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Roots of resistance and resilience: Agroecology tactics for resettlement in El Salvador

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Abstract

In the current era of intensifying global migration and displacement, people face significant obstacles as they resettle and reestablish community in a new place. This reflective essay explores the process that the researchers used to study how one community in El Salvador employed agroecology tactics for resettlement after the Salvadoran civil war and has remained rooted despite new forms of violence across Central America. The authors reflect on how their relationship to the community and their role as researchers from the United States visiting El Salvador unearths important connections between resettlement and agroecology. An approach utilizing oral histories, participant observation, and situation analysis revealed the need to

connect macrolevel sociological perspectives on the environment to a spiritually informed understanding of how people relate to food systems and agriculture in everyday life. The essay highlights how cooperative agroecology tactics can contribute to people's ability to resist the forces that create contemporary environmental, human rights and international justice crises after displacement—or confront them with resilience. Concluding insights from El Salvador are offered to inform future agroecology and food systems scholarship and practice.

Keywords

Methodology, Praxis, Agroecology, Resettlement, Everyday Life, Religion and Spirituality, Social Movements, Environmental Knowledge

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Vamos todos al banquete,
a la mesa de la creación,
cada cual con su taburete,
tiene un puesto y una misión.

Hoy me levanto muy temprano,
ya me espera la comunidad,
voy subiendo alegre la cuesta,
voy en busca de tu amistad.

Dios invita a todos los pobres,
a esta mesa común por la fe,
donde no hay acaparadores,
y a nadie le falta un con que.

Dios nos manda hacer de este mundo,
una mesa de fraternidad,
trabajando y luchando juntos,
compartiendo la propiedad.

Let's all go to the banquet,
to the table of creation,
each with his or her seat,
each have a place and a mission.

Today I wake up very early,
the community is waiting for me,
I am going up the hill joyfully,
I am in search of your friendship.

God invites all the poor,
to this common table by faith,
where there is no greed,
and nobody lacks what they need.

God commands us to make this world,
a table of brotherhood and sisterhood,
working and fighting together,
sharing what we have.

—“*Vamos Todos Al Banquete*,” by Guillermo Cuéllar

This is a popular folk hymn often sung at masses and before mealtime in El Salvador. It serves as a reminder of the spiritual and communal potential of the land and the harvest, and of the capacity of food to bring people together. Monseñor Oscar Romero commissioned this song for *La Misa Popular Salvadoreña* (The Salvadoran Popular Mass), and its lyrics were inspired by one of Padre Rutilio Grande's homilies. Grande was a Jesuit priest whose assassination in 1977 was one of the first killings directed at a religious leader during El Salvador's civil war (Kelley, 2015).

The words of this song weave together images that guide much of this reflective essay on our work and experience in El Salvador: of coming to the table to break bread, sharing hopes and dreams, making space for one another, and in general remembering to consciously build community in everyday life. This song captures the spirit of faith and relationship that we bore witness to in El Salvador during our time there, which is in contrast with the stories of war, trauma, and fear that are

also deeply present in El Salvador. Salvadorans have great capacity to hold both *la lucha* (the struggle) as well as faith and hope for building a different future.

One of the co-authors of this study, Megan, got to know this song, El Salvador, and the Santa María de la Esperanza community through an undergraduate study abroad program called the Casa de la Solidaridad (Yonkers-Talz, 2003), where she studied for a semester and then returned to work. Part of her work involved being placed in a community-based learning praxis site, which is where she initially got to know the Santa María community and Mercedes, a community leader, activist, and *campesina*.¹ The research project described here offered an opportunity to reconnect with the community and stay with our friend Mercedes. Throughout the project, we had the opportunity to speak with residents about their reality and experience, and to do so in a manner that would foster mutual learning.

In this essay, we share our reflections on the

¹ In the Latin American context, farmers and peasants often use the term *campesino/a* to describe themselves. Many people have come to use the term proudly, in order to connect their lives with historical or contemporary political struggles for land rights and food sovereignty (Montes, 1988; Holt-Giménez, 2006).

process of doing research in El Salvador and use experiences from the field to highlight ways that this particular context might contribute to agroecology research and practice. To accomplish these two objectives, the essay is organized in the following way. First, it situates the social and historical context of El Salvador in relationship to agroecology, and then it reflects on the project's methodological approach. Next, the essay highlights a few notable encounters in our fieldwork. Finally, it summarizes some of the lessons we learned from Salvadoran people about how agroecology practices can become tactics for resettlement.

Agroecology in the Social and Historical Context of El Salvador

From our first day in the community, and throughout our project, we were continuously struck by the hospitality and openness of Santa María residents to our presence. As we traveled around the community, we reconnected with community members that Megan had previously met and were introduced to strangers. In each of these encounters we were welcomed into the local agroecological context as people we met often showed us what they were growing, spoke about the land, or offered us food they had grown. Although community members did not typically tell us about the scientific, ecological characteristics of the land, or use the term agroecology, they did share the local, social, and environmental context with us while inviting us to develop our own appreciation for their land. Even if residents did not want to be interviewed, and several did not, we were never turned away. This hospitality is markedly different from what we are accustomed to as U.S. citizens, where fear and uncertainty (especially at the time of this writing) seem to deeply pervade our politics, neighborhoods, and relationships.

