of “culture.”

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<sup>70</sup> For example, in *El Sombrero Azul*, the band sings that “the green that I sing to you about is the color of El Salvador’s cornfields, not the color of the berets of tropical massacres, of those that went to Vietnam to burn the rice paddies, and now walk through [our] land as though walking through an animal pen.” In another, entitled *No Basta Rezar*, they sing that it is “not enough to pray; there is a lot of work that must be done in order to gain peace.” “People pray in good faith,” they sing, but “so too does the pilot pray as he boards his airplane to go and bomb the children of Vietnam.”

Ironically, the very success of the festival, and the *ease* with which it has been institutionalized, itself complicates the process. Observation shows the event grew so quickly in its earliest year that organizers were simply unable to “catch up” with its success. As noted earlier, the official recognition, what could be called the “symbolic politics” element of the festival, was less of a challenge than organizers imagined. Passing a resolution at the city and state level was meaningful, but it was also relatively easy. Recall that the political intern interviewed about the process said, “The resolution was not that complicated to do...” The same can be said for mobilization of a large crowd. The festival met with success on both levels so quickly that organizers had no time to plan or fund the types of day-to-day organizing and political work they had initially envisioned as a companion to the festival.

In the first five years, attendance at *Día del Salvadoreño* grew from 1,000 to 40,000 in a given day. Organizers quickly had to grapple with their new identities and responsibilities as the authors of Salvadoran Day and the *dueños* [owners] of the migrant *Divino Salvador del Mundo*. Since they had no funding to work full-time for the organization, they were not able to pursue the on-the-ground organizing efforts they had originally strategized. “Right now, the thing is totally out of control,” admitted one organizer of the event in 2004. “It’s like a *cabeza sin cuerpo*,” or head with no body. Seconding this, another organizer said, “You see, there are two goals to what we are doing here. One concerns identity and culture, and the other is organizing, really organizing, and this is where all the future work lies...” He continued, “Without this and the creation of institutions [and] elected officials that affect people in their daily lives, ‘Salvadoran’ becomes something that just happens once a year.”

Not only was this symbolic politics initially easy, passing the resolution was also cheap. Initially organizers were able to pass the resolution and put the festival together as

volunteers in the hours after their day jobs were complete. But the overnight growth of the festival made it a nearly unmanageable, full-time job – one that often landed the organization in the red, scrambling to pay for a large park space and the necessary rentals and services. Day-to-day organizing became a pipe dream. Feeling desperate to move out of this realm of “‘Salvadoran’ being something that just happens once a year,” three organizers took the plunge and left good day jobs to dedicate more time to the organization, only to find themselves in the precarious situation of being without a salary at all. Over time, fundraising and food sales were just barely enough to cover event costs.

Over the next few years, organizers quickly realized the event could not run or fund itself. It was an all encompassing job that left them with little time to pursue the U.S.-based organizing and political work. When push came to shove, those concerned with political work began to abandon the operational side of the festival and the goals of *U.S. organizing*, instead drawing on their success and recognition to focus on what they saw as their priority –the imbalance of political power in *El Salvador*, the lack of productive development, the continued stream of emigration, U.S. meddling, and the lack of a meaningful emigrant “voice.” As such, the imbalance in the political goals of the organizers, versus the celebratory goals of the crowd, grew even larger.

Quite predictably, local politicians use the same “cultural logic” to describe and participate in Salvadoran Day.<sup>71</sup> Rather than describing the work through the lens of rights, recognition, organizing, and politics, as organizers themselves initially envisioned, the festival and work of the activists is routinely described as a “contribution” to the “diversity” of Los Angeles. This cultural defining of the work is nicely summed up in letters of acknowledgement sent to organizers by various City Councilpersons each year, in much the same way they are sent to the organizers of ethnic festivals throughout the city all year long:

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<sup>71</sup> See Coutin, 2003; Baker-Cristales 2004



“In a city of nearly 100 languages and countless other cultures, your efforts in promoting diversity should be commended.” Another proclamation heralds the “music, art and culture of El Salvador.”<sup>72</sup>

When U.S. politicians do recognize Salvadorans for their “work” from the pulpit of the festival, they cite Salvadorans hard work in difficult jobs, supporting their families in the U.S. and El Salvador – all true. But there is very little recognition of the stellar leadership of Salvadorans in the civic life of places like Los Angeles, where Salvadoran immigrants are disproportionately represented as lead organizers in labor unions and are known for their dedication to community organizing, the longtime struggle for immigrant rights, and a commitment to political campaigning at the local, state and federal level. These scripted “cultural” acknowledgements are repeated yearly by city and state officials, and because the acknowledgment symbolizes a real form of recognition and support for the Salvadoran population, organizers print the letters in their Salvadoran Day programs and publicity, further encoding the event for attendees, the press and public.

For the politicians, the work is culturally encoded, too. While most of them are there to “do politics,” they do so through the language of appreciating culture and heritage, something they believe plays well with the population. Sometimes this attempt is almost embarrassing, such as one Assemblyman’s speech to the crowd: “Aloha, Salvadorenos! [awkward silence, staffer whispers in ear to correct] ... HOLA, Salvadorenos!” In another speech an LAPD named “grand marshal” [in Spanish, *capitan mayor*] by organizers repeatedly attempted to connect with the crowd, thanking them in utterly butchered Spanish for being named “major captain.” But as letters to U.S. politicians soliciting their participation make clear, “culture” is a method for work and for interaction, not an end goal. In a letter soliciting the collaboration of a California Assemblyman, organizers wrote, “As

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<sup>72</sup> These examples are taken from letters printed in the Salvadoran Day program for 2003-2006.

always, you are invited to join us in person for *Día del Salvadoreño*, to make your work in this district and the broader Los Angeles County known to our quickly growing Salvadoran population.”

Although engaged in a political-cultural tango of sorts, when asked whether state-level politicians really understand the work that the organization hopes to do at such events, one such organizer responded in 2003, “I don’t think they get it. I mean they see culture. It’s a celebration of culture.” In 2004, SANA director José Roberto explained, “Right now we are powerless. We are too powerless still except in the *cultural* aspect,” indicating that culture was their bargaining chip [emphasis added]. In 2006, when asked about the success of *Día del Salvadoreño* to attract politicians, one organizer asserted that they are pleased but not naïve. The festival model has had an uncanny ability to mobilize people. But while noting the enthusiasm of *homeland politicians* from both parties to partake in the event, the organizers say that “most of them just want to get what they can from us.”

And when probed further about the support of *U.S. politicians*, in particular, they say, “Many of them do not get what serious [political actors we hope to be]. We are all smiling, taking the picture now.” “But later we will demand something,” one organizer continued, referring to the way they would solicit support for later initiatives, like accompanying the democratic process in El Salvador. “We will call on them.” Articulately exposing the irony of cultural inclusion alongside political exclusion, José Roberto exclaimed, “It is condescending. Totally condescending! They can give us a holiday, but they will not give us a green card!”<sup>73</sup>

In the initial years as the event continued to grow, organizers became increasingly concerned about losing the grounded and politicized orientation with which it was founded.

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<sup>73</sup> This quote points to a recurrent dynamic within immigrant experience of inclusion in a locality or city but not the federal polity. See, for example, Varsanyi 2006; 2007. But I would argue that it also points to a dynamic of cultural and civic inclusion alongside political (or more accurately, legal) exclusion.

Yes, the festival was created as a celebration of culture, but part of that celebration was intended to be about historical memory, civic participation, the quest for dignity and political change – not just about food, flags and music. The facility of pursuing work through the framework of ethnicity and multiculturalism, the subtle pressures to democratize the homeland politics practiced through the festival, the overt criticisms from within the Salvadoran American community, and the time and resource constraints described above threatened to turn what began – for organizers, at least – as a very politicized event into “*pura fiesta [pure party]*.”

Over time, politicized leaders from other, rival Salvadoran organizations began to weigh in on what had initially appeared to be a wild success and a brilliant strategy. “I don’t want to participate in the McDonaldization of Salvadoran history and culture,” one such leader said, explaining his non-attendance. Another activist and poet declared in 2009, “The *Divino Salvador de Mundo* is not my kind of culture. It is not culture for me. There is so much out there,” indicating that there was superficiality to the things being emphasized at the event.

There is much validity in critiques such as those of the artists, that cultural vehicles have too often been appropriated towards political ends, noted above. This tension is a struggle that can be seen throughout immigrant communities, through various organizations and events. But the statements also miss both the popular salience of the symbols and rituals contained in the festival, their resonance with political actors on both sides of the border, and the general multicultural logic of the context itself – the pressures that context exerts on the *ways* immigrants can work and the type of work they can do. Within that context, ethnicity constitutes one of the few “relatively acceptable and safe vehicle[s] for the political mobilization of oppressed groups” (Baker-Cristales 2004: 30).

The commentary of the critics as well as that of SANA organizers also reveals the way some actors miss the power that exists in the cultural form, not as an overtly political expression but as a “subtler expression of the exercise of power” (Kubik 1994: 244). The question remains, over time does the emphasis on ethnicity and culture contained within the festival form began to limit the type of politics event organizers practice there? What are the dangers of building symbolic unity without political or class unity? At the same time that the festival enables political goals through the processes described here, it constrains and circumscribes them.

## **Discussion**

For a solid decade, *Día del Salvadoreño* met with increasing success each year, drawing larger crowds and more significant political representatives from both El Salvador and the United States. During that time, event organizers took *Día del Salvadoreño* from one small festival in Los Angeles to a celebration officially recognized by U.S. Congress, in turn leading to the reproduction of countless events throughout the country. By 2009, however, SANA’s signature event in L.A. began to show significant signs of strain. Critics predictably blamed this downfall on the success of the FMLN in El Salvador. If the FMLN could take power in the homeland – fulfilling one of SANA’s political goals – the organization would no longer “need” *Día del Salvadoreño* as a platform and vehicle for political organizing.

There is truth in this assertion; the festival was organized partly as an act of resistance and an underdog’s ticket to inclusion in the life of the city in which it was hosted and the homeland to which it referred. Once the event was institutionalized, working to change the structures of power in El Salvador became a key priority in the minds of the more “elite” activists within the organization – those that tended to control the agenda. In their calculus, the fate of would-be migrants would not change without the creation of

opportunity and a more equal playing field in El Salvador. Moreover, an opposition government in El Salvador could mean a new relationship between immigrant leaders in the U.S. and government officials there, creating newfound access, direct channels for collaboration, and possibly even new support for immigrant projects. And, as chapter seven will further explore, the FMLN victory constituted an important form of closure that organizers had sought for years. Perhaps, on those levels, the festival platform which allowed the emigrants to play a small role in that victory, would not be as essential as it was in the era of ARENA.

But blaming the evolution of *Día del Salvadoreño* on the FMLN's success alone also misses what this chapter reveals – namely the underlying tensions and pressures that had been percolating under the surface of the festival for many years. As shown in this chapter, the ethnic festival as a form held an uncanny ability to mobilize the rank and file as well as political actors from the host and homeland; it simultaneously enabled the direct political action of event organizers. Through this mobilization, immigrant leaders, the masses, and political actors alike participated in a joint bounding of the immigrant population around an ethnicity-based framework and identity, overlooking key differences in class consciousness and political orientation within the larger immigrant population. But the partisan political work that this significant mobilization facilitated in the homeland caused conflict within this diverse immigrant population, making visible those very differences over time.

Here, I argue that the tensions that emerged over the course of a decade were magnified and drawn out (if not partially caused) by this dual frame embodied in many ethnic festivals and immigrant communities – an ethnic and homeland-based frame that resonates so deeply with the people in affective terms, mobilizing the masses and their political representatives, but the politics of which divide them. These macro political dynamics are what made for such success – the enormous crowds at the festival, the

transnational political draw, and its rapid institutionalization into the landscape of U.S. festivals and holidays at the federal level. But the internal tensions described began to lead to a breakdown in the functioning of the event, causing constraints on the overt political action organizers aimed for and further polemics within the larger community.

Two important and related pressures contributed to the tensions within the community, to the constraints on organizers' overt political action, and to the changing character of the event in general. First, both Salvadoran American critics and entities within the host-state political establishment pushed organizers to "democratize" the leftist homeland politics practiced within the festival site, making room for all Salvadoran political tendencies. The second constraint organizers experienced was a more subtle pressure to drain the political and civic content of the event by drawing out the "cultural" components, defining the festival primarily as a contribution to the cultural diversity of a multicultural city and state. This process is one to which immigrant organizers are party because, within the given context, it both works and is salient.

Despite their class consciousness, the history of both (forced) separation from the homeland and denial of inclusion in the polity of the hostland renders the ethno-national framework of "Salvadoran-ness" extraordinarily salient to organizers and the rank-and-file alike. As importantly, as the creators of the event, the organizers internalized that which is deemed both "acceptable" and viable within the host context and that which might be perceived as either ineffective or a threat. These two more subtle pressures of ethnicization and democratization, in turn, are not unrelated. It is precisely because of the use of a cultural vehicle, because organizers mobilized an ethnicity frame, that the democratization of homeland politics becomes an issue in the first place.

But what are the larger implications of the specific story and small-scale processes described in this chapter for the study of immigration? First, in narrative and

methodological terms, it is important to note that at the end of this chapter we are just beginning to *arrive* at symbolic ethnicity. Indeed, as organizer, JR, indicated in the final section of the chapter, it is due to the combination of tensions and pressures described here that a more substantive political content is either drained or never achieved, and “Salvadoran [becomes] something that only happens once a year.” The symbolic politics of recognition and the cultural components of the festival remain, but the ability of organizers to use this institutionalization to organize or affect significant change comes under threat for a number of reasons.

The starting point of our narrative and the methods used matter for making this process visible. Had I begun by viewing the festival primarily as an example of “symbolic ethnicity,” we would have missed the processes by which the collaborations, tensions and subtle pressures described here affect both the goals of organizers and the very content of the event itself. Moreover, the findings become visible by observing the evolution of the festival through its rise *and decline* in lieu of making an assessment based on one or two successful years. They are also made visible by consciously alternating the level of analysis from in-group dynamics (at various scales) to out-group dynamics, and by privileging alternative voices, namely critics and outsiders to the organization as well as the subaltern voices *within* the organization.

In theoretical terms, the dynamics highlighted here reveal a number of important ironies which speak to the relationship between processes of immigrant integration and transnationalism. First, the festival can be seen as a strategic site for illustrating how the host state context simultaneously encourages and limits the homeland political action of immigrant organizers. This is the case, as others have noted, because the very “stateness” of the host context allows immigrants to live outside the homeland, protected from violence there and granting them the freedom to speak out, criticize, and organize bodies and funds

towards homeland change; at the same time, the host context concomitantly exerts pressure on immigrants to curtail those very connections (Waldinger 2013b).

But this duality in encouraging and delimiting homeland politics has to do not only with the stateness of nation-states but also with the peculiar interplay of host and homeland politics that exist within the culture of immigrant politics in the U.S. At *Día del Salvadoreño*, homeland politics are both routinized and normalized at the event (thus facilitated and encouraged) and simultaneously contained and watered down. That the homeland political orientation of these particular activists leans far to the left only renders this routinization more visible, calling our attention to the irony of the connections made at the festival.

Although the state always reserves the right to curtail such connections more violently, under mundane conditions what we see is remarkable (if superficial) collaboration between home and hostland actors – not the overt tensions between efforts to variously nationalize versus ethnicize the immigrant population as the literature indicates. This is the case because part of the process of nationalization and integration in multicultural centers, like Los Angeles, occurs *precisely through ethnicization*, creating a joint agenda between the different political entities across borders.

While shunned and legally excluded by the state because of their nationality, and although citizen nativists often deride immigrants for “clinging” to their heritage and failing to “Americanize,” hostland politicians send a very clear and contradictory message to the immigrant organizers of events like *Día de Salvadoreño*. Organization and collective entrée into the civic and political landscape of a city like Los Angeles or a state such as California is done *precisely through* identification with and mobilization of the “ethnic” community, with all its “transnational” connections. In simpler terms, if you want to turn out U.S. representatives on a large scale, you have to mobilize both the rank and file and politicians, and in a place like Los Angeles that mobilization is done *precisely through* a “Salvadoran”



effort, not through a focus on issues alone, and *not* through a shedding of one's cultural ties. At an event like *Día del Salvadoreño*, host state actors and event organizers are first and foremost "doing politics," but that work is done through the social operators of ethnicity and the institutionalization of "culture."

That said, homeland and political connections are circumscribed but through subtler processes. When operating through the encouraged and accepted vehicles of ethnicity and culture – an umbrella container that superimposes unity over political and class difference – immigrant organizers face pressure to democratize homeland politics. The U.S., unlike some of the countries from which immigrants hearken, is a democracy after all. Moreover, "this is a Salvadoran event!" Everyone should be included. But that thinking utilizes national blinders.

Holding both the national and cross-border frames in tension reveals a second set of ironies. From the transnational perspective of the migrant organizers themselves, forcing inclusion of the rightwing perspective (in this case), not only puts immigrants that have fled a war in an intractable moral position. It also furthers the pre-existing imbalance of power in the homeland while simultaneously taking from organizers one of the particular gifts of migration itself, namely the ability to influence the homeland from the safety of the other side of the border.

Data analyzed for this chapter point to a particular nation-building logic in the U.S., particularly in the metropolitan contexts in which migrants are most likely to settle. It is a logic that accommodates and even encourages cultural difference (enough to create a pressure valve anyway) but not political difference. The class consciousness, political tendencies and civic vibrancy of immigrants like the organizers and their allies must be culturally encoded. And multiple pressures from within the migrant community, from outside of it, and those deriving from the process of migration itself create pressure to

ethnicize and homogenize this diversity of consciousness. Immigrants and their communities are seen as “such a great contribution to the diversity of our multicultural city and country!” as one city councilmember put it. And on some level, because of separation from the homeland, nostalgia and nationality-based exclusion and discrimination, this framework is salient within the community itself. But funds are not easily made available for political organizing or even civic engagement. Or in one of my interviewee’s words, “You think you can go higher than this? No! You chill now, fool!” “You can have a festival but not a greencard.” The *facility* organizers experience in mobilizing the masses and political representatives through the vehicles of ethnicity and culture, and the difficulty they experience in enacting civic participation and politics, lead to a number of questions about immigrant integration, in general.

Leaving this bigger questions aside, I now return to the particular story at hand. Beginning in 2009, politicized event organizers began to allow the slow collapse of the platform they had worked so hard to construct. After all, now that *Día del Salvadoreño* had been institutionalized at the federal level, others could pick up the work, and they did. In 2009, the festival was “rescued” by less political actors from the organization who, over time, had either been pushed out or had retired due to their frustrations with the militancy of the core organizers and the invisibility of their own efforts.

Meanwhile, the politicized organizers, frustrated by the constraints and burdens of hosting *Día del Salvadoreño* each year, shifted gears, joining with other activists. They took their work out of the public domain, focusing on less-costly and possibly more effective tactics such as direct political lobbying. Arguably, they could not have done this without the credibility of having mobilized 100,000 compatriots at the festival’s height and being the authors of the federally recognized “Salvadoran-American Day.”

In the following chapter, I set aside the critical voices and the perspectives of the community-based organizers included here, as well as the contestation within the larger community, and instead home in on the core political actors within the organization and their key allies. I focus on the activists' work for political change in the homeland. The festival and, in particular, its political uses again make an appearance. But as ethnographies must, the next chapter leaves the somewhat artificial "site" of the festival and follows the actors into other venues, both public and private, and both in the host and homeland.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***Dále Salvadoreño: Embodied Wisdom and ‘Transnational’ Activist Methodology***

*Con Nuestra Propia Salsa*<sup>74</sup>

Sitting in his house on the eve of the American war in Iraq, Chamba privately and spontaneously lamented:

We feel so pained when we see that other people are now suffering what we already lived through... when we were saying to Bush senior that he was helping the wrong people, when he should have been helping El Salvador with tractors and fertilizer and not with arms. The arms that the Salvadoran government used were paid for; we had to PAY FOR THEM. They were killing us with arms that we [as such a poor country] were BUYING. Meanwhile influential corporations like [*inaudible*] were becoming millionaires.

But how does one convince... [*voice trails, long pause*]. There is so much frustration for all of us that work for peace. We feel that there is no “echo,” not even from God. Not even God can hear us. Imagine if the FMLN wins in El Salvador [in the 2004 presidential elections]. And [the U.S.] doesn’t approve of it. They are going to invade us and kill us for this. Why!?! After we have come out of the mountains without shoes and now we are working so that a legitimate political party legally wins power, so we can conduct the nation in the manner that we all feel is correct, *con nuestra propia salsa!*

And all this motivates us, MOTIVATES us in SANA to have a movement – not an organization but a movement – a form of thinking, an entity that is constantly connected to the life of the *pueblo Salvadoreño*.

–Salvador’s house, private interview, April 2003

In 2007, four years after Salvador voiced this deep frustration, the popular Salvadoran journalist, Mauricio Funes, traveled to Los Angeles for the yearly *Día del Salvadoreño* celebration. There, with insider information about his potential presidential run in El Salvador, the Salvadoran American National Association named him Grand Marshal. At the time, he was best known for his career in journalism: his wartime reporting,

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<sup>74</sup> “With our own salsa,” meaning, with our own input, on our own terms

critiques of the ARENA government, regular appearances as a correspondent on CNN Español, and role as host of several popular news shows including *Entrevista Al Día*, *Sin Censura* and *La Entrevista con Mauricio Funes*.

Although many people in Los Angeles watched his shows, Funes' appearance at *Día del Salvadoreño* was his first live encounter with the massive Salvadoran population living in L.A. Nearly 75,000 people were estimated to attend the celebration that year.<sup>75</sup> He was received by the crowd with warmth and curiosity as a famous television personality, not a politician. It was there that rank and file Salvadoran-Americans first heard the murmur from FMLN militants within in the crowd: "*Se ve, se siente, Mauricio presidente* [You can see it, you can feel it, Mauricio for president]!" Over the course of the evening, there was a growing sense that event attendees were witnessing an important political moment in the making. Following Funes' appearance at the festival, a steady buzz around his candidature was generated within the emigrant population.

When Funes returned to Los Angeles in October to speak at the annual *Salvadoreños en el Mundo* conference (SEM), he was considered a "pre-candidate" for president.<sup>76</sup> Although staunch supporters of the FMLN voiced concerns about Funes' fidelity to the goals and vision of the FMLN, it is safe to say that support for Funes as a moderate and populist voice trumped that of all prior FMLN candidates both in the homeland and within the larger Salvadoran-American community, including the oft-skeptical activist circles. Unlike the prior candidate, Schafik Handal, who alienated non-orthodox factions of the left as well as mainstream U.S. politicians, Funes drew broad support from progressive Salvadoran

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<sup>75</sup> Fire Marshal's estimate, over a two-day period

<sup>76</sup> As mentioned in chapter three, this conference is organized annually by the emigrant organization, *Salvadoreños en El Mundo* (Salvadorans in the World).

leaders in the U.S.<sup>77</sup> He also drew support from successful “transnational” entrepreneurs, some of whom were supporting the FMLN for the first time ever. “Not all of us are dressed in red,” one such entrepreneur said at a campaign event in L.A., “but we all have the same goal, and that is to put Mauricio Funes in office.”

Funes closed the SEM conference in October with a compelling speech in which he urged Salvadorans living in “el exterior” to get involved with the political process of their homeland and “become agents of change.”<sup>78</sup> This was followed by a lengthy question and answer session with an audience filled with activists, entrepreneurs and intellectuals. The questions ran the usual gamut of concerns from economic revitalization and dollarization in El Salvador to remittances and the emigrant vote in the U.S.

Just before organizers closed the session, a young, second generation Salvadoran American jumped from her seat with a final question. She quietly walked down the center aisle to the standing microphone and asked the question that everyone in the room had hesitated to address, provoking a poignant moment of political truth amid the excitement of Funes’ presidential bid. Given the role that the U.S. played in the elections of 2004, she asked pointedly, how will you deal with the strong possibility of U.S. intervention in this upcoming election?

No one had to explain the meaning of her blunt and astute question. Everyone in the audience was familiar with the relationship between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments: the United States’ historic political and economic interests in this small country, its direct interventions during the war years, “default” support of the Salvadoran rightwing in the

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<sup>77</sup> Funes was a populist candidate and outsider to the FMLN party, favored by social democrats over more orthodox candidates from within the party. He ran on a platform with a “hardliner,” vice presidential candidate, former FMLN commander Salvador Sánchez Cerén.

<sup>78</sup> Audio recording and fieldnotes from conference, 10/07

post-war era, and ongoing, tacit interventions and “strong preferences” for this particular country and for the larger region in general.

As described briefly in chapter three, SANA leaders and other FMLN supporters experienced the discouraging role of conservative U.S. political actors in the Salvadoran election of 2004 firsthand when Schafik Handal ran for president on the FMLN ticket. Despite a significant effort by emigrant activists to spearhead election monitoring missions, high-ranking officials from the Bush administration and a handful of conservative U.S. Congressmen issued statements that sowed deep, irreparable seeds of fear in the general populace in El Salvador.

Exploiting the profound connections between Salvadorans in the U.S. and their families in El Salvador, the rightwing-dominated media in El Salvador picked up these sound bites and ran. By the eve of the elections in 2004, a large percentage of the population was convinced that an FMLN win would lead to the deportation of their relatives in the U.S. and a ban on the 2.5 billion dollars in annual remittances that kept families afloat. Conservative U.S. politicians such as Tom Tancredo (R-CO) fanned these flames with threats to introduce legislation that would cut the flow of remittances to El Salvador were the FMLN to take office. The front cover of newspapers in El Salvador ran headlines such as “U.S. Remittances in Serious Danger.”<sup>79</sup> Full page ads showed scenes of riots and anarchy.<sup>80</sup>

In fact, these 2.5 billion dollars in annual remittances may actually have served as a key pressure valve on discontent that kept the rightwing ARENA party from being democratically or otherwise overthrown in the postwar era (see Garni and Weyher 2013). The juxtaposition of ARENA’s “pimping” of the Salvadoran diaspora out of one side of the party mouth – heralding them as the hope of the nation and the financial lifeblood of the

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<sup>79</sup> A headline from one of El Salvador’s main dailies on the day before elections (*El Diario de Hoy*, March 20, 2004)

<sup>80</sup> This dynamic will be discussed in further detail in a later section in this chapter on diplomacy and lobbying.

country – while simultaneously engaging in outright manipulation of their families’ deep emotional and financial dependence on remittances for political gain made progressive emigrant activists positively irate. But by the time activists organized to mount a response, the damage was done. Propaganda about remittances and deportations had dominated the airwaves and print press for weeks leading up to the election, and the wheels of large-scale voter fraud and intimidation were fully greased and set into motion.

Activists did not need to wait for Embassy cables released via Wikileaks in 2011 – many of which confirmed a general pattern of U.S. tinkering in El Salvador’s elections – to grasp a painful, political truth.<sup>81</sup> Their *host* country, which tooted the democratic horn, had played a non-trivial role in influencing the electoral process of their *home* country, still struggling to emerge from the grave civic damage of a U.S. supported war. Moreover, the manner in which ARENA, aided by conservative allies in the U.S., had rhetorically debunked the FMLN, playing on the fears of the people by holding hostage the resources of a diaspora that had kept the country financially solvent for a decade was simply too bitter a pill for many Salvadoran-American leaders to swallow.

A few days after the election, Salvador, the eternal optimist, sent a harsh and sarcastic but heartfelt statement to his close friends and allies via e-mail. There he provocatively noted that the results of the election must be a message to remitters living in the U.S. that their family members feel fine about the conditions they experience in El Salvador. As such, he asserted, there would be no need to send more remittances then; better to put this money into taking care of the second generation in the U.S. before they become part of the “delinquent statistics of gang members, the imprisoned, those riddled with bullets or deported to El Salvador.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Taken from direct e-mail correspondence



Tragically, just seven months later, his own son, “Chambita,” was gunned down on the streets of Los Angeles and killed. But beyond Salvador’s astute, personal observations about the real financial choices that remittance senders make lays a more subtle but important point: although the remittances that immigrants send to their families have political and electoral consequences, the remitters themselves lack *political voice*.

In 2004, Schafik went on to win 36% of the vote – an increase in the FMLN vote share won in the previous election.<sup>83</sup> Yet even if a majority had voted the FMLN candidate into office into 2004, the infrastructure to support and protect the decision of the masses was shaky at best. Come Election Day, SANA’s international monitoring teams were sitting ducks. They were not prepared to document the fraud practices that occurred in the days leading up to the election. More importantly, they were not properly equipped to counterbalance the damage that propaganda about remittances and deportations had incurred through widespread press coverage over the prior months. They had come prepared to monitor a national election but had failed to fully address the geopolitical context and cross-border linkages in which that election occurred – the unwavering relationship between ARENA and the Bush administration and the role that financial dependence on remittances could be made to play.

They say the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice. Whatever constitutes one’s view of justice in this case, one thing is certain: in order to bend that arc, activists must exert pressure in the right places at just the right time, changing either the character of action itself and/or the context in which action is carried out. In 2009, emigrant activists and their allies worked hard to target and correct the vulnerabilities revealed to them through the elections of 2004, drawing on their unique position as both emigrants and immigrants.

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<sup>83</sup> The FMLN ran Facundo Guardado as their candidate in 1999, winning 29% of the vote.

In the year leading up to the 2009 election, SANA partnered with historic solidarity organizations, like CISPES and the SHARE Foundation, to exploit the diplomatic opening presented by a recent Obama win in the U.S. Meanwhile, other Salvadoran organizations, such as SANN, Carecen and SALEF worked their own channels of influence with local politicians and leaders.<sup>84</sup> With pressure from local representatives and members of Congress, who were in turn pushed by these emigrant activists, the U.S. Embassy put an official lid on the propaganda that had dominated the prior election, squashing the idea that the U.S. would not work with a democratically-elected FMLN government.

This shift in the diplomatic context in which elections occurred had a huge impact for voters on the ground. Meanwhile, as news of the official U.S. position was published and replayed in the media throughout the country, Salvadorans and their emigrant compatriots were hard at work on the ground documenting, publishing and working to halt the preparatory legwork of fraudulent voting practices used in the past. With a 51-49% win in 2009, Funes' election might legitimately be called a "people's history" – one in which the people *vigilando* [keeping watch] on the ground in El Salvador and emigrant activists engaging in strategic, political work may just have made the necessary two percent difference.

### **"Totally Connected": Obstacles and Strategies in "Transnational" Political Change**

Students of transnationalism have often been accused of forgetting to address the harsh realities of the state, while state-centered scholars sometimes forget to consider what occurs beyond national borders. In El Salvador, in 2004, both omissions were laid bare in practice. States played a key role in shaping the terrain of the election, but they did so in large part through cross-border political and financial alliances that worked together to

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<sup>84</sup> These are all historic (Salvadoran) solidarity organizations or second wave organizations, like SANA, many of which operate at the national level in the U.S. See Appendix for full names.

create a context of fear and the threat of warm relations between the U.S. and El Salvador turning sour. For many Salvadorans in the homeland, the connections between contexts are a true lifeline. The relationship not only facilitates financial aid and the promise of projects, such as those delivered through USAID; more importantly it permits the open flow of billions of dollars in remittances and frequent renewal of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), the latter of which allows more than 200,000 Salvadorans to work legally in the U.S. and send money home.<sup>85</sup>

Back in 2003, when asked where the epicenter of SANA's work was focused, organizer Mario said, "The work is focused here [in the U.S]. We cannot have a repeat of the conditions that caused us to leave El Salvador." "So the work is connected?" I asked. "Totally connected! Cannot be separated!" Mario replied with agitation. For the casual observer, Mario's statement feels like a "disconnect." But in fact, it reveals a deep experiential and political truth. For transnational activists, the link between contexts, in this case the lived effects of the relationship between the U.S. and Salvadoran states, is not irrelevant, abstract or theoretical. That relationship is deeply imprinted on the lives of these individuals and embodied in their very personal experiences of violence, displacement, loss, political closure and – also – the possibility for change.

The juxtaposition of the two most recent presidential elections in El Salvador, and, specifically, the work done and *corrections made* in the strategy used by transnational activists from one election to the next, reveal important insights into both the political reality within which such activists operate and their best targets for effective action. The larger contextual lesson learned is that when power relations exist between two countries, political sovereignty (and political change) for the less powerful nation is qualified. As such,

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<sup>85</sup> USAID in El Salvador funds a wide swath of projects in areas like health, education and disaster relief. In this case, TPS was a disaster relief measure passed in 2001 and consistently renewed since then.

the work of transnational activists is often as much about promoting U.S. neutrality in the political processes of their homeland (or working to shape the particular *type* of relationships that exist between state actors in the home and host) as it is about their own direct action and intervention in El Salvador.<sup>86</sup>

In different terms, both the constraints on and the opportunities for immigrant transnational action are located largely in the connection between states. The work is facilitated and enabled by the embodied wisdom of the immigrants and their unique location between polities, which permits distinctive (albeit restricted) potential to influence both the diplomacy of the hostland and the politics of the homeland.

