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Reclaiming the Self:
Political Prisoners, Gender, and Subjectivity in Post-War El Salvador

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Abstract

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This study analyzes the lived experience of former political prisoners in El Salvador. Based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, it inquires into how women and men who survived political imprisonment and torture during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) make sense of their experience and reclaim power over their lives in similar and different ways. It also explores the role of social organization and survivors' notions of memory and justice in shaping that process. This research is important in light of the government-sanctioned state of impunity surrounding past systematic human rights violations and survivors' persistent struggle to attain justice and truth. At the Latin American level, it is important because it considers the aftermath of Cold War authoritarianism and countries' subsequent transitions to democracy, which they are still working to implement.

This research speaks to various gaps in our knowledge: (1) our sociological knowledge on torture and the possibilities for agency in its aftermath; (2) how equating the “gender question” with women only and with sexual violence has been problematic in transitional justice and can be overcome; (3) debates about the efficacy of traditional transitional justice mechanisms (trials and truth commissions); and (4) the reduced number of studies on political prisoners in Latin America, especially those considering how collective efforts affect survivors’ sense of recovery and wellbeing. My empirical results propose that: (1) political prisoners find productive and creative ways to enact agency, despite their trauma and what most theory on torture claims; (2) gender is more productively analyzed in this context in a relational way, by considering femininities and masculinities as part of the gender question, and analyzing how abuse has structured vulnerability and agency for all individuals; (3) transitional justice should consider a wider spectrum of rights and justice than is usually done (also prioritizing economic, social, and cultural rights, and including restorative justice ideals); and (4) notions of the collective (solidarity and belonging) have strongly informed survivors’ elaborations of the self, becoming an “antidote” to the detrimental effects of torture and serving survivors’ sense of recovery at various points in time.

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DEDICATION

To my family. And to the people in El Salvador who taught me about choosing life and hope.

*“Arrancaron nuestros frutos
Cortaron nuestras ramas
Quemaron nuestro tronco
Pero no pudieron matar nuestras raíces.”*

*[“They yanked out our fruit
They chopped off our branches
They burned our trunk
But they could never kill our roots.”]*

*—Anonymous Nahuatl poem
often quoted by COPPES in publications*

*“Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect
some illumination... [it] may well come less from theories
and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often
weak light that some men and women...will kindle under
almost all circumstances...”*

—Hannah Arendt (Men in Dark Times, p. ix)

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Early in 2013, I landed in El Salvador for the first time, oblivious to the lessons this place would teach me about the darkness and the light that societies can come to know. Within a day, I was sitting in an idyllic tropical landscape, in a family's backyard teeming with cacao and banana trees—a generosity of nature that mirrored the generosity of the people living there. But as in most of my experiences in El Salvador, alluring human and natural beauty is also heavily mirrored by an opposing force. Within hours, I heard somber testimonies from a family of civil war survivors in which deep experiences of pain intertwined with powerful narratives of resilience and survival. This contradictory character to human experience and human societies fascinated me and tugged at my heart's strings. I too was born to a Latin American Cold War dictatorship in the southern tip of the world, Chile. And while my own individual history eluded firsthand interaction with overt political violence, my bones inherited the echoes of widespread tyranny and fear from my family and my larger community. I inherited a connection to the human disasters and ensuing forms of survival caused by an unforgiving wave of state violence sweeping over Chile and Latin America during the Cold War years. Thus began this research project and a learning process about El Salvador that would bring me closer to home—at times in uncomfortable ways, other times in unpredictably redeeming ways.

*

Throughout the twentieth century, political repression in Latin America, and El Salvador specifically, sought to destroy demands for social reform and access to rights. The process accelerated in the second half of the century, with state terror being implemented to destroy the voice of political dissent challenging an oligarchic status quo cemented during colonization (Ching 2016, Corradi et al. 1992, Leslie 2001, Montgomery 2018, Sluka 2000). Though the country

transitioned to democracy after a period of authoritarianism, war, and systematic human rights violations, a nearly unshakeable context of impunity has prevailed. This has been sustained by a broad-sweeping amnesty law (in place until late 2016), a weak judiciary, corruption, and lack of political will. To date, the Salvadoran state has implemented minimal reparation programs and there have been very few convictions for crimes against humanity committed on a broad scale: forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and torture (Binford and Alarcón Medina 2014; Martínez Barahona et al. 2012, 2016; Skaar et al. 2016; Silber 2011). This makes it stand out among Latin American neighbors; while achieving full justice continues to challenge many of these countries, El Salvador notably lags behind in securing victims' access to rights (Martínez Barahona et al. 2012, Skaar et al. 2016).

Consequently, the lessons we can draw from victim communities grappling with the aftereffects of Cold War repression in this particular area of the world are considerable. In fact, despite its reduced geographical dimension, El Salvador's history is rich in lessons about the interplay between colonization, revolutions, United States intervention, and patterns of systematic abuse. Its recent civil war (1980-1992) makes it an eloquent example of Latin America's Cold War transit.

At the onset of the twentieth century, the historically impoverished masses began to actively question the status quo. Attempts at social protest, of which a 1932 indigenous peasant uprising was the foremost example, were squashed with brutal violence by the state (Almeida 2008, Ching 2010, Sprenkels 2005). From then on, state repression would become the default and systematic government response to meet all expressions of popular dissent, critique, and calls for social reform (Corradi et al. 1992, Leslie 2001, Montgomery 2018, Sluka 2000).

But social forces of upheaval continued to question the oligarchic foundations of the property and wealth distribution system (Montgomery 2018, Silber 2011). By 1980, large sectors of

the population had mobilized resources and ideas around the need to reform society in a fundamental way. Armed conflict broke out as a leftist revolutionary guerrilla movement attempted to overthrow a right-wing authoritarian government backed by the United States government. A powerful authoritarian state apparatus was set in motion to quell the revolutionary effort. Eventually, at least 85,000 people would be killed, 95% of them by government forces (Betancur et al. 1993), and widespread torture would be applied throughout the country (Hammond 1996, Leiby 2015).

In the post-war period, where absence of accountability for these crimes is still the norm, the road to justice, healing, and truth for victims of systematic human rights violations has been long and challenging. Still, persisting survivor communities speak loudly to the possibility of resistance. Torture, as a form of violence done to the body, has been theorized extensively as a disciplinary mechanism in the literature (Aretxaga 1995, Asad 1983, Feldman 1991, Foucault 1979, Marx 1967, Rejali 2009, Scarry 1985). These theories suggest torture destroys the individual, her voice, and her agency (Brown 2016, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten and Schmid 1995, Graziano 1992, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019), but persisting organizations in El Salvador made up by former political prisoners who underwent this brutal practice continue to battle that destruction. While carrying considerable experiences of pain on their shoulders and facing an adverse social context, former political prisoners continue to vindicate their human rights.

1.1 RESEARCH FOCUS

While amnesty laws and concerns about backlashes into authoritarianism kept many new Latin American democracies involved in the “politics of oblivion” (Jelin 2007, Waldman 2009)—arguing for similar versions of the need to “forgive and forget” for the sake of national unification—many societies have made significant strides towards implementing transitional justice measures

involving reparation, truth, and justice. Transitional justice encompasses all measures, practices, mechanisms and concerns that “arise following a period of conflict, civil strife, or repression, and that are aimed directly at confronting and dealing with past violations of human rights and humanitarian law” (Roht-Arriaza 2006). They may include judicial and non-judicial mechanisms such as amnesties, reparations, prosecutions, lustration, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and dismissals, or a combination thereof (United Nations 2004). El Salvador is an extreme case at the highest degree of post-authoritarian impunity in the region, however (Martínez Barahona et al. 2012, Skaar et al. 2016).

Yet, in spite of this hostile environment of oblivion and near absence of legal justice, torture survivors continue to organize in order to resist the dominant discourse of forgetfulness, impunity, and even shame surrounding their experience (Budden 2009, Fessler 1999, Kirmayer et al. 2018). This speaks of an intentional process to fight for truth, justice, and reparations; and to chart a path towards recovery. It also speaks about the spaces for meaning-making that survivors create; these resist destruction of the individual’s ability to claim power over their life, which adverse sociopolitical conditions at different times—such as historical marginalization, torture practices, and post-transition impunity—could have erased. On broad terms, this research seeks to explore those spaces, delving into the processes by which individuals exercise power and enact their subjectivity (ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring).

In this research, I define recovery as the process of reclaiming power over one’s life. I made this choice based on my pre-existing familiarity with former political prisoners and my reluctance to define their experience primarily as traumatic, which is a psychological concept that may preclude their own definitions of self from arising. The idea of claiming power over one’s life involves the social and symbolic dimensions that tie individual lives to society. The idea also emphasizes the quality of this phenomenon as an ongoing process and of the idea of individual lives as embedded in

history. In addition, the lived experience of torture—which concerns me in this project—fits under the umbrella of phenomenology and (post)structuralist studies. They have framed torture as a disciplinary mechanism focused on destroying the individual (as explained above).

Specifically, my research question is the following: **How do women and men who survived political imprisonment and torture during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) make sense of their experience and reclaim power over their lives in similar and different ways?** To answer these questions, my research aims are to (1) describe former political prisoners' forms of subjectivity (ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring) and their paths to recovery (reclaiming power over their life), (2) analyze the role that social and political organization has played in their lives, and (3) describe the notions of justice, memory, and healing that survivors draw from to memorialize their experience and claim rights.

1.1.1 *COPPEs: An Organization of Former Political Prisoners*

Through my work at the University of Washington Center for Human Rights (UWCHR) as a graduate student and its project on transitional justice in El Salvador, I established a relationship with an organization of former political prisoners in El Salvador named COPPEs (Committee of Former Political Prisoners of El Salvador, or *Comité de Ex-Presos Políticos de El Salvador*). This is an organization that brought together individuals who were detained without due process and tortured for their participation in social and political activities associated with leftist ideals. It was created in 1980 out of the Centro Penal de Santa Tecla, a detention center near San Salvador, and later extended to a detention center in Mariona (*Centro Penal de Mariona*) and a women's jail in Ilopango (*Cárcel de Mujeres de Ilopango*). It remained active throughout the civil war, helping prisoners to communicate with their families, organizing hunger strikes to protest mistreatment, and supporting the revolutionary cause. The organization was reconstituted in 2008 around the goal of turning a

former prison into a museum, and currently maintains relationships with other national and international organizations in its pursuit of justice, truth, and reparations. Some of its members have filed formal complaints before the justice system and participated in civil society-led symbolic tribunals. While I did not consider COPPES as my unit of analysis, most of the people I interviewed for this research project are associated with COPPES in some way. The organization also provided crucial support for my research effort.

1.2 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE ADDRESSED BY THIS RESEARCH

1.2.1 *Gap 1: Gap in Transitional Justice Theory and Practice*

There is an ongoing debate about the efficacy of transitional justice measures in Latin America and the rest of the world. Around the globe, the evidence showing whether transitional justice has been successful is mixed (Grandin 2005; Hazan 2006; Kutnjak Ivkovic and Hagan 2011; Mendeloff 2009; Mutua 2015; Nagy 2008, 2009; Olsen et al. 2010; Savelsburg 2010; Sharp 2014; Sikkink and Kim 2013; Sikkink 2011; Skaar et al. 2016; Struett 2008; Theidon 2007a). As a field of knowledge and practice, transitional justice (TJ) has experienced different phases of development, of which the latest occurred towards the end of the 20th century with Latin American, African, and Asian transitions to democracy. This phase has generally been characterized by governments' focus on unity politics and conciliatory mechanisms geared at restoring the rule of law and preventing further confrontation between major sectors of society (Bell 2009, Clamp 2014, Leebaw 2015, Teitel 2003). The Latin American region prominently contributed to TJ's advancement (Hayner 2011, Skaar et al. 2016, Sikkink and Walling 2007), as nearly half of all countries that have implemented transitional justice mechanisms around the globe are located within the Latin American region. As early innovators in implementing human rights trials and truth commissions (Sikkink and Walling

2007), Latin American governments shaped a type of transition to democracy that would become paradigmatic (Arthur 2009, Clamp 2014, Sharp 2013).

However, this does not imply by any means that Latin American countries have attained all the goals that transitional justice theory has set out for societies. While much has in fact been accomplished (and main TJ mechanisms like truth commissions and trials have contributed to reconciliation in multiple settings¹), critical scholars are pushing for an expansion and betterment of the field, especially in light of three key aspects (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2008, Cavallaro and Albuja 2008, Clamp 2014, Fourlas 2015, Laplante 2008, Lundy and McGovern 2008, McConnachie and Morison 2008, McEvoy 2008, McEvoy and McGregor 2008, Ní Aoláin 2012, Robins and Wilson 2015, Sharp 2014, Theidon 2007a, Zehr 2002): *(1a) expanding the focus from civil and political rights to include economic, social, and cultural rights* (McGregor 2013, Mutua 2015, Nagy 2008, Sharp 2013); *(1b) questioning whether the current approach, based on a legalist perspective, actually delivers reparation for victims* (Cassese 2002, Clamp 2014, Mallinder 2007, McEvoy 2007, Schabas 2006, Sharp 2014, O’Connell 2005); and *(1c) producing a “thicker” understanding of transitional justice in order to represent victims’ interests* (Clamp 2013, McEvoy 2007, Sharp 2014).

Gap 1a: Expanding the Human Rights Spectrum in Transitional Justice

Regarding the first of these dimensions, the Salvadoran case can provide key insight about what rights TJ should consider given the stark contradictions produced by the country’s democratic transition. In the literature, there has thus far been little scrutiny of what peacebuilding fundamentally means or how it might differ from transitional justice as liberal democracy building

¹ For example, truth commissions have made a significant contribution to reconciliation in many countries (Hayner 2001). They have been strongly supported as an alternative mechanism to compensate for the weaknesses and failures of trials and produced an entire library of “research and analysis into [their] every aspect and [their] comparative advantages and disadvantages over previous attempts” (Mani 2005, 517). On their part, human rights trials have changed international culture around impunity following periods of conflict since the precedent-setting trials in Nuremberg and Tokyo after World War II. Before, impunity was the default response to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during times of war (Mani 2005, Thakur and Malcontent 2005, Neier 1998).

(Andrieu 2010, Arthur 2009, Clamp 2014, Ekern 2018, Mani 2005, Ní Aoláin 2012, Mutua 2015, Sharp 2014, Turner 2013). Yet, the Salvadoran example shows the importance of interrogating this difference. The country's post-war trajectory illustrates the pitfalls of a liberal democracy model applied rather unquestionably by political elites after the 1992 Peace Accords; the model supported a “forgive and forget” approach to the past and simultaneously helped produce subpar human development indicators in the post-war era, such as high criminality levels, limited access to healthcare, and elevated levels of inequality and poverty (Acosta and Montiel 2018, Moodie 2010, PAHO 2018, Silber 2011). In tandem with that, outcomes for transitional justice became detrimental.

Government-supported transitional justice practices—albeit few and far between—fit under this post-conflict democratization model. While there have been some efforts in that direction, such as the creation of a Human Rights Ombudsman Office, the acceptance of a UN-sponsored truth commission, the implementation of “culture of peace” programs in schools (DeLugan 2012), and partial state recognition of responsibility (through public apologies and minor economic reparations)², efforts place El Salvador at the low end of the accountability-impunity spectrum in Latin America (Skaar et al. 2016).

In turn, these meager advancements in transitional justice also echo an underlying problem with “pacted transitions” in Latin America. These transitions cemented a procedural version of democracy under the promise that civil society would later further democratic outcomes (Godoy 2006). But unfortunately, El Salvador is an extreme case of a prevalent tendency followed by Latin American nations emerging from authoritarianism and civil strife. The country acutely reveals the

² Through President Funes' public apology in 2010 for violations carried out by state agents during the armed conflict, and another apology in 2011 to El Mozote victims on behalf of the state. While the Funes administration was willing to admit to these crimes, it was not equally willing to acknowledge crimes committed by guerrilla forces or to strike down the amnesty law (Barahona and Salazar 2016). Symbolic economic reparations have also been granted to the El Mozote victims. This involves small amounts of money that are nonetheless significant for many survivors living in poverty.

inadequacies of the neoliberal strategy that implemented structural adjustment economics while prioritizing civil and political rights. On one hand, post-war access to political and civil rights such as freedom of expression, association, and participation in fair and free elections has ameliorated in the country. On the other hand, however, “public participation in El Salvador is largely limited to voting” (Martínez Barahona and Gutiérrez Salazar 2016, 197; UNDP 2010): a population that could barely access secure levels of social and economic wellbeing has hardly been able to participate in the democratic political process as expected by the guarantees of a procedural democracy transition model. In the realm of transitional justice, a socially disenfranchised civil society has faced a steep uphill battle against the weight of institutionally-sanctioned impunity.

Given that scenario, this research allows us insight into what a core tenet in sociolegal scholarship means for human rights victims in a small war-torn Latin American country: that classical and neoliberal rights are unable to limit systemic violence (McCann 2014, Scheingold 1974). As in other Latin American countries, a nominally restored rule of law in El Salvador could only partially (and in fact, very poorly) address deep-seated distributions of economic and political power that sustain systemic violence and produce subpar human development indicators. This speaks to a broader question regarding which rights matter, how rights can be negotiated and secured in this context, and what possibilities for justice and healing arise vis-a-vis the state’s practical absence and the democratization model’s infertile results.

Gap 1b: Questioning the Legalist Perspective in Transitional Justice

Regarding the second dimension, an aspect that critical transitional scholars bring our attention to is how to transcend legalism in transitional justice, in the sense of building upon it. By legalism, I refer to the predominance of the law and legal discourse in post-conflict societies and transitional justice (McEvoy 2007). For example, at the international level, transitional justice has

been institutionalized in major legal edifices such as the international tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the International Criminal Court, and other local and hybrid models (McEvoy 2007). Attempting to settle accounts and re-draw the boundaries of what is right and what is wrong, democratic transitions—including those in post-Cold War Latin America—have tended to prioritize state reconstruction programs of the “normal” criminal justice systems through efforts designed to rebuild the rule of law and secure a more efficient delivery of justice (Brooks 2003). Legalism in this context has involved holding the law as the dominant discourse in order to seek some measure of objective and positive truth, especially after a period of conflict in which political meanings were contested (McEvoy 2007). More generally, legalism refers to how the law tends to shape and regulate our behavior, our political relations, our language, and the way we think (Ewick and Silbey 1998). As Clifford Geertz claims, the law allows people to imagine, articulate, and conceptualize how they would like the social world to be, encouraging the creation of an ordered and rational place based on universal understandings (Geertz 1983, McEvoy 2007, Roberts 2005).

A legalist approach to transitional justice in Latin America has tended to focus on individual accountability for mass atrocities, which some critics contend implies a narrowed view on human rights (Nagy 2008, Sharp 2014). But in the immediate aftermath of conflict, an attachment to legalism in Latin America was arguably functional to avoid a backslide into repression by securing basic human rights standards (Cassese 2002, McEvoy 2007, Schabas 2006). In the best-case scenarios, legalism in transitional justice translated into truth commissions and human rights trials. They helped breed important advancements by culturally sanctioning impunity across countries, create legal tools to punish crimes against humanity, and produce vital research on violent histories in order to avoid their future repetition (Hayner 2011, Mani 2005, Neier 1998, Thakur and Malcontent 2005). In less optimal scenarios, these mechanisms became standard-setting references. In the worst-case scenarios, like El Salvador, the combination of a weak judiciary, feeble political

will, and frustrated Peace Accord justice reform promises have stalled legal trials, despite significant efforts by victim communities and human rights groups. The truth commission in this country was valuable but also generated limited effects (Call 2003, Cavallaro and Albuja 2008, Hayner 2001, Ekern 2018, Martínez Barahona and Gutiérrez Salazar 2016, Popkin 2000, Schermerhorn 2016).

Even in contexts where traditional mechanisms have in fact been implemented, following decades of experience and institution-building, the question arises about whether the dominant approach to justice has been enough for victims, as research on human rights trials interrogates whether formal justice translates into victims' sense of redress (Akhavan 2001; Mallinder 2007; McEvoy 2007; Mendeloff 2009; Minow 1998, 2019; O'Connell 2005). Scholars pushing for an expansion of the TJ field thus call for an interrogation of the conditions under which predominant TJ mechanisms produce desirable outcomes for survivors. They propose amplifying the scope of justice to include distributive and restorative conceptions as well. They tend to resist "one-size-fits-all" instruments that may be overly technocratic or decontextualized, producing truths and subjects that are blind to key aspects like gender and social injustice (Nagy 2008).