Overall, the orientation of deep hospitality that the Santa María residents seemed to carry toward us was both comforting and surprising, given the history between the country where we are citizens, the United States, and El Salvador. El Salvador's civil war, which took place from the late 1970s to 1992, resulted in the death of approximately 75,000 civilians. The loss endured during the civil war cannot be separated from the millions of dollars of

military aid that the Nixon, Carter, and Reagan administrations sent to El Salvador. This aid was in addition to the military training provided to Salvadoran army units at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. The U.S. government not only stayed silent during the horrific violence that happened as a result of its funding, it actively covered up the brutality of the war in an effort to protect the perpetrators within the Salvadoran government (Bonner, 2016; Danner, 1993).

Today, the U.S. continues to have a large impact on the lives of Salvadorans. The complicated and deadly gang violence in El Salvador has resulted in large part from the deportation of gang members from Los Angeles to El Salvador in the 1990s. When gang members arrived back in El Salvador during that time, often having originally fled to the U.S. due to the war violence, they were entering a very complicated social fabric. As El Salvador continued its civil war recovery, gang violence multiplied under the "iron fist" tactics of the newly forming national police force that failed to address the root causes of gang affiliation (Wolf, 2017). Today, El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. The Rev. Gerardo Mendez, a priest who works in San Salvador with young people, puts it this way: "The problem of violence has many causes, social familial, and economic. We've always said: the violence doesn't exist because of the gangs. The gangs exist because of the violence" (Garsd, 2015).

Gang violence continues to traumatize Salvadoran communities. In 2016, there were a recorded 5,278 homicides. Despite being a small country with only 6.5 million people, by 2017 El Salvador was experiencing an average of 10 homicides daily (Malkin, 2017). This reality has had a complex connection to the United States. Throughout history, decisions made in the United States have had profound effects on El Salvador—ranging from financially supporting the Salvadoran Civil War, contributing to the gang problem, and now turning away and deporting many migrants seeking safety and opportunity in our country (Gonzalez, 2011).

As researchers from the U.S., we found ourselves asking: what is the larger historical narrative

between our two countries? How were we being attentive to these connections in our preparation and carrying out of this project? How were we sharing our reality when asked about our life back home, while being attentive to our privilege and the way that U.S. policies are currently affecting the lives of Salvadorans? It was important as researchers to carry these connections with us. While our project and interviews focused on community life and agriculture in Santa María, we also spent time connecting more informally with community members to be open to potential learning.

During a short visit to another Salvadoran town, we also learned about other community agriculture practices in the country. About an hour from Santa María, in Suchitoto, the Centro Arte Para La Paz (Arts Center for Peace) was featuring the work of local permaculturalists as part of an exhibit on the history and future of human settlement in El Salvador. The center was founded during the Salvadoran civil war with leadership from Sister Peggy O'Neill and local community members. Sister Peggy told us how many people in Suchitoto have been inspired by the “cosmic vision” of the local permaculture movement. We began to see how community members in Santa María were part of a larger, ongoing movement of resistance, resilience, and local power through cooperative agricultural practices in El Salvador (see, for example, Duffy, 2015).

In the years since the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords following the war, many people who were forcibly displaced had to resettle either within El Salvador or abroad. In many cases, cooperative agricultural practices have been part of this process across El Salvador through the related permaculture, food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology movements (see, for example, Gómez, 2014; Millner, 2017; Radio Mundo Real, 2016). More generally, agroecology emphasizes the ecology of food systems, including the technical, social, and ecological aspects of how food gets from seed to plate (Altieri, 1995; Gliessman, 2014). Our experience in Santa María and El Salvador has much to contribute to a transdisciplinary, participatory, and

action-oriented approach to agroecology (Méndez, Bacon, & Cohen, 2013).

Although issues of resistance and resilience have been explored in agroecology as they apply to social-ecological systems (Altieri & Nicholls, 2012; Gliessman, 2013; Koohafkan, Altieri, & Holt-Giménez, 2011) or the aftermath of disasters (for example, Holt-Giménez, 2002), the Salvadoran context presented here highlights the importance of understanding how agroecology is being employed for resettlement in an era of intensifying global migration and displacement. Research has begun to show that there are important connections to be made in this area, for example, in urban agriculture practices among immigrants (Mares & Peña, 2010) or gardening initiatives in refugee camps (Millican, Perkins, & Adam-Bradford, 2018). Moreover, agroecology has been studied as a means to repair social-ecological relationships in marginalized communities (Cadieux, Carpenter, Liebman, Blumberg, & Upadhyay, 2019) or create of conditions for bottom-up peace formation in environments that have a history of violence (McAllister & Wright, 2019). It also seems evident that in the process of advancing this kind of a “political agroecology,” the spiritual and religious dimensions of people’s experience with the land may be forgotten—which calls for a *deep agroecology* to more fully consider personal relationships with the environment (Botelho, Cardoso, & Otsuki, 2016).

The Salvadoran context builds on this research to highlight some of the connections among resistance, resilience, and agroecology in people’s lived experiences with resettlement. Considering the continuing influence of ecological sciences in some agroecology perspectives (Méndez et al., 2013), which shape how resistance and resilience have been historically defined (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004), it is important to reflect on the social, political, and spiritual context of these terms.² In order to do this, our project combined macrolevel perspectives on environment and community development with a spiritually informed understanding of how people relate to

² In social and behavioral sciences, resilience has also historically been used to refer to an internal psychological state (Kumpfer, 1999). This is different from our approach, which looks at community experiences and social-ecological relationships.

food systems and agriculture in everyday life, beginning with the methodological approach.