As the historical background section of my introduction details, this larger geopolitical context and the strategies that exist for being an active player within it are not new to Salvadoran American transnational activists. In the 1980s, these same individuals spent more than a decade working for U.S. neutrality during the internal conflict between the rightwing-backed military dictatorship and the opposition forces. The idea then was that, internally, El Salvador was ripe for change; without U.S. military aid, the country could arrive at a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, even if it took a civil war. U.S. financial and tactical support for the ruling dictatorship tipped the balance severely to the right (despite counter support from both Cuba and the Soviet Union), dampening immense popular momentum towards social change.

Since that time, the U.S. has continued to work to influence the politics of this small nation, albeit through less violent methods. Hence, Salvador's quote in the opening to this chapter: after enduring the violence that accompanied U.S. intervention throughout the 1980s, after the FMLN laid down its arms and worked to transform itself from a clandestine

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<sup>86</sup> Note that this was the case in the Solidarity Movement as well.

organization into a popular and legal political party, would the U.S. still not allow Salvadorans to decide their own fate?

### Chapter Foci

In this chapter, I transition from the work of culture, ethnicity and the politics of recognition explored in the previous chapters, instead focusing on the civic and political work carried out by SANA strategists and their allies. Rather than see the festival as the main platform for that work, here I move outside the terrain of the festival, treating *Día del Salvadoreño* as just one of many venues and vehicles through which immigrant leaders, such as the SANA directors, work to create political community amongst Salvadoran emigrants, on the one hand, and to integrate the politics of homeland and host, on the other. Here I describe the embodied wisdom and methodology that the activists utilize, drawing on two Salvadoran elections to illustrate my points. My work in this chapter is largely descriptive, focusing on the work organization leaders did, and how they learned from their shortcomings, revamping their strategy from the election of 2004 to the victory of 2009.

While academic students of transnationalism sometimes have a hard time locating the state in their analyses, transnational activists like the SANA leaders and their allies have a very clear and personal understanding of the role of the state, a form of knowledge I call their embodied political wisdom. SANA's practical, political work always starts from this vantage point. Their methodology derives from a deep understanding of the ways that their two country contexts are connected, a growing awareness of their unique position between political fields, and a cognizance of how their host and homelands can be both "positively" and "negatively" integrated in practice. That understanding derives from their experience of war, migration and the solidarity movement of the 1980s, and is continually reaffirmed in the present era.

Focusing on how immigrant “transnationalists” work – what situated political wisdom they bring to the table, what methods they employ, what vulnerabilities are revealed and what corrections are made from one election to the next – tells us a great deal about both the power of the state and the unique role that activists occupy in challenging, mitigating and directing it. The 2004 electoral loss in the homeland was a stark and painful reminder to SANA activists of the ongoing importance of political connections between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments, and the constraints contained therein. The strategy pursued by ARENA in tandem with the Bush administration and other conservative political allies in the U.S. revealed paralyzing restrictions on activists’ desires and work to bring the FMLN to power in the homeland. But with strategic analysis, the loss also revealed the potential opportunities in that relationship. Experience past and present taught the activists that their leverage point was not political work in El Salvador or the U.S. per se, but rather in the relationship between the two.

No matter how SANA activists describe the work, whatever rhetoric they choose, observation shows that, in practice, their political work over the last decade and a half has been focused on a two-pronged set of goals. The first is working to convert the Salvadoran American population from solely an economic power (as *remeseros* or HTA members) into a source of political power, especially in homeland affairs. The second goal is shifting the relationship between the U.S. and Salvadoran state, transforming that liaison from default U.S. support of the Salvadoran rightwing to a more equitable relationship of interchange – one that would support a major political shift in El Salvador, if that is what the population so desires. Each goal lends itself to a different mobilization frame, the first drawing on shared ethnicity or nationality, and the second drawing on democracy and anti-imperialism.

Over a period of more than a decade, the activists worked on these two goals through three concrete methods or practices: First, they created pan-Salvadoran

institutions, platforms and frameworks with the goal of politicizing and leveraging the Salvadoran-American population in regard to homeland and hostland affairs. Secondly, they engaged in intense diplomacy campaigns, aimed at creating a network of civic and political allies in the U.S. that would support a policy of U.S. neutrality and would commit to working with a democratically elected FMLN government. Finally, they used their organizing skills to implement innovative election observation tactics – what, in the spirit of labor campaigns, could be called *guerilla* tactics, which move outside the limited terrain of the election booth and draw on their connection to and membership in the U.S. to damage the rightwing ARENA election machine.

The activists' goals are not just oriented towards electoral change in El Salvador. Rather they are concerned with myriad issues such as migration, trade policies, and economic reform. In what follows, however, I illustrate how these three practices were carried out by drawing on evidence collected over two election cycles in El Salvador. Before launching into that description of transnationalist methodology, I step back from the detailed analysis of *Día del Salvadoreño* presented in the prior two chapters and provide a somewhat broader view of the political context in which the festival emerged.<sup>87</sup>

### **Celebrating Culture or Producing Political Community? *El Día del Salvadoreño* in Broader Perspective**

There is a popular song, written by the Venezuelan composer, Alí Primera, which is dedicated to the Salvadoran [class struggle/anti-imperialism]. It is entitled "*El Sombrero Azul*" but is popularly remembered for its refrain, "*¡Dáale Salvadoreño!*" There is no perfect translation for the phrase *dáale*, but in this context it holds the sentiment of something

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<sup>87</sup> This chapter includes the voices of a larger tier of activists beyond SANA, including members of other Salvadoran organizations, FMLN-LA and activist contacts from the East Coast and Canada. Unless otherwise indicated, I was present for all the events/interactions described here, including campaign rallies, speeches, strategy meetings and election monitoring missions in El Salvador.

between “go for it!” and “give it to them!” In between a call and response of *dále*, the song’s refrain reads, “There exists no little bird that, after taking off, stops in midflight.”

In the song writer’s tribute, this little bird is the tiny nation of El Salvador, involved in its own, internal struggle while simultaneously fighting against intervention from its powerful, “imperialist” neighbor to the north. For many Salvadoran migrants, this song takes on added meaning. People describe the song as a bridge of nostalgia that connects them to their homeland while reminding them of El Salvador’s difficult and divided past. At the same time, the song affirms pride in their present “Salvadoran-ness” and the struggles that this identity embodies, including the processes of migration and integration in the United States. Almost every pep talk at *Día del Salvadoreño* starts off with the organizer’s signature call and response of *Dáaaaaaaaaaale!*

For transnational activists, however, the song digs deeper. The message about *lucha* [struggle] connects their hopeful Salvadoran youths to their present U.S. reality. For these activists, *El Sombrero Azul* is about a struggle that began many years ago, and while some activists have been killed or dropped out or turned coats along the way, for many leftist Salvadoran activists that struggle has never yielded; it has merely changed forms. By the 1990s, activists like Salvador and Werner had come so far in their own activist journey, come so close to change and witnessed so many personal and collective sacrifices that they were simply not going to give up midflight. The trick was to re-invent themselves for a new phase of life and a new stage within the struggle, to think outside the box, and to show that while the state shapes the terrain, well-organized and dedicated migrant activists can engage a creative and truly sustained flight of resistance.

Recall in chapter three, when SANA first created *Día del Salvadoreño* the Salvadoran-American community in the U.S. was in a different era altogether. The reality that much of the parent-generation was making L.A. its permanent home was just beginning to sink in



and truly be accepted. Former Solidarity activists were turning to new endeavors, focusing on hometown associations and U.S. integration. The second generation was still very young – entering primary and middle school. And pride in Salvadoran-ness was barely emergent. There were a few small-scale events in town plus a couple pan-Central American events, like the Independence Day Parade and *La Feria Agostina* in MacArthur Park, the latter of which leaned rightward in its politics. But there was nothing to tie it all together. As activists remember it, the idea that it was cool to be Salvadoran or that young people would soon be wearing hipster shirts reading, “*guanaco*” or “*cipote*” [slang for “Salvadoran” and “kid”] was almost inconceivable.

As described, SANA came onto the scene with *Día del Salvadoreño* in 2000, and it was an immediate success. Meanwhile, similar events were indeed emerging organically within different parts of the city and country. The timing for this emergence – both organic and strategic – makes sense. Stepping back from the SANA leaders’ particular experience, the 1990s marks a distinct “moment” in the life cycle of the Salvadoran American community as one generation accepted the community’s permanence in the U.S., the second generation began to come of age, and activists moved from a battle for survival to a moment of reflection and reconnection. SANA’s contribution to that moment was not so much the creation of a festival as it was the creation of a civic opening and infrastructure upon which to build via the national recognition of August 6th.

By the writing of this chapter, there are so many Salvadoran Day events in the U.S., Canada and Australia that they are literally difficult to count. Searches have turned up nearly a dozen events in Southern California alone, with major festivals in Washington D.C.

and New York as well.<sup>88</sup> Even festivals developed as political rivals or counterparts to SANA's festival draw on the institutionalized date and name, modulating and consolidating efforts. What one critic once said about SANA's creation rings true today: "The infrastructure does not belong to [SANA] although they have taken ownership. It now belongs to all the Salvadorans in the U.S."

It is fair to say that SANA's work has been a constitutive part of the ensuing and still emergent Salvadoran pride movement. It was a simple thing, one founder recalls: "We said, 'Hey man, don't forget where you come from. We are *Guanacos*. Yes, we are Latinos, but we are *also* Guanacos, and that is ok.'" Since 2000, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation has come on the scene loud and proud. Cultural organizations are exploding, an established music scene has developed, and a cohort of gifted, young Salvadoran intellectuals, artists, political hopefuls and academics are becoming increasingly visible, taking up high-status professional positions, collaborating, and paving a path forward. The Salvadoran community has also begun the task of studying and documenting itself through Central American studies programs, oral histories, autobiographies, analyses, art shows and photo essays.<sup>89</sup> And although still underrepresented in elected office, Salvadorans remain highly overrepresented in civil society leadership positions, playing key organizing roles in NGOs and labor unions.

But, for SANA – like others – the goal of instilling awareness and pride in being "guanacos" has never been an endgame. "What is the point of asserting identity without progress? What sense does it make? It only makes sense within the context of fighting for opportunity, accountability!" Mario articulated. He continued, "*Día del Salvadoreño* is a

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<sup>88</sup> The festival in Hempstead, NY, has grown to be as big as SANA's festival and, in its peak years, looks poised to take over as the largest gathering of Salvadorans outside El Salvador, with an audience in the tens of thousands.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Pérez 2007 and Segura 2010; also, note the development of a Central American Studies program at Cal State Northridge and coursework at UCLA.

celebration of identity and that is a *first step*. But later it will be a celebration of success and of victory.” As described in prior chapters, in the minds of the SANA founders, identity has always been tied to exploring the lived trajectory of the Salvadoran population – the class struggles that have defined much of El Salvador’s modern history and the role that U.S. foreign policy has played in the country and region. For these leaders, in turn, this effort is part of a larger critique of the Salvadoran rightwing, its relationship with the U.S. state, and a vision (or more accurately *mission*) of political change in both homeland and host. Discovering one’s “identity,” they assert, should not be about promoting *pupusas* and wearing blue and white alone.<sup>90</sup> Rather, “identity” should call people to deal squarely with the historical record, and the politics, violence, and class dynamic therein.<sup>91</sup>

Like the response it received, the timing of SANA’s initial strategic intervention in the political trajectory of the Salvadoran American population also makes sense. As noted in chapter three, *Día del Salvadoreño* was in many ways an organic response to the cultural crises experienced by its founders as they grappled to accept the end of the war and their permanence in the U.S. But it was also created just a few years after the signing of the peace accords in 1992, as a response to what was happening in El Salvador. The creation and migration of the *Divino Salvador* image and the first large scale festival in 2000 followed the first two elections cycles of the postwar era. The continued power of the rightwing following the civil war, the steadfast support of the U.S. government for those administrations, and the presentation of FMLN candidates that SANA leaders did not fully support, provided an impetus for intervention even if they were not sure just what role their emergent event and organization could play.

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<sup>90</sup> *Pupusas* are a type of stuffed, hand-made tortilla very specific to and highly identified with El Salvador

<sup>91</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, this is part of the struggle against the cultural encoding and depoliticization of Salvadoran “ethnicity.” There I note Beth Baker Cristales’ work on the transition in the Salvadoran community from class to “ethnic” identification (Baker Cristales, 2004). She tackles the question of “why?” In chapter four, I begin to explore “how?”

An even more urgent but related catalyst, was the perception, noted briefly in chapter four, that the rightwing ARENA party was engaging a 180 degree shift in regard to its relationship with the Salvadoran population living in the U.S. ARENA officials began “reaching out” to former enemies – namely the leadership of the Salvadoran-American organizational infrastructure – encouraging remittances and involvement in the homeland from the “*hermano lejano*,” and attempting to tap the vast population of Salvadorans living outside the homeland as potential remitters, investors, liaisons and party supporters.

From early on in the organization’s trajectory, SANA leaders were enraged by this “outreach” or *oportunismo*, as they called it, disturbed by the character of the U.S. presence in the postwar life of El Salvador, and hopeful about the possibility of Salvadoran Americans playing a role in influencing the next election in El Salvador. “Oh I loooove the idea that we could influence the next election in El Salvador!” one leader said early on. It was as though such influence was a delicious pipedream, floating out there on the horizon somewhere well out of reach. But through the work of the elections of 2004 and leading up to 2009, leaders began building a platform, honing a strategy, articulating a vision and reactivating a network of allies. The context had changed, but, in their minds, the revolution certainly was not over. In fact, for supporters of Schafik Handal, a leader who had always advocated social change through the electoral process, his presidential bid in 2004 brought history full circle.

In the time that passed after the signing of the peace accords, SANA leaders continued to solidify their relationship with the FMLN. As Chamba put it: “If in the past [the relationship] was like a captain and his lieutenants, now the relationships are at the maximum level.” Unlike emigrant leaders with connections to other leftist factions, many of whom broke away from the FMLN, died, shifted right or were pushed *out*, SANA leaders remained steadfast in their support of the party. As the orthodox faction with which they

were historically aligned became a dominant voice within the FMLN in El Salvador, these emigrant leaders moved from a marginalized role in the war era to a more central role in the postwar era, often occupying the role of gatekeeper, mitigating and controlling access between FMLN *dirigentes* [leaders] and the larger population of Salvadorans present at events like *Día del Salvadoreño*. In a related move, they worked to solidify contacts with several key, elected officials and civic leaders in U.S.

In the five years that passed between the elections of 2004 and 2009, activists also gained additional experience on the ground in community and labor organizing, as lead organizers with powerful organizations like AFSCME, the SEIU, Change to Win, and OneLA (of the Industrial Areas Foundation). And by 2008, they were fresh off more than a full year's work on the Obama campaign as individuals and through their work in unions. For some, this organizing was a full-time, paid job.<sup>92</sup> As in the past, as individuals they continued to walk precincts with their families and friends in the U.S. for political contests at all levels of governance. But, perhaps most importantly, by 2009, they had also returned to El Salvador to monitor several key elections (two presidential and several legislative and municipal), gaining insights into the electoral process *there*.

Thus in the five years that passed between presidential elections in the homeland, leaders gained a firmer understanding of the way politics would be played in the postwar era. They had a better sense of where power was located and what their unique skill-set and position was as Salvadoran-born U.S. citizens. This meant that they were no longer naive to the game-changing impact of propaganda campaigns launched against the FMLN in El Salvador, the tacit support of these campaigns by U.S. conservative allies, or the general geopolitical conditions (or connections between states) that greatly stacked the cards against political change in El Salvador. They also had a growing awareness in the potential

of a Salvadoran immigrant population that could transition from an economic force in the homeland to a political one and confidence in their potential as lobbyists who could play a small but important role in influencing the official opening stance of a newly elected Obama administration towards Latin America.

Fortunately for them, El Salvador's March 2009 presidential election was the first such election within the Americas to take place on Obama's watch, making it an important symbolic stage for what geopolitical message Obama would send to his neighbors throughout the region and how he would attempt to define himself in contradistinction to his hawkish, ultra neoliberal predecessor. The question was, if emigrant activists could help influence perceptions about the FMLN candidate in the hostland while simultaneously setting a climate for elections in the homeland free of interference and intimidation, were the citizens of El Salvador ready to vote for change? In what follows, I detail the three-step methodology developed by SANA activists and their allies in influencing that cross-border context.

### **Method 1. Beyond Nostalgia and Remittances: Politicizing "Salvadoreño" in the Hostland**

#### Creating a Broad Platform

"Los Angeles is a strategic city for El Salvador with 800 thousand or more *Salvadoreños!*" Chavelita, now in her mid-70s, was giving a pep talk to activists gathered for the FMLN's presidential campaign kickoff event in Los Angeles in November 2008. "This only works if we are involved in the campaign," she continued. "If you noticed during the Obama campaign, those *estados ya definidos* in the US went on and worked for the other states." Then tapping the emotions of everyone in the room: "This campaign did not start today. It started YEARS ago!" A loud response went up from the crowd, shouts and murmurs

of affirmation. “A lot of family and friends gave their lives for this!” another activist continued, his voice growing stronger as he connected the dots from the violent past to the present election in El Salvador. “The moment has arrived,” declared a Filipino priest, drawing on his own homeland experience, and standing in Solidarity with the activists. “Don’t let it slip away!”

This campaign kickoff event, held at a large Presbyterian church in Los Angeles, had a particular energy and urgency to it. In part, that energy could be felt simply by the presence of a slightly wider population of leaders than normally attend FMLN-LA events. As noted, Funes’ candidacy had already mobilized broad coalitions of activists and entrepreneurs, many of whom had had a hard time seeing eye-to-eye in past elections. [FN] As several speakers at the event reminded the crowd, not everyone supporting Funes this election was an FMLN militant. Rather, they were united by a “common denominator” – the urgent need for change. But despite the energy of those present at this kickoff event, the overall turnout was decidedly dismal. “*Son los mismos de siempre* [it’s the same crowd as always!],” one critic later remarked. Another friend, visiting from El Salvador, chimed in. “You still have some militant standing on stage screaming ‘¡COM-PA-ÑEROS, TA-TA-TA!’ [imitating the form of campaign speech]. It’s just plain scary sounding!” she quipped.

On two different summer occasions, just 15 and then 3 months prior, the story was quite different. As described in the introduction, in August of 2007 and 2008, when Mauricio Funes took the stage at the *Día del Salvadoreño* events in Los Angeles, the excitement and enthusiasm of the crowd was palpable. Rather than a room of a hundred believers, the festival crowds were comprised of a totally mixed bag of tens of thousands of people. There were as many young people as old. A walk through the parking lot and surrounding streets confirmed that people had arrived on foot, bike, and by bus; the parking lot was home to old trucks and beater minivans as well as BMWs, and a large number of

brand new SUVs. As usual, one could pick out a sizeable presence of overt FMLN supporters, but in general the crowd was dominated by the rank-and-file, many of whom are apolitical, purely religious, nominal lefties or even ARENA supporters.

Sitting in a diner in 2007, Chamba and I discussed SANA' strategy for political change in El Salvador. At the time, the tensions at *Día del Salvadoreño* had begun to climax. As described in the last chapter, the "political" and "cultural" elements of the festival were increasingly at odds, and the festival form was actually hampering the organizers' ability to carry out political activity as they wanted. "Why not organize around a more revolutionary message and packaging? Why not just be more outright in that political identity?" I asked.

"We simply can't do that," Chamba responded, explaining the strategy to create a broad platform. If we did, he continued, "then part of the people would feel excluded. This would be a huge turnoff to people. So we have to look at a more [holistic] Salvadoran platform, one that isn't overtly political. Otherwise, it would be death with the crowds and other connections. And it wouldn't fly with the [U.S.] politicians here." He went on to say that the leaders of the organization know what they believe in personally. We are unwavering in our critique of the rightwing, he said. But we must reach an audience larger than ourselves.

Creating a broad platform with mass mobilization potential, as described in chapters three and four, and then leveraging the crowd to rally and attract political allies has been a centerpiece of SANA's strategy to affect change in their two country contexts. That mobilization provides an effective, alternative stage from which to raise the opposition voice and a key form of political capital for its organizers. Importantly, it also creates a venue in which organizers can present an agenda of civic education – one in which the emigrant population is pushed to look beyond their economic contributions to the home and host and encouraged to consider their political potential as well. As such, *Día del*



*Salvadoreño* constitutes part of the immigrant infrastructure through which representation is sought and political community is made.

### Civic Education and Political Consciousness

As previously mentioned, SANA has created a deliberate, demarcated space at the festival for civic education and politics – the “civic ceremony.” It is here that issues like the renewal of TPS, driver’s licenses for immigrants, the Dream Act and concern about mass deportations and economic strife are addressed. U.S. Representatives and civic actors are called to the stage, asked to speak to the crowd, and publicly told they will be held accountable for the promises they are making to the Salvadoran people. Likewise, invited Salvadoran diplomats, leaders and candidates visiting from the homeland take this moment to raise salient issues, attempting to connect with their emigrant population at an emotive level.

In lieu of delivering dry politics, the civic ceremony is structured in such a way that it further taps the crowd’s nostalgia and sense of deep connection to El Salvador. The SANA leaders and guest speakers draw on cultural connections and symbols, like *El Divino Salvador*, and use them to connect with the crowds’ feelings of sacrifice, nostalgia, loss, anger and pride, challenging them to channel these emotions into an investment in their future in both the U.S. and El Salvador.

For example, festival goers are reminded that they are citizens or residents in the U.S. and that they pay taxes for a reason; they have a right to be treated with dignity and an obligation to work for change in their hostland city and country. Likewise, they are reminded that they are not just supporting their families in El Salvador through remittances for nothing. Rather they are contributing to the future of their homeland, and they should both care about and have a say in what happens there.

For example, in 2008, Funes used the festival stage to tell the crowd: “All of you have worked and lifted El Salvador up [...] you with your work sustain the Salvadoran economy. [But] unfortunately no government has recognized your right to vote, your right to elect, your right to help shape the path of this country!” In a less than subtle critique of previous administrations, Funes reminded the crowd that their hard-earned money sent in the form of familial support should not be used by the Salvadoran government as an excuse to do nothing – a reason to continue to “export migrants” while failing to take constructive steps towards stimulating a more productive home economy.

The civic ceremony creates a space for introducing the crowds to actual people and issues, but, more generally, provoking them to feel curious about or invested in those issues and places, and possibly even roused to action. There is a broad sense of *civismo*, of pride, of individuals mattering and making a difference, and the important element, as emigrants and immigrants, of being HEARD by representatives. “This [speech] is a recognition of YOU,” Funes exclaimed in 2008. Ana Sol Guitierrez of Maryland (D-MD House of Delegates) ended her speech by saying, “You are the *mero mero* [the real deal]. And we celebrate you!”

Through this component of the festival, event organizers work to create a unified body, a politicized emigrant entity that can be later mobilized towards *particular* ends.

### Introducing representatives and candidates

At the center of the political work event organizers carry out is the presentation of political representatives. As described at length in chapter four, the practice of featuring candidates and elected officials at ethnic festivals in the U.S. is nothing new; it goes with the territory. As U.S. political staffers attest, for U.S. politicians, showing up at these events is “just part of the job description” – both a duty and a method for connecting with constituents.

Watching the event year after year, one can almost begin to pick out a universal script used by representatives at different levels of governance: some point of symbolic connection to the immigrant population through mention of an important historical event or experience in their collective life (or sometimes even just a type of food!) and mention of the beauty of events “like this one” that make our “multicultural city” what it is today. There is often a moment of connection to the past and mention of the way that immigrants have built this country. Finally, there are promises, and calls for mobilization around more local issues in the district, city or state.

The presence of U.S. political leaders is often coupled with one or two special visitors from the homeland. For SANA leaders, showcasing representatives and candidates for Salvadoran government posts is central. Such guests are routinely brought to the stage, introduced to the crowd, and, very often, given a chance to address their emigrant population. This is the moment when candidates for high office, like Mauricio Funes, can work the “soft vote” and push for awareness and investment in issues back home and those that relate to immigration in general.

As with any election, some of this is pure pandering and some is a genuine form of collective education and affirmation, as candidates bring reports of problems plaguing the homeland, including emigration itself – often giving official voice to complaints that festival-goers have held themselves or have heard from family members still living in El Salvador. This “reporting” and request for attention to issues can be seen as a deliberate process of validating emigrants’ experiences and bringing them into the national “loop.”

To date, no guest at the festival has done this work more compellingly and convincingly than Mauricio Funes. While prior candidates used a nostalgic language of connecting to the *hermano lejano*, Funes repeatedly stressed the experience of migration from the perspective of *migrants* rather than from the perspective of the homeland state or

family members living there. This is nicely highlighted in the speeches he gave at *Día del Salvadoreño* in both 2007 and 2008, and his closing speech delivered to activists and professionals at the SEM conference in 2007.

During each of these visits he demonstrated this aptitude for connecting with the concerns and habitus of the emigrant crowd. His speech is not overly politicized in recognizing the experience and work of refugees, who fled the country and yet maintained their connection to the struggle for change. Rather, he leaves war baggage behind, moving into the present moment and drawing on the *commonality* of the migrant experience as lived by the vast majority of the crowd at the event.

Speaking as a presidential candidate in 2008, Funes delivered this compelling speech from the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño* to an energetic crowd spontaneously erupting into chants of “Funes! Funes! Funes!”:

Friends, brothers and sisters, compatriots, we dedicate this to all those true heroes that have crossed the southern border of the Unites States. We dedicate this to our brothers and sisters that left El Salvador because, there, they could not earn a decent wage. They have not found life conditions that are just or acceptable for themselves or for their families. These heroes that have risked, that have paid a coyote, sold their lands, and their goods, to come and fulfill their dream ... these heroes who have lived and worked for years in the U.S., who suffer persecution, to whom they don't want to give work permission despite the fact that they come to contribute with their work and their taxes to the betterment of this country, these heroes who in addition to leaving to get ahead [...] work hours upon hours to help their families move ahead in life, these heroes who send what dollars they have to El Salvador so their families live better. This is a recognition to all of YOU, all of you have worked and have lifted El Salvador up!<sup>93</sup>

Over the course of a decade, SANA has brought Salvadoran candidates and representatives to the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño* from all levels of governance and from a spectrum of affiliations and tendencies within the FMLN; leaders that historically have been aligned with

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<sup>93</sup> Audio recorded at the event.

*Las FPL* and the *Partido Comunista* factions of the FMLN and are currently identified with both the orthodox and “renovador” movements within the party.

With all of these candidates, one trend remains constant: unless put in a politically intractable position, rather than providing the Salvadoran rightwing an extra-territorial stage from which to speak, SANA has historically reserved their emigrant stage for the left voice; for candidates that represent the FMLN to meet with and make an impression on the emigrant audience. When rightwing candidates have been featured, it has been in conjunction and juxtaposition with historical figures on the left, as was the case in 2002, when SANA hosted both Vice President Quintanilla-Schmidt and Schafik Handal – as described in prior chapters.

This use of the festival puts SANA leaders in an important role of gatekeeper, controlling the access of politicians (both from the U.S. and El Salvador) to the larger crowds at their events, and to one another. This gives the organizers a form of leverage above and beyond what the humble status of their organization would otherwise permit. “Access is power,” one organizer explained behind the scenes of the festival one year. But bringing someone to the stage is always a risk, they explain. In planning meetings they deliberate carefully about the political orientation of their guests and the likelihood that those representatives will go on to hold high office.

In 2004, for example, the mayor of San Salvador repeatedly asked for time at the microphone. SANA leaders were hesitant to grant him access without prior vetting. In this case, an organizer explained, they needed to confer with *dirigentes* in the FMLN in El Salvador first and to make a political calculus. “We aren’t exactly sure who this guy is, politically speaking,” he said. Yes, he was an FMLN mayor and looked to be a hopeful, future presidential candidate due to his youth and popularity in San Salvador. But this popularity and probable candidacy had to be weighed against his reliability: What tendency in the

party did he represent and was there a chance he would split from the FMLN to a center party before launching his presidential bid, as mayors like invitee Hector Silva Arguello had done before him?

Critics ask whether this type of exposure for candidates is purely “symbolic” – a kind of rite of passage for U.S. and Salvadoran politicians, a pre-packaged routine that all parties engage in. Or can it actually play a role in affecting politics in the homeland?

In 2008, after Funes visited the stage of *Día del Salvadoreño*, he made clear just how crucial these visits were in his own mind and those of his political strategists. The visits were part of an unambiguous political calculus. Speaking with journalists, he explained that the “*voto duro*” in El Salvador was pretty much settled. “Now we have to fish in the sea of the undecided [...] Los Angeles forms part of this undecided vote not because they themselves will vote but because they influence the *animo* [motivation] of Salvadoran voters that live within the national territory.” Here he meant that emigrants wielded significant influence over their family members and contacts in El Salvador. Likewise, in 2004, Rivas Zamora indicated that his hands were full with work at home, but that he almost had no choice but to pay serious attention to the emigrant community for political reasons.

The importance and impact of the visits can also be confirmed in the degree to which they raise contestation and conflict. The tighter the race and the more influential the visit, the more protest is incited, be it in the form of physical protests at the sites of candidate speeches, like the festival in 2008, or through opinion pieces written by the opposition – such as the scathing criticism written by the Salvadoran consul general in *La Opinion* described in chapter four.

Finally, the political impact of these visits by Salvadoran candidates and elected officials is not tied to the event alone, where an audience of some 30,000 or more people

may pass through each day of the festival. Rather, the bulk of the impact lies in the press spin that follows the events. *Día del Salvadoreño*, *La Feria Agostina*, the SEM conference and other venues for visits by people like Funes are routinely reported in the major newspapers in El Salvador, such as *La Prensa Grafica* and *El Diario de Hoy*. The events are also routinely covered in the ethnic press in the U.S., including papers with large circulation, like *La Opinion*, *Hoy* and even the Los Angeles Times. Visits by popular figures like Funes or the Romero Brothers are also broadcast on television, including general Spanish language networks like Univision and Salvadoran specific “transnational” shows like Antonio Ayala’s *Hola El Salvador*. Furthermore, blogs and Youtube videos give the events an even larger grassroots impact and longevity through their preservation in cyberspace.

Orchestrating candidate visits is not only part of a general attempt to politicize the Salvadoran American population, motivating their participation in the political life of the homeland; it is also a way to play a role in a *particular* race or election through specific candidate exposure and information.

### Building Transnational Political Institutions

A final method for creating political community involves building more formal linkages and institutions for political participation in the homeland and influence in the hostland. In the years leading up to 2006, when SANA organizers were working for Congressional recognition of *Día del Salvadoreño* in the U.S., they directly tapped event crowds, circulating petitions, gathering signatures and building direct support for the initiative. Similarly, when SANA worked with SALEF on the San Salvador-Los Angeles Sister Cities initiative, the broad numbers mobilized at events like *Día del Salvadoreño* were clearly in play, as the mayors for both cities were spotlighted at the festival and courted in the more elite, behind-the-scenes galas that accompany it.

Astute politicians like Funes recognize this more direct impact that their visits with the emigrant population may have in the future. As noted, in his speech at the SEM conference in 2007, he made an urgent plea to Salvadoran emigrants to get *directly* involved with the life of the homeland. His goal was not to simply motivate increased remittances or community projects, rather he urged emigrants to work to make their political voice heard. He ended his speech by saying, “What I urge you, more than anything is that you demand participation in the destiny of our country [...] It is only in this way that the authorities in our country will respect you, not just as *remeseros* but as a force that has the capacity to decide.”

In lieu of solely asking emigrants to return to El Salvador to cast a vote or urging them to influence the decisions of family members voting there, he discussed the possibility of the emigrant vote, urging that, with 17 months until the election, it may still be a possibility for the presidential race in 2009. “I urge you, *compatriotas*,” he continued, “to demand your constitutional right [to vote in 2009].”

In sync with Funes’ call, SANA and other civic organizations have long discussed building momentum towards formally establishing extra-territorial voting – a step that, at the writing of this dissertation is in the works for the election of 2014. Funes and allies in the National Assembly succeeded in passing a law that would facilitate emigrant voting rights; meanwhile emigrant leaders formed cross-border committees to both pressure and serve as advisors for such a transition. Now organizations like SANA are working with consulates in Canada and across the U.S. to create the appropriate infrastructure for executing the vote (by mail) and spreading information to fellow emigrants about the official identification necessary to participate, where paperwork to receive it can be processed, and details about how the voting process itself will be carried out.