Producing "Thicker" Descriptions and Understandings of Transitional Justice

Regarding the third dimension, creating a "thicker" understanding of transitional justice would help consider how relations of power mediate access to rights—an aspect typically neglected by conventional approaches—and therefore interrogate how dimensions like gender, race, class, sexuality, and involvement in the political conflict at hand may condition the attainment of justice (McCann 2014, Ní Aoláin 2012, Scheingold 1974). Distinguishing between "thick" and "thin" theories in the social sciences implies juxtaposing multi-layered, complex explanations of social reality focused on the meaning and context surrounding human behavior, with more

unidimensional, narrowly descriptive, or positivistic analysis (Coppedge 1999, Geertz 1973, McEvoy 2007).

Generating thicker descriptions of transitional societies is arguably needed to render the complexity of existing phenomena and create space for non-state actors and non-state-like institutions to emerge (Arriaza and Roht Arriaza 2008, Lundy and McGovern 2008, McEvoy 2008, Nagy 2009). This offers potential to reorient the TJ field towards a more heterogeneous and participatory approach, encompassing aims related to local truth-recovery, victim or ex-combatant support, community reconciliation, and spontaneous justice practices that originate in the state's absence (Arriaza and Roht Arriaza 2008, Lundy and McGovern 2008, Nagy 2009). Powerlessness for victims and affected groups in society is shaped by multiple and sometimes conflicting layers; prominent transitional justice scholars propose that no singular mechanism will be enough and that holistic solutions are due (Mutua 2015). Regardless of the inertia behind existing theory and practice, the key goal of transitional justice practices is to restore the victim's "injured soul" and repair the nation's corrupted "moral fiber" (Mutua 2015, 7). Beyond punishing the guilty, more can be done to ask who has been harmed, what the injury is about, why the offense happened, and what the injured parties' needs are (Zehr 2002). In this process, we may find that actions by international organizations and the state can actually be at fault for citizens' harm (Robins and Wilson 2015): "The question is how to repair society by deepening the legitimacy of public power and the democratic polity" (Mutua 2015, 5). Studying the case of former political prisoners in El Salvador speaks to what culturally-meaningful ideas about justice and rights can help to disarticulate impunity in the absence of competent state action and thus promote the expansion of the democratic polity.

All in all, much work remains to be done to broaden the scope of transitional justice. In that intent, the present research contributes to an ongoing conversation about the conditions under which the current framework works and the ways in which it can continue to grow. This research

helps to explore the silences around Latin America's post-authoritarianism that still need to be considered more thoughtfully. It sheds light on what contradictions, productive traits, or less effective qualities may explain post-war healing in a Latin American society that is exceptional for its neglect of transitional justice state-implemented policies. It also aims to produce a rich description of survivors' experience in order to investigate under what conditions conventional justice initiatives and/or other forms of access to public "voice" and justice may be desired by victims.

1.2.2 *Gap 2: Gender in Transitional Justice Theory and Practice*

An important gap in the transitional justice literature regards gender and how the concept is analyzed in theory and praxis. This question also matters greatly to the Salvadoran (and Latin American) post-authoritarian experience. My study inquires into the process by which a particular group of former political prisoners in El Salvador makes sense of the experience of political imprisonment and torture and attempts to reclaim power over their lives.

We have good reason to believe this process varies by gender identity, since political repression—in Latin America generally and El Salvador specifically—was exercised in a gendered way (Bunster-Burotto 1994, DeShazer 1994, Hume 2008, Kampwirth 2002, Leiby 2015, Neumann and Anderson 2014, Randall 2003, Shayne 2004). Participation in the revolutionary struggle was also markedly divided by gender (Shayne 2004, Viterna 2013) and human rights advocacy following authoritarianism has displayed gendered dimensions (Leslie 2001, Shayne 2004, Schirmer 1993a, Treacy 1996). Additionally, the process of coming forward with one's testimony has appeared to vary by gender identity in various Latin American contexts. Women's victimhood has been described as surrounded by "public silence" (Randall 2003) and scholars have observed that talk about rape (often expected of women) usually involves silences (Crosby 2009, Theidon 2007b; 2012). While we know that forms of sexual torture were applied to all victims, and that in El

Salvador men are “much more likely to be the victims of sexual violence than is recognized by the academic or policy literatures” (Leiby 2015, 135), the expectation to discuss sexual victimization falls on women (Aron et al. 1991, Hamber 2016). At the same time, scholars observe that women do not want to dwell publicly on their experiences of victimhood (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015, Dembour and Haslam 2004, Ross 2001, Treacy 1996) or share testimony in the ways in which it is commonly elicited (Theidon 2007b; 2012; 2016). These damaging effects point to a larger issue with how gender intersects with narratives of victimization. The general silences around men’s victimization, and sexual victimization specifically, suggest the need for further work on how all survivors’ narratives are elicited.

These observations also elucidate tensions around gender in transitional justice that are important to resolve. One of these key tensions concerns how gender is conceptualized and analyzed. In the TJ field, the concept is often understood in a limiting way: frequently, it is equated with women and with sexual violence against them (Franke 2006, Hudson 2010, Myrntinen et al. 2014, Porter 2016, Theidon 2007b). Because of this, further work needs to be done on how narratives about female survivors are constructed and how testimony is elicited from women (and ultimately all survivors) in public truth-seeking instances like trials or truth commissions.

Another key tension involves how gender inequality is framed. While TJ usually presents crisis periods as bounded, it is also important to explore how social structures of inequality (like race or ethnicity) transcend these nominal bounds and operate continuously through time (Boesten and Wilding 2015, 78; Duggan and Abusharaf 2006, Nagy 2008; Ní Aoláin 2006). Gender is a key social dimension around which inequality and violence arise before, during, and after war. If gender conditions the possibilities of access to justice and reparations in the aftermath of conflict, then interrogating these consequences is crucial for human rights theory and practice.

A third tension concerns the effect of conventional justice and truth-seeking mechanisms on women. Despite their positive results, these instances have sometimes generated silence and lack of interest from women (Franke 2006, Ní Aoláin et al. 2018, Porter 2016). In fact, some scholars have documented how justice-seeking efforts have been disempowering for them (Aron et al. 1991; Hamber 2016; Theidon 2007b, 2012). In various instances, they have been shown to produce re-traumatizing effects by promoting damaging stereotypes about women as passive victims (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Campbell 2007a; Franke 2006; O'Rourke 2011; Ross 2003; Sjoberg 2011; Theidon 2007b). Instances seeking to give women “voice” have run the risk of precluding female survivors from defining their own struggles, needs and realities (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2012, Hamber 2016). This can consequently lead to a harmful appropriation of women’s testimonies. And, because constructions of femininities and masculinities in public discourse are mutually constitutive, it can amount to an appropriation of men’s testimonies as well (Dolan 2018, Franke 2006). While in the literature we still find a prevalent underlying assumption that victims need to exert public voice (in the style of legal testimony), instead we need to consider what *kind* of access to public voice is desired by victims themselves. Women’s bodies can become sites of the visible enactment of power, producing shame as a residue (Franke 2006, 820). But other pathways are possible to allow women’s bodies to be sites of their own citizen power. This research makes a contribution in that direction.

The tensions around gender and women’s experience lead us to another important silence in transitional justice—the absence of masculinities studies in this framework. The field has yet to digest an important insight proposed by feminist scholarship: that femininities and masculinities need to be studied in relation to one another. However, this crucial link and the topic of masculinities remain largely unexplored in the transitional justice literature. But this silence needs to be approached more deeply and seriously, and gender scholars in TJ speak to it by calling for various actions (Cahn and Ní Aoláin 2009; Dolan 2018; Hamber 2007, 2015; Ní Aoláin et al. 2018; Theidon

2009). Some of them propose shifting the focus from preventing violent masculinity in individuals' actions to, instead, exploring how hidden masculine cultures operate in various social spaces and hierarchies (Hamber 2007; 2016). Others propose exploring the factors that structure survivors' vulnerability (Carpenter 2005, Dolan 2018, Theidon 2007a). In my research, I follow these scholars' proposals and I also suggest focusing on factors that structure survivors' agency.

The goal at hand is to help develop an ethics of practice that favors the “development of stories that redress marginalization and anchor people’s capacity for moral agency” (Cobb 2013, 12). Adopting these renewed approaches can help to view gender in a more comprehensive manner, taking survivors' experiences and needs into greater account, and contributing to an understanding of gender as a general structure of inequality that transcends bounded periods of crisis. Exploring narratives that challenge repressive masculinized and feminized gender molds helps counter restricted versions of who is an active agent in society. We thus contribute to a notion of agency relying on “reflection, deliberation, and making informed decisions about matters that affect us and reveal the sort of persons we are” (Porter 2016, 39). Addressing the silences mentioned above can also lead us to understand the motivations and tensions involved in being publicly active or silent, and the ways in which all individuals across gender lines express their pain, advocate for their rights, and move towards healing.

1.2.3 *Gap 3: Political Prisoners, Torture, and Subjectivity*

The third general gap my research speaks to relates to torture and political prisoners. In general, studies on the phenomenology of torture tend to focus on how the power of the state destroys the individual (Brown 2016, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten et al. 1995, Graziano 1992, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019), but the experience of Salvadoran political prisoners complements this view, suggesting the possibility of something else in the aftermath of torture. Also,

former political prisoners are an important part of the Salvadoran transition to democracy, given the prevalence of torture practices by government forces during the armed conflict (as in other Latin American countries), but the topic has been scantily researched from a sociological or anthropological perspective considering the social dimensions of people's lived experience. In order to explain the aftermath of torture and political imprisonment in this context, I speak to several literatures.

First, there is a gap in our general sociological knowledge on how torture and its aftermath may not only annihilate the individual but also prompt productive elaborations of the self, particularly vis-à-vis collective notions and social organization. This assertion is especially true in the post-authoritarian Latin American context. In general, torture survivors have been studied from a medical or psychological perspective, covering topics that range from the psychological explanations of torture (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1973) to the mental health effects it creates in survivors. Here, the psychological literature dives into various issues concerning, for example: power differences in a torture situation (Haney et al. 1973), the socio-psychological aspects that lead to the exercise of torture (Bendfeldt-Zachrisson 1988; Dobles 1990; Fiske et al. 2004; Staub 1990), the social mechanisms that legitimate this practice (Janoff-Bulman 2007), the dehumanization of victims (Viki et al. 2013), the socially domineering and authoritarian personality involved in torture (Lindén et al. 2016), therapeutic models to approach this issue (Gorman 2001; Pope and Garcia-Peltoniemi 1991; Wilson and Drozdek 2004), and the assessment of various therapeutic models to treat torture's sequelae (Campbell 2007b; Fernandes and Aiello 2018, Patel et al. 2016).

Work in psychology that more closely approximates a social or cultural understanding of the torture phenomenon explores the predictors of the psychosocial sequelae of torture, among them community support and ideological awareness (Halvorsen and Kagee 2010). The neurobiological literature has produced recent related knowledge by focusing on the significance of cultural variation

in emotion, suggesting that torture creates different emotional effects across contexts (Kirmayer 2008, 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2018)³.

██████████ **Gap in Sociological Studies on Political Prisoners**

There is a similar gap regarding studies on political prisoners. Within the Latin American context, research and discourse concerning political prisoners and torture has focused mostly on the institutions that exerted repression and the testimonial rendering of imprisonment and torture (Brooks 2005, Díaz 1989, Freire 2010, Hutchinson 2011, Martínez 1978, Saumell-Muñoz 1993, Smith 2010, Valiente Núñez 2016, Voglis 2002). *Testimonio* literature is typically based on firsthand accounts of repression exerted by authoritarian governments. It is often written in the first person, and while it may include fictional components, it is written or dictated to a transcriber by the witness themselves (Smith 2010). A key aspect of testimonial literature is its ability to give voice to subaltern experiences, particularly that of women (Freire 2010). While highly valuable in resisting status-quo discourses on repression in Latin America, this field is contained in the literary genre and not in social science.

Official discourse has also rendered torture survivors through a legal perspective, considering them important witnesses to the facts of repression, especially in truth commissions and judicial trial-type instances (Boesten and Wilding 2015, Franke 2006, Hayner 2011, Theidon 2007a).

██████████ **Gap in Studies on Political Prisoners in El Salvador**

A sociological study on former political prisoners in El Salvador fills an important void in light of the stigma and invisibilization this population has experienced in the war's aftermath. Even if these individuals were once the social and political leaders of a nation-wide revolutionary

³ This research looks at the interaction of biology and culture in experience, by proposing that all forms of torture produce effects that are rooted in both human biology and local social and cultural meanings (Kirmayer 2015). Kirmayer (2008, 2015, 2018) calls this an ecosocial approach to cultural neurophenomenology. He claims: "although pain and fear are universal responses to injury and the threat of injury, their relationship to suffering is complex and mediated by meaning and context" (Kirmayer et al. 2018, 85).

movement and currently occupy the status of victims of crimes against humanity, their experience hardly finds societal, political, cultural, or legal avenues for expression. In fact, within the Latin American context torture victims were not included in earlier truth commissions (Chile and Argentina), which initially focused on extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances (Grandin 2005, Espinoza et al. 2003). In El Salvador particularly, the only truth commission from 1993 included “all grave acts of violence” in its mandate, which incorporated torture (Espinoza et al. 2003, Kaye 1997). Yet, because information was collected during a limited amount of time (six months), its count of torture cases is not representative of the overall population (Betancur et al. 1993).

Generally, political prisoners’ access to victim status in Latin America was slow to come. Rebekah Park’s study on the Argentinian case—a country on the frontlines of TJ— documents this well (Park 2014). Social marginalization experienced by former political prisoners tends to result from the stigma of being criminalized and framed as subversives by the government at a certain point in time. Regardless of any specifics, the experience seems to be prevalent across cases: South Africa, Indonesia, Ireland, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay, among others (Skaar et al. 2016). Perhaps Argentina’s experience explains the Salvadoran case as well: as a delicate new democracy faced the decision of rendering the recent past and identifying victims, the dead and disappeared were less problematic to frame as “innocent victims” than former combatants (Park 2014).

While it may seem we are restating the obvious, former political prisoners are also a different kind of victim to those who were extralegally killed or disappeared, since they are living reminders of the horrific inhumane acts of political violence that current Latin American societies might rather ignore or forget. To date, we still have few social scientific studies of political prisoners in Latin America focusing on the social and phenomenological aspects of the experience (Iturra and

Montealegre 2013, Montealegre and Robles 2013, Park 2014, Pavón-Cuéllar 2017), let alone El Salvador. Some of the most detailed studies to date in El Salvador include reports by human rights organizations, such as the non-governmental Salvadoran Commission of Human Rights (CDHES 1986; 2012) and a recent testimonial book on tortured women published by the reputable Institute of Human Rights at the Jesuit University, IDHUCA (Sibrián 2016). We know that torture in El Salvador was a widespread practice, especially in rural areas in which much of the armed struggle took place (Sibrián 2016). Estimates are only approximations, however, and probably very much on the low end.

████████ Bridging Research on Political Prisoners and Sociolegal Scholarship

As of yet, more attention can be directed towards understanding the social elements involved in being a political prisoner and torture survivor, and the links between this experience and human rights-based transitional justice. Former political prisoners can be important actors in transitional justice that push the boundaries on restitution and reparations, contributing important knowledge on the post-authoritarian healing process of individuals, groups, and societies.

This claim has been evidenced in the cases of Argentina and Northern Ireland, for example. Rebekah Park's (2014) study on political prisoners in Argentina (currently at the forefront of transitional justice policies in Latin America) considers this population's role as key transitional justice actors. Park identifies their juridical role in pushing for trials and truth commissions, and their political role in pushing for memorialization. In Northern Ireland, quantitatively-based research suggests that victims can in fact "act as a positive and inclusive force in terms of the rehabilitation and re-integration of former combatants in societies emerging from conflict" (Brewer and Hayes 2015, 741; Joyce and Lynch 2017).

What is generally missing as of yet in Latin America and El Salvador specifically, are studies on political prisoners' lived experience and the meanings they attach to such experiences—in other

words, their subjectivity. How that subjectivity is shaped by social organization and collective notions is also crucial, especially considering that both victimization and survival were socially and politically conditioned. As Giorgio Agamben has argued, justice and restitution is a matter of subjects (Agamben 1999, Chare 2006). The subject “becomes witness to its own disorder” and “its own oblivion as a subject” (Agamben 1999, 106) when social relationships are torn by violence. Reconstituting a subjective order and escaping from oblivion therefore requires transitional justice theory and practice to concern itself with subjectivity. Redistributing responsibility and shame (for the harms inflicted) and achieving a sense of restitution and recovery is necessarily a symbolic, narrative endeavor. Former political prisoners in El Salvador and the rest of Latin America can productively be represented as “transitional subjects”, a term coined by anthropologist Kimberly Theidon to describe Colombian former guerrilla combatants (Theidon 2007a). Transitional justice occurs at multiple levels and survivors themselves comprise one of them.

By engaging with subjectivity, this research contributes to empirical study on the aftermath of political imprisonment focusing on subjects’ prospect of creating agency and resistance (Foucault 1988, 1990), as opposed to a subject completely determined by social power. This supports a later Foucauldian perspective evident in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990, 1988), where Michel Foucault claimed the work of freedom to be characterized by an ethos that engaged critically and creatively with one’s present (Taylor and Vintges 2004, 3). Regarding this view, David Weberman argues “it is sensible to think that subjectivity is a kind of hybrid resulting from both the productive effects of social power and self-determination (*rapport à soi*) as well as their inter-action” (Leckey 2008, Weberman 2000, 261).

This research also finds consistency with and builds upon two studies on political prisoners, which explore similar questions in other geographical and political contexts. A study by Begoña Aretxaga (1997) on political prisoners in 1980’s Northern Ireland and another one by Polymeris

Voglis (2002) on political prisoners in post-civil war Greece (1946-1949) both make an important contribution to the study of political prisoners' subjectivity and the possibility of creating meanings around healing and resisting oppressive action. (Below, I further explain how these works inform my research and theoretical framework). Despite their important contribution, they were written about a different historical context to post-Cold War Latin America and were not framed through a human rights-based transitional justice lens.

Based on my empirical results, exploring the link between survivors' subjectivity and transitional justice is crucial: while human rights (HR) provide us with a general ethical-political-legal guideline, sociological research considers how those frameworks play out in the real. Studying human rights victims' subjectivity shows us how TJ and HR frameworks are affected by power and how, in turn, they can be reconsidered, redefined, re-appropriated, or expanded—when necessary—in various contexts. Because human rights violations do not occur in a vacuum, TJ and HR need to undertake a social analysis of the factors that promote patterns of abuse and those that help disarticulate such patterns. Human rights abuses result from specific social and political arrangements which theorists and activists alike must understand. In this particular case, building a bridge between human rights and sociological analysis of political prisoners pushes our knowledge on how survivors can access rights in an impunity-ridden context. Hopefully these lessons can help inform reparations and healing efforts for similar communities elsewhere.

Finally, the Salvadoran case speaks to a broader gap identified by a prominent human rights scholar in the TWAIL camp (Third-World Approaches to International Law), Makau Mutua (2015): scholars need to further study the central role of community in securing and understanding human rights, especially in sociogeographical contexts where individualism is not primordial. In his 2015 editorial address of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Mutua claims the human rights corpus focuses excessively on the individual while overlooking the central role of community, which

ultimately erodes the cultural legitimacy of human rights. He considers this silences cultures and parts of humanity that value social bonds (Mutua 2015, 4). We do not have to entirely agree with Mutua's assessment to find truth in it. In order to understand how human rights are sought for and secured in various contexts, it behooves us to consider how social bonds can lead to countering abuse.