Methods and Approach to Research

Our approach used the notion of praxis as process of engagement with the lived realities and experiences of the community members in Santa María de la Esperanza. In particular, we employed Jesuit Ignacio Martín-Baró's (1996) notion of praxis, which recognizes that social research can be limited if it does not seek to understand the lived, daily experiences of individuals. Martín-Baró's praxis invites us to transform ourselves as researchers and collaborators, and encourages us to seek ways to transform social reality. Martín-Baró was targeted for speaking out about human rights issues as the vice-rector of Central American University in San Salvador, which led to his murder in 1989.³ As a scholar who dedicated much of his life to living and working with the Salvadoran people, Martín-Baró offers an approach to praxis and social transformation that is well suited to the Central American context (Lykes, 2014). As a Jesuit priest, Martín-Baró developed a nuanced understanding of the ways in which Salvadorans' faith and religion might affect different aspects of their lived experience. Accordingly, we sought to ground the project in three major tasks of a praxis-oriented research, as described by Martín-Baró (pp. 30–31):

- *Recovering historical memory.* Through recording oral histories, we explored how and why the community is using cooperative farming. We also sought to understand how identity is shaped individually and communally, how aspects of tradition and culture are preserved, and how lived experiences have affected how community members view themselves and their strengths. We engaged people's current impressions and their memories to understand the larger narrative of the community.
- *De-ideologizing everyday experience.* Our project aimed to retrieve the "original" experience that has potentially been covered over with

naturalizing political ideologies, and return it back to the community through the production of a short bilingual booklet. We also followed the needs of community members, responding to present realities to craft a narrative of their own consciousness and reality.

- *Utilizing the people's virtues:* The project aimed to honor the people's virtues by recognizing resilience, solidarity, faith, and hope as virtues and a way of being for Salvadorans. Rather than solely focusing on categories, structure, or problems within the community, we sought to capture the intrinsic virtues and values that have allowed community members to survive through histories of oppression and injustice.

Our host was actively organizing an emerging women's cooperative in the community, and we were therefore also attentive to the role of women in cooperative activities, even though women were not necessarily the majority of farmers. We also learned how we might see ourselves in relationship to the community through the reflections of feminist theologian and philosopher Ivone Gebara. She connects "the struggle for survival" that women experience in the Global South to the disenchantment of an alienating and ecologically destructive "consumer culture" in the Global North. In other words, the *system* of globalizing political, economic, and environmental ideology poisons *both* the running water available to the poor *and* the spirit or psyche of those who live lives of material comfort (Gebara, 1999).

Acknowledging this continuing "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000) it was evident to us that our training in horticulture, sociology, theology, or social work may bias us toward our own model of social, developmental or horticultural science. We acknowledged that our data would be a result of this unequal encounter. Accordingly, our approach resonates with related emerging work in food sovereignty (e.g., Levkoe, Brem-Wilson, & Anderson, 2018) that asks how engagement with on-the-

³ Martín-Baró was one of the six Jesuit priests who, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, were murdered by the Salvadoran Army in 1989 at their residence on the campus of José Simeón Cañas Central American University in San Salvador, El Salvador.

ground practice and activism might shape the production of academic knowledge about food systems. We therefore pay special attention to the encounters of these different kinds of knowledge as we experienced them in the community.

There is a long history of the United States and Europe exporting their ideas of environmental conservation in ways that may be destructive for local communities in Central America and other areas of the Global South (Gareau, 2007; Millner, 2016). Accordingly, we sought to investigate the particular *varieties of environmentalism* (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997) that Santa María residents employ in their cooperative work. Our overall goal was to learn more about the particular varieties of environmentalism and community action in El Salvador while reflecting on how a continuing coloniality of power may constrain Salvadoran social reality, academic disciplines, and United States professions. More specifically our goals were to:

- learn from the community development and agroecology tactics that Santa María residents use (to possibly inform or inspire future practices in the United States),
- reflect back the current situation of the community and farming cooperative through spoken, written, or visual representations (so that community members might see their already-existing wisdom in a new light and researchers might better understand own professional and scholarly work), and
- identify future possibilities for partnering with the community (through future research, support for community economic development, or acting as an intermediary with other governmental or nongovernmental organizations).

The general framework for achieving these goals was situation analysis. While situation analysis has become popular in studies of organizational behavior and management, here we were interested in a more sociological kind of situation analysis (Goffman, 1983; Stebbins, 1967) that Mindy Thompson Fullilove and colleagues further devel-

oped in their work to study and counteract the “serial forced displacements” of African American communities in U.S. cities (Fullilove, 2004; Fullilove & Wallace, 2011). From these scholars, we learned about the ways that displacement can trigger a traumatic loss of a social-emotional ecosystem—a web of social relationships that need to be forged again in resettlement.

More specifically, through the frame of situation analysis, we approached the community as an “interpersonal episode or complex state of affairs (the situation) in the context of the larger narrative of which it is a part (the embedding drama),” in order to understand things such as “how large social systems influence and constrain smaller ones, how epidemics impact individuals and families, or how seemingly isolated incidents are connected to one another” (Rennis, Hernandez-Cordero, Schmitz, & Fullilove, 2013, p. 192). Overall, through our presence and conversations in the community we sought to identify internal and external possibilities and constraints through an iterative process of recording, with feedback from community members, the following: the participants, the steps that people follow, the roles that people play, the rules that govern actions or decisions, the skills and knowledge that participants bring to a situation, the obstacles they face, the physical and social characteristics of the setting, and the conflicting or shared values or ideas of participants.