In the past, while the Salvadoran consulate has organized its own community events, it also routinely draws on Salvadoran organizations, setting up booths at events like *Día del Salvadoreño*, *La Feria Agustina*, and the Central American Independence Parade to re-inscribe people in TPS, for example. Now that the emigrant vote is in motion, organizations like SANA and events like *Día del Salvadoreño* constitute part of the necessary logistical infrastructure through which bodies will be mobilized and information spread.

Taken together, over the years, the components discussed here – the creation of an expansive mobilization platform, attempts at rallying the homeland political consciousness of Salvadoran Americans, the introduction of particular candidates and issues, and the infrastructure for building more formal political linkages – constitute part of a broader schema to convert the Salvadoran population from a population of emigrant *remeseros* to a population with political voice in the homeland, and potentially in the host.

## **Method 2. Making “Real Friends” and Redefining “Warm Relations”: Diplomacy and Lobbying in the Hostland**

We have to be prepared so that in the moment when change arrives in El Salvador, people will advocate so that FMLN leaders and candidates are not viewed as demons or monsters. [For this reason] we need to have developed real friends here. We need to have REAL friends.

When we came [fleeing the war], people helped us because they pitied us. [*Imitating*] ‘Oh those poor refugees coming from the war! Here is food, eat!’ You understand? There were some people that [helped us] with more wisdom and understanding about the cause, and because of this we have maintained our friendships with them. But there were a lot of other people here that helped us because they saw we were starving. And that’s ok, but it can’t be just that.

-Chamba’s house, private conversation, April  
2003

If the first method SANA has utilized to push for political change in the homeland involves the mobilization and politicization of the emigrant population, the second method

draws on direct diplomacy, networking, and lobbying efforts. Unlike the public work carried out through the festival, diplomacy and lobbying are largely closed door activities that lie more squarely in the terrain of experienced activists and the networks they continue to build and activate. These methods, in turn, build on the solidarity methods used during the civil war, but also draw on the infrastructure and street credentials garnered through institutionalization of new events like *El Día del Salvadoreño*. In this sense, the festival is not only about what occurs onsite; for SANA's leaders it is also about the legitimacy and leverage it provides.

While some of these lobby tools remain the same as in the prior era, Chamba's quote above points to an important recognition that the post-war era presents Salvadoran activists with a new set of challenges. Diplomacy efforts and direct lobbying of Congress and the State Department were pivotal tools utilized during the Sanctuary and Solidarity Movements (Perla 2008). But in that era, the context for action was replete with images of refugees that were literally running to save their lives; children, women, whole families, who arrived traumatized, disoriented and impoverished. There was a clear narrative and one that was hard to find fault with.

As Chamba notes, at that time, people largely supported the cause put forward by Salvadoran Americans because "*dabamos lastima*" [they pitied us, or literally, "we gave them pain"]. The war reality created a moral incentive for aid workers, religious leaders and U.S. politicians to involve themselves in the effort to stop U.S. support for the war. As political scientist Hector Perla aptly describes it, Salvadorans provided "the denunciation, on the ground information, moral imperative, and the call to action," while "North Americans provided the social networks, political capital, and knowledge of U.S. government and society" (Perla, 2010).

Once Peace Accords were signed, however, Salvadoran American activists describe an abrupt shift. Although some longtime North American activists continued to accompany Salvadoran Americans in their cause(s), immigrant activists were largely left to carry the torch of rebuilding the country and working for a new, democratic El Salvador alone. The war was over, but the country was in dire straits.

This work would thus have to be done within the difficult environment of economic crisis, pervasive poverty and un(der)employment, weak institutions, an all but absent middle class, and a deep marriage between the economic elite and the ruling political party (ARENA). Add to that an escalating gang problem created in the US and exported to El Salvador, the highest homicide rate in the western hemisphere, the sudden collapse of the coffee market, the highly unpopular dollarization of the economy, corruption and mistrust of politics and government institutions, and ongoing, mass emigration – to name a few major obstacles (Garni and Weyher 2013).

Moreover, as in the past, some obstacles to El Salvador's political development have been linked directly to its "warm relations" with the U.S. With Peace Accords signed nearly 20 years ago, Salvadoran American activists currently work to lobby their fellow U.S. citizens and elected officials in an era formally characterized by peace within and between their two nations; a "new era" wherein the U.S. is seen by the average U.S. citizen as a neutral force for aid and democracy in El Salvador. Upon closer look, however, activists see the new, post-war era as deeply influenced by the pre-existing legacy of "bilateral relations" between home and hostland governments – one in which the U.S. has consistently favored the Salvadoran rightwing party while remaining openly wary of the FMLN, its leftwing counterpart. This preference is pushed in what is, in all practical terms, a two-party state, complicating the seemingly straightforward hope for an effective counterbalance and alternative power to the rightwing.

In generous terms, democracy is defined differently by the different entities. In their practice, the U.S. government, particularly the Bush administration, defined it as having a Salvadoran government that is dedicated to free-trade, neoliberal economic policies, and the general upholding of the U.S. agenda in the region – effectively, a government that is a staunch ally and even an extension of the U.S. state. Alternatively, activists like the SANA leaders define democracy as the ability for the Salvadoran populace to do something they have never before had the opportunity to do: to make their own history and define their national path, not through armed resistance, but by directly selecting the political representatives of their choice in fair and transparent elections, free of intimidation or coercion from forces either internal or external to national borders.

For SANA leaders, the first step on that path is the work of diplomacy and network building. The second step is active lobbying on particular sets of issues, perhaps the most urgent one being neutrality in the elections.

### Diplomacy and Networking

Some of the activists' diplomatic work has indeed been built into the festival itself as described above, but it does not end there. But that is really just the public face of diplomacy. As described in Chapter three, festival organizers also hold a private kickoff ceremony in City Hall or arrange events within City Council. There, only the “heavy hitters” are present: elected officials, activists, sympathetic businesspeople and key civic leaders from both country contexts. These events provides a more intimate venue for the interchange of ideas and commitments, a venue in which politicians and leaders from both countries can familiarize themselves with one another and with the issues at hand.

More importantly, a trip to Los Angeles for something like *Día del Salvadoreño* is also usually part of a larger *gira* or “tour” in which Salvadoran politicians or political

hopefuls meet with a number of civil society organizations in addition to city, state, county and federal representatives throughout the U.S. They do so in offices, at dinner galas, and sometimes through presentations and recognitions within Chamber doors.

While figures as popular as (candidate) Mauricio Funes might directly seek an audience with U.S. elected officials, many Salvadoran officials and leaders (especially on the left) are dependent on the Salvadoran American leadership to open doors of access, arrange meetings and public events, find venues and speaking engagements, give advice about the best connections to make, and even to serve as linguistic and cultural translators. This dynamic is repeatedly evidenced through observation but is nicely summed up by Chamba in an interview when he says, “We introduce [FMLN visitors] to the contacts we have made here in the city, and this has allowed politicians from the FMLN to come and sit down with a Congressman, a City Council Member, an Assembly Member or Senator and exchange ideas about what is happening...” In this way, Salvadoran American activists facilitate meetings and manage access between the host and homeland representatives, bringing their various allies from each context together, building partnerships and weaving networks on the spot.

This work by Salvadoran American leaders is done with the hope that face-to-face meetings between FMLN and US elected officials will help to create real partnerships between the two, building familiarity and a bond of shared interests over issues like immigration. Together, officials from each side of the border exchange information about how to improve the immigration situation, with U.S. representatives citing difficulties “here” and Salvadorans explaining the causes of migration “there.” In some cases, it can even lead to the creation of a joint agenda – like a Sister Cities Initiative, or a measure to curtail gang violence.

These meetings can also be seen as part of a general campaign to transform the image of the FMLN – portrayed in the mainstream U.S. media as a group of leaders stuck in

the era of revolution. The transition from revolutionary entity to political party is an ongoing evolution, but leaders hope meeting FMLN representatives in their current roles as capable and respected government officials will reverse the image of a party unfit to move El Salvador in a more productive direction than their competition (ARENA) has in the past twenty years. Face-to-face meetings hold the potential to show leaders on both sides of the border that, as elected officials, they may have more in common than not.

As in the past, during the Solidarity movement, when North Americans made visits to a war-torn El Salvador as delegates, witnesses, and instruments for recording what they saw and reporting back, Salvadoran American leaders today also take the initiative to invite U.S. officials and civic leaders on trips to their homeland. Once in El Salvador, U.S. officials and leaders get a view of some of the struggles discussed in private office meetings first hand, building the intensity of the connection. While in El Salvador, SANA leaders regularly take these high-profile visitors to memorial sites from the war. Their itinerary also involves meetings with representatives in the Legislative Assembly, the Human Rights Ombudsman, union leaders, historic religious leaders, and NGOs dealing with internal issues, like development and the impact of emigration on the sending state.

Additionally, SANA invites leaders to participate in official work of “accompaniment” such as monitoring Salvadoran elections. There, the leaders may work alongside activists, internationalists, academics, religious leaders and, importantly, second-generation Salvadoran American youth. During electoral monitoring missions, special guests meet with Salvadoran leaders, speak with the press, and are generally held up as an example to the Salvadoran population that the international community cares about democracy and transparent elections in the region, and that such official guests are there to work for protection of the vote as well as to bear witness to any violations they see.

These trips are done not only for the value of the work itself but, as importantly, with the hope that such prominent visitors will be transformed by their own experience in the country, their interactions with leaders there and with the general populace.<sup>94</sup> If they are able to make a real intellectual and emotional connection, the thinking goes, the visitors may return to the U.S. with a better understanding of the country from which many migrants in their districts come, with insights into the ongoing legacy of U.S. intervention in El Salvador, and, often, with a conviction to accompany the process of democracy and productive development in this small, logistically important neighbor to the south.

These small points of connection and interchange, in turn, lead to the creation of a loose network of *conocidos* [contacts] and allies in the U.S. that can be activated in the case of a natural catastrophe or political emergency in El Salvador. Specifically, in political and electoral terms, these connections are part of an effort to stitch together a fabric of leaders in the U.S. willing to support Salvadorans' right to elect the leader of their choice, without interference from the U.S. embassy or more alarmist, conservative elements within the government. This can mean signing onto a petition to the President or State Department, speaking to the press about their concerns, or generally refusing to remain silent in the face of efforts by conservative leaders in both countries to manipulate the vote by construing the FMLN, in Chamba's words, as "demons and monsters" or by using the threat of severed relations.

As both the 2004 and 2009 elections show, the work to reverse demonization of the FMLN, recasting it as a legitimate and popular counterforce to ARENA remains an uphill battle. So too does limiting the U.S. government's reach into El Salvador's political field.

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<sup>94</sup> These tactics are not unique to Salvadoran immigrant actors, but rather constitute a popular method for creating networks between countries of origin and destination and working on particular issues.

### Lobbying for U.S. Neutrality

If the FMLN takes control of the government in El Salvador, it may be necessary for the United States authorities to examine closely and possibly **apply special controls to the flow of \$2 billion in remittances** from the United States to El Salvador--unfortunately to the detriment of many people living in El Salvador.

-Tom Tancredo (R-CO), House of Representatives,  
3/17/2004

If the FMLN enters the government in El Salvador it will be necessary for the U.S. authorities to consider all available information regarding the ties of the FMLN to violent anti-U.S. groups and designated terrorist groups and, on that basis, proceed toward the **immediate termination of TPS for El Salvador**. [... Also] it will be urgent to apply special controls to the flow of remittances from the United States to El Salvador, a sum that is currently \$4 billion per year.

-Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), House of Representatives, 3/11/2009

"As we look to the future, we must weigh the potential ramifications of this election and its impact on our relations--more importantly, the longstanding and open policies related to TPS and the flow of remittances. Madam Speaker, **the stakes are high this weekend for the people of El Salvador.**"

-Connie Mack (R-FL), House of Representatives, 3/11/2009

If one wonders why SANA leaders and other Salvadoran emigrant activists feel it necessary to invest time building a network of allies and supporters in the U.S., it may not be necessary to look much further than speeches like the one made by Tom Tancredo on the House Floor days before the 2004 election in El Salvador. There, as described in the introduction to this chapter, he threatened to introduce formal legislation to cut the flow of remittances to El Salvador in the case of an FMLN win. His speech was made just five days before Salvadorans went to the polls to vote in what was one of the more contentious political competitions since the signing of Peace Accords. Predictably, the news made a big splash in the Salvadoran print media – the two most popular Salvadoran papers being owned and operated by politically conservative families, one described by the U.S. Embassy as “the nationalistic voice of the elite old guard” (unclassified cable id 46984).



In 2004, the Bush Administration and U.S. Embassy in El Salvador made no effort to publicly debunk assertions like Tancredo's, explaining well after the fact that such statements are opinions held by individual members of Congress and do not reflect an official government position. That excuse for non-action was a tough pill to swallow, particularly after White House Special Assistant Otto Reich had phoned-in to a press conference stating that an FMLN win could seriously impact "economic, commercial, and migratory relations with the United States," and Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega had visited one month before the election, meeting with all candidates save the FMLN's, and publicly urging voters to "consider what kind of a relationship they want a new administration to have with us" (Elton 2004).

As described earlier in the chapter, these clear administration statements, extreme threats by conservative members of the U.S. Congress, months of menacing ARENA ads in the Salvadoran media and statements by Candidate Tony Saca – asserting that ARENA would be the only party that could assure “tranquility for our brothers in the United States” due to its “good relations” with the U.S. – all combined to create an electoral climate of extreme fear. Monitoring elections that year, a common question to North American delegates was, “They say that if the FMLN wins Salvadorans will be deported. Is that true?” (from personal interaction, fieldnotes, San Salvador, 3/04). For a population in which over 20% of families rely on remittances and most families have a relative or friend living in the U.S., such threats created a context in which a free and fair election in 2004 was nearly impossible (UNDP figures).

Although some pundits assert that U.S. involvement in the political field of El Salvador is not tantamount to deliberate “interference,” the Embassy cables leaked in 2011 called that assertion into question. One such classified cable written just six months before Legislative and Municipal elections in 2006, urges the U.S. government to enter into a

Millennium Challenge Corporation compact with Tony Saca's ARENA administration. Under a header entitled "Bilateral Warmth Bolsters Government," Charge d'Affaires Michael Butler sites a number of programs such as USAID and USDA projects which serve to "strengthen ARENA's hand" in the next elections. He goes on to write: "Signing a compact with the MCC would also help legitimize ARENA's economic program by showing it carries concrete benefits." All these projects, he writes, "provide the U.S. with multiple opportunities to showcase" the fruits of ARENA's relationship with the country and contrast it with "the FMLN's radicalism." He asserts, "Indeed, fears of a possible deterioration in [the relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador] likely played a *significant role* in the 2004 presidential election." (cable id 40260, emphasis added).

Later, a 2007, classified cable written by Ambassador Charles Glazer makes a strong case for renewal of Salvadoran's Temporary Protected Status in the U.S. After listing a number of humanitarian reasons for renewal, Glazer adds: "While there remains a clear statutory rationale for the extension of TPS again this year, the political implications of this issue cannot be underestimated. Such a massive deportation would be a political embarrassment for the [Government of El Salvador] in the lead up to the 2009 local, legislative and presidential elections that could provide a significant boost to the electoral prospects of the communist dominated and Chavez-supported FMLN" (cable id 94964). He goes on to state that ARENA has been one of the most important allies in Latin America during the rise of leftists popular regimes "unfriendly to U.S. interests."

The combination of evidence from the 2004 elections and these cables leaked in 2011 confirm a historic tendency in the United States' relationship with El Salvador that has been frustrating for activists but not surprising. In theory, the U.S. may desire democracy in El Salvador, but in practice only one electoral outcome is deemed acceptable; suffice to say democracy is difficult in a one-party state. Just as frustrating to emigrant activists is their

homeland state's manipulation and use of the "remittance and TPS card" for political gain, as mentioned in the introduction. Given ARENA's symbolic outreach to their *hermanos* living *en el exterior* and their reliance on this stream of income for postwar political stability, their decision to use remittances and legal status to influence elections has been viewed as 100% unacceptable by the progressive leadership of the Salvadoran immigrant population in the U.S.

In what follows, I show in more detail how organization leaders drew on both diplomacy and lobbying to revamp their strategy from the elections of 2004 to 2009.

#### Learning from 2004 (Saca v. Handal)<sup>95</sup>

In 2004, these two components – the threat to "warm relations" between the U.S. and El Salvador and propaganda about the danger to TPS and remittances – proved to be a brilliant electoral strategy for the rightwing and its allies in the U.S. Migrant activists began to worry about this propaganda surfacing in ads as early as the summer of 2003. By the *Día del la Paz* celebration in January 2004, in which SANA commemorates the signing of the Peace Accords, leaders were seriously concerned that misinformation and exaggerations about the threat to *remesas* and TPS would become the defining issue in the election. In February 2004, organization leaders took a trip to El Salvador to assess the situation and came back with a report. They quickly put together a large election monitoring team for the March 21 election, which included academics, activists, and elected officials, such as California Assemblywoman Cindy Montañez.

Once in El Salvador, it was clear that – per ARENA, the press, and select U.S. officials – preservation of the relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador hinged wholly on

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<sup>95</sup> Data for the sections to follow is primarily drawn from first hand observation of pre-election organizing, participation in election monitoring trips, and post-election analysis. This is supplemented with data from interviews, and secondary sources (particularly describing the three day lobbying effort in D.C. in 2009).

keeping an FMLN candidate like Handal out of office. Drawing on statements like Tancredo's and general remarks by Bush Administration officials about the relationship between countries, propaganda about an immediate ban on remittances and the deportation of all Salvadorans with TPS ran rife. Almost every day there was an ad or a headline in the paper about the two related topics.

As I describe in chapter three, just days before the election, SANA and fellow emigrant activists scrambled to put together a press conference. Representatives like Ed Reyes (D-LA City Council), Liz Figueroa (D-CA Senate), Cindy Montañez (D-CA Assembly), Ana Sol Gutierrez (MD-Assembly) and Howard Berman, represented by a staffer (D-CA), flew to San Salvador to dispel the misinformation about remittances and immigration status. But the conference came too late and made few waves in the Salvadoran press,

To add fuel to the fire, by the time election monitors made it to voting sites, not only was fear in the air, as importantly, fraud tactics that had been put into play days in advance began to surface. A number of recognizable voting irregularities were reported – old tactics like buying votes, being unable to match a voter's name to the official list (thus turning voters away), intimidating factory workers with job loss or, literally, not allowing them to leave the workplace, and bussing Central Americans from the surrounding countries to vote using fake ID cards or under the identity of people long migrated or deceased. As one voter exclaimed in frustration, "*Solo en El Salvador siguen votando los muertos* [only in El Salvador do dead people keep voting]!" – a common refrain in countries wherein voter fraud is a pervasive reality.

Following the election, SANA leaders were visibly devastated. It was not so much because their former *comandante* and leader, Schafik, was defeated. More so, from their perspective, it was the sensation that they had been cheated: that a "fast one" had been pulled on *them*, the immigrants who send remittances, whose relatives and friends have

TPS; that their community's precarious legal position, their hard earned and generously shared income had been *used* for political and financial gain by a host government that funded the war which buried their brothers and fathers and sent them fleeing to the U.S. in the first place; that conservative U.S. officials had worked in cahoots with a Salvadoran political party whose wealth had not diminished since the war but had only grown, all the while making a career in exporting migrants (or doing so little to improve conditions that those migrants had to choose to leave their families and export themselves); a party whose founder had since been well-documented as an advocate and leader of the death squads and mastermind in the assassination of Archbishop Romero. It was the sensation that the political dynamic was the same, and that nothing had changed.

But while the 2004 election was a painful experience for the organizers, it served an important role in pushing organizers to rethink their strategy. As 2009 approached, SANA leaders began actively discussing how to prevent a repeat of the scare tactics used in 2004.

#### Strategizing 2009 (Avila V. Funes)

SANA's on-the-ground experience of monitoring the 2004 elections, their analysis of ARENA's campaign strategy, and the pinpointing of vulnerabilities therein dovetails nicely with what was later revealed in the Embassy cables leaked in 2011. Although the leaked cables are incomplete data, they do point to a number of key patterns. First, the issues at play internally in politics in El Salvador, as per Embassy analysis, are the economy, migration and security (the homicide rate). The clear preferences of the Bush Administration Embassy were for an ARENA-led government. But Glazer and company also engaged in astute analysis of the internal dynamics within the FMLN, grasping the nuance of competing political tendencies.

Their clear point of view was that, while the FMLN hardliners are a thorn in their side and are excellent organizers, on some level, they are, in the ambassador's words, "the gift that keeps on giving." While a more centrist FMLN would be seen as less of a *foreign* threat, it might be a more serious *political* threat, in that its electoral power would be stronger. Hence, the cables' authors were heartened by the exodus of more moderate FMLN leaders, who might "split the leftist vote," and they questioned whether Funes' candidacy demonstrated an evolution of thinking within the party or merely a tactical shift (cable id 159471).

More important for the strategy of emigrant activists, the cables reveal that the U.S. areas of influence have to do with the obvious points of cross-border connection like immigration policy, foreign aid (in the form of projects or direct assistance), and the flow of remittances – all of which, in turn, stem from the "warmth" of the U.S. government's relationship to El Salvador. If the FMLN put forward a popular, likeable, "good left" candidate, the U.S. would have a harder time openly defying its own call to democracy in order to defeat him (see Perla et al).

That decision, about naming a candidate, was a task for the FMLN political committee. Emigrant activists, on the other hand, could draw on their own unique position to target that point of connection, maintaining and pushing for continued "warm relations" in the face of an FMLN win and exposing what could be called "the democracy hypocrisy." In other terms, their target was "YES to true democracy," "YES to free and fair elections," "YES to the will of the people," "YES to continued relations between governments," "NO to interference in El Salvador's election," and "NO to propaganda and fear about immigration status and hard-earned remittances." The lessons from 2004 were clear and the work was cut out for them. The key was to target the connection between states – flipping it from a

connection that would suppress the vote to a method for protecting and encouraging the vote. The tool of choice was a well-organized lobbying effort.

Clearly, ARENA and its conservative allies in the U.S. had received the memo, too. If the remittance and TPS cards worked well in 2004, in 2009 they were going to push them to the max. When interviewed by the press during a visit to Los Angeles for *El Día del Salvadoreño* in August 2008, candidate Funes said, “I notice that ARENA is not following the strategy of fear; they can no longer recreate the threat that they pushed for during the 2004 elections, when they said that in El Salvador communism was going to arrive, that the relationship with the U.S. would be ruined, that there would be hundreds and thousands of deportees and that remittances would stop” (Díaz 2008b).

But Funes was wrong; ARENA just hadn’t started yet. While also dwelling on Funes’ “precarious” relationship to the FMLN, and the ability of the “pro-Cuba, pro-Chavez” hardliners within the party to use and manipulate him, the campaign of fear echoed 2004, but this time with greater intensity. U.S. Representatives Connie Mack and Dana Rohrabacher’s statements about “special controls to the flow of remittances,” “immediate termination of TPS for El Salvador,” and being “obligated” to cramp down on these by U.S. laws that prohibit aid to terrorist entities are case in point: Cold War rhetoric again, but now with a splash of terrorism. Moreover, they asserted that it was not that the U.S. representatives wanted to ban remittances or deport immigrants. The government was *obligated* by law. And for Salvadorans dependent on remittances, and with lack of education or access to information, that was hard to argue with.

New ads surfaced on Salvadoran television, too, with allies or advisers to Obama speaking for him, representing his position as one of concern about the destruction of El Salvador (Gonzales 2009; Portillo 2010). Conservative Salvadoran newspapers were also quick to push into high gear. On March 12, just three days before the election, the lead

headline on page one of *El Diario de Hoy* read, “US CONGRESSMEN: ‘TPS AT RISK WITH FMLN.’ REPRESENTATIVES FROM FLORIDA AND CALIFORNIA WOULD CALL FOR STRICT CONTROL OF REMITTANCES.” Inside was a full spread under the header, “REMITTANCES AND TPS AT RISK IF THE FMLN WINS.” The sub-header read: “U.S. anti-terrorism laws would obligate Congress to demand harsh measures against a state with terrorist ties.” On the flipside a large title with some graphs and figures read: “AT RISK: BENEFITS FOR SALVADORANS,” “TPS: 250,000 people,” “Remittances: \$4 billion dollars, 20% of GDP.”

As in 2004, Representatives like Rohrabacher were strategic with the timing of their statements, delivering them just days before the election and leaving little time for a response. But emigrant activists and their allies had already been hard at work creating a response for more than six months.<sup>96</sup>

#### A Salvadoran Lobby and Reactivation of the Solidarity Network

Timing was everything in the final, official U.S. stance towards El Salvador’s election. Obama’s administration was keen to redefine itself in regard to its relationship with a Latin America that was quickly shifting left. In fact, Central American’s work on the Obama campaign was motivated, in part, by the possibility of a new relationship between the U.S. and the rest of the Americas. In the U.S. campaign video created by Funes and his running mate, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, Obama was congratulated multiple times for his bold campaign of hope and change, and, ultimately, for his electoral win. The video echoed the general population’s “hope for a new era and a new, positive relationship” between the two countries.

In this new climate, activists’ task was to shift the diplomatic and rhetorical context that defined the election in El Salvador, changing it from a message of fear and punishment

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<sup>96</sup> SANA and CISPES spearheaded the response described in the pages to follow.



for voting for the FMLN to one of U.S. neutrality. In 2008, SANA began partnering with other Solidarity organizations towards this end. Together they built a coalition of entities including SANA, SHARE Foundation, CISPES, FMLN base communities, *Empresarios por El Cambio* and a number of labor unions. A group of activists and academics took a fact-finding delegation to El Salvador, meeting with the Embassy there. Transnational businessmen – part of *Empresarios por el Cambio* – also traveled to San Salvador to meet with both Salvadoran and U.S. officials. Academics, spearheaded by Salvadoran American political scientist, Hector Perla, wrote a letter to the Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, urging a message of U.S. neutrality in the Salvadoran elections and emphasizing the importance of this election – the first in the region – for defining the message Obama would send to Latin America. One hundred and fifty academics signed on.

Simultaneously, SANA leaders and members of their coalition began meeting with local representatives in their respective states, educating them about what happened in 2004, pointing to evidence of its impending repetition, and emphasizing the injustice of manipulating hard-working immigrants and their families in El Salvador through threats to remittances and legal status. U.S. Congressmen, like Howard Berman (D-CA), were particularly concerned about the damage to and manipulation of Salvadoran immigrants in their districts; the remittance issue and the threat of deportations had hit a nerve (post-election analysis meeting; Portillo 2010). Liberal U.S. politicians were likewise angry about the attempt by conservative members of Congress to taint the official U.S. stance and openly interfere in the elections of this small, emergent democracy.

Through their meetings, SANA leaders found a number of key allies, like Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), who penned and circulated a letter to the Obama Administration, urging restraint and neutrality in the elections. In February, one month before the election, spearheaded by SANA, a group of 50 Salvadorans Americans, traveled from multiple states

to Washington D.C. They descended on Congress in a well-organized, three day lobby effort. There, they went door-to-door, meeting with representatives, educating them about the issues and urging support for democracy and neutrality. As writer-activist Portillo explains in a piece written for the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), the delegation's key targets were the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, the Hispanic Caucus, and the representatives of districts with sizeable populations of Salvadorans (2010: 28). Ultimately, Grijalva's letter gained the signatures of 28 members of Congress, including one senator.

The coalition of organizations went on to organize several press conferences in Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and San Salvador. Interviews with spokespersons like Grijalva and journalist Roberto Lovato were covered by press outlets Democracy Now and the Huffington Post. The elections in El Salvador, with analysis over the struggle for democracy, began making news in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, The Guardian and Christian Science Monitor, to name a few. In a press conference in San Salvador just days before the election, Howard Berman sent a staffer to deliver the following, definitive statement: "Sunday's election belongs to the people of El Salvador. As Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, I am confident that neither TPS nor the right to receive remittances from family in the United States will be affected by the outcome of the election, despite what some of my colleagues in Congress have said."<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, organizations like CISPES and Southwest Voter Registration activated their networks, the former organizing a national call-in day for fair and transparent elections. The old Solidarity networks, coupled with a new activist guard lit up the phone lines at the State Department. On March 11 Representatives Rohrabacher and company

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<sup>97</sup> Quote taken from first-hand recording at the press conference in San Salvador, and checked via the website: United States House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Democrats. [http://democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/press\\_display.asp?id=600](http://democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/press_display.asp?id=600) (accessed 9/22/13)

took to the House Floor with threatening statements. The statements made headlines in El Salvador on March 12<sup>th</sup>. Later that day, the U.S. Embassy posted a strongly worded official statement of neutrality on their website: “The U.S. Government will respect the will of the Salvadoran people and will seek to work constructively with whoever wins that election.” On March 13<sup>th</sup>, Embassy Charge D’Affairs Robert Blau met with the candidates from both parties. That meeting along with the Embassy statements were, in turn, widely covered in the press on March 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. Elections took place on March 15<sup>th</sup>.

Clearly, many stars aligned to change the context of the March 2009 election in which El Salvador elected its first-ever FMLN president. The U.S. had a brand new administration, eager to change the image of the U.S. in Latin America and to create new relationships. The region had seen a steady leftward shift, with countries throughout the Americas ushering in populist, leftist governments. Funes was a “good left” candidate in the spirit of Brazil’s president Lula da Silva. He was a beloved and popular candidate in El Salvador without “war baggage” – one that mobilized new sectors of society and won the widespread support of the emigrant population. Finally, the global economic crisis had hit El Salvador hard, with poverty and the homicide rate rising steadily.

Also important were the lessons learned on the ground by Salvadoran American activists in 2004, as they saw the way the connection between their host and homeland contexts could be exploited both by ARENA and conservative political allies in the U.S. In a hard learned lesson they came to understand how effectively those entities could manipulate the vulnerabilities of the immigrant population and their families back home. But those lessons, in turn, helped define a response strategy in 2009, which utilized the diplomacy and lobbying skills of veteran emigrant activists and their network to flip that connection and use it towards different ends. The end result was an electoral climate cleansed of fear, an emboldened Salvadoran populace, and a vote for change.

### **Method 3. Safeguarding the Electoral Process**

As indicated, in 2004, SANA activists were devastated by the tactics used in the election and so entered into analyses about the strategy of the FMLN and the meaning of this election. But perhaps some of the best insights came from the folk analysis of everyday people living in El Salvador – people like Maura, who cleans rooms at the Episcopal guesthouse where a small group of international monitors were housed. Hugging me, with a mop in one hand, Maura shrugged and said, *“The people just aren’t ready yet. They aren’t ready for change. But when they ARE, you will know it!”*

Maura was right. There was an air of complacency and fear that dominated the electoral climate in 2004. It is as though the game was moving quickly and no one was sure just exactly what was happening to them, what their role should be within it. That was true for transnational activists as well. For some, it was the first presidential election they were monitoring. Much effort went into following the formal protocol provided by their hosting entity, the FMLN.<sup>98</sup> SANA activists worked to gain their observer credentials, to figure out the logistics of getting to monitoring sites, to understand what their rights and responsibilities were there. They even spent time worrying about being let into the country to monitor in the first place – as some emigrant activists were scrutinized in the computer’s immigration control system and turned away. One member of SANA’s team that year was held for questioning; and a nun who was active in the Solidarity years was told by the immigration police that “you have been here a lot, maybe one too many times.”

That year, SANA activists dutifully reported to their observation sites, spread out across the country. They reported for their shifts at the polling centers, trying to observe

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<sup>98</sup> In El Salvador, most international observers are invited and trained by the political parties themselves and then credentialed by a neutral elections body (electoral board).

the mass chaos that ensued there, photographing anything that looked strange, and hearing constant reports of irregularities that they could not quite see – mostly because they were occurring outside the polling site itself. Leading up to the elections, many people informally interviewed on the street said that their bosses had informed them that they would not be allowed to leave work to vote (my interviews). Following the elections, there were reports of widespread fraud tactics, including “buying” votes and, more notoriously, buying them from people outside the country who were bused in from Guatemala and Honduras to vote using some type of false identification. Reports were made of warehouses where these individuals were hidden and housed. But by the time elections took place, it was as if the damage had been done.