Consequently, this research contributes to understanding human rights in various settings by expanding our knowledge on the effect of social organization and collective notions of the self in countering the negative effects of torture. Particularly, it speaks to the power of social bonds in shaping this phenomenon, while also building on social theory that stemmed from the Latin American context and specifically El Salvador—liberation psychology. Because political violence originates from particular and contingent social arrangements, its effects on individuals and groups need to be understood accordingly. Ignacio Martín-Baró, a prominent scholar of social psychology in El Salvador who created liberation psychology and studied the country's history of violence and inequality, understands political violence as a “traumatic crystallization in persons and groups of inhuman social relations” (Martín-Baró in Leslie 2001, 53). In a similar vein, other scholars of political violence view it as a “characteristically cultural” experience that is elaborated in a particular way by each society (Kleinman in Leslie 2001).

Just as we speak of multiple femininities and masculinities when discussing gender, we too must explore particular transitional contexts and subjects in order to make our contribution. By accepting that violence is not endemic or inevitable (Martín-Baró 1989), we also open up to the possibility that recovery is not impossible or predetermined by the gravity of abuse either, even vis-à-vis extremely hostile social conditions (such as heightened impunity and a weakened rule of law). Here, my research focuses on the social “antidotes” to torture and explores how these particular survivors reconstruct and reinterpret human relations in a more humane fashion (Martín-Baró

1989). By viewing victims in light of the political and social meanings that gave rise to their actions, this research undertakes liberation psychology's foundational tenet of individual human behavior as being connected to sociopolitical, historical, and cultural context.

Here, this theoretical choice hardly amounts to an arbitrary preference, but rather a commitment to sociological explanations that may further victims' sense of redress. Choosing to study the importance of context we may better understand what it takes to restore survivors' sense of dignity and secure their access to rights. Thus we move in the direction of viewing transitional subjects simultaneously as victims and survivors, and making the necessary connection between human rights, transitional justice practices, and sociological scholarship positively clear.

1.2.4 *Summing Up: Gaps in the Literature*

My research questions speak to how the link between meaning and power become real and concrete in a specific location, in this case the life of former political prisoners in El Salvador. Studying the case contributes to our general knowledge on how survivors of torture and political repression reclaim power over their lives and incorporate collective notions into their elaborations of self. From them, we gain knowledge on how such views may lead to healing and recovery, especially in an adverse social and political context. Undertaking this research focus contributes to critical studies in transitional justice, gender studies in transitional justice, and studies on torture which tend to focus exclusively on how state power destroys the individual.

The study is important to sociological studies on political prisoners in Latin America, and especially El Salvador, which are scant. It contributes to understanding human rights violations through social theory that emerged in El Salvador to explain the Latin American context—liberation psychology—which seeks to situate the subject within oppressive structures in order to view it as a transformative agent.

Consequently, this research adds to our knowledge on torture and political imprisonment by considering subjects a point of entry to understand how social power and individual/group agency meet. This becomes a pertinent exercise to fuel scholarship focusing on transitional subject-citizens' wellbeing and capacity to engender their own restitution and healing.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE RELEVANCE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

This section outlines the main theoretical notions guiding the dissertation, but I will develop further theory as needed in each individual chapter. In order to better understand history and the political struggles wrought during El Salvador's armed conflict, it is important to explore individuals' lived experience and to investigate the meanings they attribute to social life. In this research project, I prioritize a cultural approach to sociology, which "makes collective emotions and ideas central to its methods and theories precisely because it is such subjective and internal feelings that so often seem to rule the world" (Alexander 2003, 5). Focusing on the subjective dimensions of social life recognizes the notion that human beings inhabit a world made through discourse, negotiating meanings on a continuous basis. The concept of subjectivity, as an important component of constructivist theories (in their structuralist, post-structuralist, hermeneutic, or symbolic interactionist variations) assumes there is no

fixed, unified, biological, essential or pre-discursive self. Instead human subjects are born into language, culture and discourse. How we talk, act, think, what is said, what can be said, who is authorized to speak, when and where, and the ways in which our lives are organized, constitute unified ways of thinking about things, people, culture and events (Somekh and Lewin 2005, 82).

Subjectivity is a socially constructed reality that “forms the will of collectivities, shapes the rules of organizations, defines the moral substance of law, and provides meaning and motivation for technologies, economies, and military machines” (Alexander 2003, 5).

In the Salvadoran context, a perspective focusing on meaning-making serves us well to understand the processes by which former political prisoners interpret their past and continuously rebuild a sense of self. As Begoña Aretxaga’s insightful study on political prisoners in Northern Ireland suggests, a cultural analysis of politics focusing on individual experience and subjectivity—defined, in short, as people’s different ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring—is important to understand political and social struggles that involve shifting reality by shifting shared meanings and symbols (Aretxaga 1997).

In such a way, the individual can be a window into collectively-defined realities. In my study, subjectivity is a point of access to the social and political meanings that surround political imprisonment and its aftermath. This symbolic dimension of life creates a power that is able to change the world. In Pierre Bourdieu’s words, symbolic power is the “power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself” (Bourdieu 1991, 170).

These discourses of resistance to state repression and repeated injustices reflect a key part of El Salvador’s armed conflict, human rights movements, which remain somewhat understudied (Sprenkels 2005, Viterna 2009). Chapter 2 of this dissertation, which describes general patterns in the lived experience of former political prisoners, is mostly a descriptive endeavor that underscores how human rights violations like torture cannot be described in a vacuum. While we have standard

definitions in international law of what torture and political imprisonment involve⁴, social science should seek to understand individual experiences within the social contexts that make these violations possible.

1.3.1 *Politics, Meaning, and Power*

It is important to consider that politics is, on one hand, a matter of power; on the other, it is a matter of what can become “real”, conscious, and therefore subject to change (Aretxaga 1997). Though torture works in physical ways, its effect relates to power, meaning, and the discursive elements that make up individual selves. Torture survivors must therefore navigate that space in which tangible physical violence intersects with the less tangible dimensions of meaning-making; knowingly or not, they must navigate the intersection of politics, meaning, and power in order to reclaim power over their lives and overcome physical, emotional, and socially-rooted trauma.

Existing knowledge on torture describes it as a mechanism used to destroy the individual, her voice, and her agency (Brown 2016, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten et al. 1995, Graziano 1992, Kirmayer 2018, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019). As the ultimate performative act of state power, the body and identity of an individual are targeted directly to destroy their individuality while building the power of the state (Crelinsten et al. 1995, Scarry 1985). Pain becomes a “medium through which society establishes its ownership of individuals” (Das 2000, 101): torture silences bodies, words, ideas, and appropriates any language generated by the victim by transforming

⁴ Torture (or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment) is defined and outlawed in Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948); Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations 1966); Articles 3, 11, and 12 of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (United Nations 1975); and the United Nations Convention Against Torture (United Nations 1987).

In summary, international law does not tolerate any cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, regardless of exceptional circumstances such as a state of war or a threat of war, internal stability or any public emergency. Where any act of torture happens at the expense of a public official, the victim has a right to access redress and compensation. Any statement which is established to have been made as a result of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment may not be invoked as evidence against the person concerned or against any other person in any proceedings (Association for the Prevention of Torture 2008).

it into the power that destroys them (Treacy 1996). Developing a sense of subjectivity in resistance to state repression, individuals must find a way to objectify and express their pain in order to make it “utterable” (Scarry 1985), expressible, visible, and ultimately socially real (Aretxaga 1997).

Because this study seeks to illuminate the practices and discourses surrounding political prisoners’ recovery process, it considers the moments and mechanisms that help resist or even transform oppressive contexts. In addition to following a later Foucauldian perspective focused on the interaction between social power and self-determination (Foucault 1988, Leckey 2008, Taylor and Vintges 2004, Weberman 2000), my project finds further inspiration in French philosopher Michel De Certeau’s “oppositional practices of everyday life” (De Certeau 1984). De Certeau’s theory specifically explores the relationship between violence and subjectivity, focusing on how practices and discourses are transformed by the subjectivities they allow and create (Aretxaga 1997, De Certeau 1984).

1.4 RESEARCH METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

1.4.1 *Research Methods*

In order to tackle my research questions, I employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are suited to explore the meanings that make up social life, allowing researchers to hone in on the values, motivations, beliefs, ideas, and experiences that social actors hold (Weiss 1994). This research project views people as meaning-makers and seeks to understand the particular cultural worlds that they construct, live in, and utilize (Somekh and Lewin 2005). Understanding Salvadoran torture survivors’ process of recovery and reclaiming power over their lives involves understanding how they navigate social meanings and elaborate meanings about themselves throughout time.

An approach based on ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and focus groups was adequate to uncover information about people's constructed worlds and meanings. These techniques were useful to become involved in former political prisoners' social world, find out how they conceived of it, and describe the meanings that make it "tick" (Somekh and Lewin 2005).

More specifically, my research sought to understand (1) how a group of Salvadoran former political prisoners make sense of their experiences of victimization (subjectivity), and (2) what they do with those understandings in order to *reclaim power over their lives* (experience of recovery). Addressing their subjectivity involved understanding their ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring (Alexander 2003, Aretxaga 1997, Foucault 1989, Leckey 2008, Somekh and Lewin 2005, Voglis 2002). I inquired specifically about their subjectivity as regarded victimization and the recovery process: what their life was like before and after repression; how victimization affected their sense of self and identity (social, political, gendered); how victimization affected their sense of belonging; how victimization affected their beliefs, ideals, or value judgments; how victimization affected their social relationships; the meaning they attribute to reclaiming power over their lives and moving on after repression; avenues for expression and finding restitution; and what notions of memory, healing and justice they hold.

The second component involved understanding the experience of recovery, or the process by which individuals have attempted to regain a sense of self and overcome the difficulties associated with repression. This involved, for example, obtaining validation by family and their social milieu (Maercker and Müller 2004), expressing through language or other symbolic representations the experience of pain (Aretxaga 1997, Scarry 1985), and addressing the psychological sequelae of imprisonment and torture (Salo et al. 2008). More specifically, it entailed exploring what aspects of their lives have helped survivors feel empowered, in what ways belonging to an organization of former political prisoners supports their recovery (or not), and their

involvement in past or present memory and justice efforts. It was important to capture the gendered dimensions of this process; and to do this I inquired about the meaning interviewees attributed to being a female/male survivor and what they thought the differences were for men and women in the recovery process, identifying obstacles or catalysts they have encountered (or seen others encounter) along the way.

1.4.2 *Data Collection Methods*

Given my general research question, I utilized three data collection techniques: (1) in-depth interviews, (2) focus groups, and (3) participant observation. I employed these techniques to address all my research aims, but different techniques allowed me to access different aspects of reality. I discuss the usefulness of each technique below.

In-depth, ethnographic interviews allow researchers to develop a detailed description of an event or development, to integrate multiple perspectives, to describe a process of interest, to learn how specific events are interpreted by participants or onlookers, and to obtain a holistic description of “systems”, such as an organization (Weiss 1994). While my unit of analysis was not COPPES (the organization of former political prisoners that my interviewees are associated with) but rather individuals’ subjectivity and their process of recovery, it was also important to understand the organization’s role and internal dynamics, especially vis-à-vis its strengths and weaknesses in providing individuals cultural repertoires, resources, and other kinds of support. Through interviews, I was able to develop enough rapport in a safe and intimate one-on-one conversation in order to discuss individuals’ needs, expectations, beliefs, and ways of thinking. This was especially important in order to approach women and attempt to understand what their particular experience has been regarding COPPES’ work.

Interviews allowed me to learn about how former political prisoners make sense of events in a shared history of struggle and victimization. In this setting, I was able to capture their views and perceptions regarding significant occurrences, understanding how that shared history has materialized in each person's individual case.

I decided to do in-depth interviews because, while I had a guiding theoretical framework going into the field (focusing on understanding the role of gender and social organization in the process of recovery), I also found inspiration in a grounded theory approach that would allow me to remain open to new themes that arose while doing fieldwork. I went into the field with a few interview questions that were closely tied to my research aims, but soon into my first interviews I realized the nature of conversations required ample flexibility on my part. This meant being flexible in how the conversation developed and how long interviews took.

Interviews became highly personal spaces in which individuals took time to describe events in their life that most of them claimed had not been shared with many people before (sometimes no one else, other times a handful of people). Most interviewees inevitably ended up narrating events in a chronological order, and they focused on describing events that shaped their political lives from a young age. This required me to remain open to individuals bringing up various dimensions of their experience that seemed important to them. Throughout the research process, I revisited the main points I wanted to address in the interviews and adjusted for dimensions I had initially neglected.

I utilized *focus groups* as a data collection technique to address all my research aims. More specifically, however, focus groups allowed me to address gender in a way that was not possible through interviews. As per the recommendation of two mental health professionals who closely know this population, I decided to do men-only and women-only focus groups (below, I will explain the logistical difficulties I encountered in carrying out the women-only focus groups). This way, and with the help of a male psychologist, we discussed topics related to the prison experience that

directly affected individuals' sense of vulnerability. In this setting, men discussed aspects of their lives that were generally not spoken about during interviews. Focus groups also allowed us to generate a feeling of comradery and rapport. We were able to discuss specific topics more intimately in this setting.

Generally, focus groups are well suited to gather data on collective identity and to study social movements. They reveal the processes of interaction, negotiation, and affirmation that go into defining a group's character (Munday 2006). In this case, focus groups allowed me to understand group dynamics, the history of in-prison organization, the type of support individuals found in COPPES during and after imprisonment, and the ways in which individuals referred to intimate topics as a group.

A focus group can be understood as a social process. In it, participants co-produce an account of themselves and their ideas that is specific to that time and place. Therefore, focus groups tend to veer towards consensus and are a good technique to understand the ways in which a peer group discusses and modifies their views and makes sense of their experiences (Barbour and Schostak in Somekh and Lewin 2005). It is an emerging order that can reveal something unique about how a group comes together. In both male-only focus groups that I carried out, this is what happened. Something different emerged in the conversation as a group, a certain feeling of safety and intimacy that allowed honest conversations about difficult experiences.

Participant observation involves “being-in-the-place” (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015) and entering the realm of everyday lived realities. In it, the researcher interacts with people in everyday life, collecting information on their experiences, feelings, activities, and thoughts in order to understand and observe the meanings of their existence (Jorgensen 1989; 2015). Participant observation provides researchers with opportunities to observe the practices and behaviors of groups and individuals within a culture of interest (Angrosino 2005; Dahlke, Hall and Phinney 2015;

Kawulich 2005; Tedlock 2005; Timeseena 2009). By letting participants' actions motivate researchers to ask questions and make observations, participant observation supports the development of nuanced theory and the adequate conceptualization of a subject of inquiry (Dahlke, Hall and Phinney 2015).

Participant observation is also especially appropriate when little is known about the population in question; when the phenomenon is hidden from public view; when the phenomenon is obscured from the view of outsiders; and when there are significant differences between views of insiders as opposed to outsiders (Jorgensen 1989, 2). As described above, these are precisely some of the reasons that led me to this research.

Following anthropologists Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg, participant observation also evokes a transgressive anti-institutional potential because it “forces academics out of their ivory tower and compels them to violate the boundaries of class and cultural segregation.” It also “renders its practitioners vulnerable to the blood, sweat, tears, and violence of the people being studied and requires ethical reflection and solidary engagement” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 9).

Thus, I utilized participant observation not only as a methodological choice but also as an ethical-political option around doing research that involves us with the people and processes we study. Methodologically speaking, participant observation allowed me to generate a relationship with individuals and their community based on collaboration and respect (see Fieldwork section below for further detail). In addition, through participating in various settings such as informal conversations, group sessions, meetings, and group meals and gatherings, I felt welcomed into a community as a colleague, a collaborator, and a friend. Through this, I learned in personal terms but also experienced firsthand how people in this social space organize and relate around victimization and survival. While interviews and focus groups were more directed, creating a specific interactive space to meet the needs of my research project, during participant observation I became a

participant in interactions that were more open-ended and would have likely taken place regardless of my presence there. In this sense, and even though I was an active part of meetings and group sessions, I became more passively involved in these interactions. I was thus allowed to see the gendered interactions between former political prisoners under a new light, and observe exchanges, actions, and conversations that happened naturally and organically.

1.4.3 *Sampling*

In total, I carried out thirty-eight in-depth interviews with Salvadoran former political prisoners who were torture survivors. I also carried out three additional interviews with key informants. Two of them were professionals who work at IDHUCA, the Human Rights Institute at the Jesuit University (UCA), and have done extensive work with victims of the Salvadoran armed conflict (including COPPES). The other key informant was the director of the Salvadoran chapter of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who had been in El Salvador during the armed conflict. The ICRC is currently the only institution that has produced official documents attesting to the detention of most people I interviewed. Most of my interviewees claimed their lives were saved because at some point during detention they were identified by an ICRC employee. So by recommendation of COPPES leaders, I decided it was important to interview someone from the institution to see what light they would shed on the experience of former political prisoners.

Although I did not sit down with them for a formal interview, I had multiple informal conversations with two other professionals from IDHUCA, a psychologist and a journalist who have worked with this population for years. I had also worked with them previously in the context of collaborations between IDHUCA and the University of Washington Center for Human Rights (UWCHR), where I worked for years during my graduate studies. These two professionals answered

many of my questions during three months of fieldwork. They constantly shared ideas and stories with me that helped me answer my research questions and interpret results.

Due to my prior work with the UWCHR, I had a preexisting relationship of trust with the leadership of COPPES, who had agreed to put me in contact with potential interviewees. They were supportive and enthusiastic about my work and agreed to support me as much as they could. Initial recruitment of interviewees therefore depended largely on them, because without this point of access into the organization's members, it would have been a much lengthier and difficult process to meet potential interviewees and gain their trust. During my research, I then used **snowball sampling** based on interviewees' recommendations of who else I could interview.

Initially it was my intention to have half of my sample be women and the other half be men. However, in practice this was difficult to achieve. Prior to fieldwork, I had been warned about the challenges by COPPES leaders. I knew only twenty percent of former political prisoners involved in their organization were women. While I desired to use purposive sampling so that I could interview an equal number of women and men to represent their perspectives' accordingly, I was faced with having to use **convenience sampling**. While I attempted to contact more women through the people I had already interviewed, I ultimately was not able to achieve equal representation. In the end, I interviewed 24 men and 14 women.

1.4.4 *Fieldwork*

I traveled to San Salvador, El Salvador in late August 2015 and lived there for three months. Due to my pre-existing relationship with COPPES and IDHUCA through the Center for Human Rights, I was in an advantageous position to conduct this research. In a trip to San Salvador during July 2015, I had met with the COPPES leadership committee in person and they expressed their

willingness to support my research. I also secured support from colleagues at IDHUCA who gave me crucial advice and feedback throughout my research process.

I carried out all **interviews**, which took anywhere from an hour to five hours. I had to sit down for multiple sessions with a third of my interviewees. Interviewees generally tapped into very personal stories and intense emotions, so some individuals needed time to explore their past or to interrupt a session in order to continue another day. The fewest number of interviewees spoke around one to one-and-a-half hours with me. Most interviews lasted two to three hours. Ten of them required between three to five hours.

As part of doing respectful and ethical research, I obtained informed oral consent from each interviewee prior to beginning interviews. I audio recorded every interview with each person's permission (to aid in later transcription and analysis of interview material), and explained their identity would remain anonymous. I assured each person that recording could be stopped at any time and that audio recordings could also be destroyed at any time if they so wished. To this end, I provided every interviewee with my contact information. I also made it clear that they could refrain from discussing any topic they were not comfortable with and that I would not inquire directly about their experience of victimization. To protect their privacy, I have substituted all my interviewees' real names with pseudonyms in the following chapters.

During the first four interviews, a psychologist working at IDHUCA accompanied me. We had initially discussed this strategy with them and with COPPES leaders, in order to make sure interviewees had enough of a support system in case difficult emotions arose during interviews. Some of the ethical implications of this work involve the level of trauma that many of the interviewees bring to the table. There was a possible risk of triggering traumatic reactions upon prompting respondents to share views on aspects of their life that evoked emotionally-sensitive material. To minimize this risk, I was as respectful and empathetic as possible, and also availed

myself with tools to handle unforeseen crisis situations. Mental health professionals who have worked with this specific population trained and advised me in this respect. After a few interviews, I decided the best strategy forward was to do interviews by myself. I felt capable of handling challenging situations and considered that a more intimate dialogue became possible when only two of us were involved in the conversation. Time and resource constraints also made it difficult for a mental health practitioner to accompany me to all interview sessions. However, I also made it clear to interviewees that if they needed an additional conversation with me or a mental health professional after the interview, it could be arranged.