In order to investigate the current situation of the cooperative agriculture practices in Santa María, we relied on participant observation and oral histories collected over the course of three weeks living in the community. We spent time learning from and engaging with community members around different community sites: planting or harvesting in family or community farms, transporting freshly harvested food, attending local activist meetings, participating in an environmentalist march, and visiting agricultural sites in other parts of the country. In this process, to the greatest extent possible, we pursued a model of “reciprocal” food justice research, where we offered our own “sweat equity” on current community projects and responded to the community’s needs and suggestions (Sbicca, 2015).

We recorded our personal observations in an ongoing photo journal and a daily written journal, including our analysis of farm, garden, or community sites; observations of the farming and agricultural practices that people employ; notes on our work alongside participants in daily farm tasks; identification of plants; and description of garden design. We conducted 12 interviews, including seven women and five men who ranged in age from approximately 30 to 90 years old. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour.

Throughout our time there, we would shift, sometimes uneasily, between accompaniment (of walking with people in their experience) and research (of trying to gather information on a topic that we had defined). Those who we interviewed were glad to tell us about their lives and have their names associated with their stories. Mercedes and others we met sometimes found our disposition as “researchers” interesting, or even amusing. Mercedes joked that we were very punctual whenever we set up a time for an interview, “like your capitalist culture has taught you.” Although we tried to moderate our approach and disposition, this tension reemerged every time we did interviews, where almost everyone found the *formas de consentimiento* (consent forms) strange. We had been required to prepare consent forms for our university’s Institutional Review Board, and the wording on these forms typically required a good amount of explanation. Most of the photos we took were meant to be for community members, which we returned to them as part of a separate, independently published bilingual photo book, distributed only within the community at the request of interviewees.

Prior to our arrival we consulted former volunteers who had lived in Santa María, and we were also in frequent communication with our host, Mercedes. With their guidance, we created a list of people in the community who had a special interest in agriculture. The interviews involved unstructured conversation based around key themes about the history of the community, including reasons for participating in the farming activities, plants that have a particular meaning or importance, the origins and preservation of seeds, history and transmission of agroecology/farming methods, or experience

with governmental and nongovernmental organizations. We also allowed participants to define the scope of the conversation, and, accordingly, conversations often diverged based on their interests and activities. Often, conversations would continue after the formal interview was done, and some of this would make it into our daily notes.

We reviewed some of what we were learning with community members, and following the approach of situation analysis we focused on identifying the threats that the community was facing and its strengths. In this process, about six themes related to the contemporary situation of Santa María began to emerge. When we returned to the U.S., we continued to read through our notes and interviews and collect our reflections around the major themes we had identified in the community. In the process of exploring these themes in the sections that follow, we explain how our own limited forms of knowledge about El Salvador’s social and environmental issues—taught to us in U.S. universities and culture—shaped what we expected and what we learned.

We found that the moments where our knowledge and the community’s knowledge met or conflicted were vital to understanding how community members conceived of agriculture in their lives. For example, spirituality is often left out of U.S. psychology curriculums that tend to focus on diagnosis and treatment of individual abnormalities, yet community members made consistent and strong connections between spirituality, agriculture, material conditions, and their lives. In this sense, our interactions with the community challenged us, as researchers and practitioners, to expand our own sense of what an effective psychosocial or agroecology intervention might look like in response to displacement. In the following sections, we explore key lessons from these knowledge encounters across the themes of spirituality, hope, subsistence, relationship to the land, environmental knowledge, and refusal.

Lessons from the Field

Engaged spirituality as resource for community resilience.

In our interviews, the theme of spirituality was often a part of people’s narratives of community life, agriculture, and history. The Santa María

community and spirituality are deeply connected to the liberation theology teachings of priests who were considered radical by the church hierarchy, such as the martyred Saint Óscar Romero, and the practices of local leaders who organized to form *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (Christian Base Communities). This model of community inspired the founding of Santa María and birthed social movements that connected church teachings to a variety of direct actions for social change (Montgomery, 1994).

One interview where this connection was particularly evident was with Don Angel, Mercedes' father. Don Angel explained, "*Dios vive en cada persona*" (God lives in every person). It is through this faith lens that he chose to spend much of his adult life being a Catholic Catechist, work that he continued even when he was persecuted by the Salvadoran army for spreading what were seen as "communist ideologies." Don Angel connected his life, the survival of his family during the war, and their community's agricultural harvest and prosperity to the goodness and care of God. Although our own education initially led us to conceive of spirituality as a variable in peoples' lives or component of their experience, we came to see that, for many people, spirituality was actually integral to the cultivation of community resilience and a shared sense of belonging.

This communal connection became clear during an evening when, at 8:30 pm, Mercedes announced that we needed to go to a neighbor's house to retrieve some limes to sell in the market the following day. We, along with her son Manuel, piled into his car and drove on the community's winding road to our destination. When we arrived, a family (who did in fact have bags of limes waiting for us) greeted us warmly. This visit seemed to represent a sense of communal trust. Community members, in this instance, were working toward a common goal of getting produce to the market. This process required trust in one another and faith in their harvest. In many of our interviews, people expressed a sense of trust in the land; they trusted that the harvest would yield what they needed to survive. The prosperity of agriculture in the community seemed linked to an active sense of care and kinship among community members, working

toward common goals.

Overall, connections between community, land, and spirituality were present in many of our interviews. Most people we spoke with frequently used God language; it was very common to hear "*Gracias a Dios*" (Thanks to God), "*Si Dios quiere*" (God willing), and "*Primero Dios*" (God first). This spiritual language was woven within community dialogue and allowed community members to have an intentionally spiritual relationship to their land. Many people spoke of their harvest using this language, connecting the generous harvest to God's grace.