If SANA’s first two methods for political change in the homeland involve politicizing and mobilizing the Salvadoran population in the U.S. and engaging strategic diplomacy and lobbying, their third method involves accompanying the election process itself as international observers. As with their lobbying campaign in 2009, following the 2004 elections, SANA and allies began to re-conceptualize the entire way they had thought about election monitoring. If fraud and fear were set into motion in the days before the election, then those were the days in which monitoring should occur. There would be many observers from other teams at the polling centers, doing what SANA leaders and their teams had done in the prior election. What they decided they needed was a more proactive, pre-emptive response team – a bicultural one – that could investigate and document the suspicious activity occurring outside the booth and publicize it in the Salvadoran and international press.

In 2009, again partnering with fellow organizations and base communities, SANA organized a large team of observers. The majority were Salvadoran Americans who were bi-cultural and better able to navigate the system and the surroundings during the week of

the elections. But, importantly, these emigrant activists were accompanied by many co-nationals that were now living in Canada and Europe, and by activists and internationalists from all over the U.S. and Latin America, including Chileans, Peruvians and Guatemalans to name a few. They were also joined by a lot of young people – both Salvadoran American and Anglo – who were deeply energized about safeguarding democracy in El Salvador and were fearless in their tactics. There was a large presence of activists with deep familiarity of Latin America, longtime religious leaders, and experienced labor leaders from the U.S.

With a team of around 100 people, SANA and allies set up shop in a building near FMLN headquarters. The effort was a joint one between the emigrant leadership and Salvadoran natives mostly affiliated with the FMLN. Together they gathered the teams and began to explain the system that would be put in place. It was a holistic, six-component monitoring system that involved: radio messaging, a 24 hour call-in center, a press report center, a set of multicultural reaction and investigation teams, the media upload and computer team, and a group of international and national lawyers, including members of the ACLU.

SANA and allies found great partners in “transnational” radio stations such as *Radio Cadena mi Gente*, a widely broadcast evangelical radio program run by a Salvadoran living on the East Coast. In the days leading up to the election a consistent call went out over the radio, reaching all corners of the country, and asking Salvadorans to participate in the safeguarding of their national elections. Salvadoran citizens from all walks of life were asked to call-in with reports of any suspicious activity. In turn, those calls were fielded by a team of twenty call center operators (both Salvadoran and Salvadoran-American), who wrote reports, noted the frequency of reports on a particular incident, and prioritized the reports for further investigation. Observers with intimate knowledge of the Salvadoran language and geography were concentrated in this department.

These reports were then passed on to the head organizers at the center – people like Werner (SANA, Central-American Parliament, AFSCME) and Fredy (FMLN Base Communities, Central-American Parliament, SEUI). The lead organizers, in turn, scrutinized the reports, engaged in reconnaissance, and then passed on field assignments to the dozen or so response teams. International monitors, especially North Americans, were concentrated in these teams to give the public the impression that the world was watching. Each team was comprised of four to five people; they had at least one emigrant Salvadoran, who could navigate the cultural terrain, one member who was visibly North American (in the spirit of “accompaniment”), and one native Salvadoran driver. Each team also had one experienced organizer in the mix, whether a labor leader or an activist. Each team was also required to have at least one good camera as well as audio and video recording equipment – the more massive and official-looking, the better. All members, except the driver, were required to be credentialed and wearing their observer vest and badge at all times.

The teams, in turn, were sent to the sites of reported activity; they investigated and documented what they saw there. Where reports of warehoused, foreign busloads had been made, the teams asked for entrée to search the premises. Everything was documented with video equipment, including interactions with the guards and supervisors at these sites. Sometimes, evidence, such as trash (with receipts or bags from Honduran or Guatemalan shops and stores) was collected or photographed. Salvadoran team members interacted with crowds of suspected foreign voters, assessing their accents, video-taping them. Spanish speaking North American team members hung back, pretending to not understand, and listening to or recording the interactions of supervisors. When situations grew tense, reinforcement teams were called from the response center and the radio stations made a call on the air for Salvadorans to come out of their houses and surround the sites, *vigilando*

peacefully, serving as witnesses. This, in turn, mobilized local television programs, which came out to document and publicize the scene on local and national news.

Returning reaction teams wrote up a report of their observations on a predesigned report form. They submitted these both to the lead organizers and to the computer and graphics team. Lead organizers decided whether there should be follow-up teams sent to the site, while the graphics team typed up the reports and downloaded the digital documentation, storing both report and digital evidence together. These short reports and accompanying pictures and videos were then passed on to the two remaining teams – to the lawyers, who assessed their viability as evidence in building a case for fraud, and to the press team, who uploaded the reports and pictures to an official blog and notified national and international press outlets as well as key members of the Solidarity network in the U.S.

Through the course of the two days leading up to elections, response teams were sent to a number of venues – to search and document human-storing warehouse facilities, sites where the crowds had stopped buses entering from the neighboring countries, and partisan street marches, booths and business banners (all of which are banned in the days immediately preceding the election).

One example of how the monitoring system played out occurred at the *Estadio Cuscatlan*, where ARENA had set up a strategic campaign center. In the days right before the election there had been constant reports of foreign Central Americans, bused in from outside the country, being housed, fed and organized there. Three response teams were dispatched to the site after dark. In those teams were a number of Salvadoran American businessmen, SANA leaders, North American labor leaders, and several observers from South America – one of whom was a documentary filmmaker. The first thing the teams noted upon arrival to the site was a huge crowd of Salvadorans gathered outside the gate to the stadium. They were mostly dressed in red, with FMLN banners and shirts, and were



shouting “¡No al fraude! ¡No al fraude!” and “¡Funes! ¡Funes! ¡Funes!” The crowds were visibly agitated, even yelling at the monitors as they arrived that they could not do enough, that they were not safeguarding the elections. Inside the stadium were ARENA campaign leaders, dressed in ARENA garb, with armed guards.

The monitors asked to enter the premises and search it. After some negotiating, they were granted access and the gate was locked behind them. Inside there were hundreds of buses stored, ready to roll out in the morning. After completing their search, they were told they would not be allowed to leave unless they could diffuse the crowds outside. A tense moment ensued, where North Americans were allowed to leave, and some SANA leaders and other Salvadoran emigrant observers stayed inside. Meanwhile the crowds of enraged FMLN supporters began to encircle the entire stadium. Radio stations called for more vigilance; more and more people arrived, coming in by the truckload. The national police was dispatched, arriving in riot gear, guarding the front of the stadium with semi-automatic weapons. The crowd was at the point of explosion.

Two SANA leaders with union experience went quickly into action, serving as negotiators between the FMLN crowds and the ARENA representatives. They began to diffuse and move the crowds away from the entrance to the stadium, convincing them that a violent clash with the ARENA team would not aid their cause. Meanwhile other team members documented the situation. No evidence of fraud was visibly found in the night, but throughout the night, reinforcement teams were sent (rotating in), standing vigilant with the crowds, sending reports and waiting for morning, and the press continued to spread images of the scene through the media. At dawn, the teams documented dozens of buses leaving from the stadium full of people, who appeared to be ducking their heads and crouching so as to not be fully seen. Videos of the scene were peppered all over the internet.

Two points are important here: First, the activists worked to root out fraud before it happened and to document evidence they found of it for both publicity in the media and potential legal action. Secondly, part of the monitoring system they set up in conjunction with their contacts in El Salvador involved the radio announcements, call-in center, and public call for Salvadorans to come out of the houses stand witness to any irregular behaviors. As such, part of the strategy was to embolden the Salvadoran people to take back their own election, ensuring a fair and transparent one. In this way, as much as the actual reports taken and reported in the press and blogosphere by international observers, the radio announcements and the call-in center gave everyday people who cared about fair elections a reason to accompany the process and an outlet for their frustrations, both in the form of gathering with neighbors to protest and observe and in the form of making formal reports.

Although election observers were sometimes verbally abused for not doing enough, with large-scale video documentary equipment, they worked to give people the sense that the world was watching. In one instance, as masses of Salvadorans descended upon a gas station in San Salvador stopping buses and trucks full of foreign voters, a man in the crowd came up to one such team with a large camera and yelled, “This is our version of democracy! We are mad because WE CANNOT TAKE THIS ANYMORE! We won’t let them STEAL THIS ELECTION FROM US!” (recorded in my personal fieldnotes)

SANA leaders and other emigrant activists played a key role in this innovative monitoring system. While many teams carried out observations at polling places on the day of elections, the system that SANA and their allies created drew on the activists’ familiarity with El Salvador, their contacts there, and their ability as emigrants to navigate the culture, language and physical terrain. As importantly, it also drew on a connection to North American monitors, press outlets and activist circles in the U.S., and U.S. professionals, like

lawyers and lawmakers. As with their diplomacy and lobby work, in 2009, SANA activists drew from the experience of the prior election to re-conceptualize their strategy, drawing on their unique position as “transnational activists” with a deep connection and familiarity with two country contexts.

## **Discussion**

In 2009, the transnational activists involved in the election work described here were ecstatic about the election outcome and about the role they felt they had taken therein. The question of whether the work of these Salvadoran American activists “made the difference” is one that my data cannot answer, although it is clear that the work definitely played a role. For my purposes here, as revealing as the outcome itself is the way that the transnationalists worked, as they transitioned from one election to the next, targeting the connection and relationship between state actors in both contexts and drawing on their own position within and familiarity with the two contexts, as well as their embodied wisdom about the consequences of that connection, to become mediators of these interactions and perceptions.

The diplomacy and lobbying they carried out in the months leading up to the elections targeted this “middle space.” A key ally made during that pre-electoral phase, Representative Grijalva, gave voice to that connection between countries and its potential “uses.” In an interview with Amy Goodman (Democracy Now), he said:

“We’re asking the administration not only for neutrality, but for [...] a public statement about the intent of this government and this administration to refrain from the activities of the Bush administration in the 2004 election, where we threatened Salvadoran immigrants here, which 20 percent of the population of El Salvador [...] are here in the United States. We threatened them with their immigration status. We threatened not to allow them to send remittances back home to their families, which is 25 percent of the gross national product in El Salvador. And those threats had an effect on the

election in 2004. We're asking the Obama administration for some real consistency. If we're going to export democracy, it's done by supporting the sovereignty of a nation, allowing the people in that nation to make the choice that they want, in terms of who's going to be their leadership."

So too did the groundwork that SANA leaders laid with the festival target the connection between contexts, as they could use the event to attempt to politicize the larger Salvadoran immigrant population in attendance, creating a platform for visiting candidates, connections between state actors from both countries, and working to build up more formal "connecting" institutions.

Likewise, the election monitoring work itself drew partly on the emigrants' connection to the U.S., not only in bringing non-Salvadoran allies to monitor the process but by drawing on U.S. contacts to publicize their real-time, on-the-ground findings on solidarity websites and through outlets like Democracy Now and the Huffington Post. This, in turn, further rallied non-Salvadorans to their cause while simultaneously sending a message to the Salvadoran people that they were not alone and that the world, or at least the U.S. populace, was watching. This targeting of the middle ground is an example of Salvadoran immigrants' attempts to engage an integrative act, drawing on the connections between their country contexts, drawing on resources and knowledge that run across the two contexts.

The activists' attempts to politicize the Salvadoran emigrant population drew on an ethnicity frame, emphasizing the affective connections and duties that connect people "here" and "there." Those attempts were also largely contained within the space of the festival itself. Their efforts to change the relationships between political actors in the two contexts, on the other hand, necessarily took them outside the realm of the festival and the world of symbolic politics, calling for a framework of democracy and sovereignty (for mainstream political actors in the U.S.) and anti-imperialism or anti-intervention (for

activists) – frames which helped them form strategic partnerships and mobilize progressive, non-Salvadoran actors to action as well.

The methods the organizers experienced highlight the importance of transnational connections; their work led them to draw on a cross-border wisdom, network and set of skills. But the case also reaffirms the role of the nation-state in enabling the work, protecting the actors, and facilitating the type of action they engaged. The case also serves as an important counterbalance to the points made in the prior chapter, highlighting the political contingencies involved in the ways cross-border connections and work is viewed by the public and by lawmakers in the host state. While under mundane conditions, the cross-border connections of immigrants might be “no big deal” to hostland representatives, this chapter shows how quickly those connections can be politicized and that dynamic can change as the political moment shifts.

In the next two chapters, I transition from an exploration of the work and goals of the immigrant organizers, turning instead to the impact the work has on those actors – how it affects them in the process and how it impacts their relationship to home and host.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Becoming American: Exploring the Integrative Impact of Cross-Border Activism**

“It’s very strange to be here, receiving this award when I’ve spent so much of my life singing songs that speak out against your government,” said the Venezuelan musician. A humble looking man of small stature, he spoke plainly from behind a podium framed by the United States and Salvadoran flags. As is the case at every kickoff ceremony for the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival, City Hall’s Tom Bradley Room was a veritable “who’s who” of local politicians and community leaders. This particular evening in August, SANA was recognizing those politicians alongside the revolutionary Venezuelan band, *Los Guaraguaos*, for their support of the Salvadoran community.

In fact, SANA had orchestrated an award for the band *on behalf of* the City of Los Angeles – a deed that organizers had tensely discussed in the backstage meetings described in chapter four. There they debated how best to facilitate and frame this encounter without causing discomfort. But unaware of that discussion, the singer couldn’t help but point out the obvious. “It’s just so strange that we would be allowed to stand here and sing ‘No Basta Rezar’ to you,” he continued with sincerity, referencing the popular song the band had just performed – one that reprimands U.S. military personnel for saying a prayer as they fly over villages, bombing “*los niños de Vietnam*.”

Indeed, to many observers *Los Guaraguaos* might have appeared as a strange bedfellow to its US-based co-honorees that evening, but for the binationally oriented leaders of SANA the band was a very appropriate choice. Not only is one of their most popular songs dedicated to the people of El Salvador; some songs even served as unofficial theme music for the guerrilla forces and popular resistance during El Salvador’s twelve-

year civil war. Other lyrics speak out against poverty, military repression and US intervention. And this year, following the US invasion of Iraq, the immigrant leaders felt it was a particularly appropriate time to honor *Los Guaraguao* with an official plaque of recognition from the place they had made their home, the City of Angels.

But perhaps the sentiment of strangeness identified by the lead singer as he stood juxtaposed with a line of suited and groomed City Council members and California State representatives merits further exploration. Just what is the relationship between “transnationalism” or cross-border activism and hostland integration? Does being integrated in the civic institutions of the hostland facilitate homeland work, as per chapter five? Or is it just the opposite – transnational work facilitates and leads to integration in the civic and political institutions of the U.S.?

### **Flipping the Transnationalism-Integration Nexus on its Head**

Indeed, in theoretical terms, the empirical puzzle of *Los Guaraguao*'s warm embrace by the City of Los Angeles points to ongoing debates in the immigration literature. In the last ten years, scholars have done much to develop our understanding of the way that transnational activity is shaped by nation-states. As noted in the introduction, most scholars now recognize the compatibility of processes of assimilation and transnationalism (Levitt 2001; Fitzgerald 2004) while still pointing to the potential for transnational and host-state actors to violently collide with one another (Howell and Shryock 2003; Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Fitzgerald 2004). Other scholars demonstrate how integration into host-state institutions can facilitate immigrants' ability to successfully carry out cross-border activities (see Portes et al. 2002; Coutin 2003; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2005). As with Fitzgerald's study of immigrant union members in California, integration into certain sectors of hostland society may even *encourage* the creation of cross-border connections and networks that would not have otherwise emerged

(2004; also Morawska 2004). And in line with the thinking of Salvadoran activists, described in chapter three, Robert Smith's longitudinal ethnography on Mexican immigrants in New York illustrates the motivational impact that assimilation pressures can have on adolescents' desire to engage a transnational imagination and set of practices (RC Smith 2006).

What remains significantly under-explored in the literature, however, is the opposite dynamic. This is what Morawska (2004: 1393) has referred to in passing as the "assimilative impact" of engaging in transnational activities (also Kivisto 2001). A few empirical studies hint in this direction. For example, drawing on a case study of Greek immigrants, Karpathakis (1999) asserts that the motivation to engage in hostland politics derives directly from a concern for homeland issues. Others touch on the empowerment and sense of efficacy gained by immigrants while carrying out cross-border activity (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Smith and Bakker 2008). This empowerment and the corollary organizations that are formed in the process have the *potential* to play a role in active, political participation in host society affairs in the future (Guarnizo 2001; Ostergaard-Nielsen 2001; Disipio 2006).

Indeed, questions about this nexus in home and hostland activities are not exactly new. Although often ignored within the current immigrant transnationalism literature, some of the classic sociological work on assimilation, carried out by Chicago School scholars like Robert Park, highlights the "integrative" role played by ethnic organizations as schools for US-based political learning and civic participation (see analysis in Lal 1990; Kivisto 2001). Since then, studies in this vein have been modified to include the contributions immigrants make in shaping the civic sphere of the host-state. As importantly, these organizations are now recognized as entities with active cross-border ties, changing our analysis. If in the past, national blinders hindered our ability to explore the impact of the



cross-border components of these ethnic organizations on host country civic and political involvement. Now, viewed through a “transnational” lens, a whole new set of questions emerge.

### Chapter Focus

In the prior chapter, I moved beyond the *Día del Salvadoreño* festival to explore the civic and political work that the immigrant activists carry out in an effort to affect political change in the homeland and integrate the politics of their home and host. The data presented in that chapter clearly illustrates that the work organizers do in their homeland is largely facilitated by their integration and political incorporation in the host context. Their legal status as citizens and their deep knowledge of U.S.-based civic practices allows them to better interface with hostland, elected officials both at events like *Día del Salvadoreño* and through more intimate, backstage encounters in office visits, private events and meetings like the one on the top floor of City Hall.

Their political incorporation also facilitates diplomacy efforts, allowing the activists to make connections between representatives from their two country contexts and undertake lobbying efforts in the host country directly, without the aid of native born allies. As importantly, this political incorporation and the legal status it grants allows the immigrant activists to travel back and forth to El Salvador freely so that they can complete diplomatic tasks, engage in fact-finding missions and carry out actual work, like monitoring elections – all activities that their activist counterparts with Temporary Protected Status would love to take part in, but simply cannot. Finally, citizenship in the host country provides the activists with a degree of protection against retaliation that their Salvadoran counterparts cannot count on.

As described in chapter three, for activists like Werner and Chamba, this possibility (whether a justification or an actual motivator) was a key part of the calculus on becoming U.S. citizens in the first place. The activists worked to convince compatriots that, as difficult as it was in affective terms, U.S. citizenship could allow Salvadorans to better address the ongoing crises occurring in the homeland in the 1990s.

But how do those “transnational” efforts, in turn, affect the individuals’ connection to the U.S.? In this chapter, I flip the accepted assumptions on their head, exploring the opposite dynamic. If so much energy goes into working for political change in the homeland, or engaging the work of “in-between,” how does that work situate the actors and affect their connection to the civic and political institutions of the host country? The idea that immigrants’ cross-border attachments and activities may not only build upon but may actually *result* in integration in the host country is somewhat counter-intuitive. However, by focusing on the practical tasks entailed in carrying out these commitments, by extending our unit of analysis beyond the migrant population itself, and by considering the gradual unfolding of processes over time, this very picture begins to emerge. It is a paradoxical dynamic in which immigrant actors, with the intent and in the very process of carrying out transnational activity, sometimes become more embedded into the hostland context than they ever imagined.

For example, consider the remark made by one SANA leader as he described his involvement in the transnational effort to halt US military intervention in El Salvador following his migration in the 1980s:

[The North Americans in the movement] taught us everything [about organizing *here*]. So, when NACARA [Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act] came around, we were doing it on our own, just the Central Americans in the US. That’s the beautiful thing. These people taught us to *caminar* [walk/operate] in the US, to go learning the laws [here],

learning about civic participation, how it works. The education we've had is superior to any university.

It is not the case that Salvadorans gained their activist ability solely from US actors. Indeed, as the historical background chapter makes clear, many of them came to the US with sophisticated organizing skills that they learned in El Salvador and passed on to North Americans (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Perla 2008; Nepstad 2004). In many ways, they partnered with and politicized their U.S. allies. But one can argue convincingly that immigrant activists added to and became embedded within the civic and political institutions of the host-state *precisely through* their involvement in the transnational solidarity movement of the 1980s.

Although the goals of the larger movement were certainly cross-border; although those aims may have been in conflict with the geopolitical goals of the US government at the time, the *practical* activities engaged by immigrant activists facilitated this embedding. Twenty years later, the SANA leadership continues to build on the hostland social and cultural capital gained in that era, maintaining their cross-border activities and orientation, and all the while finding themselves increasingly entrenched in the hostland civic and political landscape.

In what follows, I show three arenas or ways in which transnationalism has led to hostland integration for this population of immigrant activists: through attainment of hostland social capital, civic and political know-how, and the development of a dense organizational infrastructure.

## **Integration in the Process**

### Attaining Hostland Social Capital

Were I to begin my narrative for this chapter with the creation and uses of the current *Día del Salvadoreño* events, it would be the implicit subtext of chapter five – how the citizenship and increasing integration of SANA leaders has facilitated their ability to be effective agents of change in their homeland. This dynamic unquestionably exists. But by beginning there, we miss the ‘ghosts’ of the past that make this present possible. Examined over a longer period, the embedding of these immigrant actors into the civic and political sphere of the host-state occurred precisely through their engagement in the transnational solidarity movements of the 1980s.

Much of the literature on the Central American solidarity and sanctuary movements focuses on North American activists who challenged US military intervention in the region during the 1980s, defying immigration policy by providing “sanctuary” for undocumented migrants fleeing the conflicts (Smith 1996; Nepstad 2004). But participants interviewed for this study, and a whole crop of recent work attests to the fact that Central Americans were fully immersed in (and orchestrators of) the movement in the US, even at the height of state-led hostility towards activists (see also Gosse 1996; Hamilton and Chichilla 2001; Coutin 2001; Baker-Cristales 2004; Perla 2008; Coutin and Perla 2012). Researchers walk a delicate line between protecting undocumented human subjects engaged in clandestine action and perpetuating the myth that the activist movements of the 1980s were solely carried out by those on center stage, North American progressives; in some cases, analysts confuse strategy with reality (see Coutin and Perla 2012 for critique).

As described in the historical background, study participants recall “meeting constantly” in the 1980s, in *comités* linked to different factions of the FMLN and broad-based organizations. Rank and file activists began their work through simple activities, like selling *pupusas* under freeway onramps to collect funds for the FMLN and sharing their personal testimonies of persecution with North American audiences. With time, immigrant

participants became the physical and cultural mediators between FMLN leadership and US-based activists, politicians and religious leaders. More experienced activists travelled throughout the US and beyond, engaging diplomacy on behalf of the FMLN; helping to stitch together the fabric of a broad-based peace movement and a growing, international network of FMLN supporters (Coutin 2003; Perla 2008; Baker-Cristales 2008).

In some cases, legal status, or lack thereof, did not stop Salvadoran activists from travelling between countries to carry-out their work. But, in general, a centerpiece of the movement was a partnering of North American and Central American activists, where the former took a front stage role, the latter operated backstage, and the migrant rank-and-file provided the symbolic imagery of war collateral, which, in turn, gave a moral face and impetus to the movement.

Many of the Salvadoran activists involved explain that they did not think much of the connections they were accumulating through this transnational social movement. In their words, they were living in the moment, driven by passionate dedication to the struggle in El Salvador. But as they engaged the work deemed necessary to combat both the violence of the Salvadoran government and the corollary financial and logistical support of the United States, they formed important and useful relationships in the host-state. In retrospect, the impact of these ghosts is now visible. The partnerships developed left Salvadorans with a number of important “artifacts”: a powerful network of hostland social contacts, including long-time peace activists, religious leaders, academics, and budding, local politicians; a civic and political skill-set for effective action in the host state; and a dense infrastructure of organizations.

In subsequent years, Salvadoran leaders have repeatedly capitalized on these connections, first in their campaigns for immigration and workers’ rights in the 1990s; now in their increasing entrée into US politics and the ‘identity’ movements of the current

decade. For example, when SANA first came together to organize the Patron Saint pilgrimage and festival that would become *Día del Salvadoreño*, many of the individuals that assisted them were religious contacts from the 1980s. These contacts lent broad legitimacy to the events by hosting the religious image in their well-known church congregations, participating in the ecumenical mass at the festival, and attending the behind-the-scenes political gatherings that lead up to the public festival. Solidarity era political contacts also played a key role in achieving the official proclamation of August 6<sup>th</sup> as *Día del Salvadoreño*, first in the City of Los Angeles and then throughout the State of California. As organization veterans explain, many of the politicians lending their support were just “idealistic kids” who participated alongside Central Americans in the movements of yesterday, but now occupy prestigious positions in local government.

In this sense, it was participation in the transnational activities of the solidarity era that led Salvadoran immigrants to develop a network of hostland leaders and allies. That social capital has, in turn, played an important role in their integration into the hostland civic arena, adding to the swift success and institutionalization of events like *Día del Salvadoreño* and raising the political profile of organization leaders. A similar dynamic can be seen as we turn from this prior transnational action to explore the impact of SANA’s current cross-border efforts, even though the frames used (one of human rights then and diversity now) are distinct.<sup>99</sup>

SANA leaders have entered into a wide array of working relationships with US political actors as a result of their attempt to impact the economic and political future El Salvador. They have developed state-level relationships through their efforts to secure travel visas for diplomats and artists visiting events in Los Angeles. Conversely, the

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<sup>99</sup> Note that “anti-intervention” (a la chapter five) provides a consistent frame that resonates with progressive allies now just as much as then, even as the context (from war to peace) has changed.

integrative affect of the work described in the last chapter is that immigrant leaders have formed state and federal-level political relationships with US congressional members while working to ensure that elections in El Salvador are carried out in a fair and transparent manner. This is so because the very process of working to secure a truly democratic election in El Salvador led to the creation of new relationships with Members of Congress and their staffers, as well as dialogue between Salvadoran leaders and the US State Department.

While some relationships are created in the back-and-forth of cross-border politicking, another tier of relationships is formed simply through the mundane activities needed to create the stage upon which such politicking can occur. For example, organizing an event as big as *Día del Salvadoreño* requires gaining access to public park space, securing resources from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, soliciting in-kind donations from city and state politicians, and getting street and health permits. In the process of carrying out these activities, SANA leaders have formed additional relationships with local politicians, religious leaders, the Los Angeles Police Department, the city's Fire Marshalls, and a host of corporate sponsors.

As political staffers and organization leaders attest, the quality of these relationships varies significantly. Some are purely symbolic and instrumental; others are more lasting. Interestingly, the stronger relationships often result from substantive projects—many of them “transnational”—such as working side-by-side in the solidarity movement, travelling together to El Salvador, or organizing press conferences to counter the skewed electoral rhetoric of the Salvadoran mainstream press. No matter the actual “success” of these cross-border projects, however, one cumulative outcome of working on them is the creation of an extended network of civic and political contacts in the host-state. Thus, while integration

certainly may facilitate transnational activity, the converse is also true: host-state civic embedding can occur as a direct outcome of engaging in cross-border action.

### Assimilating Civic and Political Know-How

Some scholars describe the sense of empowerment that immigrant leaders gain working on *homeland* projects, such as those carried out through HTAs. But lasting empowerment is *also* tied to the development of a concrete repertoire of hostland cultural and political know-how, gained in the very process of engaging in that cross-border work. For SANA leaders, the transnational solidarity movement was a grand *escuela*—an intense civic and political education. Although the leaders' pre-migration experience meant that many of them arrived in the U.S. with exposure to organizing methods and a heightened sense of class consciousness and political awareness, they also assert that they gained concrete experience in *US-based activities*, such as organizing press conferences, leading demonstrations, and pressuring elected officials through democratic tactics. These skills were later put to a test in the hostland struggles of the 1990s, as Salvadorans moved from their covert, backstage roles in the solidarity movement to center stage roles in immigration reform battles, such as that which resulted in the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), and labor contests like the Justice for Janitors campaign.<sup>100</sup> Since then, the learning curve continues to be steep. In organizing *Día del Salvadoreño* and all the cross-border activity that accompanies it, SANA leaders have acquired skills in multiple terrains, including logistics, funding and marketing, and communications.

General logistical know-how includes skills like securing state-owned park space for events, arranging street permits, and coordinating with the Los Angeles police and fire

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<sup>100</sup> Justice for Janitors is a campaign and social movement that dates back to 1985 and is organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The campaign advocates for the rights of janitors across the U.S. and in select cities in Canada. See Waldinger et al. 1996.



departments for accompaniment of their event. Meanwhile, maintaining the cross-border elements of this event has led to a better understanding of political logistics. Event leaders learn how to host political galas in City Hall, make homeland-oriented presentations and pleas to U.S. Legislators, and work with officials to secure both travel visas and respectable audiences for visiting Salvadoran diplomats. As one SANA leader indicated, working to safeguard a message of U.S. neutrality in El Salvador's 2009 presidential election was not only empowering, it was also a learning experience in which he observed and gained knowledge about the "strategic timing" U.S. politicians utilize when they add their name to a particular measure or public statement.

Sometimes logistical learning entails subtle adjustments like accommodating to a culture of "planning." SANA leaders assert that the culture of "planning ahead" is homeland-specific and something they have had to assimilate into their own cultural repertoire in the process of organizing events like delegations to El Salvador. In meetings and social gatherings, organization leaders jokingly reminisce about the heart attacks they gave their U.S. born social contacts in prior years by pulling off events in a self-described "*estilo clandestine*" (i.e. at the last minute). In an interview one director explained, "We come from a place where the concern is how to eat, how to pay the rent *today*. There isn't [money] for anything else. It's not a culture of 'planning' like in the US, especially in the sectors of power, that 'in three years we plan to land on the moon' type of thing."

Cross-border activities also necessitate skills in the terrain of funding and marketing. Hosting major public events and organizing trips to El Salvador are expensive. The quest for funding has pushed leaders to learn how to submit applications to U.S. based funding sources, such as foundations and the Department of Cultural Affairs. They have also learned to be cautious about the limits that funding sources and their own non-profit status impose on activities. And, with time, they have accepted the necessity of formal, even paid,

accounting and bookkeeping. Observation of this learning was brought into relief several years ago when SANA's 1.5 generation bookkeeper retired. Working on funding matters in her absence, one leader explained, "This is extremely difficult, but what takes work to learn, you appreciate more. We have to learn this!"

The need to fund their activities has also led organization leaders to learn how to interface with corporate sponsors. As mentioned in chapter four, SANA leaders had been staunchly opposed to taking money from Salvadoran businesses or government officials that, in their perception, could belong to the Salvadoran "oligarchy" that "maimed and killed our families." When an alternative festival emerged in Los Angeles on the same dates as *Día del Salvadoreño*, the similarities and differences in sponsors were initially apparent.<sup>101</sup> The cross-town festival, *La Feria Agostina*, featured large *Salvadoran* banks and companies like the Salvadoran-based airline carrier TACA as event sponsors, while the SANA festival boasted Bank of America, American Airlines and small Salvadoran-American owned businesses.

With time, increased power, and an evolving understanding of how they might influence economic and political development in El Salvador, organization leaders have increasingly begun to work with *empresarios*—Salvadoran immigrant business owners—some of whom traditionally supported the rightwing in El Salvador. Coming together with the disparate interests of promoting economic and political development in El Salvador, on the one hand, and confronting a Salvadoran legislature that discriminates against medium and small-sized cross-border businesses, on the other, SANA and the *empresarios* joined forces. This newfound relationship endows the *empresarios* with politically-connected allies and SANA with business backing for their endeavors. Their shared interest in creating

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<sup>101</sup> The *Feria Agostina* has since come under new leadership (by longtime community organization, *El Rescate*), opening the door to changes in the events' characteristics. The *Feria* is the secular counterpart to *la bajada*, and is modeled on El Salvador's weeklong *fiestas agostinas*.

relationships in El Salvador has led both sides to reinvent their prior impressions of one another. In doing so, they forged a stronger, more cohesive and institutionally complete Salvadoran American network in Los Angeles.

Communications and marketing encompass a third terrain of skills adopted in the process of engaging transnational action. As the scope of their action has grown, immigrant leaders have felt the need to hone the craftsmanship of their written communications and to formalize their presentation. As such, they increasingly work with L.A.-based graphic designers to create high-quality invitations, posters and proposals. Their desire to broaden the reach of *Día del Salvadoreño* and the impact of their work in El Salvador has also brought SANA into direct contact with the media-communications world, helping to solidify contacts at US-based Spanish language television networks and newspapers, and with English-language press like the *Los Angeles Times*. Drawing on the learning gained during the solidarity movement, SANA has continued to master the art of pitching their stories and events and pulling together effective press conferences, many of which regard issues in El Salvador.