Interviews took place in various locations: UCA (the Jesuit University); REDES (a non-profit organization where one of COPPES' leaders works, which often offers up its offices for COPPES meetings); and other third-party locations (people's homes, offices, cafes, malls, restaurants). UCA and REDES were generally viewed by interviewees as neutral and safe places.

I was able to carry out two **focus groups** with men only, and they took place at UCA and REDES. As part of doing ethical and transformative research, I discussed with COPPES leaders and with my colleagues at IDHUCA a creative research strategy. We carried out a focus group at the tail end of a participatory workshop focused on psychosocial support for torture survivors. We all believed that (my) research would be more useful and meaningful to participants if they were able to share information about their past in a setting that empowered them to healthfully deal with the emotional challenges involved. I initially intended focus groups to help me address the gendered aspects of political prisoners' process of reclaiming power over their lives. So I followed the mental health professional's lead in how to access interviewees' gender constructions regarding victimization. He guided various exercises that asked participants to identify places in their body that had been hurt by torture. This became a point of access to discuss aspects of vulnerability in a safe environment, while also setting the intention to provide psychosocial support. As per the

psychologist's suggestion, he and I also participated fully in all exercises. This generated further rapport and helped me minimize the artificial separation that often occurs in ethnographic work between researcher and researched, and between "professional experts" and "non-experts". Both the psychologist and I encountered difficult emotions regarding our own personal history, just like the other group participants. I was in a position that allowed me to share of myself and my own history with political violence in Chile. I believe this strongly enhanced the quality of conversations that ensued during the focus group.

One focus group centered on topics related to the experience and sequelae of victimization. The other one focused more on the experience of imprisonment, solidarity, and moving forward. Each focus group had five participants. While I had intended to carry out focus groups with women too, logistical difficulties made it impossible. Before beginning my research, COPPES leaders had warned me of the difficulty involved in securing attendance at regular meetings. While I scheduled and organized two focus groups, confirming attendance with each participant by phone, various factors prevented us from carrying them out. One day, torrential rains made it difficult for people to leave their homes. Also, people lived in nearby cities and it took hours for them to come to San Salvador. This involved a considerable time commitment.

I carried out **participant observation** in various instances. During my three months of fieldwork I participated in ten weekly group therapy sessions organized by COPPES at the REDES offices. These sessions took place on Sundays from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. and were led by two graduating Psychology students from the National University of El Salvador. This was a novel and exciting prospect for COPPES, given the resource constraints they have faced over the years. Access to psychosocial support has not been an easy task, let alone ensuring members' commitment to participate. Initially, about fifteen individuals committed to participating in the weekly sessions. With time, some members would stop coming or attend intermittently. Other people dropped out

altogether, but on average there were seven to nine people at each session. These sessions involved various activities geared towards creating relationships of trust between participants, sharing experiences of victimization, and providing tools to understand and deal with post-traumatic stress disorder. I did not audio record these sessions because its content seemed too intimate for me to do so. But I took notes extensively. I participated in all group activities that were not directly focused on sharing experiences of victimization. For example, sometimes activities required people to make drawings, split up into groups to have small-group discussions, create a poster board, or act out a sketch. The two facilitators also participated in the same capacity as me.

In addition to these formal sessions, I became an active participant in casual conversations that often took place before and after these meetings. Sometimes there were meals and snacks involved. A few times I scheduled an interview right before the group therapy sessions so that a participant did not have to make an additional effort to come see me elsewhere. Often, this led to additional small-group conversations involving other COPPES members as they arrived.

Another important instance that I got to partake in was a national *Encuentro Nacional de Víctimas* [*National Meeting of Victim Organizations*], which is a conference where multiple communities of civil war victims around the country join to pay homage to their dead and to share important news and recent achievements. This *encuentro* takes place at UCA. During my three months of fieldwork, I lived in a guest house on the university campus, which made it easy for me to visit the IDHUCA office and find out about various activities related to victims nationwide. I regularly visited IDHUCA offices to have conversations with various professionals doing human rights work with former political prisoners and other types of victims throughout the country. All of this, added to my previous visits and experience in El Salvador, helped to provide plentiful context information to understand the social world that former political prisoners navigate as victims of crimes against humanity in an impunity-ridden country.

1.4.5 *Challenges*

As described later in Chapter 2, Salvadoran society currently experiences high levels of daily criminal violence. Because of high crime rates in El Salvador, I was less flexible than I could have been in other settings to travel to locations where interviewees could have wanted to meet. That is why I tried to carry out most of my interviews at the Jesuit University or at REDES (NGO offices). On one hand, this allowed me to provide a safe meeting place for both the interviewee and myself, but also to help generate trust in my research since UCA and REDES are both dependable institutions that people are familiar with. This inflexibility of displacement in some ways hindered my ability to improvise and seize emerging opportunities to access new interviewees. Also, taking precautions to remain safe implied incurring in greater costs and planning times. This included paying for (specific and well-known) taxicabs instead of riding public transportation, spending time planning my travel throughout the city, and relying on third parties to arrange secure meeting locations for interviews and focus groups. I soon learned that for everyone involved, remaining safe depended on planning things as a community and relying on other people's help.

As in any empirical research endeavor, unforeseen difficulties arose. The biggest challenge involved interviewees not showing up for an interview or not following up for a second session, and not being able to carry out focus groups with women as planned. While I attempted to prevent this from happening by establishing as personal a relationship as I could over the phone or in person prior to interviews, various factors likely affected people's inability to participate: people's schedules; difficulty of displacement; possibly lack of trust; and—perhaps most importantly—the generous effort it takes to share very personal and emotionally charged memories with a stranger. While I may have wanted to secure more interviews, I believe the richness of the multiple exchanges I did have make up for these aforementioned challenges. While in general it was more difficult to secure interviews with women (and one woman did not show up for an interview, while another did not

follow up for a second session to tie up pending topics), the richness of interviews with women and all the informal conversations I held with them either in person or over the phone was overwhelmingly valuable.

While I recognize that adopting roles such as “researcher” and “research subject” engages power differences, I bear in mind self-reflective methodologies that consider both the researcher and the researched as subjects with agency, even if with differing power statuses (Ackerly et al., 2006, Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015, Jakoby 2006, Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004). I opt to see power not as uni-directional in the research process. In utilizing my field research techniques, I attempted to transcend binary constructions of the researched as powerless and the researcher as powerful. Instead, I chose to view our research spaces as co-constructed instances in which each participant (myself and others) was helping transform research practices, and resist abstract notions of justice, healing, and rights. Although we each entered these spaces in different capacities, they were intended to be respectful spaces that help transform and enhance current transitional justice practices.

As part of this approach, in all instances I was open about being Chilean and a native Spanish-speaker. Because I have been involved with the UWCHR for some time, I believe I was generally perceived as a trustworthy collaborator. Having a shared cultural and linguistic background also helped. For men, it is possible that having a young woman (age 32 at the time) interviewing them on some of the most challenging episodes in their life may have caused difficulty. In general, and while I interviewed fewer women, they more immediately tended to discuss aspects of their intimate lives with me. However, as mentioned above, during other instances involving men that prompted them in other ways (i.e. by the co-leadership of a male psychologist in a workshop/focus group, by doing group activities, by having to move their body or identify sites of physical pain), interviewees more readily offered information regarding aspects that made them feel vulnerable.

1.4.6 *Data Analysis*

I transcribed interviews and used iterative identification of codes to analyze them. I analyzed interviews as text and treated them as representations of interviewees' experiences, thoughts, and feelings. I combined closed coding with open coding; on one hand, I started coding by looking at the specific dimensions that I asked about in my interviews (subjectivity; recovery; gender; notions of justice, memory, healing), but on the other, I used open coding so that themes could emerge organically from the data.

Following Weiss (1994), as I coded the data, I asked myself what I was seeing instances of, what I was learning about, and what questions the material raised. In an ongoing and iterative manner, I made decisions regarding whether instances fit my categories, further specifying them as I worked through more transcripts. Thus, I developed and defined coding categories through interaction with the data. In this sense, I was inspired by a grounded theory approach, in its desire to let the "data speak for themselves", approaching middle-range theories and concepts by moving back and forth between data collection and analysis (Katz 2001). However, I was already going into the field with certain theoretical notions and "hypotheses" about what I would find, so my study did not follow a full grounded theory approach.

1.4.7 *Limitations of This Research*

A limitation of this research is that it is not representative. Due to my project's methodological approach, and to time and resource constraints, I was able to interview a small group of individuals. In that sense, my conclusions do not comprehensively represent the population of former political prisoners in El Salvador.

Although my methodology is set up to get as close as possible to others' experiences, empirical limitations exist regardless of how in-depth my interviews may be. Any ethnographic work

involves the possibility of doing symbolic violence to the interviewee as well. There is an entire agenda of concerns that I as an interviewer may have imposed upon the interview which may have prevented the interviewees from raising the concerns of their own lives. I attempted to avoid this as much as possible by providing interviewees the space to bring up that which they valued, and by making myself available as a listener. We secured a temporal and physical space in which we were not bothered. I attempted to generate rapport by sharing of my own experience when necessary. I was mindful of my body language and voice so as to not impose or objectivize the person in front of me (Weiss 1994).

I also asked questions in an open-ended enough way so that I could know when a person did not wish to talk about something. I attempted to remain as open as possible to respondents' demands and was ready to follow their needs in terms of when to talk and when to not. As mentioned earlier, I also did my best to create a safe space for them to share their experiences and feel supported.

Finally, I echo Philippe Bourgois and others in recognizing that after postmodern theory, social researchers can hardly claim moral authority over others in the name of all-encompassing ideals such as civilization, science, or progress (Schonberg and Bourgois 2009, Stallybrass and White 1986). The tensions at the heart of ethnography can find no unitary transcendental solution, and any of our representational practices are inevitably "torn between objectifying and humanizing; exploiting and giving voice; propagandizing and documenting injustice; stigmatizing and revealing; fomenting voyeurism and promoting empathy; stereotyping and analyzing" (Schonberg and Bourgois 2009, 9). While inhabiting these inescapable limitations, my hope and intention for the present research was to be conscious of them, pushing to gravitate as much as possible towards the latter pole of each of these tensions.

1.5 LAYOUT OF THE MANUSCRIPT

My dissertation is divided into four body chapters. Chapter 2 is chiefly a descriptive effort that lays out the most prominent life patterns emerging in the narratives of former political prisoners. It descriptively addresses my main research aim, which is to understand how women and men who survived political imprisonment and torture during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) make sense of their experience and reclaim power over their lives. Using the notion of subjectivity to explore individuals' lived experience, the chapter puts this experience in context vis-à-vis El Salvador's recent political history. The chapter also describes the patterns that defined former political prisoners' capture, interrogation, and subsequent imprisonment, and the social conditions of their youth leading to their early participation in a revolutionary political movement.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of how gender shapes former political prisoners' experience. First, I argue that gender needs to be understood more comprehensively and thoughtfully in the transitional justice realm, offering empirical evidence to take us in that direction. I consider "gendered moments" in former political prisoners' lives which shape both vulnerability and agency for women and men.

Chapter 4 delves into former political prisoners' notions of memory, justice, and rights. While survivors' narratives emphasize serious human rights challenges in El Salvador, they also point to the spaces of possibility in which rights can be actualized and negotiated in a promising way. Evidence thus speaks to what culturally-meaningful ideas about justice and rights can help to counterbalance severe impunity in the absence of competent state action. Survivors suggest that transitional justice should consider a wider spectrum of rights and justice than is usually done. This would entail complementing conventional approaches with restorative justice ideals, and a greater focus on economic, social, and cultural rights. In this context, it becomes clear that no single mechanism will suffice; rather, multi-pronged and holistic solutions are due.

Lastly, Chapter 5 focuses on the understudied collective dimensions of torture and political imprisonment. It explores how in multiple instances (interrogation, imprisonment, and post-war recovery), the collective has become an “antidote” to the annihilating effects of torture and state repression. In this way, former political prisoners reconstruct and reinterpret human relations in a more humane fashion (Martín-Baró 1989). This counters phenomenological explanations of torture which focus on state power annihilating the individual. On the contrary, former political prisoners in El Salvador have found productive and creative ways to enact agency, despite their trauma and what most theory on torture claims. Notions of the collective, such as solidarity and a sense of belonging, have strongly informed survivors' elaborations of the self, serving their sense of healing and recovery at various points in time.

Chapter 2. THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS IN EL SALVADOR

This chapter lays out a foundation for the rest of my dissertation by introducing the reader to the most salient dimensions and realities shaping the lives of former political prisoners I interviewed in El Salvador. While every person's story is unique, there are many common patterns that emerge from the individual lives I came into contact with. In the upcoming pages, I describe some of these patterns, which also underline significant moments in recent Salvadoran political history. I expect this context will serve as a backdrop for the following chapters, rendering these analyses meaningful. In the next chapter, for example, I utilize this material as groundwork to explore the gendered dimensions of being a former political prisoner. In the following two chapters, I explore political prisoners' views on memory and justice (Chapter 4), and their collective notions of the self (Chapter 5). To protect individuals' privacy and identity, I utilize pseudonyms throughout my dissertation. I avoid including any other identifying information that could have damaging effects on them.

The chapter describes the history that shapes interviewees' subjectivity, focusing on the patterns that defined former political prisoners' capture, interrogation, and subsequent imprisonment, and the social conditions of their youth leading to participation in a revolutionary political movement. As torture survivors, former political prisoners have to navigate the intersection of politics, power and meaning in order to reclaim power over their lives (Aretxaga 1997, Agamben 1999, Foucault 1990). The effects of torture are not only physical, but also have to do with the social roots of abuse, the meaning that survivors attribute to their experienced pain, the way they are perceived and treated by society, and the ways in which their experienced pain leads them to seek

justice and demand their rights. This chapter offers important context information to frame their lived experience.

2.1 DESCRIPTION OF FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS' LIFE PATTERNS

Within my sample of thirty-eight interviewees, each individual political prisoner's experiences are particular and unique. However, general patterns also emerge from the narratives they shared. Their individual stories consistently reflect the larger events that took place in El Salvador between the 1970s (when state repression increased), the early 1990s (when armed combat concluded), and current-day El Salvador.

All my interviewees joined a social movement in their youth as a response to the widespread violence and repression they were experiencing at the hands of government authorities on a regular basis; then they all made the decision to join a political or social organization that would eventually conform the broader national revolutionary effort led by the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), consisting of five major leftist revolutionary organizations. Eventually, they would all be captured by security, military, or paramilitary forces without due process, experiencing political imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Salvadoran state.

According to the UN Truth Commission of 1993, over 4,400 of the human rights violations documented during the armed conflict correspond to torture and mistreatment. Out of 22,000 complaints of serious acts of violence that occurred in the country between January 1980 and July 1991, over 20% concern torture (Betancur et al. 1993). This is an approximation, given the Truth Commission did not capture every act of violence and only received a significant sample of human rights violations during its three months of gathering testimony (Betancur et al. 1993). But it shows these violations were widespread and reveals the context in which my interviewees experienced torture. Many abuses were inextricably linked to other abuses documented by the truth commission

and other human rights organizations: forced disappearances, arbitrary detention, denial of due process, extralegal assassinations and massacres.

2.2 CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE (1930S TO 1970S)

All my interviewees describe a childhood and adolescence characterized by conditions of poverty. Many of them were born into agricultural settings, although they now live in San Salvador or nearby cities, and their families generally included multiple children. They tend to identify with El Salvador's working and peasant classes who had—from the time of independence in the early nineteenth century to the onset of civil-war violence—experienced exclusion from access to dignified living conditions. The need for my interviewees' families to provide for several children often made material deprivation more acute.

The kind of social marginalization and deprivation described by interviewees is what many scholars of El Salvador describe as a fundamental root cause of armed strife during the 1970s to 1990s period (Binford 1996, 2002; Ching 2016; DeLugan 2012; Gould and Lauria-Santiago 2007; Silber 2013; Sprenkels 2005; Tilley 2005; Viterna 2009, 2013). The causes of conflict relate to the deep-seated origins of a modern nation state developed to establish oligarchical rule in the country following its independence from Spain. For over two centuries, popular unrest was motivated by social and economic marginalization, extreme poverty, successive military regimes, and the removal of lands from control of the rural population (DeLugan 2012, Tilley 2005). Historical precedents to the armed rebellion can be found in various peasant and indigenous uprisings during the nineteenth and twentieth century (Tilley 2005), prompted by the extreme concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few families. By the end of the nineteenth century, the government had promoted coffee exports as the main drive of El Salvador's economic growth and had destined a large portion of the country's land to coffee production. By then, a well-known "fourteen families", connected to

political and military power, increasingly concentrated the best lands in their hands (Johnstone 1995).

Of the various peasant and indigenous rebellions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the so-called Matanza (The Slaughter) in 1932 set a key precedent in El Salvador's chronology of state violence towards the population. The year before, multiple uprisings had linked the interests of urban labor with those of rural populations, which were mostly indigenous. This led to an attempted insurrection led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, which was met with a sudden and bloody response from government forces (Johnstone 1995). Over a period of two weeks, between 10,000 and 40,000 people were murdered (Anderson 2001, Gould and Lauria-Santiago 2008). This somber episode represented the killing of one percent of the national population through ethnocide aimed at discouraging citizens, especially in rural areas, from engaging in popular mobilization. It also led to the forced assimilation of indigenous groups (Almeida 2008).

Here, an interviewee reflects on the experience of extreme poverty shared by many former political prisoners I interviewed:

I wasn't born into a rich home, or a middle-income home, but rather a home where we went hungry, you see. I remember eating tortillas with vinegar on them, or tortillas and salt, just because we didn't have anything else to eat. My mom was a... she was a strong woman, a fighter, and my dad an urban worker. They had eleven kids. It was a lot.

2.3 EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE AND REPRESSION (1960S TO MID-1970S)

Many of my interviewees describe growing up in a society characterized by violence and social upheaval, where any form of social manifestation or protest was met with repression from police or military authorities. My interviewees therefore encountered repression early on in their

lives, which often meant that someone in their close social circles was mistreated, beaten, imprisoned, or—in the worst but not uncommon cases—disappeared and assassinated by security forces.

Rodrigo, one of the male interviewees, describes an episode that reflects the widespread normalization of violence and abuse from government authorities towards regular citizens during the years prior to his participation in the revolutionary movement. He recounts an episode in which he and his friend tried to, out of fear, avoid the National Guard headquarters on their way home. They ended up receiving a beating for no particular reason besides looking like students when they encountered a National Guard officer a few blocks away:

We had to walk by the National Guard headquarters. So I said to my friend, “let’s not walk on the main street, let’s go through the neighborhood.” That’s where the Atlacatl neighborhood is. So we went through different alleyways, we didn’t walk on the main street. But our big misfortune was running into a National Guard sergeant. He was at a house on one of the intersecting streets. Maybe he lived there. He was pretty drunk and there was a young man with him. From the moment he saw us, I noticed his intention of stopping us. And he did. The sergeant said—he was in uniform, but not really put together, his shirt was untucked... He ordered one of the young guys who was there, “beat them.” They started giving us such a beating, one of those you would never expect. All these things leave an impression on you, and you realize there is so much abuse of authority, even when you haven’t done anything at all.

Rodrigo describes an overarching sense of impotence and injustice, knowing that police and security forces held the power to exert violence arbitrarily without check. In his words, we also read that violence was exerted as an end in itself, only to instill more fear and assert authority—not necessarily to punish for a misdeed or to make some sort of moral statement.

Mass protests beginning around 1950 continued during a later protest phase (mid-1972 to 1976), albeit in reduced numbers due to heightened government repression (Almeida 2008). In the 1950s and early 1960s, intensified social protest would lead to the emergence of prominent opposition leaders who would eventually take key roles in the revolution—Salvador Cayetano Carpio, Fabio Castillo, Saul Santiago Contreras, Jorge Schafik Hándal, Mario Medrano, and José Mario López. During the 1950-1960s decade, they were imprisoned or exiled due to their political involvement. By the late 1960s, however, they would escape government repression and help to build steady popular movements that would generate the largest protest wave in El Salvador since the late 1920s and early 1930s (Almeida 2008).