We observed that much of the community was authentically living out this belief in God. It was made evident in the way they cared for one another and embodied their own resilience. Don Angel articulated a sort of spiritual resilience by saying: "*Diosito siempre me cuida*" (God always takes care of me). In our interviews, some community members shared their histories of the civil war—stories of survival, resilience, and also deep loss and injustice. As they continue *la lucha* (the struggle) of day-to-day life in a country that continues to be plagued with violence, their faith stands out boldly. Many community members spoke of a faith in one another and in God. Others described the faith it takes to farm and their trust that God will always provide the sustenance they need.

This spiritual resilience seemed to be connected to the larger context of people's faith. The Salvadorans we encountered did not seem to have a "blind faith" and trust in God, as a conventional materialist analysis of religion and society might contend. Rather, they embodied a faith in context, a sense of hope and solidarity developed through (rather than in spite of) the injustices they have faced. They expressed courage and conviction in God's vision of liberation and recognized that the hope of humanity is much larger than we can even imagine. Dean Brackley (2008), who spent several decades accompanying communities in El Salvador, explains it this way:

While the truth of poverty and injustice makes a painful entry, the faith, contagious hope, and solidarity that accompany this evil are consoling and uplifting—so much so that life is

worth celebrating, almost anytime. This great drama—the struggle of good and evil, grace and sin, the dying and the rising—gradually becomes the integrating factor that reconfigures our world. (p. 6)

Spiritual resilience can be seen as a resistance against injustice and the act of choosing gratitude and celebration in the midst of hardship. We witnessed this joy each day in the community—laughter and play among children, coming together of family and neighbors over meals, communal festivals, and celebrations of the harvest.

Overall, not only did the people of Santa María have very personal and intentional relationships to one another and the land, they also expressed a profound relationship to God. For many residents this deep faith seemed to embody their roots of resilience, and it was a source of strength as they encountered struggle in their lives. We asked community members about their hope for their community and land, and many shared their hopes with the phrase, “*Primero Dios*” (God first). This deep faith and trust in God seem to enrich the community with a fuller hope for their future, and a deeper love for one another, the land, and their Creator.

The abundant life of hope on the march. El Salvador faces a growing social and environmental crisis. Large, poisonous industries have destroyed the forests and polluted the land, air, and water (Jamaíl, 2011; Panayatou, 1998). In many places today, life is precarious and vulnerable to gang violence. Sustaining a community and maintaining trust can seem impossible in this situation, but as we witnessed in Santa María, community is a work in progress. Salvadorans continue to fight and organize for a better life and country. With the hard work of many activists, in 2017 El Salvador became the first country in the world to ban metal mining. Activists and communities continue to fight for the rights to public water, local agriculture, and community health. Care for the environment and collective stewardship of the earth is an act of protest that is necessary for survival.

Many Salvadorans, and especially residents in Santa María, described their work as part of a larger struggle for justice, *la lucha*. “We are still here,

fighting,” Adelia told us while we worked on a parcel of land farmed by a women’s cooperative in the community. Lucia similarly explained, “We are fighting, this is the struggle we have—to see if this is how people are going to work and wanting to work like this [in cooperative agriculture] brings us closer and encourages us.”

Perhaps not consciously, our outlook—as residents of the United States visiting El Salvador—had initially centered on images of poor Salvadorans living in violence and scarcity. This often-repeated narrative from the U.S. media derives from existing differences in material wealth between a country like the U.S. and El Salvador. But its extension to the dignity and capability of Salvadorans—as a lacking, deficient, or even demonized people—reflects a “Eurocentric Mythology” (Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002) at the center of colonization, which positions “less developed” countries as less-than, in need of rescuing and research, or deserving exclusion and confinement.

Despite the vast material differences between El Salvador and the United States, there was consistent reference to abundance in our interviews. Phrases such as “we get everything we need from the land” were common, and at almost every occasion that we visited someone’s house, we were given some kind of fruit. Rather than looking for the scarcity we set out to find, we began to see signs of abundance—hidden patches of corn and *güisquil* (squash) along the road, mangos rotting in the street because there were too many to eat, a sense of celebration where friends and neighbors were gathered, and jubilant, colorful parade floats at an environmental march in San Salvador.

It was challenging initially to recognize the sense of collective hope and shared abundant life, because in Northwestern cultures, like the one that raised us, it is mostly individual success and achievements that are a reason for celebration. As Ignacio Ellacuría (1991) explains:

This [Latin American] hope that arises from life, that arises together with the promise and with the negation of death, is celebrated festively. The sense of fiesta, as it exists in the poor-with-hope, indicates for now that they

have not fallen into the fanaticism of desperation and of the struggle for the sake of struggle. But neither do they fall therefore into the error of the fiesta purely for amusement that characterizes the Western world—fiesta lacking meaning and lacking in hope. Fiesta is not a substitute for missing hope; it is the jubilant celebration of a hope on the march.
(pp. 61–62)

This sense of hope, abundance, and fiesta is not naive, but it is rooted in material reality. While U.S. consumer culture can be about an exorbitant accumulation that often has little connection to necessity or community, in El Salvador,