Communications know-how also includes learning how to solicit help from social contacts in the US. Following-up on a letter addressed to Los Angeles' mayor, inviting him to be part of a delegation to monitor El Salvador's local elections, one organizer asked, "Is that the right way to put it, in terms of democracy?" and "Is the letter too long?" The organizer went on to explain he felt the letter was too long and that, in the US, elected officials shun formality and just want to get to the point. SANA leaders have likewise learned about the importance of following up with politicians and leaders that have supported their work—writing thank you letters and presenting them with certificates of recognition before crowds of Salvadoran constituents.

The desire to effectively utilize their events to raise awareness about homeland concerns has led to a final, important type of communications know-how—namely how to frame their activities in the U.S. This component of cultural and political know-how constitutes a negotiation, evident in behind-the-scenes dialogue, and is further discussed in chapter four’s section on cultural encoding. No matter how “democratic” their goals, the organizers’ historical experience teaches them that cross-border activities may be perceived as a demonstration of “dual-loyalties.” Even when not threatening, there is “a way you do things,” as further described in prior chapters.

Accordingly, SANA leaders have learned to pitch their events to maximize their reach and support. As discussed in prior chapters, this leads to the quintessential U.S. format for the organizing of immigrant communities – using the language of “ethnicity” and “culture.” One can see how explicitly political goals, like promoting political change in El Salvador, rejecting so-called ‘fair trade’ policies, and generally combating what they see as irresponsible US intervention in Latin America, are recast in cultural terms to fit US cultural vehicles. This strategy proves practical and effective in drawing broad-based support from US allies and elected officials.

When deemed appropriate, such as during the work on elections in El Salvador, that language is shifted to a more salient frame of “democracy,” “anti-intervention” and “sovereignty,” thus packaging efforts in a way that affirms accepted and professed U.S. values. For example, in a letter written to a Los Angeles mayor, SANA beseeched him to help the Salvadoran community ensure that Salvadorans in the homeland would have the same liberty that Salvadorans in the US are so privileged to have: “the right to vote their conscience.” In 2009, SANA discussed how to follow up with US Congress members who worked towards the US’s official message of neutrality in the Salvadoran elections. They

agreed upon thanking them for their commitment to “the electoral process” in El Salvador and for their support of a “peaceful transition of power.”

These final examples reveal an important if not crucial element of host-state cultural know-how –namely how to pitch an organization and its work to US contacts more comfortable in the language of ethnicity and democracy than binationality, transnationalism, internationalism or, even, social change. Several layers of cultural and political learning are revealed here. Organization leaders gain an increasing awareness of how their activities can be most effectively pitched to politicians, potential funders and the general public. They engage a process of genuine exploration, by trial and error, of what can or cannot be done in a US political context. And, as some of them remarked in the aftermath of the 2009 Salvadoran election, they come to better understand and believe in the possibility for well-organized grassroots actors to communicate with and affect high-level political actors in the US, through democratic means and with little financial backing. Put differently, they not only learn how to use the language of the game, they increasingly come to believe that the game (democracy) can work, if you know how to play.

As with the development of a US-based social network, it is not by shedding connections to or identifications with El Salvador but rather by attempting to engage the homeland that the SANA leaders have assimilated into their operational repertoire a set of political-cultural skills for effective action and interaction in the US context.

#### Developing an Organizational Base

One brief, additional example in which the integrative impact of cross-border action can be seen is in the development of an organizational base in the host context. As others have noted, this organizational infrastructure will not always be utilized to address concerns in the host country. But, in some cases and in some moments, it will. Moreover,

the creation of this infrastructure, when viewed over longer periods of time (e.g. two generations), may constitute another mechanism through which cross-border activities and mobilizations can lead to the eventual embedding of an immigrant population in the civic and political life of the host.

In the Salvadoran case, the transnational solidarity movement resulted in lasting organizations and institutions (such as CARECEN, El Rescate and Clínica Romero) that now serve a client base extending well beyond the Central American population in the U.S. Some of them, such as the *Clinica Romero* have become models for organizations nationwide, earning them visits from U.S. presidential candidates, like John Kerry (Segura 2010). As others have noted, this organizational base was not formed only to aid migrants during the war. Core organizations also emerged as vehicles for direct aid and connection to El Salvador, a creation of organizations that mimicked the factioning of the FMLN itself. As new organizations have cropped up and old ones grown, many of their veteran directors have remained connected to the goals and leadership of political factions whose roots are based in El Salvador's past, even as those ideologies have evolved over time. Competition for homeland recognition and power can hold causal power in and of itself, fuelling the creation of new organizations in the US.

Despite these cross-border roots and commitments, the leadership of such organizations are now located at the center of many host-state issues, including US immigration reform, workers' rights, and access to education. They also often bridge homeland differences to work collectively on US-based issues. Leaving their ideological and organizational affiliations behind, they constitute a core nucleus of highly skilled activists with great potential to effect change. They work tirelessly in host-state political campaigns—walking precincts for local elections and creating umbrella coalitions in support of important federal-level legislative measures and candidates.

The research leads me to raise an important counterfactual question. Would an organizational base that is so sophisticated, dense, and central to the civic landscape of cities like Los Angeles possibly have emerged *without* the transnational activities and homeland-oriented political ties described here? Now viewed through a transnational lens, we can ask of cases past and present whether it is partially with the goal and *in the very process* of pursuing political and social projects in the homeland that the leadership of such populations become part and parcel of US civic and political institutions, and how?<sup>102</sup>

## Discussion

One great irony may be that no matter the success of cross-border activities—be they broad transnational campaigns, particular political efforts, or identity movements—their effects can be seen in the embedding of their participants in the host-state through establishment of social contacts, cultural and political know-how, and organizational development. That the solidarity movement is not regarded as a victory by SANA leaders does not mean it was without serious consequence for the embedding of these actors into a larger field of action in the US. The same can be said for the homeland political efforts of this decade. Despite the “failure” to significantly impact El Salvador’s 2004 elections, the work undertaken by SANA leaders to create a stage for mobilization in Los Angeles has led to an improved skill-set and network of relationships – both utilized with success in 2009. Perhaps the integrative impact of cross-border activity does not rely upon its “outcome”

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<sup>102</sup> Drawing on historical cases in order to explore this question further could provide a fruitful avenue for future research. For example, in their comments on a draft of this chapter, both Gail Kligman and Roger Waldinger point to “Jewish socialists of the turn of the century who arrived with revolutionary experience in Russia and continued to be oriented towards comrades abroad but used their political experience (pre-migratory) to build strong labor unions once in the US” (See Rischin 1963; Green 1998; Herberg 1952, for a different take). Others have pointed to work of Irish emigrants in the “homeland,” and the organizational infrastructure and political connections that such work led to in the host context. And in her work on Greek emigrants in the U.S., Karpathakis (1999) highlights a similar process.

properly understood—e.g. homeland change—but rather occurs in the very process of carrying out that activity, no matter the result.

In this chapter, I have focused not on the way that integration may *enable* transnationalism. Instead, I have focused on the manner in which transnational activities can facilitate integration. Rather than assuming that transnational social power will necessarily result from transnational activities, on the one hand, or that such activities will inevitably collide with the constraints of “the state,” on the other, the approach taken in this chapter reveals a paradoxical middle ground which connects processes of transnationalism and assimilation through praxis. When processes are analyzed over time with a keen eye to practical action and its consequence, and when one’s methodological lens is opened not only to see the connectedness of migrants to their homelands but also to non-migrant hostland actors, this integrative impact of transnationalism comes into view.

As indicated in the dissertation introduction and in prior chapters, one broader lesson that can be drawn from this chapter is that it may behoove us to step back from the study of either transnationalism or assimilation and turn instead to a more holistic examination of the post-migration process. One method of studying these processes has been to pit them against one another in search of a winner. Findings that transnationalism is engaged only by “the few” and the elite, or evidence that cross-border ties do not last into the second and third generation, have been touted as proof that transnationalism is not as important a phenomenon as scholars make it out to be. Another way to approach this terrain, however, is to explore how the two processes are bound up and implicated in one another, each being a potential mechanism of the other under given circumstances.

In this sense, it does not matter whether the phenomenon endures generations or even which process “wins.” In the case presented here, studying how transnationalism is enacted in practice aids in understanding the process by which Salvadoran activists have



become embedded in the civic and political life of the US. Transnationalism, then, is an important, if not crucial, component of this population's post-migration process. And the hostland social capital, know-how and institutions created while engaging cross-border activity will likely continue to play a central role in the lives of the generations that follow, no matter the orientation or direction of their particular activist inclinations.

Finally, although cross-border engagement may, under the right circumstances, create openings for integration in the host-state, transnational actors may still encounter significant external obstacles that prevent them from taking their political involvement in the US to the next level. In addition, obstacles aren't always external. Despite the openings created for mobilization around US-based issues like immigration reform, immigrant actors may remain one-track in their emotional commitment to homeland issues. This, in turn, can constitute a significant source of tension between first and second generation activists. And in analytical terms, it reminds scholars to distinguish between the objective opportunities and subjective commitments of transnational actors. Accordingly, a follow-up question is how the transnationalism also *constrains* the integration of immigrant activists by competing for resources and continuing to fuel some of the homeland-oriented factionalism that can impede collaboration and mobility in the host context.

In the next and final chapter, I begin to explore some of those issues, with particular attention to both the benefits and the difficulties or sacrifices that accompany cross-border activism. As with this current chapter, the following analysis uses a lens that focuses less on organizer goals and outcomes and more on what happens to the actors themselves as they attempt to engage the work of integrating their host and homeland contexts and effecting change in both places. In contradistinction to this chapter, however, in my final chapter I take a step in, examining the more personal aspects of engaging cross-border work – what

drives the organizers to give so much of their life to the work, and how it affects them in both positive and negative ways.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Transnationalism's Travails

*"I am very happy, but it follows 35 years of pain."  
- Werner, March 2009*

#### *We're Going to Build a New Homeland*

It is dark out, but all over the city of San Salvador horns are being honked. Pick-up trucks are swarming towards the *Redondel Masferrer*<sup>103</sup> and hands are raised, flashing a staunch and long overdue victory sign. The city is awash with red flags and banners and shirts donning the white signature letters F-M-L-N. The *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* has just won its first presidential election, and it has done so through squarely democratic means. Whole families rush the plaza. For a moment, a long awaited moment, ecstasy trumps fear.

A suburb away, in the quiet grounds of the "Beverly Hills Hotel" in San Salvador, a group of 20-some Salvadoran emigrants are gathered under a graceful white cabaña. Lights flicker off the water of the hotel pool as each person takes a turn reflecting on this moment, explaining what it means to him or her personally, expressing to whom he or she is grateful, to whom this *lucha* [struggle] is dedicated.

Werner's youngest brother Herbert – the gentle giant and 300-some pound triple black belt in Tai Kwon Do – steps forward tentatively. "I am shy," Herbert says. There is heaviness in his voice, an out-of-breath nervousness and emotion. He has come from Toronto to work as an election observer and, in his own way, to give protection to the other activists gathered here. "I am shy, but I want to dedicate this moment..." And then he weeps.

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<sup>103</sup> Central Rotunda, named for Alberto Masferrer (poet, essayist, journalist)

Two older brothers step forward, each one placing a hand on Herbert's shoulders. Where one brother breaks down another seamlessly continues: "Their names were Manuel and Amílcar." They were two of the 75,000 people who, willfully or not, gave their lives on the journey to arrive at this day. The trio somberly reflects on the significance of this moment for their family – now scattered in Canada, the U.S., and El Salvador; 4 brothers living, two in the ground. After they have spoken, the oldest, just a fraction of Herbert's size, hugs him. "This is our baby," Wilfredo says, rubbing Herbert's large, shaven head with affection.

In different, well-appointed hotels across the city, similar clusters of Salvadoran expatriate activists are gathered in reflection. The majority of these actors now live in the U.S., but Canada, Sweden, Mexico and even Cuba do not go unrepresented amongst the activist émigrés. Moreover, they are accompanied by non-Salvadoran internationalists from Chile, Peru, Guatemala, New York, those militants alongside labor leaders and a young cadre of anti-globalization, Obama-era youth from the U.S.

Just moments before, en route from San Salvador's FMLN headquarters, the Beverly Hills Hotel gang found itself smack in the middle of a sea of vehicles pouring into San Salvador, headed to the *Redondel* from every nook and cranny of the city. Squished in the front seats and pickup beds of trucks rented for 500 dollars a week, they survey the scene with looks of near disbelief, shock and awe. "Puuuuta pero que vergo de gente!" "Que vergaso de gente [Daaaamn, what a shitload of people]!" Taking in the scene, participating in the scene, being one with the scene, SANA's Mario is standing in the bed of a pickup. A red handkerchief covers most of his face. He is totally silent, quietly taking it all in, not afraid to let the inner *efemenelista* [FMLN militant] emerge in full force.

For many of the activists, this is the quietest of loud moments. A notable silence hovers around them as they navigate the mass movement. Amid the noise, there is a gentle

happiness. Time stands still. There is a sensation of being truly humbled by their countrymen; simple, poverty stricken people coming out of their houses, losing their fear, and celebrating this “people’s moment.” Mingled with this feeling of reverence for a humble and steadfast people is the sensation of having genuinely made a difference. Quietly, for days to come the activists would process the moment out loud: We did this, right? We helped do this. We helped win this election. We invested everything in this. We gave our brothers for this. We gave up our country for this. My wife left me for this!

Feeling the need to part ways with the masses and head back to the quiet of the hotel for debriefing, Werner steers his pickup under a streetlamp poster donning the smiling face of his deceased father figure and *comandante*. Looking up he whispers, “You see, Schafik?” We did it. From a nearby pickup truck, his compatriot, Fredy, animatedly yells into the dark night, “VAMOS A CONSTRUIR UNA NUEVA PATRIA!!!”

### ***They Robbed Us of Our Youth***

In the months, and one might say years, leading up to this moment, the emigrant activists invested more than seemed humanly possible in this outcome. And as some people were quick to note at the first post-election meeting in L.A., this was just the beginning. The dedication to work for change in the homeland began in the 1980s, when these activists fled the country as mere youth. The work has never ceased since. Rather it has simply changed forms, morphing with the times. One might have thought that commitments would dwindle with the end of the war and the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, or with the birth of an American-born second generation; quite the contrary.

In late March 2009, when this election had come and gone, the Salvadoran émigrés had not slept in weeks, perhaps months. But, in their own words, the long and crooked road they traveled to arrive at this historic shift in power *valio la pena* [was worth the pain]. It

would be fair to say that they had been waiting their entire lives for its arrival. They had lived through civil war, emigration, undocumented living in the U.S., the clandestine activities of the solidarity and sanctuary movements, numerous organized labor and immigration contests, the hometown association explosion of the 1990s, and now this: a decade of efforts aimed purely at democratic, political change in El Salvador. Moreover, as indicated in the introductory chapter, many activists had lived through survivor's guilt, the loaded emotions of emigration, and one haunting and unspoken question: with no change in sight, had their *compañeros caídos en la lucha* – their brothers, their fathers, their cousins whose deaths had been justified as a necessary sacrifice on the road to change – died in vain?

For many, it was not possible to mutter this question aloud except to verbally debunk it in the face of this victory, nor had there been time to question their dedication to the cause. It was all they had ever known. They were born into it. They grew up and became young men and women in its midst. And now, 30 years later, as politically equipped and increasingly empowered U.S. citizens, they had the opportunity and the responsibility, they argued, to use their power to protect the vote in El Salvador. In the process, they had taken what was a painful wound without closure, namely exile, and shaped it into a mighty sword. And a great sense of reconciliation and empowerment emerged in the wake of this transfiguration. March 15, 2009, was a date with history they simply could not afford to miss.

The day after the election, a dozen activists and observers journeyed with Werner, Herbert and Wilfredo to their hometown. Their lunch at a local eatery was “paid for by the people of Aguilares.” After lunch, they gathered around the site of the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande – a priest that had taught the people in the area they had dignity and were equals in God's eyes no matter how poor, no matter how abused. Looking at the monument, Wilfredo spontaneously began: “We haven't stopped fighting since they assassinated Rutilio Grande!” “We were just little kids,” he lamented, his voice trembling and his eyes receding as he journeyed into the past and remembered:

We had ideals and dreams of beginning our professions, returning to our towns, setting up a little office, helping the *pueblo* to develop ... gathering with our friends, going out on the town, meeting up with our girlfriends. But they interrupted our lives! They stole our youth! And they forced us ... they FORCED us to take up arms. We defeated them ... we defeated them militarily. And, on Sunday, we defeated them politically [...] And now we feel that we took the right path all along, that we were right, that Rutilio Grande was right.

In the wake of this victory, this grand “interruption” – the events of the last 30 years – suddenly fell into place.

### ***It Pains Me***

Just a couple months later, the activists reunited again in San Salvador, this time for the inauguration of the new FMLN president. The entire Salvadoran-American activist community, including rival organizations and militant-turned-critics of the FMLN, returned for the big event – one hundred some leaders plus many rank-and-file. For some families, this was a jubilant reunion. Despite the realities of governance, stepping foot in an FMLN-led El Salvador was like stepping into a freedom never before experienced on motherland soil. Families like the brothers from Aguilares were represented in full force: three generations and thirty individuals from the immediate family made the pilgrimage to savor these first moments of the new El Salvador.

But while many organizations and sectors of the Salvadoran-American community abroad made their presence known through inauguration events, brunches, galas, and meetings they organized across the capital city, none were graced by a visit from the President. “People are treating him like he is an activist. He is now the President of the Republic of El Salvador! We cannot expect that he will just show up; he has to do what is strategic for him,” one activist justified. Moreover, not everyone from these well-known diaspora organizations would receive their ticket to the actual inauguration ceremony. And

while symbolic, in many people's minds, access to the formal events told a more important insider story about who was visible, who was being rewarded or punished, and who would be welcomed into the new administration.

As the big day approached, everyone scrambled to work their own channel of access to the broad coalition that had brought Funes to power. Some emigrant activists, like Werner, were a shoo-in due to their decades-long militancy and their diplomatic posts with the Central American Parliament. But others – newcomers to the scene, members of the rank-and-file, those who had stepped outside the fold of the FMLN, activists that had not put in enough face time over the years or who simply did not have the financial means to BE truly transnational – those individuals were sorely disappointed, particularly after having made the big trip “home” with all the expense and excitement it entailed.

“How can it be that I am not on the list?!” One such activist exclaimed. “After all the work that I’ve done... how can I not be on there? How can I not get [an invitation to] anything!?” Raul lamented, standing on the sidewalk outside FMLN headquarters in San Salvador, gesticulating, his head shaking, tears welling in his eyes.

But even those individuals that had been able to be truly transnational, that had invested everything, that had lived their lives quite literally between two places organizing continuously on behalf of the FMLN, were not guaranteed any special recognition or role in the administration and its consular satellites once the inauguration was said and done. Sometimes, the immense time activists had invested in on-the-ground organizing had cost them the more formal education credentials necessary to be named to a post – honors that other diaspora members would receive no matter their paucity of work with the party in the preceding years. Moreover, some of the most committed individuals were too orthodox, too *rojo* [red], for this cautious and populist, Obama-friendly president.



The inauguration events were filled with unquestionable joy, whoops and hollers, and dancing in the stands of the arena where the public events were hosted. But in quieter moments, some militant activists voiced fears about the access of diaspora members to the new administration. Others shared hushed feelings of woundedness at not being recognized for all the hard work they had done. “We [the most militant] are always overlooked,” one activist admitted privately upon learning he had been disregarded for a particular post, in his perspective, due to his political orientation. “But you know what?! That is ok. I am not doing this for politics or for fame. I am not doing this for recognition. This started a long time ago. I have two brothers. You see Foncho, right there?! He buried my brothers, *his brothers*, up there in the mountain. And that is what this is about for me. And I will not stop. And I don’t give a shit!” he exclaimed agitatedly. Then a pause, a step closer, and a whispered confession: “Pero me duele. *Me duele* [It pains me].”

### **Inside the Immigrant ‘Transnationalist’ Experience**

When immigrant transnationalism was first introduced in the migration literature, it was described by some proponents as an underdog’s tool for pushing back against the oppressive power of the nation-state (Basch et al. 1994; Appadurai 1996; Guarnizo and MP Smith 1998; Portes et al. 1999; Faist 2000). Fellow migration scholars quickly criticized the initial studies as taking an “excessively celebratory tone” (Favell 2003a: 37). Individuals and communities could push back against the nation-state, effecting change in the countries they fled and resisting the pressures of assimilation in the countries to which they migrated. But their lives, their possibilities, the very *position* they found themselves in as both emigrant and immigrant were first and foremost *shaped and facilitated* by the power of the nation-state -- its ability to exclude, withhold, and hoard along the lines of both nation and state; its ability to monopolize the legitimate means of violence, movement and membership.

Over the last twenty years, this initial, celebratory tone has been tempered. Immigrant transnationalism as a perspective has been brought into critical dialogue with what scholars and, particularly, migrants themselves know all too well about the harsh political realities of the nation-state and its corollary social closure. These days, one would be remiss to write anything about the cross-border ties of immigrants without including an awareness of the role the nation-state plays in shaping that terrain. And with time, the initial black-and-white call and response of “is-isn’t,” “old-new,” and “win-lose” have made way to more nuanced work exposing the duality of the state as a simultaneous delimiter and facilitator of so-called transnational action.

Still, examining the work and lives of immigrant transnational activists, one wonders if the original admonition and the important corrective it provoked have come at the expense of our exploration of a central facet at the heart of initial studies – namely a deep view into the experiential reality and creative agency of immigrants seeking to re-engage their homeland; the collective sense of empowerment, the real possibility for underdog success when the right conditions present themselves, the unique position in which they find themselves between polities, the benefits *and* the pain of disappointment and constraint that can exist in that work.

In this chapter, some twenty years after initial studies were done and twelve years after my first contact with study participants, I return to this celebratory notion of immigrant transnationalism. I re-examine that proposition, focusing on those activists at the center of this study – those political migrants that truly fit the definition of “transnationalism.” These actors are not everyday immigrants that have commonplace, ongoing social and economic ties to friends and family in their countries of origin – characteristics that describe *most* migrants, as migration scholars have rightly argued. Rather, the actors in this study can safely be said to embody the “ism.” They are actors that

live in a state of “being transnational,” anchored in two places, living lives across two locales in two country contexts, with multiple loyalties and commitments. Moreover, as indicated in the introduction, as leftists, labor activists and organizers, philosophically speaking they are often oriented “beyond” the nation. As such, they are transnational in orientation and practice.

Here I take the view that this need not be the either-or exercise presented in much of the transnationalism literature: either we explore the celebratory agency of transnational actors or we focus on the macro constraints they face. Rather, an honest look at the total experience of these immigrant activists illuminates both agency and constraint. One could say that the nation-state in its ability to facilitate and constrain, in both its power and its impotence against the resilience of the human spirit are embodied in these individuals and their work.

Secondly, I include in my analysis the subjective experiences of the transnational activists. I believe that taking seriously the “inner experience of individuals” and the “materiality of terror and oppression” they have experienced can help us understand immigrant activists’ commitment to their work (Prager 2001). Approaches that “take the pain out of the distinct ways in which history has been experienced” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 30) might help us to focus on the instrumental actions of individuals and collectivities, pushing us to see the way “the past” can be mobilized as a resource (Alexander et al. 2004; Eyerman 2004), and helping us to understand the external conditions – institutional structures, resource mobilization, political processes – that facilitate and constrain the work these actors do. Those constructivist approaches also warn us against inadvertently “memorializing” the experiences of actors. But I also believe that such an approach leaves us with an incomplete understanding of these individuals, their work, their dedication to the cause, and how the work, itself, affects and situates them.

Rather, cross border activism and inventions such as *Día del Salvadoreño* might more aptly be seen as both a product of the *experience* of trauma and an instrumental vehicle that works towards its reversal. Closure can be seen as a potential result of the way such experiences are drawn on to formulate public narrative and, thus, create political intervention, *and* a result of the therapeutic, restorative value of working collectively for change.

Methodologically, in order to grasp these dualities that exist in the work, we must both engage and move beyond the militant's narrative and the self-advocacy of formal interviews; we must be willing to follow the actors over time through both failure and success; and we must be interested in hearing about and seeing the social meaning of the work they do, beyond the larger and more readily apparent political goals and outcomes.

### Chapter Foci

In what follows, I take a decisive step inward from prior chapters, focusing specifically on the personal and collective experience of engaging transnational activism, examining how the work affects the doers in personal terms. Doing so helps to complete the story at hand, taking us full circle to the collective and cultural traumas that I argued partially gave rise to *El Día del Salvadoreño* in the first place, as discussed in chapter three. Here I step into a terrain not often broached within the transnationalism literature and rarely spoken aloud in formal interviews. Nonetheless, a decade of observations confirms that the experience, the energy, the social healing and the empowerment of engaging this work are a central component of the lifeworld of immigrant transnationalists, of those that participated in this study and I suspect many others as well.

There is a deep social meaning in the work, meaning that is bound up in the actors' experience of both nation and state, their sense of identification, purpose and responsibility.

In exploring that meaning, a number of questions arise: What exactly does the career of a transnational activist look like from the inside-out? How do they interpret the meaning of their work? What sustains and nurtures their commitment to the cause? What benefits do immigrant transnationalists derive from this unrelenting and often invisible work? What hardships do they encounter? And what, if anything, do these experiences highlight about the structures and constraints within which activists operate, and those that they seek to change?

I find that my study participants do indeed derive a deep sense of empowerment and personal reconciliation from their cross-border activities no matter the larger outcomes. Transnational activism holds within it a meaning-making component, one that brings some level of personal closure, agency and satisfaction to actors whose lives have been characterized and shaped by violence, displacement, loss, and social and political closure. Moreover, the actors derive tangible benefits from their activities above and beyond these emotive elements. As explored in chapter six, they build activist careers; they gain important skill-sets, social connections, statuses, and recognition. But as importantly, they build a social world full of dignity; one that has a true value-added quality to it. For people like Salvador, this constitutes a whole second life “outside the garage.” Indeed, on so many levels, their lives are transformed and made richer *because* of the work and relationships they engage. And sometimes, as was the case in 2009, the work makes a definitive splash, altering a diplomatic context or influencing the vote just enough to tip the course of history in the home country that has both expelled and wooed them.

That said, there is a double meaning in the quotation that opens this paper. Activists like Werner have indeed been waiting 35 years for a shift in power in their native El Salvador. These have been painful years of disappointments and gaping wounds without closure. But the pain of those 35 years also emanates from transnational activism *itself*. In

the years since his migration, activists like Werner have carried both the joys and the *burdens* of a second life – a life committed to social and political change in the homeland. Those years have been filled with small, steady victories. But they are also years characterized by huge investments of physical and emotional energy, money, and time.

In the second half of this chapter, I explore three of these hardships in further detail. First, in the actors' experience of it, "transnationalism" as a state of being is a messy and often uncomfortable identification. In the beginning, the identification derives not from a sense of empowered "both-ness" but rather from a position imposed upon them by circumstances beyond their control. The immigrant actors stress the trauma of the experiences that locate them where they are, not the glory. The celebratory benefits that accrue from "being transnational" are built by the actors from scratch as a creative response to this unwanted and unwelcomed position as they seek to flip the political and social closure they have experienced on its head and work to redeem and change the realities that put them where they are. As such, one could say that while transnationalism has a deep, celebratory and agentic potential to it, as a state of being, for these actors it derives from a position of powerlessness and pain.

Secondly, a person is not automatically "transnational" simply by virtue of living in a host country and having some ongoing connections to the homeland. In a social and political sense, the actors must *arrive at transnationalism*; they are in a constant state of *becoming* transnational, a status and social reality maintained through immense dedication and effort. They work tirelessly against closure in both the host context and the homeland. While entrée in the homeland has often been depicted as easier than entrée in the host context, here actors are shown to grapple with access in the homeland despite a solid track-record of sacrifice and commitment to "the cause." While work in the homeland is sometimes a status booster, transnationalism is also a constant struggle against invisibility.

Access within both country contexts, and even within the more intimate border-spanning peer group *itself*, is earned through loyalty, commitment, face time, resource investment, and sometimes subordination to the powers that be.

Finally, while “being transnational” can afford actors the important personal and collective benefits already mentioned – careers, skills, connections, empowerment, and a life-enriching social circle, the motivating possibility of actively effecting change – like with any form of activism, these benefits come with significant personal sacrifice, even if the actors themselves do not openly view or recount them as such. The militant’s narrative is one of commitment, responsibility and joy in the work at all costs. And while great joy may be derived, at an objective level, time is finite. For all the technological advances of the internet, Skype, and social media, people cannot exist in more than one place at a time. As such, the actors’ family lives, their marriages, their formal education, pocketbooks and investment in the future (in the host context) can all take a significant and thought-provoking hit as a result of their ongoing cross-border commitments.

Still, the transnational activists would not have it any other way.<sup>104</sup>

## **Part One: Revisiting the Celebration**

### “We Come from Hell”

If you spend a lot of time with us, maybe someday you will really understand us, maybe not. They say Salvadorans are like chameleons, we are always changing. If you push things, agitate a little, you will start to know us. Under this, you will see we are a people with a lot of pain.

–Fidel, 2004

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<sup>104</sup> Methods: In some sections of this chapter, names and other identifying information are omitted because of the sensitive nature of the material. This chapter includes the voices of a larger tier of activists beyond SANA – including members of FMLN-LA and FMLN contacts from the East Coast and Canada. As with other chapters, unless otherwise indicated, I was present for the all events and interactions described here.

Transnational activism has been a hugely empowering force in the lives of the participants in this study, in large part because, as Mario once said, “We come from hell. We know hell.” The commitment to work for change both in the homeland and host has been built largely as a response to that experience of “hell” – the multiple layers of violence committed against these individuals by both the U.S. and Salvadoran states during the war and its aftermath.

In 2003, as SANA and *Día del Salvadoreño* really began taking off, Mario declared emphatically, “We are no longer these refugees! A new vision for a new day!” But in quieter moments, one continues to see the ways that trauma and dislocation have infiltrated and shaped the lives of these activists. The past is always there, just under the surface, making an appearance, for example, in the framed pictures of Werner’s buried siblings that travel with the activist brothers whenever they attend FMLN rallies or events in San Salvador. While activists such as these have been able to rebuild their lives and charge forward with a mission to change the contexts that gave rise to their traumas, their commitment in large part derives from their experience of past helplessness and pain. As with many “militants,” these actors consider themselves “marked” by trauma and loss and compelled to move forward in commitment; their efforts a constant attempt at recovery.

Although it is not something that is often overtly discussed, the roots of this conviction are always there. In private moments, expressions of hardship, such as this one arise: “My youth years were just, were ... it’s been hard. It has not been a normal youth that I have enjoyed. It has been a youth where I have been embroiled into this struggle for justice, struggle for human dignity, struggle for human rights. And ever since then I have been involved in this. And that has marked my life.” On another occasion, this activist said: “It’s been very ... it’s been so hard. I don’t wish these things to happen to any human being.” And then describing the loss of home and family he continued: “The trauma, oh the trauma is so ... I don’t even know why I am still healthy. I mean, we’ve been through so much.”



For others, expressions of trauma emerge in less explicit ways. Talking with Salvador about his migration story, he broke down and lost control of his emotions precisely in the three moments in his story that highlight the helplessness and loss of dignity he experienced in fleeing the war. The first moment was when he talked about the work he did, carrying people and bags of goods through muddy, flooded streets for pocket change in Chiapas. The second was his description of crossing the U.S. border, when his wife tripped on a cable and was covered in mud, and in that moment Salvador swore he would make a decent life for his family and that he would never again see them go through such degradation and loss of dignity. And the third was when he described being smuggled across the border in the trunk of a Cadillac with his wife, sister-in-law and three-year-old son.

When they arrived on the other side of the border, they were starving, only had three dollars in their pockets, and all four of them shared one hamburger. Highlighting the way that pain was embodied in his experience, Salvador wept at the indignities he endured. Forced migration to the U.S. constituted a separation not only from family, friends, and pueblo, but also from a whole life and sense of dignity and control that he knew as a skilled university student.

A younger activist explained that after coming to terms with the fact that he had some emotional issues to address, he finally went to see a therapist: "When she found out I was from El Salvador, she was like, 'Oh I specialize in people from El Salvador,' especially the males. He told the therapist that he did not think he had had it that bad compared to others, especially since he was so young. "But then when she started asking questions: 'have you lost somebody because of the war, has someone you know been killed?'" He continued, "My wife too, she is like, [honey] all of you guys need therapy." In another moment he explains the questions that still haunt him: "Why can't I have my family? Why

does everybody but me have the grandmother, the uncles, cousins? I don't. [...] I go back to El Salvador and see my cousins, but it's like people that I don't know. That [component of life] I lost; I cannot get it back."