Another interviewee's testimony reflects a more systematic application of violence towards the citizenry. There was generalized violence and also targeted violence directed specifically at dissolving street manifestations and protests. Raul's mother was a teacher in the 60s and 70s, and she participated in strikes that were met with severe violence:

[There was a union that] brought together... a high percentage of teachers. My mom was part of that union. There were two big union strikes in El Salvador, in 1969 and 1971. In 1969 I was nine years old. In 1971, I was eleven. These two strikes lasted many days and [generated] a lot of popular support on one hand and brutal repression on the other. In my mind, it was clear to me that my mom was on the right side, let's say, the fair one. It was a struggle for... you know, union demands, better wages, better conditions, medical care [...] Nineteen days after the [new president] had taken office, his first big thing was getting the army into the National University. It was our only public university at the time and it still is. He occupied the National University: the campus to the west of the country, the one to the east, and the one in San Salvador. They took over the university and began to persecute and assassinate instructors and professors who participated in

student organizations. That's when an entire fascist-style phase began.... They named a new university president and school authorities, who of course became puppets of the nascent dictatorship.

This account reflects that workers' unions, in this case teachers', were not only attacked outwardly during concrete episodes of protest in which citizens expressed and demanded respect for their rights. Freedom of protest, thought, and expression were increasingly undermined in a systematic way by infiltrating educational institutions as vital as the main public university. This was an added dimension to the brutality of repression that ensued when citizens gathered publicly to resist government action or proclaim their rights.

The teachers' association named in the quote above was created during a large protest wave between 1967 and 1972 (Almeida 2008). Paul Almeida, a scholar of popular protest movements in El Salvador, describes this phase as characterized by orderly and nonviolent mass actions, organized mass strikes, and street demonstration throughout the nation (Almeida 2008). In particular, mass actions led by the teachers' association demanded work benefits such as a modernized retirement system, benefits packages, a salary program, and dignified treatment as a professional association—rejecting a relationship with the government that would make it a “clientilistic support base for the military party's election campaigns” (Almeida 2008, 5). Simultaneously, workers in urban sectors such as bus drivers, metallurgical, textile, sanitation, and bakery workers organized *de facto* strikes and work stoppages to force the military government to recognize their right to strike (Almeida 2008).

By 1977, massified protest began to reemerge in more violent and disruptive ways, led by organizations that took on a more revolutionary identity and made more radical social and political claims (Almeida 2008, Silber 2011, Sprenkels 2005). Actions by a larger proportion of civil society groups ensued, something that was unprecedented in El Salvador's history. The rural population showed up on the streets of the capital, when peasants working on coffee, sugar, and cotton

plantations united to take mass action to demand land, credit, state-subsidized agricultural inputs, and the end of paramilitary violence in their villages (Almeida 2008). Regime change was proclaimed by multiple sectors alike: employees of the public and service sectors, church parishioners, high school and university students, shantytown dwellers and market vendors. This social synergy would eventually lead to the civil war of the 1980s, steered by many of the reformist protest leaders of the 1960s mentioned above who had come to escape government repression. Towards the late 1970s, many of them began to direct guerrilla armies and serve as international ambassadors to a political movement of national scope seeking to radically transform Salvadoran society (Almeida 2008).

2.4 FAMILIAR EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Living in a context of protest and violence, my interviewees either became aware that someone in their close social circles—a friend, a classmate, a cousin, a sibling, or a parent—was part of a social or political organization, or was in the process of joining one. Joining some sort of collective effort was often a response to the violence that was generally experienced by the population at the hands of government authorities, according to all my interviewees. This early experience set these individuals on a path to eventually joining and believing the only alternative to face such violence was social participation.

Estela describes that through her father's influence, she learned the importance of social struggle and organizing to defend workers' needs. In this case, Estela lived in a rural setting and her father exemplified advocacy work on behalf of farm workers' rights:

My dad helped organize peasants. They formed organizations to combat mosquitos, for example. There was a river, a very beautiful river, and they fought against its pollution. They organized around all that. They also had a meeting place where they showcased films that was meant for the youth. There was effervescence around creating social fabric... [all] based on organizing. I learned

from that and studied it. [As a young person], I still went to dances and to fashion shows, but I was also living a life of social struggle and organizing at home. My house always revolved around organizing, my dad always had things going on there.

Many former political prisoners I interviewed became determined to join a revolutionary organization through a close friend's or relative's influence. Teresa illustrates an example of this, as she describes the process of joining the FPL, Fuerzas Populares de Liberación [*Popular Liberation Forces*], which had its origins in the Communist Party and was founded in 1970:

I enlisted in the FPL, that's where I started, together with my brother. My brother asked me to help out. He was one of my older brothers. I started out very young, you see. By then, I was already involved in the revolutionary student movement. We went to all the protests, to street manifestations, and we shared in all the struggle process... My brother, he trained me and educated me. He taught me how to treat people, how to have integrity in handling whatever [resources] people gave us. He taught me how to defend the dispossessed, the most marginalized, and to learn that I was just another average woman, another poor person that is part of our people.

Esperanza, another interviewee, describes her cousin as an example who led her to join a revolutionary organization. She also recounts the difficulties she encountered during the process of training for revolutionary armed combat. While using a gun to defend herself seemed like a frightening and foreign idea to her, her female cousin's example, encouragement, and teachings led her to continue her pursuit:

My cousin would motivate us, educate us, and train us both in political matters and in military matters... The first time I encountered a firearm, I trembled. I was—yeah, I was around fourteen or fifteen years old, at most. But I was already hanging out at the university, because my cousin was in college and they had meetings there. That was the first time they gave me a firearm, and I had to

put it together and take it apart, you see. My hands trembled, my voice shook, and I didn't know what to do about it. I shook like this [shows shaking hand] because I never imagined I would ever be in that situation. But my cousin would instill a lot of confidence in me. She was a woman I'd known all my life. I respected and admired her a lot. And I thought to myself, "if she can do it, why can't I do it too?"

In other cases, it was a different kind of effect related to loved ones that led an individual to join a revolutionary organization. In many instances, interviewees sharply remember repression experienced by friends and relatives, and those episodes marked a watershed in their lives. Such events often fueled rage, extreme feelings of disempowerment and a desire to do something to counter that disempowerment. They also generated a “no other alternative” mentality—a prevalent belief described by many interviewees that there was no way out of generalized violence and injustice except for taking political action against it. Individuals had the feeling that, one way or another, violence would escalate to a point of no return and government forces would continue to tolerate little to no dissidence. Historical evidence firmly supports this perception, as Salvadoran government repression heavily ensued any form of mass protest (Almeida 2008, Ching 2010, Sprenkels 2005). Government-supported death squads already made their appearance in 1975s, when the group FALANGE (Anticommunist Wars of Elimination Liberation Armed Forces) announced its pledge to exterminate all communists and their sympathizers (Sprenkels 2005). Vis-à-vis this level of state-promoted violence, it became a logical alternative for interviewees to actively engage in a resistance movement. Many of them joined before they turned eighteen years old or they interrupted their university studies to pursue political engagement, which entailed considerable personal sacrifice.

As an example of the effect a loved one's experience could produce, Raul describes his sister's capture in 1975 during a student protest. Even though Raul's sister escaped the situation unharmed, it was a traumatic situation for him and his family that would eventually convince him there were no better alternatives than getting involved in a revolutionary organization. Before the civil war officially began in 1980, the student protest in 1975 that Raul describes generated multiple casualties and disappearances. The population generally experienced this type of repressive response from state authorities as normalized and unchecked. Luckily, the interviewee recounts his sister made it out alive thanks to a fortunate coincidence. Without it, however, she could have easily become another anonymous casualty, formally unaccounted for to this day.

In 1975, there was a student manifestation to protest the violation of university autonomy, and it was met with heavy repression. It happened in a very emblematic area of the city, which was close to many hospitals. That day was July 30, 1975... my sister and her friend, who were older than me... [...] they tried to get out, because they were ambushed with tanks. It was very, very bloody and violent. To this day, there is a list of disappeared and dead people [from that protest] who still haven't been officially accounted for. Only students commemorate this event every year. Anyways, they captured my sister. And just by a very lucky coincidence, her friend had a military uncle and other high-ranking relatives. Thanks to that, my sister and her friend were able to escape unharmed.

Scholar Ralph Sprenkels (2005) documents this student march on July 30, 1975, during which the army attacked students who demanded the end of the army's occupation at the Santa Ana campus of the University of El Salvador. During this specific massacre, at least 37 people were killed or disappeared (Montgomery 2018).

The episode set an important precedent for another type of group effort that would arise vis-à-vis state violence: when people who had participated in the march did not come home that day, their relatives began to actively look for them. This gave rise to a prominent

human rights groups, COMADRES, the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of the Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador. This organization was mostly made up of mothers and relatives of the disappeared, and was officially established in December 1977 with support from the Catholic Archdiocese of El Salvador and Archbishop Oscar Romero (Schirmer 1993b). While members of this group would be targeted and persecuted by the government security apparatus during the armed conflict, it continued its active work throughout.

2.5 A DEVELOPING SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONAL FIELD

In addition to being influenced by close relatives and friends, there were various other reasons and ways through which interviewees ended up joining a revolutionary organization. Sometimes, interviewees' political motivation simply became the result of experiencing injustice. The daily realities of violence prompted their sense of disempowerment and fueled their impetus to do something in response. For some of these interviewees, joining a revolutionary organization was at first not related to developing their political and ideological constructs to an elevated degree. It was initially the harsh realities of consistent state violence and repression, experienced firsthand, that led them to join a revolutionary effort.

Also, corruption of the electoral system furthered many people's distrust in any viable democratic alternatives to authoritarianism and unstoppable violence. For example, Ricardo explains:

And I tell you, I joined the guerrilla not because of my heavy Marxist training or because I fully understood the deep social problems I wanted to transform through my political participation. It was more stuff like that [episode of heavy violence experienced firsthand] which led me to understand many

things weren't right. Then came the elections of 1972 and 1977... my mom and dad kept us very informed about how the opposition had genuinely won but the ruling regime didn't allow the winner to take power. We observed and lived through all that. For example, in 1968 there was a teachers' strike. I was very young but I already went to school. All those things made an impression on me along the way. That's why I tell you—if you'd asked me at the time why I was joining [a revolutionary movement], I would have said my main motivation came from witnessing unfair situations and being subjected to problems that I was in no way responsible for.

Another interviewee, Alfredo, explains how all electoral and democratic alternatives increasingly closed up, leading him to a “no other alternative” mentality. He describes the 1977 elections in which his father, a Christian Democrat leader, ran for election as vice-president for UNO (National Opposing Union), the main opposition force to the dictatorial regime made up by an alliance of the Christian Democratic Party, the National Revolutionary Movement (linked to the Communist Party) and the Nationalist Democratic Union (social democrats). The election was eventually lost due to government violence and election fraud.

It was a pretty broad alliance that brought a military officer as presidential candidate and my father [a civilian] as vice-presidential candidate⁵. They represented a sector of the military who were supposedly against military dictatorships and who desired change. They ran for elections and won, but the military officers in power disrespected the popular vote and massacred lots of people in the San Salvador square. That heavily impacted my life because, to me, it confirmed that all possibilities of resolving the country's problems through electoral means were now closed.

⁵ This interviewee, who would later become one of the founders of COPPES (Committee of Former Political Prisoners of El Salvador), came from a more privileged socioeconomic background than the majority of interviewees included in my study. He continues to be a well-regarded leader among former political prisoners for his persistent commitment to the revolutionary class struggle.

Alfredo's description reflects a trend that scholars also point to during 1970s El Salvador—as democratic procedure weakened, state repression increased (Almeida 2008, Silber 2011, Sprenkels 2005). Electoral fraud between 1972 and 1976 prevented UNO from securing a parliamentary majority or winning the executive. In fact, the elections oversight committee, the CCE, was used to manipulate vote totals. Opposition members were intimidated, vote totals were manipulated, party candidates were decertified, and ballot stuffing occurred at the local level. This demonstrated the Salvadoran state closed down the political system at the national level by obstructing both presidential and parliamentary elections. This was especially visible during 1972, a year in which both types of elections were held (Almeida 2008).

Yet, despite curtailed institutionalized democratic freedoms and securities, civic organizations established in the late 1960s continued to develop in the early to mid-1970s. Regime liberalization during 1950s and 1960s—in which post-World War II Latin American governments, including El Salvador, moved beyond state-led development into industrial manufacturing and diversified production—had benefitted key actors in Salvadoran society in terms of organizational experience and know-how. Rooted in the educational, labor, and church sectors, these groups would now continue to deepen their organizational work. Even though the Salvadoran government reverted back to a repressive stance in the 1970s, the echos of prior liberalization led to the revolutionary organizational infrastructure that would emerge in the mid- to late 1970s (Almeida 2008, Sprenkels 2005). In the educational sector, public school teachers', high school students', and university students' organizations would emerge. For example, ANDES-21, one of the most important teachers' associations, would by the mid-1970s have the organizational capacity to mobilize 15,000 teachers for strikes and work stoppages at the national level (Almeida 2008, 109). In the labor and religious sector, unions and various types of Christian-based groups and communities

would increasingly fill the social organizational field (Almeida 2008, Montgomery 2018, Sprenkels 2005).

And yet for other interviewees, the process of joining a political or social organization of resistance was characterized by becoming increasingly aware of social injustice and the ideological responses to it proposed by grass-roots and Marxism-inspired leftist organizations. A general sense of injustice and exclusion affecting broad sectors of Salvadoran society, combined with witnessing various forms of violent repression from up close, led many interviewees to sign up for a specific community or political organization. These organizations critiqued and resisted the status quo, ideating alternatives to it. They included labor unions, teachers' unions, student organizations, Liberation Theology-inspired Christian base communities (or CEBs, *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*), farmers' unions, and revolutionary organizations that proposed political resistance and transformation—some of them through armed struggle and others through processes of awareness-raising and reform. New oppositional figures emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the church sector, the educational sector, and the labor sector (Almeida 2008, Montgomery 2018, Sprenkels 2005).

There were five major revolutionary organizations that developed in the 1970s which would eventually coalesce under the umbrella of the FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Sprenkels 2005). The FPL (Farabundo Martí Liberation People's Forces) was founded in 1970 and resulted from a split-off from the radical wing of the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS). The ERP (People's Revolutionary Army) was founded in 1972, and generally included the youth section of the PCS plus dissident Christian Democrats. This organization disagreed with the traditional line of the PCS about the timing of the revolution. RN (National Resistance) was founded in 1975 as a result of an internal division within the ERP. The PRTC (Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers) was founded in 1976 by Central American workers, and the Salvadoran branch separated into its

own organization in 1980. The FAL (Liberation Armed Forces) began in 1980 and was made up of the PCS, which finally decided to pursue armed struggle (Arnson 2003, Grenier 1999, Sprenkels 2005).

2.6 CHURCH INSTITUTIONS: STATUS QUO OR REFORM?

While the student movement gained strength at the beginning of the 1970s with growing university enrollments, the Catholic Church also played an important organizational role during this time (Almeida 2008, Binford 2004, Galdámez 1986, Sprenkels 2005). Educational forces gained strength in leading actions around budget allocations, university admissions, and the general education requirements. In the meantime, the Church helped coordinate major organizational initiatives in rural areas for the first time since the 1932 massacre.

It was a specific sector of the Catholic Church that participated in this social upheaval, the Liberation Theology-inspired reformers. In El Salvador, these forces were found in the rural Christian Base Communities (CEBs), the new Christian Democratic Party, the Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana, UCA), the private Catholic secondary school (the Externado de San José), the San José de la Montaña seminary, and the San Salvador bishopric (Ching 2010). Liberation theology prepared the way for a new consciousness within peasant sectors based on a radicalizing Christianity rooted in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The emerging trend called on Church authorities and followers to take up the "preferential option for the poor," making the predicament of the poor a focal point of Christian faith (Binford 2004, Ching 2010, Galdámez 1986). This modernizing approach divided Catholics throughout the world between conservatives and reformers (Ching 2010).

This religious vision was based on a sociological analysis of the human condition that seriously considered both people's material and spiritual needs (Binford 2004). Promoting ideals of liberation in the here-and-now, Theology of Liberation associated the figure of Jesus to the humble and disenfranchised of the world (Batstone 1997, Hassett and Hugh 1991). Hence, the theology explained and justified its preferential option for the poor. In general, impoverished sectors of the population and others who were critical of government repression identified with this approach to Catholicism, which prioritized social justice and sought to translate the Gospel into tangible social action.

Erik Ching (2010) and Leigh Binford (2004) identify the roots of the Salvadoran armed insurrection in this new interpretive consciousness, which spread among peasant classes especially in the impoverished Morazán region that would be so central to guerrilla warfare. Their work agrees with other scholars' who make similar arguments (Cabarrús 1983, Dunkerley 1988, Galdámez 1986, Metzi 1988, Montgomery 2018, Pearce 1986). Taking hold increasingly during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the consciousness promoted by liberation theology would eventually lead some peasant groups to engage in militant action.

For many of my interviewees, experiencing the overall social landscape in El Salvador at this time helped them interrogate the role of major social institutions in sustaining the status quo. It made them realize the need to promote profound social change. For example, Raúl became increasingly conscious about the Catholic Church's role in sustaining an unequal social order:

Finally, between 1975 and 1977, and considering all my baggage of knowledge and critical thinking, I began to question and realize what the Catholic Church was doing in El Salvador. On one side, I saw a sector of the Church... [which] clearly understood what was happening in the country, and realized El Salvador needed some drastic and urgent change. That part of the church was more... let's say, participatory. It came close to marginalized and popular sectors of the

population. On the other side, we had a traditional Church like in any other country of the world, like in any other country of Latin America, that was more conservative and remained close to economic power circles. At the time, it was the landholders. All this led me to question what I was doing as a member of the Church.

This interviewee later continues (see below) describing an epiphany that many experienced at the moment of deciding to give their lives to a revolutionary cause: the “no other alternative” mentality also stemmed from observing that repression and violence would affect them directly even if they did nothing about it.

The conservative, status quo Church described by Raúl was entrenched in the majority of dioceses in El Salvador. Only the archbishopric in San Salvador officially supported progressive Catholic forces. Bishops in all other four dioceses of the country—based in the departments of Santa Ana, Usulután, San Miguel, and La Unión—defended conservative forces that discouraged more progressive pastoral agents from promoting programs challenging elite ideologies (Binford 2004, Whitfield 1994). But still, progressive Catholicism took root in many rural areas as a result of clergy and catechists trained at peasant training centers (also known as *universidades campesinas*, or peasant universities). There were a total of seven in the country, and even though CEBs (Christian Base Communities) have received more attention, these training centers were also a crucial element of the popular Church in El Salvador (Binford 2004, Peterson 1997). About 15,000 leaders, most of them peasants, received training in such centers between 1970 and 1976 (Montgomery 2018). As a reference, an estimated 50,000-60,000 Salvadorans participated in CEBs by the mid-1970s (Vega 1994). For instance, between 6,000 to 8,000 copies of *Justicia y Paz*, the monthly newsletter for rural CEBs circulated between 1972 to 1980, representing a much higher distribution than that of *Orientación*, the official weekly newspaper of the Catholic Church (Almeida 2008, Rosa 1976).

Amalia, an interviewee who always participated in Church organizations, describes the organizational synergy that arose not only within Catholic organizations but also between Christian communities of various denominations:

Our ecumenical effort in El Salvador included different churches: the Episcopal Church, the Emmanuel Church, the Lutheran Church, the Baptist Church, the Catholic Church, etc. There were six Churches in the ecumenical team, which included priests, nuns, pastors, lay people—everyone. In that process, we planned big events at the national level to bring lots of people together for workshops, gatherings, and sharing complaints. All our work went towards fighting injustices in El Salvador. All our pastoral work, organization work, community work, political work, and ecumenical work, was geared towards that. It all focused on promoting justice, equality, and freedom for the Salvadoran people. Participating in that process helped me grow a lot in terms of organizing and training. I began to establish relationships with pastors and other churches. We kept a very open mind... to me, a Catholic person and an Evangelical person are the same. I don't see any difference. All that experience helped me become more open-minded in order to face the work that needed to be done in El Salvador.