The historical experience of death, and not merely of pain, of death by hunger and destitution or death by repression, and by various forms of violence, which is so living and massive in Latin America, reveals the enormous necessity and the irreplaceable value, first of all, of material life—as the primary and fundamental gift in which must be rooted all other aspects of life, which in the final analysis constitute development of that primary gift. That life must be expanded and completed by internal growth and in relation to the life of others, always in search of more life and better life.
(Ellacuría, 1991, pp. 63–65)

One image that stands out from the march that we attended with Mercedes is the giant puppet of Oscar Romero at the top of a hill leading hundreds of environmentalists. Drawing attention to the need for public water infrastructure and programs that promote local food system ownership and control, people from communities across the country marched on what would normally be a busy street, with protest signs. For many people we met at the march, this moment was a direct extension of the long national struggle for democracy and peace. As one speaker before the march reminded us, a country that does not allow equal access to the abundance of our mother earth will never be at peace. This abundance ought to be stewarded in common, available to all. This was not a call for a utopian future, but something that

many people there were already living out in their communities.

Economic subsistence through cooperative practices. Free trade zones, foreign investments, concentration of landholdings, and other forms of capitalist globalization contribute to the vulnerable position of many Salvadorans. Small farmers and businesses in El Salvador are isolated to sell their products to the global market or mold their livelihoods to the fluctuating demands of large, profit-seeking corporations and the shifting tastes of global consumer cultures. As many scholars have pointed out, this economic context has had devastating consequences, from alienation and displacement to violence, poverty, and environmental degradation (Durham, 1979; Faber, 1992; Garni & Weyher, 2013).

In the midst of this widespread experience of dispossession, the people whose stories we heard in Santa María indicated that they were able to survive and subsist based on the food that they grew as a community. This was because they did not seek to subsist alone, but together. Community members survive together through daily attention to family and collective farms, selling excess food to an urban cooperative in San Salvador, sharing with community members in need, and exchanging food through the town's collectively run store. The focus on daily survival—in some ways outside of typical capitalist modes of production—demonstrated that although the dominant mode of production across the world is increasingly capitalist, community life and maintenance enable a degree of freedom and self-determination that is partially outside the logic of the market. As sociologist Segundo Montes (1991) explains, El Salvador has long been characterized by both the presence of a capitalist mode of production and a noncapitalist mode of production, where some groups are “scarcely affected” by the ups and downs of capitalist markets.

In some ways, we were expecting (or maybe hoping) that people in Santa María would speak in radical political, spiritual, or ecological terms about the production of food in their community. Sometimes they did. Although we, as outsiders, had titled our initial project “roots of resistance and

resilience,” we found that most community members did not quite know what this meant, and as we tried to explain it, we found that, in some ways, neither did we. We would still describe what we saw in community members as an extraordinary resilience in the historical context of an oppressive political, economic, and military regime, but for the community members we met this is not abstractly conceptualized. It is faced every day, and lived every day.

Overall, the people of El Salvador reaffirmed the empirical and theoretical value of research as praxis—to learn from the values and history revealed in people’s lived experience (Martín-Barró, 1996). Social theories at Western universities, in which we have been schooled—from sociology and economics to social work and psychology—often have an individualist/capitalist (or occasionally a collectivist/Marxist undercurrent) as they employ abstract concepts of economic, social, and political systems to explain human behavior. Although ideologically different, both approaches to explaining social life and development tend to emphasize the process or outcomes of economic *production*. As we spoke to people in Santa María, however, we found an emphasis on the ongoing struggle, survival, and *maintenance* of social relationships and ecological health.

Because Santa María is a resettlement community (its initial inhabitants arrived during the civil war from more rural areas in El Salvador or refugee resettlement camps), many people consider their existence there to be a gift, for which they expressed gratitude for the founders of the community. The act of survival itself was considered an accomplishment. As countless community members told us, the work now is to continue on this founding. When people responded to our open-ended questions about why they farm in Santa María or why farming is important to them, they spoke about repetitive tasks such as weeding, preparing, planting, or daily acts of care in their individual or collective plots. These reflections focused on the promise of the harvest as something that they had to trust in order to survive.

Lazaró told us of long days walking back and forth across the community to tend to different areas, his own and parcels for the community. “I par-

ticipate in agriculture because I do not have another option. . . . There is no other job, for me all of life is working the land,” he told us as thunder and gathering clouds signalled another rainstorm approaching.

Lucia explained that, “Agriculture is good to have to survive because if you do not have money and you have food, you have more if you are harvesting for yourself. One knows what he or she is eating. One knows what he or she is going to eat is made of. It is the importance of working in the land. One knows that he or she is producing something good.” In our conversations with Magdileno, he explained the importance of agriculture in a larger national context when he told us: “The agriculture in Santa María is important because we survive from it, we maintain the community from it. From it comes the tortillas to eat with the beans. That is important. . . . Maybe they have their good job in San Salvador, and from there, they pay for food: buy corn or tortillas. We do not, as we are more self-sufficient, we dedicate the community more to the work of agriculture. From there we have the corn and the beans to eat.”

From our time in the community we learned that agriculture is not the only thing that the community maintains for survival; there is also active community involvement in the ongoing construction and maintenance of local infrastructures. While we were there, for example, several of the community members were involved in a repair project for the road that goes into the community. Community members explained that the farming and agricultural activities have always been conceptualized as a vital part of the larger community infrastructure, and they are a way for new arrivals to join with their neighbors in creating local power and community self-determination.

