

Making Our Way: Migration, Community, and Meaning in Transnational El Salvador
College of Humanities Research Fellowship Proposal
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Objectives:

The migration of young people from Central America to the United States has recently become a hotly contested subject of debate in the United States, yet there is little understanding of the complexity of root causes, underlying cultural dynamics, and social consequences of such widespread emigration in places of migrant origin. My book project, titled *Making Our Way: Migration, Community, and Meaning in Transnational El Salvador*, offers a fine-grained, nuanced ethnographic analysis of how marginalized Salvadorans interpret, navigate, and respond to recent cultural, social, and economic transformations wrought by mass postwar emigration and economic globalization.

El Salvador, which for decades has pursued the promise of a modernization narrative that heroizes its emigrants and their monetary remittances as the ideal path to development and betterment, now finds itself at a critical disjuncture. Decades of steady neoliberal reforms and the growth of remittances, as a substitute for viable rural and urban postwar development strategies, have actually deepened economic inequalities. Violence has only escalated after years of hardline anti-gang policies have failed and as drug trafficking has recently proliferated in the region. Even as these forces have pressured more people to leave El Salvador, undocumented migrants encounter a humanitarian crisis in crossing international borders and Mexico's terrain of drug war violence. In the United States' unwelcoming immigration climate, migrants encounter stricter border and immigration enforcement and increased rates of incarceration and deportation.

Based on sustained, recurring research over the course of more than 15 years, *Making Our Way* explores the transnational political, economic, and cultural elements that have produced this predicament. Using an in-depth ethnographic lens, it focuses on the transnationalized experience of one rural community of postwar Salvadorans who live on the margins both in El Salvador and in the United States as international migrants. Initially formed out of a resettlement of regional refugees who had fled El Salvador's 1980-1992 civil war, the community is known for its rich history of community organizing and collectivist action. However, like elsewhere in northern Central America, its stream of emigrants – especially among youth and young adults – has continued since the war. Seen as antithetical to community cohesion, migration has thus increasingly become a key source of internal tension, even as it has also become a natural aspect of community life and a crucial source of income.

This project examines the emergent cultural struggle produced from these conditions, one that is concerned with reknitting community fabric in response to migration's divisive effects and with building other possibilities than undocumented emigration for El Salvador's younger generations. My research finds that, in the absence of institutionalized social support, people engage with this cultural struggle by turning to community networks, resources, and identities, working across borders to navigate and respond to their predicament and to seek out new possibilities. This cultural struggle, the book argues, comes at a historic crossroads at which El Salvador now finds itself. It fits a broader cultural-political shift toward questioning long-established state-endorsed meanings and values that frame emigration and its cooperation with capitalist economic globalization as a promising path to progress and well-being for the future of El Salvador.

Methodology and Work Plan:

Research for this project builds on more than three years of continuous dissertation fieldwork, along with recurring fieldwork ranging from several weeks to several months from 1999 to the present. I carried out most of the field research in El Salvador. There I took copious ethnographic field notes and conducted interviews as I followed the changing understandings and responses to emigration in the community that was the focus of the study. I also interviewed political actors, development practitioners, and migrant rights activists, and I participated in their meetings, presentations, and forums to identify larger trends and changes. I also spent several months immersed in the Salvadoran community in the greater Washington DC area, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, where I lived with and interviewed migrant families and interviewed local immigrant rights activists. Finally, the book incorporates evidence from several short-period ethnographic fieldwork visits between 2006 and 2015 among Central American migrants in transit and humanitarian workers working along migrant routes on the northern and southern borders of Mexico. My research therefore departs from conventional ethnographies that offer a limited snapshot of time and space. The long-standing and close rapport established with the community that is the focus of this study makes it possible to contribute a unique longitudinal and transnational perspective that goes into rich detail.

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion chapters, the following are the main chapters to be included in this book:

1. Legacies of Violence and Expulsion
2. The Political Economy of Postwar Migration
3. Navigating Across Borders and a Humanitarian Crisis
4. Fractured Community
5. Mobility, Networks, and Traces of Collectivism

6. Cultivating Meaning, Memory, and Place across Borders

7. Belongings, Returns and Circulations

8. Youth Imaginaries and the Struggle to Find Other Paths

With the support of the College of Humanities Research Fellowship, I will be able to complete three chapters of this book (Chapters 6, 7, and 8), bringing the project to its near completion. For Chapters 6 and 7, I will be revising and adding to previously written dissertation material. I will reframe these chapters and add new ethnographic detail from field notes and interviews not included in my dissertation. Chapter 8 will be based on dissertation research that I was not able to include in my dissertation write-up.

I am currently writing Chapter 3 and on revising dissertation material and a conference paper to complete Chapter 5. I expect to have each of these chapters completed by December 2015. The remaining chapters (1, 2, and 3) require lighter revisions from dissertation material. I plan to complete them, as well as the Introduction and Conclusion chapters, during the academic year following the Spring 2016 Fellowship period. The University of California Press has expressed interest in the manuscript and I have spoken with the Latin American Studies editor. I will secure a book contract if awarded the College of Humanities Research Fellowship.

I am requesting research funds for transcription assistants and equipment. They will be responsible for transcribing certain interview segments from fieldwork that I have already conducted. The first half of the award period will be used to analyze and organize field notes and interviews to expand the ethnographic evidence for the chapters I will be working on. I will also use this time to reframe and make initial revisions to Chapter 6 and 7. The second part of the fellowship period will be devoted to writing Chapter 8 and to making final revisions to Chapters 6 and 7.

Anticipated Outcomes:

The ultimate outcome of this project will be the publication of my book manuscript. The Spring 2016 Semester fellowship period will allow me the time needed to complete the portion of the manuscript that needs the most significant work, and it will give me the momentum needed to complete the manuscript by the following academic year, with a secured book contract.

I am writing *Making Our Way* to appeal to a wide public, and I expect it to be particularly useful in classrooms of both undergraduate and graduate students. It will offer students and those interested in contemporary Central American-U.S. migration a window into on-the-ground lived experiences and effects of international migration, humanizing the phenomenon beyond politicized media debates and helping students tease apart its complex historical, political, and cultural contextual configurations. This book will respond to a dearth of up-to-date, theoretically informed and ethnographically rich, classroom-friendly anthropological works on Central America and migration. Grounded in anthropology, the book incorporates transdisciplinary perspectives and contributes to the fields of migration studies, development studies, social movement studies, Latin American studies, and Latino studies.

The book is not only relevant to a broad range of students, policy-makers, and a wider public, but it is particularly valuable to CSUN and the Los Angeles area. Los Angeles is home to the largest Salvadoran and Central American immigrant community in the United States. CSUN hosts the largest student population of Central American background in the country and is home to the country's first and only Central American Studies Program. This book will therefore be particularly useful to the CSUN campus community and to those who work with the Central American immigrant community in Los Angeles area.