"It's been hard for years," another activist confessed. "I have even sought the assistance of a professional to help me sort out all this. I started seeing a therapist to help me cope with all this, it was just so much. It was overwhelming." Some activists add to this an understanding of the way their context of reception in the U.S. magnified the traumas they had already experienced in El Salvador: "When I first came here, what I have found here is a lack of resources, because see we were not recognized as political refugees, or refugees at all, so the resources were not available to us to deal with all the trauma, pain, hurt, anger, all these heavy emotions." This activist goes on to explain that he had to seek out help himself. "If I hadn't done that, I doubt that I would be here. I doubt that. I was, what, 17, 18, 19 years old? And I had already experienced such horrendous levels of violence in my life."

For many migrants the present context helped keep the trauma alive. Such was the case following the 2004 elections, described in chapter five, when the U.S. government colluded with ARENA to shut out an FMLN win. Likewise, as Chamba explains in the historical background chapter, the re-election of Reagan followed by George Bush fueled his feeling of helplessness, his feeling that the community was failing him – a dynamic that scholars of trauma view as central to its social construction.<sup>105</sup>

As the vignette about Herbert that opens this chapter reveals, moments of success or hardship also expose the degree to which activists carry the burden of their lost friends and relatives with them all the time. For the activists that traveled to El Salvador for the

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<sup>105</sup> See Prager's *Presenting the Past* (2000) for a discussion of how past traumas are experienced through the lens of the present context.

2009 elections, the journey can be seen as a reverse pilgrimage of sorts, a long awaited homecoming. The victory was experienced as an incredibly poignant moment of redemption and personal closure. But that moment also carried with it the pain of those that could not be there, those that “did not make it.” This could not have been clearer in the days following the FMLN electoral victory. Sadness and quiet infused the moment of joy, and the air was thick with memories of those that were not there to witness it.

In those moments of both defeat and victory, activists allow emotions to publicly bubble to the surface, and open discussion is permitted within the social circle of fellow activists: “Every time, in the happiest days and the saddest days, all the memories come back, you know when we’re having a normal day, talking not too much, but when we are very, very happy or very, very sad, [loved ones] come immediately [to us]. Because if we are happy we would like to have all those people enjoying this happiness, and when all the pain that is in our soul and our mind, we also want them with us, supporting us.”

Dora, who fled to the U.S. in the mid-1980s after organizing in the mountains with the armed resistance, argues that the pain is sometimes magnified for activists (particularly men) that experienced horror but did not stay in El Salvador to fight with the opposition. Those that talked about going “back to fight” but never did are filled with frustration and guilt, she asserts. This view is corroborated by a male activist, who did go back to fight once in the U.S. At the time, he was working in the solidarity movement. He was assisting some of the older, more experienced activists, and became very involved in diplomacy efforts and presentations at universities across the U.S. At some point he was encouraged to take up a fellowship offer and study law, but instead he made the decision to go back to El Salvador and fight in the mountains. “I had wrestled with it for years, for fifteen years I had been preparing myself to go. It was something I felt I had to do to have closure. And it wasn’t what I thought it would be.”

Nonetheless, he explains that, in emotional terms, he is glad he did it. It brought him answers to some questions, freeing him and his family from the psychological unrest and burden he felt. His oldest son had just been born at the time and he said he remembered thinking, “Ok, this is it. This shit ends with me!” Returning to the mountain was his way of rejoining a community that could help him reconstitute his sense of agency, and address his sense of loss.

The brother of a U.S.-based activist who decided to *remain* in El Salvador after the war even as others fled said that he sees friends and family that emigrated as always having a pain, a “vacío” [emptiness] in their lives. On the flipside, what they might not always realize, he asserted, is that they were a crucial part of the war; the diplomatic work in the U.S. to end the war made places like Los Angeles a critical “second front” on the war. Other entrenched transnational activists, like Fredy, differentiate between those emigrants that were explicitly “sent” to the U.S. by FMLN higher-ups in order to help with efforts there versus those that fled independently for their lives. He felt the “emissaries” have less of this feeling of guilt or of incompleteness that complicates the trauma that everyone lives with. They were not fleeing something; they were on a mission.

People also struggle with having had their lives completely torn apart by war and dislocation but not having a precise “story” to tell. The insecurity about “not having a story” emerged from Salvador on the day of his son’s funeral in Los Angeles in 2004. Referring to Chambita’s death to gun violence – something he links to the difficulties of the childhood Chambita had to endure – he said, “Now I have a story too.” The hardships the war and migration inflicted are not always as overt as a story about having one’s brother or father disappeared, tortured and killed. But the complete interruption of one’s life, separation from friends, family and country, and the insecurity and indignity of the life that was

endured once in the U.S. are trauma enough, not to mention the U.S. government's lack of recognition of this violence and initial denial of membership in the society.

Salvador's experience reminds us of these various types and layers of trauma. For him, one major, ongoing component was not the death of family members but the interruption of his studies in civil engineering at the Central American University (UCA), something he mentions over and over again. He makes reference to how hard it was to go from being a student at a top university to resigning himself to a lifetime of managing parking lots in Los Angeles. The juxtaposition of the Reagan administration responsible for putting him there in the basement of the garage alongside Reagan's fancy fundraising dinners in the hotel down the street, as described in the historical background, is a poignant reminder of the connections at hand.

In all these cases, a common thread is present – namely the experience of helplessness and a loss of agency that accompanied the horrors of war and the interruption of life as it was known. For most of the people in this study, that interruption came at a critical time, in adolescence, as they were just beginning to learn about freedom, independence, first love, rock and roll, and injustice. If they could have chosen to be “transnational activists” in that moment, the youth would have shunned it with everything in them. Transnationalism emerged out of the violent interruption of humble but joyful and increasingly conscious lives grounded in the pueblo. Most the participants say they would have given anything to remain rooted in that prewar moment; and in “downtime,” gathered with fellow activists, in reverie and song, the activists always return there, singing songs of the era and sharing stories about the magic of that time, and then the horror.

Working through Pain: Processing Trauma, Defining a Calling

Although some people could access psychological services once in the U.S., for most of these participants, activism itself became their way out, their therapy, their road to restored agency. One day at a small *pupuseria*, arguing with Werner about politics and the infighting in the Salvadoran activist community, I said, “I have this theory that even though everyone is ideologically divided, all the leaders of these factions are similarly processing pain and trauma from the past, and the work is one way to process it.” Werner paused, leaned forward and said quietly but emphatically, “Now, THAT is an interesting theory.” Other activists, like Dora, that have been part of the community of activists for years have voiced similar points of view: “The trauma of the war,” she once explained, “I believe is processed through work in different forms of organizing.”

Corroborating this view, Mario said of his struggle for emotional survival in the 1980s, “Anger, frustration ... I channeled it creatively into improving me and improving my skills and, wow, it was like, whew, I kind of took off. You know, I was free.” He decided to see a therapist, but as importantly he used activism as a healing mechanism: “I plunged into doing the work to oppose those very mechanisms of death that were actually initiated and maintained from here,” he said, explaining his role as a refugee coordinator at *La Placita*. “It was in the work that I realized that that was the best way to really take care of, you know, my stuff, to release my anger that way. [...] When you are doing something that you are so convinced, you know, that it is truth that you are upholding, the truth actually sets you free. You do it with such joy. I was like, I don’t care! I didn’t even have papers!”

“That’s probably the therapy. That’s probably where you find some sense of peace,” a younger activist said unprovoked, speaking of social justice work and homeland commitments. “In my case, that’s the case. That’s where I go when everything else fails. That’s where I go when I want to give up. How many people had to die for me to get here, right? They didn’t get killed so that I could leave the country, but they died so that I could

live in a place where there was some type of freedom, where there were more political freedoms and choices,” he said of his sense of responsibility to remain politically and civically engaged.

The activists argue that many people they know that did not use this outlet went crazy. “Madness, cynicism, frustration, schizophrenia,” one activist said of some of the conditions that plagued people around him. Without the infrastructure of having a vehicle or social circle for working through trauma, they lacked the “support group setting in which they [could] bloom and kind of dig into their pain,” he explained. Judy, the wife of another activist agrees. She explains that she knows so many men who stopped being active and they became withdrawn, “like different people, not happy, not themselves.” Although having her husband so involved in activism, especially in the homeland, is hard on the family, she says she knows he needs to do it for his mental health.

In the minds of many transnational activists, this work has become a constant memorial to the loved ones they lost and the indignities they themselves suffered. “We have been marked,” said one such activist. “We have been marked for the rest of our lives. [Those lost to violence in El Salvador] are present with me always.” Another activist explained, “We remember the people [lost in the war] in the work we do.” And yet another said, “Inspiration day by day, in every single day of our lives, our hard work is because of them.” The FMLN victory in 2009 provided many of these activists a sense of closure that “everything we have been doing is not in vain.” “Not just my life,” explained one activist quietly in the days following the victory, “but all these lives that have worked towards a better El Salvador.” And in an impassioned speech at a barbeque in Los Angeles after activists returned from the elections, Fredy, a highly committed activist exclaimed with tears in his eyes, “We owed this to our people [that died]. We OWED IT TO THEM!”

In turn, the work has provided a concrete means for building a narrative for one's life, defining a sense of purpose, reconstituting community and moving from a state of victimhood to active engagement and control over the last 30 years. Activists describe themselves as being "marked" and their work in both the homeland and host as being part of a calling and career. Pain "has marked my life," said Mario one day. "And I made this my career. And, believe me, it has been worth it...with all the pains and the difficulties there have been moments of great joy." "I couldn't finish my studies in El Salvador," explained Salvador on a different occasion, "but I'm happy here working for this. This is my passion! This is my life!" In another moment, he said: "I have faith that one day the human race will live with justice. This is my *mission*."

Outsiders or fence-sitters to this world of transnational activism, such as this second generation youth, look into the lives of those more committed and wonder: "You do so much here and you get so little compensation and recognition! So what is it that you seek? What is it then?" Another critic downplayed the commitment by emphasizing the activists' need for recognition. This is a totally unrecognized population, she said. They want someone to notice and validate their work.

But the activists themselves become immune to criticism about their commitment over time, seeing the work literally as a career and life calling. Recognition remains an important issue for many, as will be discussed later in the chapter. But the most entrenched activists say they are used to being overlooked. "I am human, and at some level I would have liked XYZ," said one such activist about his commitment to the FMLN in El Salvador. But that is not why I do the work, he continued. Other activists brush off criticism, emphasizing the way their experience has called them to work for justice in general: "We have seen suffering, Arpi. We have cried, we have wanted, longed for even a ball to play with, like I told you [about my childhood] the other day. [...] We have grown up to become a



type of person that most aren't. I am conscious of the fact that we are few. A lot of people can say, 'It's ridiculous what these guys are doing.' They criticize us. But [...] through life, everyday, we must be working towards justice. The commitment to justice comes out of the experience of suffering."

This way of talking about the work stands in contrast to how other community activists explain their reasons for involvement. Towards the end of *Día del Salvadoreño* in 2008, for example, as we sat around on folding chairs resting for a minute, one such leader explained that he does not need the money or recognition of doing this work, but that he loves art and culture and does the work purely for personal satisfaction. That comment met with silence from most of the transnational activists gathered there. In contradistinction to this line of thinking, Mario said about the festival one day: "This is so much more than just representation and culture! It has to do with ... we are peacemakers and people of conscience and *we come from hell*. We know hell, and we don't want that the policies of our newfound country to continue to create hells for other people around the world. No more!"

A sometimes critic of the political work SANA does said in a private interview, "If there is one thing that nobody can successfully [question] it is [these guys'] commitment to change and to social justice. How they go about it is up to debate, but their intent and their dedication and their loyalty to it is unquestionable. And that's what makes them different."

#### A Whole Second Life: Empowerment, Dignity, Skill-Building and a Life-Giving Social World

The activists recognize that part of the healing that emerges from the work has to do with the restoration of energy and empowerment that occurs in the process. And that is aided by the social support group – the reconstitution of a redressive and likeminded community – that is generated and reinforced in the work. Describing their first few years in the U.S. in the early 1980s, activists say they were lost and alienated until they found

their way into committees working in the solidarity movement. Likewise, as described in chapter three, after the movement dissolved and the regular meetings stopped, feelings of alienation returned but were quickly countered by work in hometown associations and second wave organizations, like SANA.

Describing the community created in the last twenty to thirty years, Werner once said, “The margin is cold but the margin is also warm with the community that you build.” Working on pursuits in the U.S. and particularly in the homeland allows one to “find people that resonate with your own story, with your own energy, the vision...” Another organizer said, “We have an energy that kind of resonates among ourselves. What we have going is something very unique, and it’s very exciting. It’s new, it’s exciting, it’s life giving and this energy, we send this energy, we carry this energy out there [with us in what we do].” That energy spun in the social circle of the activist group also motivates the actors forward in their work: “I am among a group of the most loyal friends. And yeah. There is that energy of creativity and that energy of, well, you know what? We cannot be passively sitting over here comfortable, okay I’ve got my house, I’ve got my job, you know...”

Observation shows that this energy is spun somewhere between remembering the past, carrying out concrete actions and missions together, and reverie about the future: “We sit together and we, whew... dream together, decide all the possibilities. It is like a strategic team. We have a lot of experiences in common. We have worked together on different projects for twenty years. If we have been able to do all this with no funding, imagine what we could do if we are devoted 100% to this work [through funding]. [...] It’s the will of our spirit. [...] The sky is the limit!”

From the beginning of their work in the solidarity movement, the time spent in activists pursuits stood in stark contrast to the actors’ day jobs. Juxtaposed, transnational activism allowed for a process of empowerment that was impossible in the work done to

*“ganar la tortilla”* [earn a living]. The participants of this study began with day jobs such as working as parking lot assistants, bagging groceries, working at Smart & Final, and laying carpet. But through the solidarity movement, they were engaged in strategic meetings, learning how to participate in press conferences, organizing demonstrations, and telling their “story” at universities, in City Hall Chambers, and at high-profile churches throughout the country.

Even early on in a SANA meetings, the empowerment of the group effort was visible, as this excerpt from fieldnotes taken in 2003 reveals:

There is a feeling of control in the meeting. Moving through the agenda, there is a definitive sense of taking control of the situation and of getting stuff done. A point is brought up, a need is mentioned, and BOOM a sub-committee is formed. Those people within the committee are expected to get XYZ task done and report back. They must constantly answer to the group. If there is a financial need, BOOM, money comes out of the pocket or pledges are made right there on the spot. -- Fieldnotes, 2/22/03

With time, empowerment and skills have only grown. As both Chapter Four and Chapter Five demonstrate in detail, in the post-war years, these leaders have moved from backstage roles to front and center roles, both in their interactions with the FMLN and with politicians in the host context. Their lobby efforts during the 2008-2009 campaign season in El Salvador were completely self-organized and self-orchestrated. Meetings following the elections, such as this one held in Los Angeles just two weeks after Funes was elected, reveal the level of empowerment and the set of skills developed in the course of engaging transnational activism over the last 30 years:

Quickly the group turned to next steps. One step that MF proposed is immediately sending thank you notes to legislators that signed on to the letter circulated in Congress, or to anyone that was supportive in the process. The group began to brainstorm about how to follow up with these individuals. “Can we get some of them to go to the inauguration in San Salvador in June?” The strategy arrived at was three-prong: (1) thank you letters, (2) visit and follow-up with

individuals in California (each SANA member meeting with one or two representatives) in order to give a letter/recognition in person and/or encourage a trip to El Salvador, (3) a visit to Washington DC in May to do the same; possibly a trip to Arizona. The letter would be a thank you and recognition for aiding in the “peaceful transition” to democracy in the homeland. Tasks were immediately divvied up, including who would draft the letter and who would visit which representative. The latter depended on the relationship of the activist to the representative throughout this recent work, through other work with unions, or because they lived in their district and so on. Ten representatives from State and Federal level offices were immediately identified for follow-up. --Fieldnotes, 3/30/09

Speaking of the contrast between the types of work enabled through SANA versus that of his day job, Salvador once explained that in his work in managing the parking lot he was under the thumb of his boss. He literally had never missed a day of work there, although this meant that he had missed the opportunity to engage in vital efforts in El Salvador, such as monitoring the 2004 elections and accompanying the pilgrimage of *El Divino Salvador* from San Salvador to Los Angeles – events that would have been very meaningful to him. In contrast, however, work with the solidarity movement and later with SANA allowed him to meet with city, state and federal level officials in the U.S. and also enabled direct interaction with high-level FMLN leaders such as *comandante*-turned- presidential candidate, Schafik Handal, who slept and ate in Salvador’s house when he visited Los Angeles in 2004.<sup>106</sup>

After several years of work with SANA, Salvador quit his work in the garage. Even though he was uncertain how he would survive financially, he wanted to devote time to transnational pursuits, leaving the life of the garage behind. Discussing this move, he explained that it was risky, but that “this is for me, for Chamba!” Transnational work had brought him both satisfaction and a level of opportunity that the garage simply could not. Some years later, after a failed bid for mayor of his hometown, President Funes name him to the post of Governor of his municipality, Ahuachapán, in 2011 – from garage to governor.

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<sup>106</sup> Taken from direct fieldnotes and interaction with Handal when he visited – not from a later recounting

For younger, less entrenched activists, the contrast between their SANA work and their daily lives was painted in even greater relief. Fidel described his initial work with SANA, saying, “I was part of [the effort to bring the image], and I was feeling very proud of being part of SANA too. [...] It make me feel that I am doing something very special, real, something very strong.” Later on he said, “I saw a picture of my father in the newspaper in San Salvador crying about the image, and I said, *I am doing this!*” With time, the confidence of someone like Fidel has only grown. Interviewed a few years later, Fidel, who was still doing part-time construction gigs for his day job, but who had learned to interface with politicians like Mark Ridley Thomas (formerly California State legislator, currently Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors), explained: “I have learned that a lot of people have faith in myself. I have learned that I can put together an event, and I can create my own team to do that, and I can get it done. I can *do* that.” By 2012, Fidel was hosting fundraising events for candidates for city council at his own house.

For Fidel, that empowerment and learning also spilt over into how he carries himself in his day job. Sitting over dinner with his wife, three kids and housemate one day, he told the story about a foreman he had on a construction job he was working in Pasadena. The foreman was always yelling at him, so finally one day, Fidel told him, “Hey, you need to respect me.” He explained that he has learned through his other work that he deserves respect and is capable just like anyone else. The foreman laughed and said, “Who are you? I don’t need to respect you...” And Fidel walked up to him, put his finger on the guy’s chest – “a big giant gringo,” as he described him – and said, “FUCK YOU.” And then he quit the job, even though he was asked to stay.

There is an incredible amount of dignity and confidence in the work that the activists do. Some leaders have explained that being poor but having this dignity is what really matters: “It doesn’t matter if you don’t have much to eat, but that we are respected,

that we are appreciated, this is what is important. A smile and we die happy..." one leader said. But even for those organizers, like Sophia, that have prestigious day jobs that earn great salaries, or for others that are lead organizers for their unions, transnational activism, and the work engaged through SANA, presents organizers with a whole second life full of meetings, skill-building, contact-making, network creation, travel and targeted goals and actions. Traveling with the activists, the extent of this network of fellow activists is made obvious, as SANA leaders literally have a place to stay almost anywhere they go whether in the U.S. or El Salvador via the FMLN.

Alongside intensive and exhausting work for actions like elections-monitoring, where 2-3 hours of sleep a night is not uncommon, there is also great celebration; singing, drinking, dancing and endless laughter that rejuvenates the spirit of the participants, and oscillates between nostalgia and remembering the past and reverie about the future. In moments of disappointment, the social energy in the group, and particularly singing and remembering together, helps the actors to process a failure and prepare for the next task at hand.

For example, following the disappointing 2004 elections, the air was thick with disappointment the next day. For the most part, all of the SANA activists had a hard time even speaking about it. They had poured countless hours into organizing around the election, and they had also incurred great expense, for some teetering on the edge of being fired from day jobs in the U.S. The day following the election, the group gathered, went to the beach, and sang. They quite literally sang all day and night. At one point, as people took turns with solos and shared a few words in reflection, Werner began to cry. "I'm not ashamed to share these tears with you," he said, choking on his words, explaining what this experience had meant for him. "For those of us who have struggled, we know that when you lose you just keep your chin up and keep struggling," the activists affirmed. But part of

the buoyancy of the moment was in the social interaction. By the end of the night, the activists were already talking about their next steps.

This social dynamic is a pattern. Following a hard week of work in L.A. or El Salvador, time is always taken to relax and commune together even if it means missing out on yet more sleep. The following are excerpts of moments of collective processing and restoration in Los Angeles and San Salvador respectively:

Soon Fidel is into protest songs and everyone is joining in and singing, banging on impromptu drums. Although SANA has only been together a handful of years, these songs go way back, and everyone knows them. There is collective memory in this, solidarity. The songs are sad, of war and of struggles, of work to be done. There is a young Salvadoran who shows up. I notice that he does not know these songs as the older folk do. Soon Werner and Isabel are dancing together. The singing goes on for hours. Before long there is literally not a person (aside from me, the young guy and a woman, who I learn is Mexican) who is not singing his or her heart out. Every now and again someone sings out the verse solo style - making it up as creatively as possible to the joy of the crowd. The songs move in and out of sadness and joy, past and present. Andrés begins to sing a solo, he stands, motions slowly with his hands, holding them up in the air, a cigarette between two fingers close to the webbing that binds them. When he inhales, he holds his whole hand open, flat against his face. He belts out with a low, raspy voice, "*Es demasiado aburrido, seguir y seguir la huella, andar y andar los caminos sin nadie que me entretenga ...*"<sup>107</sup> To end the gathering, everyone joins in a few Salvadoran classics, Fidel leading the last song with, "*Como se llama?*" In the pause, someone yells out, "*Como se llama, compadres?*" and everyone responds singing slowly and throwing their arms out, "SANAALVAAAADOOOOOR..." (2003)<sup>108</sup>

Some six years later following a disappointing event held on the eve of Funes' inauguration in San Salvador, SANA leaders gathered with other FMLN activists from both El Salvador and the U.S. They were invited to a bar by a local FMLN supporter:

The music is rocking inside. Periodically, Juan, Foncho, Fredy, Werner, Mario are belting out lines from the music. It is partly music from their youth. There is music in English that everyone knows. They are singing at the top of their lungs: "We don't need no education ..." and drumming on the table - ba ba baba, ba ba baba. "We don't need no thought control!" At some point the music switches to songs in Spanish and in no time everyone is singing, "*Oye mi amor, no me digas que no...*" In this moment and so many like it, there is a

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<sup>107</sup> "It is too tedious to follow in the footprints, to walk and walk the pathway with no one to entertain me" from the song *Los Ejes de mi Carreta*.

<sup>108</sup> "What is it called? What's the name?" from the song *El Carbonero*.

deep nostalgia for these actors that is linked to their youth. A poignant nostalgia that has to do with this mix of rock and roll - some from the U.S. or U.K. and some from Latin America. Memories are tied to it, and a combination of emotions. The activists begin talking about it like an era of happiness and youth and first loves. Yes, perhaps signs of a pending war were present, but all these people were teens at that time. They were falling in love, sneaking out to see their girlfriends. Even the initial foray into the resistance was exciting. And then it all began to change. (2009)

A few nights later, driving home after a music and memory filled dinner at a fellow *FMLNistas* house in San Salvador, the activists squished into an SUV and headed for their hotel. They discussed their pending return to Los Angeles, running through all the work they had put aside for months during the campaign season in the homeland that they would now need to catch up on. Through the windows, the lights of the city shone bright on the night horizon. Then quietly, almost in a dream state, Sophia whispered under her breath, "But our country is beautiful, isn't it? It is right to keep fighting for it..."

"That's what SANA is; it helps us to do something with our emotions," Fidel once said about the organization. The materials presented above show that, in personal terms, the work allows these actors to collectively process the traumas that they have experienced and creatively channel their "emotions," as Fidel says. It is not only the successes and public outcomes of strategic action that restore agency to these individuals. Rather, a sense of community, meaning, energy, agency and hope are created in the very process of working together towards "larger" goals. Moreover, in the process, the actors come to attain more tangible benefits, like social capital, organizing skills, empowerment and experiences that their day jobs could never afford them. For many, the work is a second career, and one that is a deeply rewarding and enriching component of their lives; one that allows them to take control of their interrupted lives and work collectively towards structural change.

### **Part Two: "Happy, But It Follows 35 Years of Pain"**

"It's complicated": Thoughts on Bi-nationality



That benefits can accrue to people dwelling in the world of the in-between is not to say that the life is easy or should be glorified. Much of the literature on transnationalism paints this process and state of being as a somewhat celebratory phenomenon, a method for pushing back against the violence, containment and caging of “the state,” or even as a state of “freedom.”<sup>109</sup> As described above, for people whose lives have been characterized by displacement, loss, and socio-political closure, trans-state activism is indeed one mechanism for restoring agency and for attempting to act back on the state in the way that it has acted on them. Over time, transnationalism becomes a way of life. That said, as is made clear through transnational activists’ life stories and observation of the work they do over time as transnational actors, the very position these migrants find themselves in derive from experiences beyond their control, and circumstances that they would never choose or “wish upon any human,” as one activist put it.<sup>110</sup> Being bi-national is described by many as a complicated identity – one that affords them unique opportunities, gives them a critical, insightful and amplified skill set and lens through which to analyze and participate in political life, but, also, can be experienced as a state of unease no matter how routine it has become.

As described in chapter three, for almost all the participants in this study becoming a “member” of the U.S. was a painful process, but a process they felt they had little choice in. “We all suffered from the experience of “becoming American,”” one such activist outside SANA explained in 2008. In 2004 another person described it as a gradual process of acceptance: “I’ve been able to adjust to this as much as I’ve been able to ... to this country.” Almost everyone emphasizes that life circumstances imposed this state of being upon them,

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<sup>109</sup> If you only interviewed activists once, this might be the full story told; the underside emerges through participant observation and becomes visible over time. On freedom, see, for example, Appadurai 1996. See Favell 2008, for a case that follows the most “elite” of transnationals and uncovers the struggles that even they encounter.

<sup>110</sup> See Favell 2003a; Smith and Guarnizo 2003 for a discussion of transnationalism from below.

this condition of being “in-between.” As such, along with affording unique opportunities, being bi-national is also described as something that traps the actors to some degree, not necessarily something that sets them free. Said Salvador, “If life gives me the chance to return to El Salvador [permanently] and do something good ... I will have to do [my work] in two places, because now I can’t ever disconnect myself from the United State, EVER. If I have two daughters that live here [...] no longer can I think in less than two paths. This is the position [that I am in] [...] We’ve been converted into people of here and there.”

Other activists describe the sensation of not quite belonging in either place; not having a country to call 100 percent “home.” As described in chapter three, Werner once said, “When I return to El Salvador, I do not necessarily feel at home. You know, I was very young when I left.” But about the United States he said, “Someone asked me how I felt about the U.S. being my country now. And I thought, you know, the U.S. is like a stepmother. She doesn’t really love me as her own son, but she will take care of me and give me shelter.” His comments point more to a condition of “nationless-ness” than dual-belonging.

Activists and emigrants that have not returned to the homeland for many years often find the reunion joyful and disconcerting or disorienting. Arriving at the San Salvador airport with the brother of one activist, now living in Canada, he was taken aback by the unfamiliarity of the place. During the whole drive from the airport to San Salvador, he processed aloud: “This is not my El Salvador. This is not the El Salvador that I left. [...] I don’t recognize any of this!” A few days later he continued to “trip out” about the homecoming. He was there for the inauguration of the new FMLN president. On the way home from a bar, sitting in the backseat a few days after arriving, he continued to grab my arm urgently, open his eyes widely and say, “This is so crazy. Do I belong here? Is this my El Salvador?”

Salvadoran activists that are more centered in the U.S. sometimes criticize or even “shame” the ongoing connection and commitment to politics in El Salvador. “Are you

looking for social justice?" One younger, 1.5 generation activist asked rhetorically, "Because you can do it here!" An older activist who also migrated as a child criticized the others' desire to work more formally in politics in El Salvador: "You can't take up a foreign post like that because then you would be representing another country from the inside! I'm sorry, I love my country, I love my people [speaking of El Salvador], but I'm American. I grew up here, my children were born here, and I would never turn my back to this flag. I love the Salvadoran flag too, but I'm American. This is where my loyalties are. I don't want to vote in El Salvador. I don't even need a DUI [Salvadoran national identification card]; I don't need 2 passports. Why would I? Because I vote here!"<sup>111</sup> As natural an outcome as transnationalism might be for many people that fled or left one country for another, the identity is still viewed by others, including fellow immigrants, as illegitimate or improper in some sense.

After being questioned about where his loyalties are, which country he considers his home, one activist said, "I am American and I am Salvadoran," and then responding to snickers, "and it is NOT FUNNY." On another occasion, he further explained, "We have a '*sentido*' [feeling or sense] of shamefulness about who we are, and about our dreams and our ideas. People are ashamed of their story," which is complicated, he explained. It is a story that is not as neat and tidy as the mirage of the nation-state. Many people, he continued, "have decided to just put themselves into the system and to be absorbed by it."

On one level, activists explain, their state of living in-between is a completely natural outcome of their experience. Their experience has given them attachments to two places, and they continue to act on them. Rather, it is the sense that these dual attachments are illegitimate or "not ok"; it is the very act of having to choose citizenship in one place that feels "artificial" and "unnatural." Still, they remain cognizant that this orientation can be

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<sup>111</sup> The *Documento Único de Identidad* (DUI) is the ID card used for voting in El Salvador.

threatening to outsiders to their world, especially those born and raised within the boundaries of one nation-state. And, given the “system,” it is sometimes a difficult or risky status to maintain.

Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example, when the “loyalties” of Muslim and Middle Eastern domestic organizations were being scrutinized, one SANA director voiced his concern and his realist take on the way that immigrant groups fluidly move in and out of being “included” in the “nation” depending on what is happening in foreign policy. Projecting a change in power in El Salvador to the leftwing FMLN, he said, “And because of this, we, as SANA, want to secure our friendships with everyone [politicians, civic organizations, etc] so that when it is the Salvadorans’ turn – and our turn *will come* – we are not left out!” Then explaining his response to those that would accuse him of dual loyalties, he continued, “We want to be able to say, ‘Hey do you know who we are? We are American and we are Salvadoran. It’s the same thing!’”

#### A Constant State of “Becoming”: On National Closure and Access

In the literature on immigrant transnationalism, the routine connections of immigrants that maintain contact with their loved ones, send money “home,” or visit periodically are often conflated with the intense, all-encompassing homeland-oriented activities of individuals like those represented in this study (Fitzgerald 2004; Fox 2005). But perhaps a person should not automatically be considered a “transnational” simply by virtue of living in a host country and having some ongoing connections to the homeland. As Waldinger and Fitzgerald rightly asserted in their influential 2004 article, *Transnationalism in Question*, such a condition describes immigrants in general, not immigrant transnationals. When all these “connections” come under the generalized rubric of “transnationalism,” a disservice is done to our understanding of that small but important percentage of people

who genuinely have fashioned a life out of working in and living between two places (Favell 2003b; 2008).

As natural as the connections to two places may be initially, producing a life of profound connection to both is a status that requires constant effort, dedication and maintenance, such that immigrants must work to “arrive” at transnationalism. Here I describe transnationalism as a constant state of “becoming” and “maintaining” that can deliver benefits but also requires continuous input and sacrifice. Long-term observation of the participants in this study shows that they almost all work tirelessly against social and political closure in both the host context and the homeland – work necessary to maintain and develop the access, contacts and networks that actually allow them to “be” transnational in practical terms.

Indeed, as described in prior chapters, with decades of work, the Salvadoran emigrant activists in this study have gained political status in the U.S., access to some political representatives and offices, and increased recognition for the larger Salvadoran, immigrant community. Likewise they have been continuously engaged in electoral politics, canvassing, walking precincts and manning phone banks. In the homeland, they have been central in the emigrant efforts to maintain a political connection. They have remained tirelessly within the fold of the FMLN, supported FMLN presidential candidates like Handal, Funes and now Sánchez Cerén 100%, lobbied U.S. representatives for accompaniment of the democratic process in El Salvador, monitored elections at all levels of governance, held countless press conferences, pushed to secure emigrant voting rights, and worked to create committees within the Salvadoran government and laws that focus specifically on issues of migration and the connection between country contexts. In the process of working on these issues in both the U.S. and El Salvador, they have often been informal ambassadors, accompanying diplomats in their visits to one context or the other, arranging meetings, and

engaging diplomacy. In short, they have engaged a great deal of work largely aimed at building up “connective tissues” or a middle ground between contexts.