This description evokes the kind of Church work that Leigh Binford discusses in his research about the intersection of peasants, catechism and revolutionary ideologies in El Salvador, particularly in the Morazán region where guerrilla warfare initiated and developed (Binford 2004). Training centers were key to a group of peasant intellectuals who would work in tandem with local clergy to help communities engage with the new Liberation Theology view of Christianity that directly related to communities' lives. A significant portion of people who eventually joined the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) during its early and clandestine phase between 1975 and 1980 would come from the ranks of Christian Base Communities in northern Morazán (Binford 2004).

Because this religious vision considered people's material and spiritual needs at once, impoverished sectors of the population and others who were critical of government repression easily identified with it.

2.7 CONVINCED TO JOIN: THE TERROR PERIOD AND POLITICAL RADICALIZATION

An important historical moment symbolizing the severity and impunity around government violence, was San Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination. He was fatally shot by death squads in March 24, 1980, while delivering his homily. Romero had openly condemned the widespread and unchecked violence of the Salvadoran government towards peasants and the urban poor in the late 1970s, advocating for collective mobilization to eliminate the "structural sin" of poverty (Becerra 2016, Gutiérrez 1999, Lernoux 1980). At his funeral service in San Salvador's Cathedral, a massacre took place when government forces opened fire against tens of thousands of mourners in front of the cathedral (Moodie 2010). The episode resulted in at least 26 deaths and over 200 wounded people (Mahony 2007, 152). Despite this government-sponsored violence, in the United States, the day after the funeral the House Appropriations Committee approved \$5.7 million to fund equipment for the Salvadoran security forces (Armstrong and Rubin 1986).

Surely, the death of this prominent social and religious leader inspired the radicalization of resistance groups. The FMLN came together as a unified guerrilla front by October 10, 1980 and launched its first guerrilla offensive in January 10, 1981, initiating the civil war (Guardado 2012). Because of this, many also point to Romero's assassination as marking the beginning of El Salvador's 12-year-long armed conflict (Hatcher 2016, Sprenkels 2005).

About a third of my interviewees mention Romero's death as an important moment in their personal and family history. For many, this event became a tipping point. The following interviewee aptly describes the thought process many people likely experienced after Romero's assassination

raised government impunity to a new degree. In this particular case, it led Raúl to finally decide join a revolutionary organization:

And well, this entire process of knowing what Monsignor Romero was publicly denouncing and expressing... it all helped me to finish preparing. Until then, I hadn't taken the final step of voluntarily joining [a revolutionary organization] and saying "yes, I am now part of this" or, "yes, I am going to be part of an organization." [...] In 1980, I was about to take that step, but I still didn't dare to. It was Monsignor Romero's assassination, on March 24, 1980—that was definitely the straw that broke the camel's back. My reasoning went more or less like this. Monsignor Romero was a public and political figure that carried a lot of weight. He was internationally well-known. He was a prominent member of the Church, and despite all that, he was assassinated! What's going to happen to me if I'm just an ordinary citizen, an ordinary mortal? Hell! If I'm going to get killed in this country, at least have them kill me while doing something! In the following days, I spoke to a few friends and contacts, and I said "look, I've decided to get fully involved in the armed struggle."

Because of Liberation Theology's prevalence, political murders like Oscar Romero's frequently, and somewhat paradoxically, contributed to constructing an "affective community of hope" during El Salvador's war (Moodie 2010, Peterson 1997). Scholar Anna Peterson (1997) explores the role of martyrdom and the politics of religion in this context, posing that political killings were often interpreted in terms of Christ's passion and God's plan for mankind. These killings could even be normalized and assimilated into culture by believing the only hope was that of resurrection, and that admirable martyrs like Romero offered their lives to a greater cause following Christ's example (Peterson 1997).

Around early 1980, members of political organizations and their mass fronts faced intensifying repression by the state's security forces and military death squads. Each month, at least

one thousand people were dying in military-related violence (Ching 2016). Erik Ching (2016) quotes a former field commander from the FPL at the time, describing the chaotic swarming of violence in the city of Santa Ana, where a death squad attacked one social sector after the other. One week only students' dead bodies appeared on the street, while on subsequent weeks it was market vendors, then tailors, then nurses, and then workers (Ching 2016). People were constantly exposed to death scenes during their daily commutes, with dismembered or decapitated bodies lying on the streets, and military troops everywhere (Ching 2016, 166). Like for many of my interviewees, Erik Ching describes that among guerrilla *comandantes* reminiscing on that period, repression deepened many people's resolve to join the war effort: "with each new massacre, torture victim, or disappeared person they believed the regime was revealing its true nature and bringing on its own downfall" (Ching 2016, 166).

Interviewees themselves speak of this period as the *época del terror* (terror period), agreeing with scholars on the term often used to describe extreme violence during the years preceding the outbreak of war. Generally, interviewees' memory of this time is filled with death scenes like the one mentioned above. One interviewee describes:

During that time, people were captured en masse throughout the country. We call that time the terror period because killings happened daily. Dismembered dead bodies would show up everywhere. That led many people to choose a clandestine life so they could protect themselves.

However, violence not only propelled people to action. For many of my interviewees, it was also an extremely uncomfortable and intimidating reality that translated into cumbersome constraints hindering their "normal" lives. These individuals, currently between the ages of 50 and 70 years old, were barely adults in the mid-1970s and early 1980s when violence escalated to the degree described above. After major public universities closed and daily life became so tinted by

overt violence, joining a revolutionary movement became a more logical decision than one might expect:

After the university closed, my parents couldn't afford a private university, which was the only one left... "Well then", I thought, "now I must get one-hundred percent involved." During the entire the year of 1980, I focused on preparing and participated in various [revolutionary] activities.

Just as revolutionary organizations began to take clearer shape, so did the government's repressive apparatus. Death squads appeared around 1975, while military and security forces began to set up clandestine detention centers in their headquarters (Sprenkels 2005). Towards the late 1970s, a stronger campaign of terror by death squads and the military began against grass-roots organizations like the liberation theology sectors of the church. Repression against peasant organizations had already begun to escalate in the 1970s, when the state declared activists military targets. This led to a generalized feeling that the state "made war" on people (Becerra 2016). In fact, counterinsurgency programs and paramilitary agencies were created a decade before the first guerrilla group formed in 1970, while activist groups seriously debated the desirability of armed struggle well into the late 1970s (Almeida 2008, Grandin 2006, McClintock 1985).

Rodrigo summarizes his impressions of the terror period, which was a time of utter insecurity for him:

At the national level, we saw lots of abuse in El Salvador against the peasant population, simply because they demanded better food security or asked for a better life. They were massacred, they were captured and tortured too, they were disappeared. We had people who openly exercised that kind of abuse. It was the military forces, the National Guard, the Treasury Police, the National Police... we experienced such insecurity between 1975 and 1980. It was dreadful. Those five years were really tough. The population felt defenseless, but at least it was aware, and people began to say: "now we

need to defend ourselves... even if I only own a sickle.” That’s how we broke through barriers and people gained courage, using their sickles and other supplies. People armed themselves and we had a civil war with thousands of dead people. Man! It was really... it was really a river of blood that ran through El Salvador. Now, we see it was fruitful for some, but for the rest of us—well, we are still motivated to keep demanding justice... The truth is, in El Salvador we have lived in a state of war for a large part of our lives. I think I lived all my youth in a state of war, and now at my age, we keep living in a war. We are still waiting to bring about the changes we wanted.

Another interviewee describes similar feelings regarding the “scorched earth” campaigns that affected the country’s rural areas, and her family specifically. These campaigns were a determining factor in causing her family’s migration to the city and convincing her parents to join the revolutionary effort. In the countryside, indiscriminate violence was exercised towards the rural population. As part of these scorched earth tactics, the army raided entire villages, burning them to the ground—including livestock, houses, and crops—under the pretext that people sympathetic to the guerrillas lived there. Under this rationale, thousands of men, women, and children were brutally murdered or forcefully displaced (Binford 2016; Danner 1993, 1994; Sprenkels 2005).

My mother told me scorched earth operations began in many hamlets, which is where the armed conflict basically took place. That’s when the army came and, of course, they burned down houses, crops, they killed animals and people too. They didn’t leave anything behind. My mother told me they had to flee. They fled at night, holding their oil lamps. They went to the nearby hill with everyone else from the hamlet. That’s when she and my father faced the decision of what to do next. They carried my younger sister in their arms. I was, I don’t know, we’re talking about 1977 or 1978... I think I was seven years old in 1978... So, I was seven, my brother was five, and my

little sister was two-and-a-half. They took me and my brother by the hand, and my little sister in their arms. In the other arm, they carried a bundle of clothes and a few other things.

When the FMLN united under a common front and launched its first joint military operation in October 1980, they were able to take some of the urban centers. However, because the military was better equipped than the guerrillas, it fought back and forced them to flee into the mountains (Sprenkels 2005). Guerrilla forces then focused their influence on certain areas they called liberated zones. They moved around from place to place, avoiding confrontation with government forces. Thousands of people from rural areas, among them many who sympathized with rebel forces, lived in camps or in abandoned villages (Sprenkels 2005).

The military carried out most of these operations targeting rural populations in 1981 and 1982. As the previous interviewee points out, however, scorched earth tactics were already applied before 1980 during the terror period. This strategy was known as “taking the water from the fish”, because the general civilian population was viewed as the guerrilla’s source of support (Betancur et al. 1993, Binford 2016, Danner 1994). US-trained special battalions such as the Atlacatl or Belloso participated in these counterinsurgency operations in which thousands of civilians were massacred. By the end of 1982, a large part of the countryside was uninhabited and hundreds of refugee camps sprung up throughout El Salvador and close to the border in Honduras. Between 1982 and 1983, the armed conflict would eventually develop into a confrontation between two established armies; most war casualties would result from that type of hostility, in addition to the kidnappings and disappearances implemented by the security apparatus (Sprenkels 2005).

Besides forcing some to migrate, generalized violence affected many interviewees at an intimately personal level. In addition to being torture survivors, they are also victims of other crimes against humanity by virtue of having relatives who were extrajudicially killed or disappeared by government forces. The experience of losing a parent or a sibling is a profoundly painful one for

many interviewees, which fueled heavy feelings of rage, injustice, and sadness. Many of them also catalyzed these feelings into the desire for social change. The experience of losing one or more family members or close friends to state repression was foundational and continues to define their identity; it shapes how they see themselves as civil war survivors and seekers of justice in a post-conflict period.

2.8 JOINING A REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION: A SERIOUS COMMITMENT

Joining an underground militant organization in El Salvador during the 1970s was a very serious commitment. Many of my interviewees refer to this process in various ways, reflecting the personal effort, commitment, and emotion that went into considering such a weighty decision. Scholar Erik Ching provides some context to understand a militant's decision to fully engage in political activity:

A militant had to surrender his or her past life, give up ties to friends and family, and dedicate herself or himself to the unending and challenging task of mobilizing an insurrection in secret. Fear of capture by state security agents was constant. Every militant knew that arrest meant horrific torture and probably death. All it took to be captured was a minor slip in security, betrayal by a comrade, or simply the bad luck of being stopped at a roadblock. Another great fear was that the security forces would learn the identities of a militant's friends or family and exact retribution from them (Ching 2010, xxx).

According to my interviewees, when individuals joined a revolutionary organization, they were no longer in control of their own individual lives. Their corresponding political organization decided what kind of activities they would engage in—military or logistical training, armed struggle, coordination and communication, resource supply, health services, etc. All interviewees describe a

fully conscious decision to offer their individual lives to a greater cause, even when this decision was conditioned by impending state violence and severely curtailed democratic freedoms.

Estela summarizes a key belief leading many people to offer their lives to a cause they considered worthwhile:

We all faced a decision and we were fully aware. If we needed to put our lives at the service of social change, justice, good education, and a country that included poor people, then so be it. That was something we were all convinced about. You could see it in all social movements and all the people that came from families with a background in social organization.

At the onset of war violence, Camilo illustrates the reduced number of life options available to him as well:

When the armed conflict began, we didn't—there were no other options but to leave the country or go to the mountain [join the revolution]. And so I had to... I had to face that option. I ended up on the mountain.

Sandra describes her own reasons to join an organization:

It was the last thing we could do in the face of so much injustice, so much marginalization, so many human rights violations, so many labor rights violations, and the fact that no one did anything. We regarded some of the freedoms we now have as a very distant thing. Just to give you an example, if I wanted to wear a T-shirt with my union's logo on it, that was a good enough reason to be captured and killed. If I wanted to listen to music by Guaraguao, which was the most popular band at the moment, I couldn't do that either. I could get killed for it! There was a time when catechists or members of the laity got killed just for carrying a Bible. They made them disappear only for that!

Bárbara describes the process of joining the war almost as an imposition, despite the awareness that many people like her had when they finally committed to the revolutionary effort.

She explains there was both a military and a political force within the field of revolutionary organizations, and while it was challenging for those forces to come to a consensus, they finally did.

We should set the record straight and say the war was necessary but also very difficult for many of us. The guerrilla became a guerrilla by force. It wasn't like the war made itself, but it's more like... you're cornered and cornered until you feel forced to show your teeth. You get to a point at which you either defend yourself or you defend yourself. In our [social and political] movement as a whole, some of us were more political and others were more military. There were two main forces. Trying to reach an agreement between the two forces about whether the war was necessary created a lot of conflict. But we also became convinced that we had no other choice. The war wasn't really a choice, it was an imposition. At least I can give you my word: as far as I could tell, I never once met a blood-thirsty assassin within the guerrilla ranks. I met combatants who defended columns of people before they got killed. I did see that. It was a war in which we fought a legitimate struggle, even though it wasn't a good war. I don't want to say it was a good war, but yes, it was a war in the terms we were forced to accept. We didn't wage the same war as the death squads did, which exterminated people and carried out horrific acts... [we didn't wage] the war [conducted in] areas that experienced scorched earth tactics, or the war of tortured and massacred people. All that was monstrous... Yes, it was monstrous.

This interviewee also speaks for many others who feel strongly about the nature of their fight and its legitimacy in the face of escalating state violence against the civilian population during the 1970s. All my interviewees believe this to be true, even when they each encountered different triggering factors to join militant organizations. Many interviewees describe a war fought in self-defense, which was made by regular citizens.

2.9 CAPTURE AND INTERROGATION PERIOD

At some point in time, as a result of their political involvement, all interviewees included in this study were captured and imprisoned by government forces. The years range between 1980 to 1992, although some of them have been illegally imprisoned again during the formally democratic years due to their continuing political activities. However, in this chapter I only focus on the imprisonment that took place during the official armed conflict years.

When war broke out on a massive scale, the worst period of repression against alleged subversives ensued, and cases of execution and disappearance numbered in the tens of thousands (Hammond 1996). Below I describe major patterns shaping the experience of political imprisonment, based on my interviewees' narratives:

1. Officers from military (Armed Forces), security forces (National Police, National Guard, Treasury Police), or death squads detained interviewees illegally, sometimes breaking into their homes in the middle of the night. They kidnapped them on the street, during military operations, or during ambush operations designed to capture them. Sometimes officers were dressed in uniform but other times they dressed in civilian clothes (especially death squads). Captured detainees underwent a period of interrogation and torture during which they became one of the "disappeared", since no one knew of their whereabouts during that time. This involved being taken to the police, military, or security force's headquarters, and within them to dungeons specifically designed for torture and interrogation. Some prisoners were also taken to clandestine prisons (Interview with ICRC director for El Salvador in 2015; Carpio 1979, Hammond 1996, Martínez 1978).

Security forces that exercised torture in El Salvador include the National Guard, Treasury Police, National Police, paramilitary bodies known as Civil Defence bodies, and other paramilitary organizations made up by military or police personnel acting as death squads. The

major ones were Unión Guerrera Blanca [White Warriors Union], the Anticommunist Wars of Elimination Liberation Armed Forces (FALANGE), and La Sombra Negra [The Black Shadow] (CDHES 2012, Sibrián 2016).

2. The first twenty-four hours after capture were crucial for interrogators. According to some interviewees, during this period of time it was difficult for anyone else to find out they had been detained. Also, if useful information was obtained during the first hours of interrogation, it could be acted upon before the revolutionary organization had had a chance to react to a comrade's capture.

One interviewee describes:

They captured me and took me directly to the National Police headquarters. They thought I didn't know where I was because they blindfolded me right after they captured me. They handcuffed me... they beat me during the entire drive. They believed the first 24 hours were crucial... during that time, no one made a move because it was difficult for anyone else to find out what had happened. If they [captors] were able to obtain information during those few hours, they could go capture other people based on what you had said. So, from the moment you were captured, they began to torture you to soften you up and get information... I don't know how long the drive was from the airport to the headquarters, because they stopped many times along the way and threatened to throw me over a cliff. They would hold me up in the air, let me go, and then grab me again by the arms or feet. I could feel the void beneath me. That happened all along the way.

3. Usually the dungeons are described as living hells located in the basement levels of the buildings they were in. They were separate from the cells where prisoners were kept, which were often on the ground floor or above. Treatment of prisoners involved: constant intimidation, threats,

accusations of being a criminal, accusations of being a guerrilla, demeaning treatment in association to their political activities, beatings, subjection to interrogation by various individuals, food and water deprivation, deprivation from sleep, subjection to drugs (usually mixed in with their drinking water), deprivation from sanitation, sexual intimidation, and sexual abuse.

Alfredo, another interviewee, depicts his impressions of the atmosphere in these torture dungeons:

The first thing that struck me was tortured people's cries, around two in the morning. That was terrible, it's something you never forget. You're there, on the prison floor, and it gets cold. Despite our country's warm climate, the mornings got cold. So the cold temperature inside the prison combined with tortured people's cries, that really made me shiver. Yes, I trembled, out of fright, out of horror, because I'd never seen a tortured person before. I had heard human screaming before but tortured people's cries felt like I was standing next to a slaughterhouse... When you walk by a slaughterhouse you hear the animals whose throats are being slit crying out. Well, human cries under torture sound very similar. I had never heard them. And that really terrifies you, it shakes you up. Seeing people coming out of torture also impresses you, because they've been torn apart, broken in all ways. They take them in there with hoods over their heads and then they come back destroyed. It's horrific.

4. Multiple torture techniques were applied to individuals, including: the *capucha* (a hood used to asphyxiate the prisoner), the *avioncito* (hanging the person face-down tied from the wrists in the form of an airplane), electric shocks, and many other forms of cruel and inhumane treatment. Torture techniques used in El Salvador have been described in a 2012 Salvadoran Human Rights Commission (CDHES) report on the psychosocial sequelae of torture (CDHES 2012) and by a

recent Institute of Human Rights (IDHUCA) publication focusing on the experience of four tortured women (Sibrián 2016). These techniques include: strangling, exposure to extreme temperature changes, hanging people up from their hands or feet, immersion in water, injuries caused by guns or knives, and amputations (CDHES 2012). According to my interviewees, for some prisoners, the ride on the way to their detention location also included mock executions by a firing squad and threats to be thrown off a cliff.

5. At some point, after undergoing interrogation and torture once or multiple times and being taken back to a cell, the majority of interviewees in this study had the highly unlikely opportunity of being seen and identified by an employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). As part of the Salvadoran government's desire to whitewash its human rights record, it had agreed to let the Red Cross enter the premises of security forces headquarters so they could oversee prisoners' conditions (Interview with ICRC Director for El Salvador in 2015). While my interviewees describe that often entire sections of these premises were unknown to outside parties like the ICRC, in many instances their existence came to the attention of an ICRC employee by some unlikely chance. While it is impossible to know the exact percentage of detainees that were documented by the ICRC, COPPES believes that being documented by the ICRC drastically increased a person's chances of survival. Therefore, those prisoners detected by the ICRC are probably overrepresented among those who survived.

In 1982, Amnesty International recognized that very few political detainees had in fact survived arrest by Salvadoran security forces (Amnesty International 1982). Eventually, international pressure would lead the Salvadoran government to decrease abuses, because US military aid between 1981 and 1983 depended on President Reagan's certification to Congress

about the human rights situation in El Salvador. That led extrajudicial executions and disappearances to decline during the mid-1980s. Regardless, political imprisonment continued in massive numbers. For example, by December 1986, there were 1,174 political prisoners in Salvadoran jails. In 1987, there were about 700 (Hammond 1996).