Relating to the land differently. The orientation toward economic subsistence through cooperative practices lends itself to different ways of relating to land and community. For example, in Western capitalist and patriarchal cultures, land is often only valued for its potential to produce economic profit; everyday relationships of maintenance and care are devalued compared to the productive labor of “male workers” (Wertheim, 2009). In Santa María,

an ethic of care seems to compete with, and sometimes triumph over, a global culture of patriarchal domination and exploitation. This was evident in how people presented their stories of the land in addition to the actual content of their stories.

Although it was not entirely clear through interviews how patriarchal or *machismo* culture specifically affects agriculture and farming activities, we did hear from several people that the male leadership had historically harbored *machismo* attitudes that privileged “productive men” over other aspects of the community. The continuing effects of this culture were evident when we interviewed the four women who take part in a women’s cooperative. These women collectively care for a piece of land about 10-minute walk from the center of Santa María.

While men tended to have no problem sitting down and pontificating about their experience when we asked our general and open-ended questions, the women were sometimes more hesitant. In some cases, it would be obvious that the women we interviewed were less comfortable talking to Matt, and in those cases, Megan would ask more of the questions. Additionally, one woman explained that her husband would prefer that she stay at home, rather than go out to work on their plot of land, but she persisted anyway. Here, the women’s farming cooperative is also a form of resistance to normative understandings of gender in the community.

In Santa María, growing food was part of a daily life of *cultural resistance* to the dominant culture that views the land as something to be exploited for profit.⁴ The tools, language, and aspirations of agriculture were oriented toward the accumulation of local survival and power, not global exports. The growing method and style we noticed in farm spaces were both purposeful and informal. In Santa María most people do not grow in typical monoculture fields or rows of industrial agriculture. They embrace something more like what many researchers and practitioners call agroecology or permaculture. Agroecology and permaculture

are two growing methods that have been appropriated, transformed, or adapted by *campesino* cultures across Latin American countries in different ways.

This resistance is also evident in how the overall approach of many people we met resists the “domination of nature” worldview that has historically propelled industrial agriculture and capitalism (Leiss, 1972). In all our interactions and conversations about agriculture in the community, residents usually began by referencing all the gifts that they receive from the land. Their approach to the land is deeply rooted in a spiritually informed sense of gratitude and relationship that makes community possible.

The land makes survival in Santa María possible, and it is also a gift of beauty. For example, Loncho summarized his feelings toward the land this way: “The land gives us life. It gives us mangos. It gives us avocados too. It is a beauty, the earth. It gives us flowers.”

Similarly, Mercedes saw this generosity of the earth as something that has taught her about other areas of her life: “I have come to love the earth . . . to love the earth, and love plants . . . I have a direct relationship with plants. In this direct relationship is that I, my body, my being, is integrated . . . So I think the relationship is deep, this feeling of love for Mother Earth. And I feel that this gives me life, gives me energy, gives me strength, gives me vision, hope, and gives me food. I feel that plants complement my life.”

In this sense, many members of the Santa María community are working to substitute a dominating and exploitative approach to the land with an emerging, more reciprocal environmental worldview that is founded on daily interactions of care. As we observed among community members, this was a work in progress where *machismo* culture and alternative, more feminist perspectives on the community and land were both present. The latter worldview enables community members to resist other forms of social or interpersonal violence, and is kept alive through the transfer of knowledge to the next generation.

⁴ Using Eric Holt-Giménez’s (2006) definition of cultural resistance: “campesino expressions of ‘agri-culture,’ that is, the ways farmer innovation, free association, mutual aid, food production, and environmental protection work through tools, organization, and language to fashion autonomous paths to equitable, sustainable futures” (p. xxi).

Environmental knowledge within and beyond classroom walls. Although much of our knowledge about the environment comes from classrooms, in Santa María, knowledge about the land and farming is often passed down in families and shared informally across the community. The way that knowledge about the environment is produced and passed on has many resonances with the history of popular education related to community landownership and cultivation in El Salvador (Millner, 2016). We often encountered a few of the most active farmers walking across the town, sharing updates on how plants or soil were doing that day. The older and more seasoned farmers we encountered also expressed great hopes for the next generation to continue to build on the foundation of community and agriculture that they had forged.

The community school that educates students through sixth grade often has holidays around the planting and harvest seasons so that students can work with their families. For Ali, a teacher in the community's school, this is not a distraction from school learning, but another component of the students' education. She hopes that students will bring their home life to the classroom and lessons from the classroom home to their parents, especially with new initiatives, such as the movement to use only organic fertilizers and build up a community composting program. She told us,

As for the care of the environment, we try to do that as our daily bread. For example, with the issue of garbage, we have arranged for a car to come to pick up the garbage each month. We are there with the children [at the community school] every day to separate the waste, so that we can reuse the organic waste, for example. Also, within science lessons we try to do better environmentally with the students. So, I feel that it is something that we are sowing in children, so that after lessons they go talk with their parents...

The religious symbol of care for the earth as the community's "daily bread" seemed to be an aspiration that was not always perfectly achieved. The several young people we met did seem to be carrying a tension—between community history

and the promise of formal education—and some of the older generation worries about the future of education and employment opportunities for the next generation in Santa María. In conversation with several people who shared their stories, we together imagined assembling a book that would provide a record of our conversations about the land and might serve to educate or inspire younger generations.

Rights of refusal: from idyllic place to conflicting aspirations. The name of the community, Santa María de la Esperanza [Saint Mary of Hope], says something about the orientation of the people who live there. It has been a community whose aspirations for a more peaceful and dignified life were expressed literally in colorful murals, vibrant gardens, personalized homes, and community encounters. Although it may be easy to romanticize the apparent successes of this kind of narrative, we also learned that such aspirations are never singular; they are contradictory and contested.