No one has questioned the concerted efforts it takes for immigrants to become integrated in the civic and political life of the host country. But access to the homeland is often viewed as unproblematic. Indeed, an emergent body of literature within the immigrant transnationalism tradition has turned its attention to the “outreach” of homeland governments as they seek (somewhat desperately) to connect with their emigrant populations living in host countries (for example, Fitzgerald 2008; Délano, 2009; 2011). Some of the same debates that raged in the initial immigrant transnationalism studies – is the phenomenon old or new? – continue now in this work on state outreach (see Choate, 2008 for a historical analysis). But the question remains as to whether such outreach and connection on the part of the state represents genuine inclusion for emigrants in the polity and decision-making of the homeland or whether a more cynical approach should be taken.

According to the participants in this study, that outreach is often a simple attempt to tap the resources and organizing work of emigrant leaders, to gain access to the larger population of co-nationals living outside the country, and to use them as sources for development and financial support. Actual inclusion in the political development and decision-making processes of the homeland country prove more elusive.

As is made clear in chapters three and four, throughout the 1990s and into the last decade, people like the SANA directors have remained consistently wary of outreach by the rightwing Salvadoran party – a party that formerly considered them “enemies of state” but grew to see them in the postwar era as potential “partners” in the efforts to aid a struggling homeland. Moreover, as a top-down organization, real access to the FMLN party has also been difficult. Over the years, numerous splits within the organization have occurred, and many Salvadoran immigrant activists have cut their ties or found their connections in El

Salvador suddenly outside the boundaries of the party for a number of reasons. As such, as the party has risen to prominence, taking control even of executive office, these activists have often fallen outside the fold of the party and the circle of influence there. For the most part, they have turned their attention to host country concerns or grassroots efforts in the homeland (in lieu electoral politics).

The activists in this study are in a somewhat different position. They have indeed gained access to the highest levels of the party – the political committee dominated by the orthodox faction within the FMLN – because of the way the dynamics between political tendencies in the party have played out over the last ten years. As the FMLN has grown in power within the country, that has, ironically, put these activists at the center of things, despite the fact that as *ortodoxos* and *comunistas* they were often marginalized and ostracized by other factions during the solidarity movement, while those such as the *FPL* and *RN* took central organizing roles in the U.S.<sup>112</sup>

But observation shows that growing access for these leaders, still limited in scope, has *only* come through unflinching loyalty and continuous support of the party and the power players therein. In a meeting following the 2009 elections, recognizing their somewhat unique position as emigrants and SANA leaders, one such activist said, “We have to recognize that we are not FMLN; we are independent and therefore can operate with more versatility.” “Yeah, the FMLN kind of wanted to take us over,” said one SANA leader in 2003 when the organization was in its early years of work. He went on to explain that, although they generally supported the FMLN, they had to make a case for their independence and the leverage it would allow them to get a wider spectrum of work done.

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<sup>112</sup> This is an important point. Refer back to the brief mapping of the factions of the FMLN, discussed in the historical background chapter. The *PC (Partido Comunista)* faction of the FMLN, led by Schafik Handal, was marginalized in the U.S. throughout the solidarity movement, making these leaders’ rise to power a noteworthy irony and a sweet victory in the minds of the organizers themselves.

But in interviews with individual activists, it is clear that formal recognition for their work – honors such as being named Honorable Citizens of El Salvador, being singled out for recognition at a private ceremony with the Vice President following the 2009 elections, being “elected” to posts such as Werner and Fredy’s status as supplementary representatives within the Central American Parliament, or being named Governor of a homeland Department, as Salvador was in 2011 – all these honors have come through intense commitment and loyalty to the FMLN. Access is something that has been “gained” and “earned” over time through a proven track-record of commitment and militancy. For all but the most committed, attempts at access have proven disappointing.

The electoral success of the FMLN in 2009 created an interesting laboratory for observations of access and closure, even if symbolic. As described in the introduction to this chapter, for the inauguration in June of that year, countless Salvadoran activists from the U.S. and beyond flew to San Salvador to partake in the celebration and formal events. Almost all of the Salvadoran organizations from Los Angeles were represented, even though many of them had stepped quite outside the realm of the FMLN over the past two decades, pushing centrist parties or protesting the political commission’s choice of candidates in prior elections.

Unless they received a formal invitation from a distance, once in El Salvador, many activists and supporters of the Funes-Cerén platform had to scramble to secure their pass to the formal inauguration ceremony and its many corollary events. Arriving at FMLN headquarters, it was immediately obvious that even activists that had largely cut their connections with the party in past years were trying hard to work their own channels of access. Activists like Werner and Fredy were placed in a somewhat uncomfortable “gatekeeper” role by the FMLN, handing out passes, sometimes making a push for one group of people or another to gain access or be denied.



When one handful of solidarity activists that had fallen outside the fold of the FMLN showed up, Fredy explained, “This guy, he gives me a huge hug and then behind my back calls me a communist. But I saved them passes because even though they left the party years ago, they are really good, talented people. If they hadn’t left the party, they would have been HUGE right now. But they went to the center.” This was a big mistake on their part, Fredy continued, because in this context you are either ARENA, FMLN or out of the game. But, he explained, they have been part of this trajectory of the FMLN and Salvadoran American community, and they constitute talent we should not lose.

Transnational businessmen that had backed Funes solidly in the preceding two years were given passes to the main event, but their spouses, who made this special trip with them – some of them leaving young children behind in the U.S. – were turned away and only given access to the larger, corollary events. Brothers, sons, spouses and other contacts of longtime militants were in the same boat. “Internationalists” were given some special privileges but, like the “spouses,” not a seat at the formal event. And countless rank-and-file activists from the U.S.-based FMLN committees or other U.S.-based organizations were disappointed across the board, receiving nothing.

For people that did not get into the events, this was a bittersweet moment of happiness and huge disappointment. “If you think you are pissed,” Werner said to more recent activists, “You should talk to some people that have been working for this change all their lives!” The teenage son of one SANA activist said to me over a beer a couple nights before the inauguration, “I am so excited that I am here for the inauguration. I have some Salvadoran friends. They are probably not even going to believe me if I tell them!” But the morning of the event, along with the brothers of other hardcore activists – people that have been FMLN supporters their whole lives and lost family members to the struggle in the

process – this youth was hugely disappointed. For many, the formal inauguration was taken in on television from the comfort of their San Salvador hotel rooms.

Following the FMLN win, U.S.-based activists wondered if they would receive increased support for their organizations or would be named to any important posts in the new government. Although they generally have developed a much better relationship with the consulate, positions within the consulate or invitations to participate directly in the Funes administration more generally have been few and far between. The same can be said of material support for immigrant organizations, an opening of resources that the leaders had believed would occur. The naming of Leonel Flores, a SANA representative in Washington D.C., as the new Director of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute, the access of some FMLN supporters to roles within the Embassy and consulates, and Salvador's appointment by Funes as Governor of one of the 14 regional Departments that comprise El Salvador were all seen as small rays of hope that the emigrant population would be given some access to the new administration.

At the same time, activists in this study immediately began backpedaling as early as the Inauguration when Funes did not visit any of the galas and events organized by emigrant activists in San Salvador, arguing that he was now the president and access would no longer be as simple as it was before. Businessmen that had supported the party platform through *Empresarios por El Cambio* – a transnational organization – also began to worry. For many, their support of the left had developed through frustrations with a rightwing government that created unnecessary obstacles to transnational business endeavors. “But how available will Mauricio be now? Will we be able to meet with him?” one leader asked, concerned.

Some months later, when President Obama visited El Salvador on his Latin America tour, emigrant activists were upset that they had not been formally included in the visit by

contacts in El Salvador. Prior to the visit, the U.S. State Department arranged a conference call with the emigrant leaders of key organizations, asking them to accompany this process towards democracy in El Salvador, and a small handful of leaders from organizations like SANA, SHARE Foundation and *Salvadoreños en el Mundo* were able to work one channel or another to attend a dinner gala with Obama in San Salvador. But the irony remained for many, including those invited. As one person said, “The State Department calls to invite us to be part of this connection and relationship but the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs – who we know so well – doesn’t even *contact us* and ask us to be involved in Obama’s visit! What the hell, man?”

Since then, a few developments have been promising for activists in their attempt to institutionalize a connection between contexts. One is the passage of The Special Law for the Protection and Development of Migrants and their Families (*Ley Especial para la Proteccion y Desarrollo de la Persona Migrante y su Familia*), which creates an office, personnel and a board to deal with migration issues and concerns, including emergency funds for accidents and incentives for Salvadoran businesspeople wishing to relocate to the homeland. SANA director JR was named to this board by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012. Another development is the creation of *El Salvador Global*, a group of international Salvadoran talent working with the Economics Ministry on economic development issues. Finally, the Funes administration and emigrant allies continue working to extend voting rights to migrants living in the U.S.; several SANA directors have been entrenched in this work for a number of years, serving on committees such as the “commissioners of the vote in the exterior,” a committee named by the Ministry of Foreign relations in 2012.

Still, maintaining that stance of being “between” countries remains difficult. And the notion that being in the U.S. with citizenship automatically facilitates access to the homeland via the “hostland integration equals transnationalism” equation is called into

question. Living in the U.S. allows the organizers to reach out and to receive certain protections they would not have living in the homeland, but gaining political access within the homeland from a distance is still difficult. As one leader who returned to El Salvador recently said of SANA leaders, “If they really want to affect change in El Salvador, tell them they should live in El Salvador!”

Too this point, in 2008, when Salvador decided to run for mayor in his hometown of Atiquizaya, colleagues criticized him for “taking himself out of the game.” In a sense, going off to work in one’s hometown was seen as going to the margins, becoming national again, when the key work is seen as existing at the federal level in the connection between contexts. In this sense, the “game” and the “center” are not in a small town in El Salvador but rather in the U.S., but with deep integration and connection to key civic and political institutions in El Salvador. After his failed bid for mayor, however, Salvador remained in the homeland, moving his life there. Two years later, President Funes named him Governor of the entire Department of Ahuachapán, wherein his hometown is just one municipality. Integration at that level necessitated becoming “national” again. Not only did it take a proven track record to get there; also, it was only once Salvador had given up his livelihood in the U.S. and moved permanently to El Salvador that he was granted this access and this honor.

In the weeks following the 2009 Election, one would have expected a respite from the tireless work that led up to the elections. Family members of the emigrant activists were mad, marriages were literally splitting apart, and teenage kids teetering on the brink of disaster. Instead, just two weeks after Funes was declared president, SANA was holding its first post-election meeting in Los Angeles. And just two weeks after that, they held a weekend-long, all day and night, strategic planning session. At that first meeting, after reviewing the election monitoring process and assigning tasks related to follow-up with

local elected officials, SANA directors began discussing the next phase of work. Looking up at me from across the table with a smile and a shrug, a young, 1.5 generation director shook her head and mouthed incredulously, “THEY JUST KEEP GOING...”

“Hasta Tirar Las Maletas en La Calle”: Transnationalism’s Toll<sup>113</sup>

Following the March 2004 presidential elections, in which the Salvadoran electorate voted the rightwing ARENA party back into office, Salvador, who had been pushing for a change in government for years, released the following sarcastic but revealing statement to his close friends and allies (noted in chapter five):

The *Hermano Lejano* [distant brother] comes out ahead, because the results of the election prove that our families are just fine with the current situation, and it is no longer necessary to send so much in remittances like we’ve been doing until now. This money would be better invested in the education of our own children here [in the U.S.], so that they cease being part of the delinquent statistics of gangs, the imprisoned, those riddled with bullets or deported to El Salvador where they are awaited by tyrants, ready to decapitate them, and without having analyzed that they lost out because their parents had been sending a large percent of their income to their families who don’t have a precise understanding of what it takes to earn this money - money we cheat our children of and send in the form of remittances.

Although this statement is about remittances in particular, it tells an important truth about all transnational activism. Not only does such a reality call for constant maintenance and work, the time and resources poured into cross-border endeavors also *have to come from somewhere* (Kivisto, 2001). Unless activists are involved in some type of cross-border business endeavor, crafting of a life of “in-between” is not a paid gig. It is a second job that activists primarily do for free. As such, the flipside to the benefits described in the first part of this chapter are the constant sacrifices that are made.

This component of the lifestyle is given short shrift in many accounts of “transnationalism” that depict the phenomenon as a potpourri of remittances, a few hometown committee meetings, and the occasional trip “home.” Likewise, in the

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<sup>113</sup> “To the point of throwing our suitcases in the street...”

transnational activists' narrative, such tradeoffs often go unspoken. The word "sacrifice" is almost taboo; instead, doing the work is a privilege and "an honor." It is about "commitment." But longtime observation brings these tradeoffs to light – the most often noted being investment in higher education or job mobility, time "*robado*" [robbed] from the family, and efforts taken away from U.S.-based organizing pursuits (see also RC Smith 2006: 94-122 on spousal relations).

Following the election of Mauricio Funes in March 2009, the intense work ethic of transnational activists was exposed in plain view. After having slept 2-3 hours for multiple nights leading up to the election, engaging monitoring missions and analyses, the morning following the election the activists were up early and attending meetings at FMLN headquarters. Upon return to the U.S., at the first SANA meeting in Los Angeles two weeks later, Werner explained that he had spent a few days at a conference with his wife, where he had time to just relax at the hotel and do nothing. Describing the break he said to fellow activists, "*Tengo años, AÑOS, do no hacer esto* [I have not done that in years, in YEARS]!"<sup>114</sup>

The vast majority of the activists in this study arrived in the U.S. in the teenage years. Their junior high and high school educations were interrupted, and although many went on to earn a high school diploma or its equivalent eventually, college was not much of an option. This is true both because of the need to maintain a day job and the cost of education, but also because time spent studying at a university was time taken away from activism, and there are only so many hours in the day. The top priorities have been to make a humble living and to work for change. If the two can coincide, all the better, but a part

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<sup>114</sup> The tradeoffs for these individuals are not unique to *transnational* commitment, per se. Rather, they are the sacrifices and choices made by all activists. That the work often takes these individuals out of the country adds an additional layer of hardship, although much time is spent in meetings, either in person or on the phone, in the U.S. host context as well.

from organizer trainings and learning on the job, notions of formal “skill-building” or self-improvement have not found space on the agenda.

Indeed, as Salvador once said, activism has been “an education better than any university.” The skills learned “on the job” in the process of working for change in both the U.S. and El Salvador can make the skills and know-how of a university graduate look anemic by comparison. Still, activists admit that certain obstacles like a lack of basic writing skills either in Spanish or English remain a challenge for many people in their cohort and can even keep them from interacting via evolving technology like e-mail. Although these leaders are confident that their organizing skills are superior to most people, even those with multiple higher degrees, as one activist put it, in certain situations “having a title would definitely help.”

Following the elections, the lack of time spent gaining a formal education presented activists with a painful irony: although most of them had dedicated their *entire lives* to working for a change in power in El Salvador, once it arrived, they were not in a position to be offered or to take up posts in embassies, consulates or within the new Administration in general, because they lacked the formal skills necessary. When the Funes administration came looking for talent in the Salvadoran American community immediately following the election, they first met with “professionals” in lieu of community organizers – even with some people that had not been involved in the campaign at all. One older, former solidarity leader described as “naïve” the buzz in the transnational activist community about who might receive a placement. “They are not trained for those roles. Why would you want a job that you cannot do well?” she asked.

In a strategic planning meeting following the election, activist Sophia gave voice to this problem and irony: “On many levels we are not organically prepared, as a community, for the position we have just arrived in.” Later in an interview, she went on to explain that

there is something painful in this reality – those that have given the most, working tirelessly for change over the past 30 years, are not “qualified” to lead at that level. Although the lack of formal education is not a game-stopper, she explained, it proves an important obstacle to the upward mobility of this cadre of leaders and for their integration into higher, more visible leadership roles in both countries. “They made the mistake of putting all their eggs in one basket,” she explained.

Mario, a 1.5 generation activist, offered his assessment:

You can be a brilliant mind without any formal training but to implement things where there’s already a set rule, group of instructions, you gotta understand those things first to implement your vision from within. And I think that’s where we haven’t been able to succeed because those leaders that came in and were forced to do this work have not continued development in the professional aspect, education, a lot of us. We get distracted and we think that it’s more important that we continue this work [we are doing] than our own education. And I fall into that same trap many times...

He explained that there is a bitter irony in it: “This is a huge challenge for Salvadorans, because of the lack of formal education and training. A lot of [the older generation] are great organizers because of their lifelong experiences, organizing in unions, organizing in El Salvador. The ability of that generation of Salvadorans to organize is *unique*. I’ve seen it. I’m like in AWE. WHOA. But the strategic organizing is where we lack...”

To some degree, part of the activist ranks that stayed in El Salvador after the war were better able to continue their educations, whereas those that fled had their educations wholly interrupted, had to scramble for survival, learn a new language from scratch, and missed “the moment,” as one person put it. Still other activists that gave one hundred percent in the solidarity years later put activism on hold, pouring their energies into furthering their educations and focusing on professionalization, although they are now less familiar with or tapped into the political reality on the ground in the homeland as a result.



The following letter, written by a transnational activist from the East Coast reveals his awareness of the tradeoffs that have been made. He could arguably be described as one of the most skilled and committed strategists in the Salvadoran transnational activist community. Following the 2009 FMLN victory, as the Salvadoran American community discussed which emigrants would be given a role in the new administration he preemptively wrote about his own situation and that of his *compañeros*:

How many [activists] have left the party, some were bought out, others got tired, others arrived at the conclusion that everything was done, and better to decide to make money, have a family, graduate from the best universities – why not? – become a doctor... And the rest of us, we never thought of our families, we didn't think about studying at a university, instead we analyzed and studied how to defeat our enemies. We have dedicated the best years of our lives to this struggle ... And although they called us difficult, troublemakers, ignorant, lacking academic preparation, although they said that we are not capable, that we don't have friends in high places [...] We succeeded. We succeeded even though many people didn't believe in us ... Why? Because we always have thought of everything but ourselves. Our families abandoned us, marriages ended in divorce [...] And now we are not thinking in being ambassadors or consuls, or ministers or vice ministers ... if we are called, of course we will try [our best] to do it, even though we don't know how to use a keyboard, we don't have titles, we haven't graduated with degrees in administration or law or other professions; even though we don't know how to write and we struggle with grammar...

As this activist notes in this heartfelt passage, not only education pursuits but also the U.S. based families of transnational activists have taken a serious hit. “Where is that one hundred percent coming from?” one young activist said. “Who is not getting one hundred percent for you to be out there? It's such a struggle, because those that invest so much time with the family are called lazies. And if you're always out then your family suffers and you suffer a lot. There's got to be a balance, but I am comfortable with the fact that most people in this line of work are dysfunctional.”<sup>115</sup>

Among the organizers in this study, the work is often framed as something done for the “next generation.” But, in reality, activists often reproduce the war-induced family disruptions that they seek to vindicate within their own present-day families. Talk of furious wives or angry kids is frequent. After the solidarity movement, some leaders took

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<sup>115</sup> Here he was referring to both activists and legislators; he works with both.

time to refocus on their personal lives, get married and start a family, “get a life,” as one leader put it. And in the early years after SANA was formed, a concerted effort was made to include families in the work by, for example, holding meetings at houses in lieu of other spaces, rotating turns hosting, and bringing all the kids together to play like cousins. But the time grew to be too much and before long phrases like “my wife and kids are ready to *kill me*” became a frequent refrain for some organizers. After the first few massive *Día del Salvadoreño* events, followed by election monitoring missions, one organizer indicated that they would have to address the problem more systematically: “People are mad, there are hospitalizations, divorces; families are trembling, to the point of throwing our suitcases in the street!”

For those activists that emerged from the solidarity movement and never stopped, the dynamic is old hat. As one such activist once told me, “Here [in this house], nobody waits for me. Everything is cool. Every night I arrive at 11pm. That’s just how our lives are. Fortunately we have understanding wives, because otherwise, to do this with a woman that gets annoyed about it would be practically impossible.” That marriage ended in divorce some six years later. The commitment entails working consistently “after hours, after hours and sacrificing families, sacrificing our finances, which are not the best to start...”

Employers corroborate this version of reality. Talking with one union boss at a protest at UCLA, she indicated that not only are these guys constantly working on El Salvador when they should be doing union work, “their families must get NO TIME from them...”

And as younger or newer activists come into the fold, they quickly learn what the work will take; they are socialized into it. Following accompaniment of the 2009 electoral process in El Salvador and the inauguration events, at a barbeque one younger activist said he wanted to “thank our wives for putting up with us.” Making this socialization into the world of transnational activism visible, another said, “We are *learning* how to do this. We

are learning how to follow this example [of the older, dedicated activists] and leave our wives behind.” Of course, some spouses are men as well, but they are fewer and further between.

Along the way, over the course of the last decade, several good organizers have dropped out of the work because they realized what it would cost their families. One explained that he came to the point of not being treated that well amongst the activists; he wasn't feeling the work was appreciated, and he consistently had to be gone from his family. His choice after his day job was to go to a SANA meeting or go home. In the end, he chose family, with a good dose of pressure from his wife (who shared a similar account of events).

Spouses' perspectives on the situation vary, although the lack of cohesive family time is a noted problem across the board. At community events, comments like the following are not uncommon: “Oh, we really haven't seen [my husband] much. No we haven't seen him. He comes late and leaves early. There is not a lot of communication going on there, to be honest”; or sarcastic responses such as, “He comes to visit us now and again. If you see him, say hello...” Many wives complain about their spouses missing dinner, coming home late and falling into bed; or even if they are home, “[they are] always on the phone.” Others say they are tired of constantly “worrying” about their husbands' whereabouts or safety.

For some women, these concerns are a constant source of tension. But other spouses have come to accept the reality and have found ways to fashion a life that is independent and does not rely so much upon their spouse being around. Explained one wife, when her husband was gone so much in the solidarity era, and when he returned to El Salvador to join the FMLN for a period of time, she seriously questioned whether she would stay with him. Many times, in that era, she said, she had suitors that were interested in marrying her. Although she was pregnant with her first child [from her activist partner] she

considered leaving him and raising the child with a different father. She also said that she always thinks about taking care of herself and having a plan in case she loses her spouse. Indeed other wives have talked about taking the time to develop their own careers and professional lives, although that has been difficult given that they are raising children largely on their own.

The difficulty is particularly acute in families where only one spouse is interested or invested in the transnational work. Discussing this problem with male and female activists in El Salvador during an election monitoring mission, one woman described the wife of one of her close *compañeros*: “She is jealous, but she is not jealous of him being with other people or women. She is jealous of his dedication to the movement, his being a ‘revolutionary.’ It is not her thing. And being a revolutionary takes a 100% commitment, let me tell you.” The male activist in question confirmed this, explaining that his wife is jealous of his involvement in the movement, and that she just wants him to be home with her. She comes from a conservative family, he said, and she is happy doing what she does.

One couple that is involved in the work together explained on multiple occasions how hard it is for other couples where only one partner is involved – all the meetings, all the travel, all the separation, and then the parenting of kids really falls on one person. Other activists have been “envious of our dynamic as a couple” they both affirmed on different occasions. As the wife, Sophia, put it, “At home in private we are lovers just like any other couple. But in *la lucha* we are *compañeros* and friends, and I know that Vicente will always have my back and I’ll have his.”

Another couple that was wholly invested in the solidarity movement explained that there came a moment when they realized their children were suffering due to the parents’ constant involvement in meetings and actions. Over time, they, like other parents, decided one parent would need to stay home with the kids more, and hold down the fort, especially

when work involved travel to El Salvador. In many cases, women were the ones that stayed home with young children or teenagers on the brink of going astray. Although the women explained that they would have *loved* to participate in the trips, it just was not possible at that time. This dynamic is fairly standard. Speaking with women, almost across the board there came a moment when they had to reduce their participation in transnational activism or when they sent their husbands to stand in for both of them, making this form of activism highly gendered and largely affected by the life cycle. Not only were women more likely to curtail their activity at some point (than men), but also this point usually came either during early child-rearing or in the adolescent years.<sup>116</sup>

For couples in this study that have one partner highly invested in the work and the other detached, the balancing of family life and activist pursuits is an uphill battle. Not only have the marriages bent under the pressure, ending in a number of difficult divorces over the last few years; also their teenage kids have struggled to find their place in the world, several of them falling into delinquent lifestyles. Conversely, the most intact couples and families are comprised of those where both partners are invested in transnational work to some degree even if only one takes the lead and participates full time or where the family works on activist endeavors as a solid unit – children included – but with much less intensity than the activist lone wolf.

Likewise, cases in which spouses or family life demand a lot of time (or the activist decided to consistently privilege family over organizing), tend to result in being pulled out of transnational pursuits, rooting these individuals back in the host context and effectively making them “national” again. Likewise, in several cases a complete break with a day job and/or the family led the activist out of transnational pursuits into a more “national”

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<sup>116</sup> Gender dynamics and the impact of parents’ activism on the second generation are both extremely important topics that are not given adequate attention in this chapter. I cycle back to this point in the conclusion. These topics will be key points to address in the next phase of this work.

lifestyle, but for different reasons and in different ways. In some of these cases, the activist moved full-time to El Salvador, and in others, the activist cut transnational work almost altogether and started again with a new family or new job rooted in the host context.

Finally, activists also admit that their transnational work has often pulled them from concentrated organizing pursuits in the host country, such as working to mobilize the Salvadoran American population in a more profound manner. This was one of the initial goals for *Día del Salvadoreño*, as described in chapter three. But the activists learned quickly that there genuinely is only so much time in a day, no matter how little you sleep. With no time to pursue education and professionalization endeavors, with very little time spent with the family, for the past decade, U.S-specific efforts have been put somewhat on hold, unless they are squarely in the terrain of “in-between,” such as building linkages between countries or lobbying Congress.

A disproportionate number of activists in this case study currently work with unions or as community organizers for their day jobs. As such, they feel comfortable that they are making a difference for workers and the poor and marginalized here in the U.S. In this sense, their work is very literally “transnational” in that it is oriented “beyond the nation.” But the dream of working to train young Salvadorans, specifically, and propel them into elected office in the U.S., the dream of going door-to-door to more formally organize the larger Salvadoran immigrant population around issues of concern in the host context, as described in chapters three and four, or making concentrated efforts to form tight, lasting connections to civic leaders and elected officials in the U.S. have all been sacrificed for homeland-oriented or “in-between” pursuits.

This proves frustrating for younger activists and for community-oriented organizers (such as those cited in chapter four), because they assert that the “obsession” with the homeland can pull some of the population’s most skilled activists away from hostland

concerns and shaping the future of the Salvadoran American population in the U.S. As one younger organizer put it, “[The lack of attention to host country causes] has nothing to do with capacity. It has to do with will, because these guys are super bright. I have been part of the discussions, debates, strategic work. And the reality is that *everything* is subject to how it plays into the bigger picture of what [is happening] in El Salvador. As long as the priority is elsewhere, then [the paucity of concerted hostland work] is the result that we’re going to get.”

The activists themselves acknowledge that work has been highly lopsided in the last decade. As discussed in strategic planning meetings following the 2009 FMLN election, the first priority in work was political change in El Salvador. Following Funes’ victory, organizers began to analyze how they could turn their attention back to endeavors in the U.S., such as immigration reform. But, in practice, the aftermath of the Funes election has demonstrated that until organizers cement a second FMLN victory in 2014, proving that Funes’ election was not a populist fluke, but like Obama’s, represents a larger political shift within the country, or until the country elects a candidate that is not just “with” the party but “of” the party (like current candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén) they will likely continue intense transnational pursuits. Likewise, the creation of more lasting institutions that link the two countries together – such as emigrant voting rights – remain high on the list of priorities, as activists feel there is a better chance of gaining recognition and building institutions for formal inclusion of the emigrant population (some of which require constitutional changes) while the FMLN party remains in power.

This tendency to be somewhat lopsided in activist efforts might appear to fly in the face of the findings in the prior chapter where I make an argument for the integrative impact of transnational activities. More accurately, this tendency qualifies those findings. As noted in the conclusion to chapter six, cross-border pursuits and commitments can

indeed create openings and contacts for civic integration and engagement in the host country, but actually following up on and pursuing those openings or opportunities for integration will depend upon the subjective orientation and priorities of the actors themselves.

### “A Sacred Place for Strong Men”

So, who gets left out? In-depth exploration of this issue is a task for another day, but it merits at least brief mention here. The dream of most activists is that they might be able to leave their day job and “go full-time” in their pursuits for political change both in the U.S. and El Salvador. In this way, the volunteer work they currently do anyway would substitute for their day jobs, opening up more time, and producing less sacrifice. That dream is as palpable for the highly politicized actors as it is for the more community-oriented organizers within an organization like SANA. But that dream often proves a mirage. Numerous individuals in this study quit well-paying day jobs to pursue the dream, only to find themselves without a salary a year or two later, making transnational work (and all the travel and expense it necessitates) even harder than before.

Observation of the participants in this study, and analysis of those individuals who stayed versus those who dropped out along the way, shows that class and status interact with transnational endeavors in very important ways. This is true because no matter the orientation of activists, the practical costs associated with travel and the lack of flexibility associated with certain wage labor makes transnational practices nearly impossible to sustain. Although the most active participants in transnational efforts are not wealthy by any means, they are able to sneak meetings into their daily schedule and take off large chunks of time, working from a distance or clumping day job work into particular stretches of time. Also, their employers often provide them with smart phones, cell service, and even



computers, which facilitate their ability to be “connected” across borders and transform their vehicles into mobile offices. Although solidarity era efforts were undertaken by activists regardless of income, increasingly, the individuals involved in rigorous transnational activism in organizations like SANA are middle to upper middle class, singles or members of two-income households, and largely homeowners.

In addition, sometimes what is seen by transnational activists themselves as a weak commitment is actually a class or status effect, as described in the discussion around intra-organizational conflicts in chapter four. A number of the original SANA organizers and FMLN-LA activists remain decidedly poor, working part-time, switching back to laying carpet or doing piecemeal construction work when part-time paid organizing jobs with churches and other NGOs dry up. This effect has been particularly acute during the global economic crisis, the onset of which coincided directly with the 2008-2009 elections cycle in El Salvador. The individuals that went on to participate in lobbying and monitoring work during that time (as described in chapter five), were largely middle class; many of them interpreted the lack of participation by fellow organizers as a lack of commitment. In truth, a number of activists were left by the wayside. Although they may be transnational in orientation they lack the capital to act on those commitments consistently in practice.

Salvadoran transnational activist groups are also highly cliquish. The track records of potential “members” are scrutinized for inclusion or exclusion in the peer group, and entrenched activists are quick to punish or neglect individuals deemed less than 100% committed. In this sense, there is peer pressure to continue and perpetuate the sacrifices described above in order to maintain acceptance in the group; inconsistency pushes an activist out of the peer group. In addition, inclusion is path dependent and often calls for wartime or other deep organizing credentials that younger or less entrenched activists do not have. “Oh no, no. [They] would never let me come into the inner circle,” one 1.5

generation activist explained. “Because that’s a sacred place just for strong men that, you know, come from way back.”

Observation also shows a pervasive gender dynamic. For some reasons discussed above and others that merit further study, women are poorly represented within the immigrant transnational activist cohort, even as they are relatively well-represented amongst the activist ranks of the FMLN in El Salvador. The “revolutionary” and activist Salvadoran world is one filled with myriad forms of gender discrimination. As one younger activist put it, “[The upper ranks in the Salvadoran-American leadership] are still closed to women. I saw so many talented women that got turned off by it. Of course, of course, [the leaders] use them to do their heavy lifting [all the operational work]. But the privilege of decision making stays within the hands of a few very talented, hard working and committed men, but nonetheless *men* that in my opinion do not let women take the role that they deserve.”<sup>117</sup>

Over the last five years, organizations like SANA have made a concerted effort to bring more women onto their board of directors. For example, four very skilled, strong and committed women now sit on SANA’s board. But those women, too, have their critiques. Driving into the hillsides of San Miguel, El Salvador, one day Sophia broke it down for me, her husband cringing in the back seat: “The thing is, Arpi, that everything that has to do with being strong or courageous or even ‘cool’ in Salvadoran Spanish has to do with having a big dick. All these words like ‘*vergón*’ basically mean like, whoa what a HUGE DICK.” She went on to say that the point is not just symbolic; there is still an enormous amount of *machismo* in the movement.