6. Contact with the Red Cross representative allowed individuals to be identified, put on a list, and finally lose the status of “disappeared,” as the Red Cross became a connection to the outside world and notified their families of their whereabouts. To this day, for many former political prisoners in El Salvador, and most of my interviewees, the only official document that remains as proof of their imprisonment were those generated by the Red Cross upon their identification. This speaks about the state of legal invisibility in which all these crimes against humanity were subsumed. Even up to this day, the Salvadoran government has not done its due work to document these human rights violations and implement policies to secure justice and deliver reparations.
7. Sometimes, after the Red Cross identified prisoners, this exerted pressure on security forces to put them through a military tribunal, in order to maintain some veneer of legality, or to begin the release process. Once families were alerted about the whereabouts of their disappeared relative, they often began the process of gathering enough funds to pay for an attorney or to cover the bail. Some prisoners were also released thanks to various partial amnesties negotiated between the government and the FMLN in response to international pressure around El Salvador’s human rights record.

By 1983, 533 political prisoners were released under a partial amnesty and about 200 were left in detention. Around 1986, America's Watch estimated about 700 political prisoners were behind bars. In 1987, another amnesty ensued as part of the Central American Esquipulas Peace Process which sought to settle some of the military conflicts affecting Central American nations, notably Guatemala and Nicaragua (Hammond 1996). Its beneficiaries were mostly members of military and security forces but also included 400 political prisoners. After their release, only sixteen were left in jail (Human Rights Institute IDHUCA 1988). Later, that number would increase again, especially after the November 1989 FMLN offensive. In 1990, about 370 political prisoners would be left (Americas Watch 1987, 1990, 1991; Amnesty International 1988, 1989). Before the end of the war in 1992, many would be released, and others freed in an attack on Mariona prison in 1991 (Hammond 1996). Only sixty-two were still in prison at the time of the Peace Accords in February 1992 (Hammond 1996).

Amalia describes the importance of the Red Cross at that moment:

The Red Cross was basically our salvation [from death and disappearance] at the time. If the Red Cross found out where we were, it was the one and only thing that could stop the security force whose control we were under.

Ricardo describes corruption and lack of transparency in military tribunals:

I was in a court of the Ministry of Defense. That was the difficult part, though, because you weren't tried in a normal court. Here you could see how corruption operated. For example, to get me out, they asked for 25,000 colones (...) which at the time was like 10,000 dollars. It was just some paperwork the lawyer did with the judge, and the lawyer was the middleman. They didn't even take

me to a courthouse, they came to question me at Mariona [prison]. They transferred me to Mariona and then they went there to question me.

Bárbara complements Ricardo's description, explaining how false accusations sustained a corrupt justice system:

The trials they put us through involved huge volumes of files. Those files were full of accusations—some could be true, others somewhat true, and yet others absolutely false. They accused each of us of kidnappings, deaths, and anything else they could think of.

8. Under military tribunals, prisoners were often obliged to sign declarations which they were not allowed to fully read or were not fully capable of reading; more often than not, their mental and physical abilities were severely compromised after sleep deprivation, food deprivation, forceful intake of narcotic substances, and multiple forms of torture and inhumane treatment experienced during interrogation. This may have been the case especially with people who occupied positions of command in the revolutionary organization. Many of my interviewees to this day do not know what those statements said and what accusations about them were made in legal documents. In any case, under Article 15 of the 1987 Convention Against Torture, any declarations made under torture could not be lawfully utilized in any criminal proceedings (United Nations 1987).

Regarding this, Gabriela describes:

When I was at the [National] Police, they put together an entire written statement that I had supposedly made. I didn't have a problem with it. I read it and then they said, "sign it." I scribbled whatever I could but it wasn't even my signature... I knew they could make up whatever they

wanted, they could say whatever they wanted. And so what? Under those circumstances... I finally never found out what they'd written [on the statement].

9. After the period of interrogation was over, prisoners were taken to either the Mariona prison, the Santa Tecla prison in San Salvador (which stayed open only until 1982) or the Ilopango prison for women. During the armed conflict, the majority of prisoners were men (Hammond 1996). As a reference, in 1986 there were 89 women political prisoners, with 27 children living in prison with them (Harlow 1992). By 1987, only about thirty female political prisoners would be left out of a total of 700 (America's Watch 1987, Hammond 1996). After the 1987 amnesty, most male political prisoners were taken to prisons in the departmental capitals, especially Santa Ana, San Miguel, and San Vicente (Hammond 1996).

Upon arrival to the prison after interrogation, individuals were welcomed by a group of political prisoners, who were held in a different part of the prison than regular inmates. This allowed them to form their own political community within the facility. In September 1980, political prisoners had founded an organization called COPPES, Comité de Presos Políticos de El Salvador (*Committee of Political Prisoners of El Salvador*) simultaneously in all three prisons. In 1982, all of the male prisoners held at Santa Tecla were transferred to the Mariona prison. My interviewees argue that this allowed the government to establish better control of the prisoners, especially as the inmate population increased.

2.10 IMPRISONMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COPPES

Transitioning from the interrogation period to imprisonment at the Ilopango, Santa Tecla, or Mariona prisons, often meant a significant improvement in living conditions for the individual. In

general, torture and interrogation no longer occurred after a person arrived at the prison. COPPES had its own leadership and organized different activities that structured individuals' lives, focusing on meeting their different needs within the confines of what imprisonment allowed.

The organization took care of food needs, economic sustenance, physical health, and discipline. They helped newcomers recover from torture and actively communicated with groups outside the prison who supported them, organizing hunger strikes to demand better living conditions, and protesting the inhumane treatment of other prisoners. One organization providing substantial support to COPPES was COMADRES (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of the Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador). This was a crucial organization that led the human rights struggle well into the 1980s, reclaiming the streets and resuming public demonstrations against the government and security forces when the war had fully broken out (Sprenkels 2005). COPPES also kept in contact with organizations who monitored the treatment of political prisoners: the CDHES (the non-governmental Salvadoran Committee of Human Rights), the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Doctors Without Borders (Hammond 1996).

COMADRES often organized protests when someone was captured by the army or security forces. Working with political prisoners inside packed jails, they supported their fight for improved living conditions and organized campaigns for peace negotiations (Stephen 1994). A large portion of COMADRES members had belonged to Christian Base Communities and their families had suffered repression due to their church activism. Consequently, their work was based on liberation theology as well and focused on confronting the country's military and oligarchic system, so entrenched by the 1960s (Stephen 1995).

All in all, prisoners fought to counter the abuses they were subjected to within the jails. They educated themselves mutually through a popular education approach that was prevalent in El Salvador's popular movement. They organized hunger strikes to secure certain freedoms and rights

within the prison and closely collaborated with outside groups, becoming a strong force within the popular movement, albeit from within the confines of prison. The prison experience as a whole will be further explored in Chapter 5.

2.11 DISCUSSION

The patterns outline an array of experiences that shape my interviewees' lives. They occupied positions of leadership in revolutionary organizations and suffered ensuing repression at the hands of the Salvadoran state. Their ways of thinking and reasoning demonstrate a subjectivity situated within considerable social constraints, defined by economic injustice, hindered democratic institutions, and prevalent, escalating, political violence that very palpably affected everyday life. However, these individuals consciously and willingly participated in social and political organizations created to transform these constraints. They put their lives on the line, and while this generated painful consequences for them, they continue to find in this experience a source of validity for their struggles past and present.

This descriptive chapter offers background information to support my analysis in later chapters. The experiences described display forms of subjectivity focused on resisting social oblivion and social neglect of individuals' experiences of pain. This itself is transformative of the Salvadoran social landscape. Even while we may intuit the experiences outlined above have left indelible marks, these individuals are finding ways to express and objectify their experiences in order to make them "utterable" (Scarry 1985), expressible, and visible. Herein lies the importance of COPPES in the present-day and during the armed conflict, as it has provided a feeling of belonging and multiple forms of physical and practical support that prevented further human rights violations from taking place. The following chapter will delve more closely into the gendered dimensions of these

experiences, exploring the challenges of negotiating between aspects that produce vulnerability and those that strengthen agency.

Chapter 3. GENDERED TRANSITIONAL SUBJECTS: RECLAIMING THE POST-WAR SELF

Scholars contend that gender shapes social participation and that political violence is exerted in gendered ways (Bunster-Burotto 1994, Neumann and Anderson 2014, Randall 2003). While this conclusion applies to varied periods of time and geographical contexts (Engle 2006, Franke 2006), the literature suggests this was also the case for Latin American Cold War authoritarian regimes and El Salvador specifically (DeShazer 1994, Hume 2008, Kampwirth 2004, Leiby 2015, Shayne 2004). My empirical results corroborate the influence of gender in the Salvadoran post-war context particularly for a population that remains highly invisibilized and understudied.

More specifically, this chapter explores how the lived experience of former political prisoners in El Salvador is gendered. In order to address this research aim, I argue that three main moments structure vulnerability/agency for survivors, revealing the “work” that gender does in this context: (1) involvement in the revolutionary struggle, (2) torture and imprisonment, and (3) reclaiming a sense of self in the post-war period. Results contribute to scholarly perspectives that propose a more comprehensive treatment of gender in transitional justice than earlier versions of truth commissions and human rights trials have generally allowed⁶.

3.1 GENDER: HOW FEMININITIES AND MASCULINITIES MATTER

Gender is a key dimension of social life, especially when we adopt a stratification lens focusing on questions of access to states of well-being. In addition, constructionist theories have for long described how gender is something we “do”, not something that people intrinsically or

⁶ Transitional justice is the field of theory and practice focused on addressing the aftermath of political violence, which includes the implementation of mechanisms such as: prosecutions, truth and reconciliation commissions, public access to government records, public memorials, reparation to victims and their families, amnesty laws, and lustration (United Nations 2004, Roht-Arriaza 2006).

naturally are (Jurik and Siemsen 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Femininity and masculinity are a way of doing gender in relation to the norms, expectations and social environment created around one's concept of self as female and male (Hamber 2016, Human Rights Campaign 2020, West and Zimmerman 2009, Widmer 2006). In this chapter, I refer to gender by focusing on femininities and masculinities, conceptualizing them as places in gender relations, the practices through which individuals engage that place in gender relations, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (Brittan 2005; Connell 2005a, Connell 2005b; Whitehead 2006). Speaking of gender in this way allows us the flexibility to consider there are as many femininities or masculinities as there are individuals to enact them. Forms of femininity and masculinity are also fluid throughout time (Clatterbaugh 1998; Connell 2005a; Messerschmidt 2008).

In addition, gender is a fluid spectrum and the promise of gender studies is precisely to overcome the limiting binary of male/female, prying open a myriad of possibilities for gender identities to be defined in terms of femininity, masculinity, a combination of both, or neither. However, because in my sample all people identify as cisgender female or male, I focus on femininities and masculinities while being aware that these are by no means exhaustive categories of gender for all populations. For practical purposes, however, they rather faithfully describe the categories with which my interviewees identify.

3.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

While transitional justice theory and practice has achieved important accomplishments, in this chapter I speak to vital challenges facing the field. My results contribute to scholarship that aims to conceptualize gender as comprehensively as possible in support of survivors' sense of reparation and attainment of justice. According to scholars trying to push the boundaries of transitional justice, significant challenges that linger in terms of how gender is treated and

conceptualized include: (1) equating women with gender (Hudson 2010, Myrntinen et al. 2014, Porter 2016); (2) equating gender with sexual violence against women (Franke 2006; Theidon 2007b, 2017); (3) leaving masculinities out of the gender question (Cahn and Ní Aoláin 2010, Hamber 2016, Hudson 2010, , Myrntinen et al. 2014, Porter 2016, Theidon 2009); (4) neglecting to see the structural continuities in gender inequality between “times of war” and “times of peace” (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Duggan and Abusharaf 2006; Nagy 2008; Ní Aoláin 2006, 2017); (5) and engaging the risk of appropriating survivors’ discourses (feminine, masculine, or others) that perpetuate limiting stereotypical notions, such as that of victims—and especially women—as passive actors (Franke 2006, Hamber 2016, Hayner 2001, Nesiah 2006, Ross 2003, Theidon 2018).

(1 and 2) The unnecessary reduction of gender to women neglects that other gender identities matter to this question in equal measure (Hudson 2010, Myrntinen et al. 2014, Porter 2016). This has been the case even when feminist critique and gender studies have argued for a relational and intersectional conceptualization of gender. Also, women and men can be and often are victims of sexual violence (as in the case of El Salvador, as shown by Leiby 2015⁷); by the same token, they can be victims of gendered violence that is not sexual in nature. Using reduced concepts of gender stands in the way of comprehending gender inequality as a societal problem, thus perpetuating stereotypes and harmful binaries that reinforce the very inequalities that are meant to be challenged (Boesten and Wilding 2015, Campbell 2007a, Franke 2006, O’Rourke 2011, Sjoberg 2011).

Collective memory can crystallize in problematic ways when, for example, criminal tribunals or truth commission experts solicit testimony of sexual violation specifically from female witnesses (Franke 2006, Ross 2003, Theidon 2007b). This generates the risk of popular identification with specific aspects of women’s experiences, leaving significant material out that might render their full

⁷ In El Salvador, men are “much more likely to be the victims of sexual violence than is recognized by the academic or policy literatures” (Leiby 2015, 135).

experience more faithfully. The former does not at all mean that instances of women's sexual violation should be ignored; however, we should be cognizant and critical of the ways that public testimony can shape survivors' ability to give meaning to their experiences of pain, their needs, and their realities, both for themselves and for collective memory (Franke 2006, Hamber 2016, Hayner 2001, Nesiah 2006). We should also be cognizant of the ways that eliciting testimony can harmfully perpetuate the unequal distribution of shame in society (Theidon 2018). To serve justice and truth-telling more faithfully, TJ theory and practice can further consider the silences around men's sexual victimization and the implications for women to bear the "narrative burden" (Theidon 2018, 147) of sexual violence (Dolan 2018). TJ studies should further consider how women's testimony on sexual violence can disarm or reinforce already existing social gendered messaging around shame (Brown 2006, 2008).

(3) Men and masculinities are an emergent field of study (even within feminism), so for the most part the topic remains unexplored in the transitional justice and peacebuilding studies literature specifically (Cahn and Ní Aoláin 2010, Hamber 2007, Theidon 2009). My research speaks to gender and transitional justice scholars who emphasize the need to explore alternative masculinities and thick description of the complex diversity of masculinities in peacebuilding and transitional justice processes in the everyday (Hamber 2016, Theidon 2009). This can help us shift the focus of our analyses from the prevention of violent masculinities to, instead, considering "how hidden masculine cultures operate within a variety of hierarchies and social spaces" (Hamber 2016, 30). Other scholars propose exploring the factors that structure survivors' vulnerability (Carpenter 2005, Dolan 2018, Theidon 2007a). In my research, I follow these scholars' proposals and also suggest focusing on factors that structure survivors' agency. As many other populations involved in political violence, the individuals whose lives I explore are not only victims, but also individuals who have actively engaged in social and political participation. Accordingly, exploring the factors that structure their agency

helps us understand how they reclaim power over their lives. These kinds of efforts can help expose and untie the often invisible strings of gender inequality that weave together periods of “war” with those of “peace.”

(4) Transitional justice mechanisms, especially truth-telling initiatives like truth reports, often identify temporally bounded periods of violence (i.e. wars and dictatorships). While this artificial separation is of vital importance for fact-finding on past abuses, social analysis concerned with the gendered consequences of political conflict should also interrogate the continuities between “times of war” and “times of peace” by exploring the underlying structures of inequality operating throughout time (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, Grandin 2005; Nagy 2008; Theidon 2007a, 2018). For example, scholars have explored the continuity between physical forms of violence (i.e. sexual violence against women) during war times and structural forms of violence that persist during times of formal peace. Gender-based violence and social, economic, and political marginalization are not only intertwined, but also mutually constitutive (Boesten and Wilding 2015, 78; Duggan and Abusharaf 2006, Nagy 2008, Ní Aoláin 2006).

(5) In relation to points (1 and 2) above, when holding gender equality as a guiding principle, transitional justice efforts and related research should bear in mind how testimonies of violence are elicited from survivors. Despite their positive results, conventional justice and truth-seeking mechanisms have sometimes generated silence and lack of interest from women (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015, Dembour and Haslam 2004, Franke 2006, Ní Aoláin et al. 2018, Porter 2016, Ross 2001, Treacy 1996). In fact, some scholars have documented how justice-seeking efforts have been disempowering for them (Aron et al. 1991; Hamber 2016; Theidon 2007b, 2012). For example, they have been shown to produce re-traumatizing effects in various instances by promoting damaging stereotypes about women as passive victims (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Campbell 2007a; Franke 2006; O’Rourke 2011; Ross 2003; Sjoberg 2011; Theidon 2007b).

Yet, the manipulation or appropriation of women's narratives of suffering is closely related to the appropriation of men's testimonies (Dolan 2018, Hamber 2016, Franke 2006). This is often a less-considered argument, albeit one I would like to emphasize in my research; femininities and masculinities emerge in relation to one another, and in the context I study, this interdependence is pivotal to the rights-claiming and therapeutic work that survivors of torture can access. While it is understandable that women have been prioritized in TJ efforts to account for gender due to their historic position of disadvantage, embracing gendered narratives should further the rights and equality of all gender identities (Hamber 2007, Porter 2016): "we should see victims first and their gender second" (Dolan 2018, 87).

While in the literature we still find a prevalent underlying assumption that victims need to exert public voice (in the style of legal testimony), instead we need to consider what *kind* of access to public voice is desired by victims themselves. Bodies—perhaps most notoriously women's, but ultimately all—can become sites of the visible enactment of power, producing shame as a residue (Franke 2006, 820). But other pathways are possible to allow survivors' bodies to be sites of their own citizen power, and for the redistribution of shame to flow from victims to perpetrators (Burt 2019, Theidon 2018).

Recent developments in Central America, notably Guatemala and El Salvador, suggest a hopeful pathway towards holding criminal trials that combine victims' interests and sense of reparation with the legal attainment of justice (Burt 2019). In the historic Sepur Zarco sexual slavery trial of 2016 and the 2013 genocide case against Guatemalan former dictator Ríos Montt involving indigenous women's testimonies on sexual violence, the legal procedure minded the risk of re-victimization, affording victims special protections and evoking expert witnesses to provide critical political-historical context to frame sexual violence as a deliberate and punishable war strategy (Burt 2019). In neighboring El Salvador, after meeting with Sepur Zarco victims, women survivors from

the El Mozote massacre decided to testify on sexual violence for the first time in open court in 2019. It is imperative to continue exploring the ways in which justice initiatives can successfully combine legal prosecution with upholding victims' interests.

3.3 RESULTS: GENDERED MOMENTS OF VULNERABILITY AND AGENCY

The results shared in this section highlight the “work” of gender in the lived experience of former political prisoners in El Salvador, which reflect aspects of both vulnerability and agency for survivors. While I outline certain experiences in an effort to cover the most salient themes around gender, they are not a comprehensive overview of all gendered dimensions of life, which would arguably be countless.

3.3.1 *Participation in the Revolutionary Struggle: in Tension with Traditional Gender Roles*

As individuals decided to participate in the armed revolutionary movement, they encountered multiple tensions that stemmed from choosing identities that challenged and redefined traditional gender roles (Lagarde 2005, Sharim 2005). Even if for different reasons in the case of femininities and masculinities, these tensions characterize conflict emerging between roles linked to the family and roles linked to political life. These strains reflect broader social changes regarding gender roles in Latin America (as in the Global North) emerging during the second half of the twentieth century (Giddens 1992, Jelin 2005, Lagarde 2005, Olavarría 2017, Sharim 2005). Transformations in the traditional sex/gender/sexuality system that predominated in the region accelerated during the 1970s, owing to factors such as: women's increasing participation in the labor force, the precarization of men's employment, structural adjustment policies, the re-definition of the state's role in society, increasing globalization, and demographic changes (Olavarría 2003).