One afternoon, we went to visit a married couple in their home at the encouragement of other community members who suggested they might be interested in sharing their story. They were definitely not. Nevertheless, they invited us into their home, offering us food and drink as they explained their perspective.

From their point of view, there are certain families that have more power and access to land than others in the community. Early arrivals or people who had connections to the founders received better treatment. They pointed out that some of the familial plots of land were bigger or better than others—something that we had not considered as we were listening to the celebratory community narrative.

Because of this, the project represents only the collective views of those who were willing to share their story. It is not an entire community portrait; rather, it is a perspective on some of the approaches or tactics that have allowed the community to survive over time, particularly the people whose parents forged a life in Santa María.

In traveling to El Salvador to do research from a university in the United States, we had imagined that people in El Salvador deserved the right to tell

their story, especially to people coming from a country that is responsible for much of the terror during the Salvadoran civil war. This couple revealed that *refusal* is as powerful or important as *representation*. Their hospitality made it clear that they were not necessarily refusing us as people, but what we represented: a potentially dangerous intervention that they did not want. Perhaps, just as their survival was dependent on agriculture, so too it was connected to keeping unwanted foreign interventions or researchers out of their life—due to memories of other kinds of intervention that had historically caused damage and trauma.

Our interaction with this couple also helped us to avoid an over-idyllic imagination of Santa María. Even a community built in common on a foundation of shared values and experiences—striving for peace or a more hopeful future—is built on complex and unequal power relations. So, while we as researchers were bringing our own power dynamic, we were not visiting a power-neutral community in perfect harmony. Community members drew on a common store of memories to imagine their lives and future, but they did so in sometimes conflicting ways. From the refusals we encountered, we learned that resilience may be connected to an ability to resist the very forces that destabilize human and ecological life.

Concluding Reflections on Agroecology and the Research Process

This reflective essay has explored our approach to understanding how Salvadoran *campesino* culture is adapting to, or resisting, new threats that have emerged in the last half-century. Here we offer some conclusions on the research process and highlight ways that the Salvadoran context of resettlement might contribute to future scholarship and practice.

The orientation of our project began with the contemporary situation that Santa María is facing, which is a result of the community's evolving tactics to resettle in the aftermath of forced displacement. Such a focus allowed us to better understand how agriculture was woven into everyday life, in ways that both resisted and flowed across typical analytical categories of knowledge. We came to understand that action-oriented and participatory

agroecology research would require a collaborative, open-ended, and flexible research disposition, and that this *way of being* needed to be actively cultivated. As researchers, such an approach was possible by noticing how our knowledge, actions, mannerisms, or way of speaking conflicted with community knowledge and expectations of us. In the process, we found that Martín-Baró's approach to praxis—including the wider social and political context of his work—was especially well suited to help us understand our own position as researchers and people's lived experiences. It also helped us to explore possibilities for more collaborative knowledge production.

As we listened to stories of the community, participated in daily life, and asked community members to frame their current situation, we were eventually able to “reflect back” what we heard in the form of a bilingual booklet. Although the short time we were in the community limited the scope of action that we could take and the number of people we could formally interview, we also realized that this approach allowed us to build relationships that could support future collaborations.


Community members we met in Santa María did not always talk about their work through the lens of “permaculture” or “agroecology,” but we saw how their farming practices have much in common with the wider movement for community agriculture and food sovereignty in El Salvador and across Central America. Community members in Santa María paid attention to the specific crops being grown, in addition to the social, historical, and ecological context of their practices, as do agroecology movements and scholars. Our time in the field also demonstrated that it may be worthwhile to give particular importance to the social or spiritual dimensions of resilience and resistance in some agroecology contexts.

In Santa María, community members were not only trying to bounce back, recover, or adapt to changes (compare with Kumpfer, 1999; Walker et al., 2004) in the aftermath of war. The violence faced by the community was ongoing and involved new threats of economic isolation, gang violence, or police repression. In response, many people drew on shared history, religious symbols, or spiritual language to resist the dominant global econ-

omy, politics, and culture. Some of the tactics for resettlement that emerged from this resistance included, establishing connections to national movements, relating to the land differently, dispersing environmental education beyond classroom walls, sharing portions of the harvest to benefit community projects, and even refusing research interventions.

Throughout the research process we came to see that these tactics have special relevance for resettlement in an era of accelerating migration and displacement. For many of the Salvadorans we met, resistance is not only about rejecting harmful forces; it also involves sustaining meaningful places where community and shared life is possible. In this sense, it was important to understand the lived experiences, narratives, and virtues that allowed resistance to take on a quality of active hope where community members work to make the ecologically vibrant and socially just world they want to see.

Overall, these reflections emerge from the ways in which our own knowledge encountered the knowledge and virtues that were present in Salvadoran people. As we learned from the larger environmental activism taking place across El Salvador, we saw that tactics for resettlement within a single community can also be connected to wider organ-

izing efforts, policy proposals, or propositions for community-led development. Lessons from the Salvadoran context can also encourage scholars, activists, and practitioners to consider how they proceed in an era of accelerating migration and displacement that is driven by dramatically uneven social and economic development. How do people stay rooted in this challenging situation? How do communities recover in the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence, environmental crisis, or extreme economic marginality? What is the role of a researcher in such a context? This project reaffirms that these are not new questions—which means we still have much to learn from communities that have been engaged in this struggle for a dignified life and community self-determination. 

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