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<sup>117</sup> This is a well documented dynamic in the social movements literature. For example, see Robnett 1997, on the Civil Rights Movement and the filtering of women into “informal roles” alongside closure in holding “formal” leadership roles.

All of these points on class and gender merit much further, concerted exploration than is possible in this final chapter, or even the dissertation as a whole. But they provide important next steps in a research agenda of which this case study has just been a first step.

## **Discussion**

Some of the initial findings in this final chapter segue into a much broader set of questions, raised throughout prior chapters as well: What is the impact of transnational activism on the children of leaders? How gendered are the dynamics described here? How determining are generation, class and migrant cohort? To what degree does a transnational focus draw the activists away from more concentrated host country causes, efforts and collaborations? Conversely, to what degree does it embed them in hostland political institutions? What are the mechanisms by which activists become rooted in one context or the other, or in both? Put differently, which mechanisms “nationalize” and which “transnationalize,” and for whom?

The findings also hint at questions about the future. For example, what is the impact of the first generations’ transnational activism on the integration of the larger immigrant population in the host context? What tracks are laid down? What is the impact of this work on diplomatic relationships and the organizational or institutional connections built up between countries? How do past transnational commitments affect the future mapping of the organizational infrastructure in the U.S., given that homeland-oriented activism has roots in the war and remains a highly fractioned and divisive practice? For how many generations does the legacy of these institutional divisions remain, even after the disputes of the parent generation have long died? And does the path dependency of wartime experiences and affiliations make it difficult for this skilled cohort of first generation immigrant activists to bridge habitus and thus commitments with the second generation of activists.

For now, a primary goal of this final chapter was to cycle back into the lived experience of this cohort of Salvadoran transnational activists and to attempt to better understand what the work means to those who engage in it, and how that work affects the actors themselves. Specifically, I ask how the organizers experience the work they do. What benefits do they derive and at what cost? What sustains the lifestyle? And what does an in-depth look at those experiences tell us about transnationalism as a state of being that other studies might have missed?

These are not easily answered questions. The militant or defensive narratives presented in one-time interviews often miss both the intimate meanings that the work has for the activists and the sacrifices entailed – the latter of which involves highly taboo subjects, like marital problems, neglect of children, and even, as one activist put it, the “withholding of sex” by spouses angry about the absence of their activist husbands. The understanding is in the details; after the bravado of “I don’t give a shit!” whispered confessions of “it pains me.” In order to understand this lifeworld and all the benefits, efforts, and pains it can involve, a long-term commitment to building relationships and engaging in participant observation are a necessity. As written in the introduction to this chapter, doing so allows one to understand the nuance in transnationalism as a lifestyle characterized by *both* agency and constraint.

In this vein, the chapter provides two important insights into the study of transnational immigrant activists. First and foremost, perhaps scholars should not be so quick to dismiss what was deemed by critics as an overly “celebratory” tone in early studies. Indeed, long-term qualitative analysis captures a part of the lifeworld of transnational activism that other work misses. As we move into a more nuanced understanding of the experience of engaging the work, the empowering, life-giving benefits that the lifestyle provide – not to mention the practical skills and connections – are striking. On many levels,

transnationalism can offer an experience filled with dignity – albeit a largely gendered dignity – positive social interaction, expanded horizons and opportunities. And now and again it can deliver on big promises, such as actions that allow a small number of immigrant activists to change the diplomatic context in which a homeland election occurs. Those lures, the occasional big results, and the small, daily benefits are striking enough that they provide reasons for the activists to continue in the pursuit despite the incredible costs it entails.

As in chapter six, these benefits become acutely visible when we look beyond formal interviews and beyond *intended* outcomes. Father Lapsley, who lost both of his hands to a letter bomb in South Africa and now works with victims of trauma, once told the Salvadoran activists in this study, “We concentrate on politics too much thinking it will heal us. Meanwhile, we are still damaged as individuals, as if politics will be the answer to all our problems.” There is deep truth in his statement, for perhaps the outcome of collective organizing will not always (or perhaps will *never*) bring closure to the individuals whose stories are told here. Indeed, this study shows that homeland activism can even *reproduce* the divisions and conflicts in the community that gave rise to such traumas in the first place (as per chapter four). That said, Father Lapsley’s statement misses that which can occur for some individuals in the social process of doing the work – a restoration of agency and an opportunity for growth beyond what many day jobs in the host state can otherwise offer.

That said, a second insight helps round out our understanding of the actors at hand. Taking a deeper view into the lives of these activists *also* reveals an important flipside – something that many studies neglect and that is hush-hush within the activist community itself. Transnationalism derives from natural attachments, connections and desires, but the *actual act* of maintaining a lifestyle of “in-between” requires constant work, dedication and sacrifice, and that is part of the reason it is engaged by few. The blow to formal education, job mobility and the reproduction of broken families, the countless hours, disappointments

and moments of invisibility that accompany this work collectively entail a process of “becoming transnational,” a process of maintaining and sustaining that is never quite cemented.

Moreover, these transnational communities are neither free-floating nor homogenous. They are marked by division and competition, and they are anchored in nation-states. Far from being glorified, as this case study reveals, “in-between” often emerges from a direct experience with state violence, dislocation and closure – conditions well beyond the actors’ control. And given the political realities on the ground, being bi- or transnational remains a condition of some discomfort despite the opportunities it can afford. Moreover, building up connections and institutions between nation-states still requires access to political entities therein, access that is difficult for even the most committed activists to achieve. The immigrant activists must be persistent, strategic and inventive in the quest for access. Finally, not all immigrants with a transnational orientation have the means or financial resources to act on that orientation in practice. The inability to participate or an inconsistency in participation can cause these actors to drop out of the work or to be excluded by fellow activists, thus making transnationalism a state of being that can divide people by class, status, gender, and past experience.

In this sense, it is not just the benefits that help illuminate why some people may remain entrenched in cross-border pursuits, but, perhaps, also the costs. While the benefits and the general habitus described above provide a form of motivation to continue in the work, the costs may serve to uproot the activists from integration in one place, namely the host context. Large time investments in job mobility and education, family life and host-specific organizing might be seen of as “rooting” mechanisms – things that can pull the actors away from their transnational lifestyle and re-root them in the U.S. national context. On the flipside, the more that these rooting mechanisms are weakened due to resources

placed elsewhere, and the more the networks, contacts and culture that *connect* country contexts are reinforced and built-up, the more likely a person may be to *choose* to continue the lifestyle of transnationalism, qualifying the findings put forward in chapter six.<sup>118</sup>

As we step back from this particular study to ask about the implications of these findings for the larger study of immigrant transnationalism, the insights detailed here provide grounded and nuanced evidence for assertions made by some scholars and critics of the immigrant transnationalism subfield – namely the need to better describe and elucidate what we are talking about when we use the term “transnationalism” in immigration studies. As is made plain in this chapter, conflating the intense commitments and concerted efforts of immigrants such as those in this study with the mundane, routine connections and occasional homeland altruism of a majority of first generation immigrants does a disservice to our ability to really understand and specify mechanisms in the post-migration process.

Moreover, even as we separate out the mundane and individual connections (like family communications and remittances) of migrants from more concerted, collective efforts, such as the work of hometown associations and politicized emigrant organizations, this chapter points to the need for yet further specification. The discussion in this chapter on “becoming” and “maintaining” a status of transnationalism in practice points to the importance of including the perspectives of those individuals that may be transnational in political orientation but, for a variety of reasons, can be seen as “failed cases” in practice. The term “failed” is used here not in a normative sense but rather to raise questions about some of the factors that propel a particular orientation into a set of practices that cross borders. The costs entailed in the work, gender, class, and legal status all emerge as

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<sup>118</sup> This chapter only begins to hint at this dynamic, but I believe it is an interesting question to explore in future research, as it helps us pin down what produces and maintains transnationalism as a phenomenon among some individuals and not others.

potential factors in this study, as does the path dependency of past involvement (in this case, in the wartime and solidarity era) and the commitments and priorities that emerge from that involvement. Furthermore, as chapter five makes explicit, the political milieu of the host country within a given moment and the specific connections formed and access developed in the homeland also play a critical role in propelling and shaping the work of transnational immigrant activists – and our understanding of the questions of what, who and how.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Afterward

As noted throughout this dissertation, 2009 was a landmark year for SANA directors. On the one hand, it was a year that marked the first ever election of an FMLN candidate to the presidency. At the same time, it was the first year that SANA chose not to organize their annual *Día del Salvadoreño* event at Exposition Park in Los Angeles – the very event that had breathed life into the organization, giving SANA its institutional identity and claim to fame. Over dinner that summer, two former event leaders talked openly about the possibility of the festival not taking place. “I mean, believe me, if *El Día del Salvadoreño* doesn’t happen this year, I’m gonna be sad, really sad,” Fidel lamented in Salvadoran flecked English. “We have to find a way to save it.” “I know! How can we let the people down like that?” Boris replied with an expression of disbelief. “Too much of our attention was put into the elections in El Salvador. I’m glad, that was good. Now Mauricio Funes is our president and *esto está bien*. But...”<sup>119</sup> We sat around a long table in the Sanchez living room, eating spaghetti with sauce made from tomatoes grown in the backyard. Joining Fidel, his wife, Carmen, and two of their kids were Boris and several longtime, non-Salvadoran activists from the community.

Sometimes victories and failures bring forth confessions and truth-telling – the things that are known throughout the research process but that people rarely speak out loud. And some social dynamics and interactions remain constant, even amid change in the community. As he had done hundreds of times before, between stories, expressions of frustration and laments about the dying Salvadoran Day event, Fidel played songs on his guitar. They were songs we all knew, or had come to know: love songs, tributes to the

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<sup>119</sup> Fieldnotes, date: 8/4/09

martyred Salvadoran Archbishop, Oscar Romero, and *música de lucha* like *No Basta Rezar* and *El Sombrero Azul*.<sup>120</sup>

The activists egged each other on, taking shots of tequila. With each shot, more of the dark side of emigrant activism surfaced – anger and frustration about the role of ego in the leadership of the Salvadoran community, about the complicated politics that guide community celebrations and events. “People are just using this celebration. They are using the people. They don’t think about the community. They just use them, like that!” one wife exclaimed. With more tequila, more personal confessions surfaced: “And we have been the labor for this event all these years. But we never are recognized for our work. We are never let into the inner political circle.” “The thing is that the Salvadorans are a *pescado de mil espinas*. We cannot trust anyone!”<sup>121</sup>

That night, as I prepared to move permanently from Los Angeles to Colorado, it was not lost on me that I had seen this intimate community of immigrant activists through many changes, and they me. When we first met, the founders of *El Día del Salvadoreño* were just a small group of community organizers – underdogs with “a crazy idea” to bring a replica of *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* to Los Angeles in a pilgrimage by land. Over ten years later, not only had the U.S. House of Representatives officially recognized August 6<sup>th</sup> as Salvadoran-American Day. The festival had served as an important platform in Los Angeles for mobilizing the immigrant population, making that migrant community more visible to political representatives in both El Salvador and the U.S., and working for political change in the homeland. Over that decade, half of the original organizers had dropped out of the organization. But, also, former garage attendants had become governors in El Salvador; humble church organizers were elected to the Central American Parliament. *El Día del*

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<sup>120</sup> Protest songs highly identified with the Salvadoran armed conflict

<sup>121</sup> “A fish with a thousand bones/spines”

*Salvadoreño* had become a household name for anyone paying attention to the Salvadoran community in the U.S., and SANA, despite its evolving composition, was a highly visible actor within the transnational political community.

Over the course of this institutional evolution, activists' families had changed too. As noted in chapter six, a number of spousal relations had begun to bend under the pressure of their head-of-household's constant activism and absence; some adolescents were teetering at the edge of rebellion. Meanwhile older teenagers, like Fidel's kids, had come out of their rough patches and childhood shells. Sitting with us that August night, they were participating in the conversation, taking an interest in the issues and offering their opinion. An older sister had since gone off to a prestigious liberal arts college on a four-year scholarship. And after being wrongfully evicted from their one-bedroom apartment, Fidel and Carmen had come together with their relatives and friends and bought this duplex with the big back yard in Highland Park. Now it was not clear how long they could hang on to the house itself and the sensations of ownership, privacy, and space – as well as responsibility and worry – that accompanied it.

These changes were not only markers of the passing of time since I had been studying this community, but also markers of history itself. The housing boom and bust and the consequences of unscrupulous mortgage brokering had come through the community like a wrecking ball. Three people sitting at the table were facing diminished hours at work and were in constant jeopardy of having no work at all. The promise and ecstasy of the Obama elections had faded into the blunt reality of the personal difficulties everyone faced, alongside the continuing polarization and impasses in Washington, including on issues important to the community, like comprehensive immigration reform. Finally, the sensation of vindication felt by many Salvadorans following the election of El Salvador's

first leftist president in the postwar era had weathered similar trials. Whether Salvadorans would head to the polls to elect a second FMLN president remained to be seen.

So what has happened to the Salvadoran Day festival in the era of Funes which, at the writing of this afterward, is in its final months? In 2009, less than two months after Funes' inauguration, the festival was indeed rescued by a coalition of organizations and entities, operating under the name UNICOMDES. Led by former directors of SANA and longtime political contacts and businessmen in the community, the coalition came together to make good on the promise to the Salvadoran community to continue celebrating "their day." The following year, in 2010, no such festival occurred. But over the course of the next two years, *Día del Salvadoreño* re-emerged in Los Angeles, now organized in different parts of the city by different groupings of activists. Those "intermediary" years were marked by festivals that were still well attended but that largely lost the genius that marked the original festival – namely the true marriage and intermingling of cultural, civic, religious and political elements.

Indeed, SANA as an organization did go on to split along the lines predicted in chapter four, with the community organizers forming their own entities or joining other pre-existing organizations. SANA was thus homogenized, leaving only the more politicized, transnational actors in place. No longer with a festival to organize, SANA directors increasingly took their work out of the public arena, into a more exclusive sphere, carrying out lobbying efforts, working directly with the FMLN in El Salvador on a number of issues, and organizing smaller gala dinners in L.A. with an upscale, professional crowd. As such, they began to lose their already shaky connection to the base – as well as their public, institutional niche in the community. They also lost their non-profit status, because no one was left to mind the administrative issues of the organization. That said, SANA did not disappear. In fact, at the writing of this dissertation, the organization is more involved in

the political life of the homeland than ever, but they can aptly be seen as transitioning from a community-based organization to a strategic team – one that is still very visible within the transnational political community and perhaps more linked to the FMLN in El Salvador than ever before.

Meanwhile, “*el colochó*,” the migrant Christ, ceased to be a migrant in Los Angeles, as the annual pilgrimages that shuttled him from church to church in the lead-up to the festival were discontinued. Rather, he was housed at *La Placita*, Our Lady Queen of Angeles Catholic Church in downtown L.A. There he remained “*triste y solito*,” as one former *Día del Salvadoreño* attendee put it, only making a public appearance during *la bajada*, which is still carried out each year at UNICOMDES’ festival in August.

During a family gathering in the San Bernardino mountains in the summer of 2012, Fidel and his wife, Carmen, mused on the evolution and trajectory of the image. Fidel explained that a year prior they had caught wind of a pilgrimage organized by religious leaders in the city. The “gringos” were taking the image around, they explained. Arriving at a press conference for the event, Fidel reported that he was delighted to see *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* present. “I was so happy just seeing the image up there!” He recounted. Fidel reported that at the press conference an African American priest was talking about *El Divino Salvador del Mundo*. The priests were taking “*la imagen*” on a pilgrimage along the U.S.-Mexico border to raise awareness about the plight of undocumented migrants, carrying out the ritual of the Stations of the Cross. Fidel explained that at the press conference the camera came to him: “And they said, ‘Are you Salvadoran?’ And I said, ‘Yes I am!’ And they asked me, ‘Do you know anything about this image?’ And I said, [chuckling] ‘It’s funny you are asking me because actually I know A LOT about it. My friends made it.’” Fidel said he told them the story of the birth and creation of the image in Izalco, and the 14 day

pilgrimage of the image from El Salvador to East L.A. He then went on to accompany the group along the border. Indeed, he explained, the image was taking on a life all its own.

Meanwhile, the individuals that originally formed SANA have all gone on to further integrate themselves in civic and political work in both country contexts, some more oriented towards El Salvador and others towards the U.S. But their day jobs and personal lives have continued to be a struggle. Fidel and Carmen lost the house they bought in Highland Park to foreclosure just a couple years after moving into it. Instead, they were now renting another in Echo Park, at a discounted price, from a man whose garden Fidel tends. In that house they hosted various local politicians and candidates, including Gil Cedillo in his bid for Los Angeles City Council – connections and skills learned in their work done on *Día del Salvadoreño*.

As mentioned in chapter seven, after Salvador's failed bid for mayor in his hometown of Atiquizaya, he was named Governor of the Department of Ahuachapán, a beautiful department in the western part of the country. And in 2013 he was named "the governor with the highest level of transparency" in the country. He continues to return to Los Angeles to take part in the *Día del Salvadoreño* event, and was named Grand Marshall in 2012. On the other hand, after a difficult divorce and struggles with his adolescent children, another key founding leader withdrew from his work with SANA, and from transnational work altogether, instead pouring himself into the movement for immigration reform.

Mario, Werner and JR all lost their jobs working as lead organizers with AFSCME. Instead, Werner moved up from his position as a supplemental member of the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) to the "substitute" or "*suplente*" responsible for outreach and diplomatic relations in the U.S. JR began working with alternative global business interests, trying to increase investment and development in El Salvador. And Chavelita, on the verge of retirement, continues her tireless volunteer work on behalf of the community

of Salvadorans in Los Angeles, working to organize an “alternative” *Día del Salvadoreño* each year in Lafayette Park. Finally, Fredy, whose quote about the sacrifices committed transnational activists make, as cited in chapter seven, sadly committed suicide in September of 2012, sending shock waves through the activist communities on the East and West Coast as well as in El Salvador.

In August of 2013, I returned to Los Angeles to observe UNICOMDES’ celebration of *El Día del Salvadoreño*. As in the early SANA years, UNICOMDES had come to represent a coalition of actors involved in community work, politics and business. Many elements of the festival were the same, though some had changed. As in the past, the FMLN had a prominent booth, but the crowd was not as attuned to or marked by the presence of FMLN supporters as in the past. As I turned to snap a picture of a group of contacts in the *Frente*, a young gangbanger mocked, “Ohhh, there are the *guerrilleros!*” SANA leaders were present on the stage of the event, alongside the FMLN’s 2014 Vice Presidential candidate, but their work was mostly in accompanying the candidate in lieu of organizing the festival. Or in the cynical terms of one former director, “*not doing the work, but siempre pegado al candidate [glued to the candidate].*”

Although the event, now held on Washington and Vermont in central L.A., was unquestionably smaller than at its peak in 2007 and 2008 (truly a fraction of the original crowds), it had regained much of its original messaging. Speaking from the stage as a representative of PARLACEN (not SANA) Werner pointed out all the historic actors that had made the original event a reality. “In the crowd,” he said, “I not only see members of my family, but I see Guillermo who was one of the pilgrims who brought *El Divino Salvador del Mundo* by land in a 14 day pilgrimage. There, too, I see Fidel, who helped make the creation of that image a reality back in 2000...”

The Consul General from the Salvadoran Consulate, now in FMLN hands, transformed SANA's work into the stuff of history books. During the civic act he recounted the history of the festival's evolution from its recognition by the City and County of Los Angeles, followed by the State. Continuing, he said:

And in 2006, with this visionary idea, these friends, these brothers [in SANA], went to the Congress, and they achieved what other countries and other people couldn't .... In this country, we have been *recognized*, as a nation, as a community that is strong and vivacious, of fighters, integrated in the work and in the design of this great nation and also of our homeland!

This is the *orgullo* [pride] *de ser salvadoreño!*

Meanwhile, the civic and political messages also remained intact. The FMLN vice presidential candidate, Óscar Ortiz, recognized as that year's "grand marshal" of the event, gave a ten minute discourse, followed by a speech from his female counterpart honoree – a member of the Los Angeles Police Department from that neighborhood. Standing before the crowd she encouraged: "Let me remind you that YOU ARE THE POWER! I get my power from the people out there." She continued, "We all come here to make a better life for our families, but it is up to YOU to remind the politicians WHO THE PEOPLE ARE and who elects them in the City of Los Angeles, the State of California, in the United States." To cheers from the audience, she continued, "We need to make sure that we provide a path to citizenship in the United States for our children, so they can go to college and they can someday be captain of Los Angeles." "On behalf of the men and women of the Los Angeles Police Department, thank you for this and don't EVER forget that the people are the power in the United States!"



As in the past, right-wing businesses from the homeland were largely absent. Instead, ALBA Petroleum, an alternative, left-oriented businesses, served as the main sponsor of the event. One of the company's directors took to the stage to tell the crowd that ALBA was not only in El Salvador to do business. Rather, he asserted, they are an "*empresa con corazón*" [a business with heart] and with a tremendous "social muscle" dedicated to doing social work in the homeland. The director cited the company's 40 gas stations in El Salvador and their ability to clinch the number two market spot in the country, as well as their dedication to microcredit (20,000 recipients), educational initiatives, and organizing 1,000 youth soccer leagues.

After a well organized civic act, *la bajada* was carried out – this time more humble than in days of old and without the customary *quema de pólvoro* [fireworks]. But the central messages had been retained. Salvador, who returned from Aguachapán with his whole governance team, said from the stage: "The idea to do *la bajada* came from an encyclopedia my mom gave me in Atiquizaya, because I told her that I was not 'complete' here in the U.S., because I didn't have dignity. There was no dignity, there was no recognition for our people!" Likewise, Raul, the head of UNICOMDES declared that we were once that "invisible people in this society," but now the Salvadorans are being recognized and are also proving that "we have the capacity to lead our pueblo in El Salvador – the one we abandoned." Closing the mass, just before the transfiguration of the image, Chamba yelled in one last call to the crowd: "Never renounce your identity! But more importantly, never, never lose your dignity!"

In the lead up to the event, there were quibbles behind the scenes, with multiple entities attempting to take control of the vice presidential candidate's agenda, working different channels to access City Council, where local representatives like Eric Garcetti, Bernard Parks, and Gil Cedillo welcomed the FMLN vice presidential candidate, honoring

him with a recognition from the City of Los Angeles orchestrated through the Salvadoran organizers. But these behind-the-scenes fractures were spun to the public from “splits” into growth. Said Werner of the different “rival” events at the end of his speech: “To UNICOMDES, thank you! To the *Feria Agostina* in MacArthur Park, thank you! To the celebration in New York, where some 50,000 people are gathered *right now*, we say, thank you! Because our *pueblo* deserves to elevate itself in dignity, and we are only going to achieve that working as a united front!”

The question of what will happen to the event and its organizers over the years remains to be seen. Even with the splits in the founding organization and the evolution of the original event, it is clear that the institutionalization of *Día del Salvadoreño* created a civic and cultural space that will not disappear anytime soon. It has and will continue to outlive its creators. As Salvador said in an interview at the event this year, Salvadoran Day is now unstoppable. Salvador reiterated his feelings that what began as just a “crazy idea” would, over the years, grow to be one of the most significant developments in the Salvadoran American community across the country.

As for the actors themselves, I think it is fair to say that everyone has experienced a sensation of deep closure with the institutionalization of August 6<sup>th</sup>, just as they have with their individual and institutional role in the FMLN’s election in 2009, and what may be a win once again in 2014. Cycling back to the questions posed in the introduction, we can ask: have the study participants, indeed, been able to successfully carry out an “integrative act,” working across contexts, bringing the politics of one country into dialogue with the other, reconciling their two homes in affective and public terms? I believe the answer to this question is yes and no. In many ways, many of the individuals have been able to attain their goals, building up an alternative middle ground between contexts, pushing for change in the homeland, and rising into more visible roles within the transnational political network. But

in practical terms, life remains a struggle for the individuals involved, and transnationalism's tolls and travails are highly visible, as described in chapter seven.

And what is the significance of the ongoing collaborations and contestation seen at the event itself? As indicated in chapter four, the festival form as it exists to this day continues to embody a structural tension. As each *Día del Salvadoreño* event grows, as long as politics are engaged (and especially politics oriented towards the homeland) it is hard to see how tensions between the home and hostland, and ethno-cultural versus partisan political elements of the festival, will not pull against one another. That tension is built into the form as a framework which imposes unity over difference in a crowd as "politically different as they are alike symbolically" (a la Kubik). Moreover, the legacy of sectarianism in the community appears as though it will not abate anytime soon, meaning that events organized by the first generation activist cohort will continue to occur along fractured lines. What will happen to these tracks that the first generation lays down for the second remains to be seen.

But there exists the possibility of an important qualification on these findings. As Werner asserted in a recent follow-up interview, if the FMLN continues to gain political power in El Salvador, cementing another presidential win, the partisan politics that partially defined the festival in its early years as a grassroots form of resistance and a strategic intervention into the political trajectory of postwar El Salvador may no longer be necessary. This would, in turn, create more of a spirit of unity within the crowd, and provide an important contextual specification on the dynamics of contestation detailed in chapter four.

Finally, will the *Día del Salvadoreño* events that emerge throughout the country continue to embody the political and civic edge with which the original event was created? Will Salvadoran Day continue to be an event that is as much about civic education, connections to the homeland, and integrative political acts as it is about cultural and

“ethnic” celebration? Or will it evolve in the direction of St. Patrick’s Day and Cinco de Mayo? Are the cards stacked against this continued politicization within the second and third generation?

I believe the evolution of *Día del Salvadoreño* thus far raises questions about the cultural logic of integration in the U.S. context. Seeing the early stages of development of this festival has made visible a process by which pressures are imposed upon the migrant population such that class difference and political consciousness is transformed into “ethnic” awareness. This, in turn, raises questions about what exactly “acculturation” means in a such a context wherein ethnicity is politicized after migration and ethnic mobilization is proven to be a key vehicle for collective entrée into the civic and political life of a city, state or nation? Is it, instead, acculturation of the political differences and orientation of the actors? Acculturation of the deep awareness of connections between country contexts, and what it means to be on the receiving side of U.S. foreign policy? And that alongside the simultaneous *politicization* and increasing salience of cultural difference?

And *how* does that happen? Indeed, we can step back now and wonder *why* so few immigrants attempting an integrative act between commitments to home and host are pushed to the point of alienation noted in the introduction, wherein we see overt conflict between immigrant activists and the state? Is it the brute force and control of the means of violence embodied in the state? Or is the political-cultural tango described in chapter four a process by which spaces and pressure valves are created in multicultural centers like Los Angeles, allowing for Americanization and assimilation to occur through more subtle means? And yet (or as follows), as the speeches from *Día del Salvadoreño* 2013 make clear, immigrant festivals do indeed create an important space of pride, a crucial place of belonging, a “way into” the civic landscape of the city and country, even as such populations still struggle with socioeconomic mobility and legal incorporation. This in turn highlights

the federalism of the U.S., with closure at the federal level alongside openings, inclusion and cultural recognition that exist at more local levels of governance.

In broader theoretical terms, as we step back from the details of the SANA leaders and *Día del Salvadoreño*, we can ask what implications this case has for the larger study of immigrant integration and transnationalism in the U.S. context? First and foremost, I believe the case underscores the importance of revisiting the way we have studied immigrant populations, ethnic organizations and the post-migration process in the past, in general, highlighting the value added in utilizing a cross-border lens for analysis. In this particular case, not only does that cross-border lens allow us to understand the forces that propel the migration of such actors in the first place. It also allows us to understand the politics behind the context of reception, to step into the important experiences of the solidarity movement years, and to understand the subjective orientation towards the hostland and institutions like citizenship that follow. In short, the connection and relationship between states matter; and understanding how immigrants act in the host context often relies on understanding their cross-border connections and experiences.

As such, a cross-border lens also allows us to re-examine familiar seeming institutions, such as “ethnic organizations” and “festival days” as events that are not only a one-day celebration, and that not only help immigrants find a “place” in the host country and gain visibility there, but as actual sites for carrying out and creating a practice of politics which integrates two contexts, building up a middle ground of connectivity through diplomacy, lobbying, and platforms for homeland political change.

Secondly, this case also underscores the importance of bringing analysis of the processes of integration and transnationalism together. This allows us to see how and if there is an inherent clash in those processes which pull towards the hostland, root and cage migrants within the hostland nation-state, and those which facilitate connectivity between

countries and communities of origin and destination. As the last chapter shows, there may indeed be an inherent conflict in those activities which “root” migrants in the host country through job mobility, family life, hostland-oriented community involvement and those that root actors in a transnational network and culture. But there is also a good deal of intermingling between integration and transnationalism processes.

As this case shows, it is not just that integration in the U.S. (via legal status, social capital, and the resources and safety of organizing from afar) facilitate the actors’ ability to engage effectively in cross-border pursuits. As importantly, transnational commitments and pursuits also lead to openings, know-how, and social contacts within the civic and political life of U.S. localities. Furthermore, there is a profound intermingling of “assimilation” and transnationalism demonstrated through the workings of an event like *Día del Salvadoreño* itself. Although Salvadorans use many vehicles for political work in the homeland, *Día del Salvadoreño*, as an “ethnic” vehicle has been one of the most successful at mobilizing a large immigrant crowd and politicians across borders. The ethnic frame has facilitated both integration in the host context and transnational or cross border pursuits concomitantly. And the U.S. local politicians involved in such events do not discourage those cross-border imaginings, activities and connections. On some level, they even encourage them, as such a dynamic is built into the way that ethnic politics are carried out in the multicultural centers of the U.S. Indeed, sometimes home and hostland state actors may compete for immigrants’ loyalties, but the manner in which they do so may result in a jointly enacted bounding and ethnicizing of the population, not an overt clash.

That said, host states can indeed constrain cross-border connections through an overt policing of the activities of migrants under particular political conditions. But often, under conditions of peace, that constraining effect is more subtle. For example, do the tensions within the immigrant community that are created through the political uses of a

so-called ethnic and cultural event limit what activists can do, routinely push homeland political work, or transnational endeavors, out of the public sphere and into closed door lobbying and diplomacy efforts over time? At the same time, do such events evolve from transnationally oriented sites to sites for identity politics, not *only* because of the passage of ownership of the events from one generation to the next, but also because of the dynamics and pressures cited here and in chapter four – pressures to depoliticize and culturally encode, pressures to “democratize” the homeland politics practiced in the host?

Finally, I believe this particular case study also highlights the value added in considering the subjective orientations of immigrants in transnational and integration studies – their experiences, the habitus that emerges therein, and the intimate benefits and sacrifices that occur in cross-border experiences and work. Taking these understandings into consideration helps us to understand what motivates transnational work – not just past involvement but also the cultural crises experienced in the host country. And attention to both the benefits that accrue and the costs entailed in the practice of political transnationalism help us to begin to understand why some people remain in cross-border pursuits, or why some with a vividly transnational orientation fall out of the practice.

As for next steps, aside from watching to see how the events described in this dissertation continue to play out, the next phase of this work could involve better specifying the conditions under which some of the dynamics described above occur. For example, while the cross-border activities of the organizers described in this study seem to result in some forms of civic integration in the host context, RC Smith’s actors in his 2006 monograph do not experience a similar outcome. This points to the level of organization (national level or hometown level) and the style of organizing (solidarity, pan-ethnic or *pueblo-to-pueblo*). Better specifying conditions calls for strategic comparative work across *types* of mobilizations – such as organizing forms like local homeland political chapters,

hometown associations, pan-ethnic events like SANA's, and organization in labor unions. Those conditions could also be better specified by comparison across host contexts (at the local or national level) or across immigrant cases, past and present.

Finally, as noted in chapter seven, work on emigrant politics and the intersection between (and duality of) integration and transnationalism could indeed benefit from closer examination of collective and concerted efforts, such as those described here, in addition to the methodological individualism that often characterizes studies of assimilation and cross-border activity, such as remitting. This would, in turn, call for more serious and systematic engagement with literature and theory on social movements, analytic frames, and mobilization.

For now, *Día del Salvadoreño* remains one specific location in which integrative acts are attempted in the City of Los Angeles, as well as one *type* of location. As such it is just one vehicle of many for the politicization and mobilization of the immigrant population in the U.S. towards issues in home and hostland. And given the obstacles, the immigrants' ability to find a way into openings and niches which allow for that work is impressive. As a fire marshal supervising *Día del Salvadoreño* said in 2008, "Good for these guys. They come from such a small and troubled country. Look what they have been able to do!" Studies such as this show that immigrant populations will continue to attempt to invigorate the civic life of cities like Los Angeles, in Chamba's words, imbuing it with "new and diverse civic struggles, and new and diverse human values" – civic struggles and values born precisely of the experience of crossing borders.



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