The most prominent tensions that women in my study experienced revolved around the traditional roles of mother and wife. The tensions could be overt or implicit, as these individuals

exercised roles that were atypical for women in their context. Upon asking women in my sample about their involvement as youth in social and political organizations, they mentioned their children and romantic partners almost immediately. An interviewee describes that in the process of deciding to join the revolutionary movement, she and her husband decided to adopt clandestine identities, which involved taking the entire family with them and living in what they called “security houses.” In her case, the decision of joining a political movement was made jointly with her husband:

My husband was already participating in clandestine activities, and of course our children and I went with him into a safe house, a house where comrades would meet in a clandestine way. You can probably understand... a young family with children needed security measures (Gabriela).

Another interviewee describes a pattern that was common among others: being in the armed movement implied having to solve the issue of childcare and often relying on extended family to provide it. Even during their time of active political engagement, women describe their children as an extension of themselves—they either had to come along or they had to be left in secure homes with family members. Most of the women do not speak about fathers or male partners sharing childcare responsibilities with them. Instead, it was often grandmothers or aunts who stepped in to assist with those responsibilities, a pattern that is consistent with traditional gender roles.

Since my children were young at the time... I continued to live with them. We would go from one place to the next, moving from house to house. If I noticed any danger of being persecuted I would tell them, “we need to go,” and I’d put them in a different school. Thank God, at least they were able to adapt well... they quickly got used to their new schools. They did well in their studies. Thank God they never failed or dropped out... But I actually didn’t get to spend time with them. For example, when I noticed I was being followed or realized it wasn’t a good idea to go home, I just didn’t. I’d call my mom and say, “Mom, I’m not coming home and the children are alone.”

She would go stay with them. She would move into our house.... During the time I was imprisoned, my mom stayed with them... It was a forced situation but we made it work (Andrea).

But for those women whose spouses were not politically involved to the same degree that they were, the tensions between a traditional gender role within the family and the role of political activist heightened. For example, Estela describes how her budding political participation made her seriously question the traditional roles that even she had imagined for herself at an earlier age:

It seemed to me that remaining within a normal or traditional family space—the one I had thought about and dreamt of having—didn't make sense anymore. So I divorced my husband. My children stayed with their father. I dedicated myself completely to the revolutionary movement, all twenty-four hours of the day.

However, as in the case of interviewees who were already mothers when they joined the revolutionary movement, becoming involved politically symbolized a very cumbersome decision in emotional terms. Estela's case reflects an extreme along this spectrum, in which political involvement generated rupture with children and with a spouse:

Of course, half of my life stayed behind with my kids. I joined the struggle because nearly my entire generation in my hometown had been assassinated—all my male friends, my female friends. My family was destroyed, and I had a family [with my husband] that didn't understand me. Men are different, though. Women put up with whatever the man does and decides. In my case, [my husband] made me feel very guilty. He told me I would be responsible if something ever happened to them [the children]. He'd make me feel guilty and I would think, "it's true, if something happens to them, I'd feel terrible."

Deciding to participate in the revolutionary struggle became a source of internal strife and marital conflict for Estela. To this day, she still grapples with a sense of responsibility and guilt related to

leaving her children behind, even though she describes having restored a healthy relationship with them through hard work. Often times, women's relationships with children were strained during the armed conflict and children felt abandoned by their mothers to varying degrees. While it has taken years to reconstruct these relationships and regain children's trust, all women in my sample discussed their children's wellbeing as a continuous priority in their lives.

The tension that revolutionary participation created by "pulling" women away from their traditional place in the home involved difficult feelings—sometimes sadness, guilt, or simply pain around the separation they experienced from their children. Femininity was associated with the role of mother to such a degree that individuals engaged in significant emotional and logistical effort to simultaneously fulfill the role of mother and political activist. Even when they adopted life paths that entailed leaving the traditionally-defined domestic realm, they remained connected to that sphere through the perceived need to be present for childrearing.

In different ways, men's narratives reflect a comparable tension between traditional and newer forms of masculinities (Olavarria 2017). When asked about their revolutionary participation, men also speak about the challenge of combining political activism with their immediate family ties. On one hand, they define masculinities in terms of a more traditional duty to protect a national family, leaving their personal home to engage in armed combat. On the other hand, they define masculinities around the vulnerabilities (pain, guilt, shame) that arose as they neglected a more modern masculine role in the home, which would have involved being present fathers and husbands (Olavarria 2017).

In my sample, the desire to protect others through armed combat reflects a more traditionally-defined masculine role. Masculinities here are constructed around what scholars have called "hegemonic" or "militarized" masculinity (Hamber 2016, Theidon 2018, Wetherell and Edley 1999), which is also consistent with memoirs published by Salvadoran former combatants (Ching

2019). In fact, interviewees spent numerous hours describing civil war events and feats that align with this type of masculinity, which has been defined as a performance enacted through a narrow set of behaviors that are viewed as acceptable: for example, masking emotion, disguising fear, and prioritizing aggression and obedience (Eriksson and Stern 2012, Hamber 2016, Theidon 2018, Trenholm et al. 2013). An entire literature has discussed how violent masculinities help perpetuate cycles of violence in society, and how they link to various forms of sexual violence, including during times of war (Kent 2014, Kirby 2013, Miranda 2007, Skjelsbaek 2001, Wood 2009). Interviewees' narratives cannot completely be reduced to the "dark" side of hegemonic masculinity, however, as their descriptions of war situations also reflect worthy qualities like courage and the desire to serve others through actions that involved considerable risk-taking.

Moreover, different forms of masculinities also emerge from the data, which reflect certain cracks in the war hero identity. While gender stereotyping generally influences men in conflict settings to hold expectations to engage in combat, violence, and aggressive confrontation (Hume 2008, Porter 2016), my interviewees' experiences also illustrate a more nuanced practice of masculinities during and after the revolutionary effort involving the expression of vulnerabilities. These mainly associate with the pain of severed family relationships and the loss of home. Talk of vulnerability did not arise automatically in men's narratives, however, as they generally tended to not speak directly about their feelings. They expressed emotionality in other ways and instances when a specific kind of rapport was built: during informal one-on-one conversations, weekly group therapy sessions (organized by COPPES), and men-only focus groups.

Tensions between different notions of the family (immediate versus national) needing protection and engagement characterize the gendered worries experienced by men. Most individuals in my study referred to the duty of having to fight for a greater cause that transcended the individual and the immediate family levels. This gave them a sense of ownership and agency over their lives. At

the same time, it is accompanied by a sense of vulnerability and loss. One of the oldest interviewees in the group, most likely in his seventies, described a concept of the family that prevails in men's constructs around what they valued in their youth:

Since we began the process of becoming convinced [to join the revolutionary movement]... we didn't only think about our families, we thought about all families in general... It took conviction to know it was a fair cause that was worth defending. But we didn't only defend it. We made it our own cause... from the get-go, we developed that consciousness around it (Armando).

Another man describes a similar concept of the family:

My family was relegated to a secondary position, so to speak. From that time on, I understood the family to be, well, it's all of us. In fact (...) family involves our entire community, the people, the entire country, all of Latin America, the entire planet. So, I can basically say that when I left, my family was relegated to second place. Actually, I just couldn't be with them anymore. It wasn't ever the same (Manuel).

Many men in my sample still struggle to resolve these tensions. Men's choice to prioritize broader definitions of the family through their political engagement created notable pressure on their relationships with spouses and children. Interviewees repeatedly mention the disappointment their political activism generated in their immediate family environment. The following example highlights this, as the interviewee laments losing the prominent role he used to have in his nuclear family:

We were prepared— all of my compañeros and I were prepared to give our lives up... That's when it started to have repercussions on my family. I definitely felt the effects... as she [my wife] got

*very upset. Because you think, “darn, I was the head of the household and now there’s nothing left.”
Ah, the consequences!*

When speaking of truncated family or romantic lives, they refer to neglected children that have still not forgiven them or have not entirely succeeded in life a result of their decision to leave home. Neglecting their ties to immediate family often implies losing an important social space of belonging and “failing” as a present family member. Mariano provides an example of near family fragmentation:

My children always went to school. My partner... she’s around, but she doesn’t agree so much with [my political engagement]... well, she and I have actually started the divorce process. It’s going— well, no comment! (...) Let me tell you something ironic (...) Three months ago my son left [migrated to the United States], he’s been up North for three months. Not my daughter... she just graduated. The boy didn’t get to graduate. Possibly something affected him, either he was extra sensitive, or maybe I failed him at some point, because he didn’t make it to graduation. He was in school for Industrial Engineering. He didn’t make it, something on my part probably failed.

Damián describes his sense of loss around home and family, which crystallized on the night he was kidnapped by security forces:

... the past screwed me over. That moment when I was taken out of my home in the middle of the night truncated my life. It made a crack in my own structure and now I’m feeling that crack. I had mentioned I have a family. I have kids but I’m not with them because they’re already adults and they fend for themselves. We had a house that we built for the family. Later on, I came to be homeless... (...) I went from living in my own home with my family to living in a rental place by myself. Off to start a new life.

Damián, like other interviewees, describes how his current sense of self is markedly shaped by the experience of political imprisonment, which resulted from his decision to engage in revolutionary political activity. Most men in my study express a similar frustration about the past: while some present their role as passive (“something was taken from me”), others emphasize their agency (“I chose to be a guerrilla and endured the consequences”). Roughly, half of the interviewees fit into one or the other category.

An example that articulately reflects the sense of duty to protect the nation while leaving the comfort of the home behind and separating from loved ones (especially romantic partners) is a piece of written prose that an interviewee shared with me. The writing provides a vivid description of the inner workings of masculine emotionality in this context, and a man’s perspective on his relationship to women. (In order to remain close to the Spanish version, I have kept the original punctuation).

And we renounced you... without ever ceasing to love you we made you believe, and we made ourselves believe that the war or the organization was what we loved... we didn't say back then that we learned to love in the way we learned from... you.

Without waiting for there to be a reward, without imagining the possibility of finding you again, without announcing our departure, without anything... with you all, always in our memory... mother, sister, woman, dream, image, reflection, idea... the wait.

Drawn out on the white blue and orange cloud balls in a sunset, in the raised line of a mountain range, you whispered in our ear through the ruffling sound of leaves, of pines, of oaks, or other balms, things we did not understand but translated as beautiful and we closed our eyes to imagine you doing well, thinking of us, praying for us, waiting for us and we opened them, horrified by reality

or amazed by the beautiful way in which the people manifest their love, we didn't understand how the human mind could produce so much pain and how so much pain could be the seed for new life...

How can I tell someone I love that I love her? If the answer will be... if you love me stay, don't go, come back... how can I return to combat if I'm sad... and the years went by, the battles, the nights and their dead and you were alive, like every breath on my back, like every morning facing my future and I think of that when I say you must know how much I love you and when I say how much my fingers aren't enough to count the multiple moments I think of you...

And what if none of this were true? For sure I would still have mom to cry with for the woman I no longer have, for the children who left, for the siblings who'd rather believe I'm dead, for the compañeros [comrades] who know I'm alive...

Those compañeros who know that above everything else... After so much dreaming and so many nightmares... I still dream. Of you... I still dream.

While much could be said about this passage, I would like to emphasize that it reflects aspects that showed up in men's discourses throughout. In this excerpt, a man elaborates his experience and sense of self in relationship to women, whether they are his mothers, sisters, or romantic partners. He channels the difficulty of separating from loved ones through the figure of women. Such an emotional connection serves this man, who is away fighting "on the hills", as a source of inspiration, strength, and motivation. It is an ever-present reality for him. Also, the speaker expresses a sense of duty in having to leave for combat and not being able to stay as the women in his life would expect or desire. The man leaves without being able to say when and without making women part of that conversation either. By doing so, he is keeping a more traditional feminine role

in mind, which associates with the domestic sphere and the ability to nurture, express feelings, focus on home-making, and provide emotional support (Jelin 2005).

Also, his view echoes cultural ideologies of women as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Hollander 2001, Westbrook and Schilt 2013). Therefore, the narrative offers little room for defining the feminine role as an equal participant in the revolutionary movement, and suggests only the *compañeros* [male comrades] will remain close, sharing and understanding the experiences involved in guerrilla warfare. His connection with a feminine figure who represents company, affection, and inspiration remains present even as he experiences separation and longing throughout time; this comforting sensation stays in the speaker's life even after the actual loss of children, romantic partners, and siblings.

This kind of perspective may be precisely what frustrates some of the women describing obstacles they faced when trying to participate in political movements as men's equals (described below). The speaker here, as happens in multiple masculine narratives, does not portray women as an equal partner in the revolutionary struggle. Even when men did talk about women's participation in the revolutionary struggle, they often spoke of women on the frontlines of human rights work or spouses who worked arduously to support them while they were in prison. These latter feminine roles—the mother or wife who fights for human rights in support of their male relative—is more prevalent throughout discourses. This emphasizes the kind of environment faced by women in my sample; like their own romantic partners, these male *compañeros*—whether consciously or not—expected them to fulfill traditional gender roles.

3.3.2 *The Contours of Interrogation and Torture: Signifying or Describing?*

Generally, women's narratives focus more attention on the meanings and feelings involved in interrogation and torture while men spend more time describing facts and physical effects on their

bodies. As mentioned in my methodological discussion, I did not ask interviewees directly about the details of this experience for ethical reasons, so narratives emerged on their own. Moreover, elements of shame and intimidation emerged in women's narratives, which also focused on sexual aspects. Men did not describe this kind of intimidation, sexualized or not. While silences are by definition unspoken, men's silence about this is noteworthy, given the prevalence of sexual forms of torture applied in El Salvador: 66% of victims of sexual violence in Salvadoran detention facilities were men, a finding that was confirmed by the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, the CDHES (Leiby 2015, 134)⁸.

Women's descriptions reflect how identifying with a feminine gender role involved a power advantage of an oppressor over the individual that became an important part of the interrogation. Intimidation regarding bodily harm was one thing, but certain sexualized elements of intimidation added an additional layer of fear and threat to their experience. The following excerpt belongs to a woman who was eighteen years old at the time and experienced beatings and intimidation led by a female officer accompanied by other men:

She made me take off my dress, without taking off my blindfold, only my handcuffs... "Take off your socks", so I did. And "take off your bra", so I did. But before I took off all my clothes, I began to talk to her, about all the stuff she questioned me about... and I treated her in familiar terms [using the informal "you" in Spanish]... The first slap came, "you are not going to treat me in such familiar terms, you big whore, I'm not your sister." So I felt my cheek burning. It's so painful to be slapped in the face... "Now take your dress off." So I did. "Oh, gracious God, maybe now... maybe now they will rape me," I thought. And "take off your bra" ... and she said, "Look at her! She's young but already spicy," referring to my breasts. I heard a lot of people laughing, it was very masculine laughter.

⁸ "The most frequent forms of sexual violence used against detainees were sexual humiliation (42 percent), rape and gang rape (23 percent), sexual torture (21 percent), and attempted or threatened acts of sexual violence (11 percent)" (Leiby 2015, 133).

I turned my face upward like this, to peek under the blindfold, and all I saw were tons of feet. Boots. I couldn't see any further. They wouldn't stop laughing and they were all male. And I told her, "well, then we're even. You shouldn't treat me in familiar terms since you're not my sister either."

Even while there was a woman leading the interrogation, she adopted a masculinized role characterized by asserting authority, aggression, and sexual objectification of body parts associated with femininity. The presence of other men ganged up around her created a very noticeable masculinized and threatening environment, involving shaming of a gendered nature.

Another woman describes the psychological elements of torture that affected her the most. This reflects the weight of emotional aspects in defining the interrogation experience for women:

My biggest fear wasn't so much about physical torture, because it was one of the things we all knew could happen to us... but I fell apart when I heard things [during torture] that they knew about and were true. I wondered, "how do they know?" "How did they find out?" They basically knew my story. They knew about my cousin, the one who disappeared... they had created an urban cell in her honor. They talked about that group and my brother was in it (...). So then I thought, "I'm completely in their hands and I can't make anything up. I can't say I don't know anything either. But I still kept quiet and that's what upset them the most."

While men in my sample do not readily discuss their emotional vulnerability in regards to interrogation, they more readily describe vulnerability in relation to physical abuse done to their bodies. Men tend to discuss the details of interrogation and the beatings they experienced under torture in more detail than women, although they do not mention any sexualized elements of abuse. Instead, they talk about the physical sequelae of torture on their bodies and acknowledge that they endured severe beatings.

Descriptions of beatings and precarious detention conditions are commonplace. For example, an interviewee describes physical ailments he currently experiences as a result of torture:

I have lumbago now, they've just diagnosed me. Right now I have back pain. They found I have two joined vertebrae and they are exerting pressure on the nerve. So that gives me a tingling sensation... I attribute that part to torture. And the rib, the rib, I felt they hit me in that area. Not with their fist, though... this right here, with the edge of something.

Beyond only the physical concerns and consequences of violence on their bodies, however, men also express more complex elaborations around the intricacies of vulnerability, trauma, and agency. During a focus group session with only a few men guided by a male mental health specialist, participants chose one place in their body that they viewed as a wound or injury from the time of imprisonment. This space created a different environment to the one we experienced during individual interviews or any other group (mixed gender) setting. The insights mentioned below were shared during an exercise in which each person first drew out a life-size sketch of their body with the help of a partner. Then, each person marked a spot on the drawing that represented a site of physical and emotional wounding. The session took a few hours and generated some of the richest exchanges I had with men regarding their experiences of pain and vulnerability.

One focus group participant identified his head as the location of his wound, explaining:

The main spot is the mind and represents what can't be forgotten. They say thoughts are a way to access memory, and if you forget memory, you forget the past. But we still have our memory, and it's alive, it's constantly there, it's permanent. So even if we decrease or cover up the pain, it's always there in our memory.

In this way, the interviewee recognizes the contradiction that shapes many interviewees' lives: the past is a source of identity but also of ever-present pain. Often times, identity, memory, and pain are intricately linked and seem to mutually imply each other.

Another participant, while describing himself as “not very expressive, but analytical” as a person, explains his major wounding around the loss of his family:

*The reason for locating my spot here [in my heart] has to do with history, and basically with the fact that I lost my family when I was imprisoned. That also created conflict with my children, in the sense that they basically became orphans... no father, I was in prison, no mother [as she disappeared]. That's a very long story... about the persecution of my three children. It didn't only happen at the first place they went to. It also happened later, when they were hiding with family. They had to leave and go live with my sister, and then they all went to the United States as *mojados*⁹. My family supported me with this but then my children were captured in the US and they spent about ten days in detention at the border.*

When the participant made this statement, his pain could be felt in the air. It was a good reminder that men and women alike speak of their deep suffering, although they choose different routes to do so. Men tend to describe their feelings in less direct ways, through “objective” descriptions of events and facts rather than by explaining the feelings themselves. However, men reached this depth of expression only when prompted by a mental health professional in the context of an intimately defined focus group, in which he and I participated on equal terms, by doing the same exercises as participants and speaking of our own vulnerabilities.

⁹ An expression used in Central America to refer to individuals who migrate to the United States without documents.

3.3.3 *After the War: Reclaiming the Self*

Women in Post-War Politics: “Our Own Struggle”

A significant moment for women, which did not particularly arise in men’s discourses, was the post-war redefinition of their political participation and identity as political activists. While not all the women I interviewed problematize this period in the same way, most of them speak of different avenues that currently allow them to continue standing up for the revolutionary ideals that encouraged them to undertake political participation in the first place. Contrary to insights suggested by *desencanto* (disillusionment) scholars in post-war El Salvador, who document the loss of meaning around the attempted revolution (Silber 2004; 2011, Sprenkels 2005), women in my study continue to hold revolutionary ideals close to their hearts. They continue to place value on working to achieve ideals of social justice and dignified living conditions for all.

Desencanto implies a “post-war disillusionment where unmet expectations of equality” combined with “daily experiences of poverty [to] create a profound sense of frustration” (Silber 2004, 563). My data certainly indicate feelings of loss and disillusionment around the political achievements secured (or not) by the revolutionary effort, but they also suggest that disillusionment does not necessarily translate into inaction. On the contrary, *desencanto* can be the fuel for further political participation based on redefined revolutionary ideals to generate meaningful transformation—including spiritual, personal, community, and other social activity seeking to improve people’s lives.

At the core of these women’s post-war experience lies the reinterpretation and resignification of femininities vis-à-vis the public/social/political realm. Perhaps these narratives emerge more emphatically in feminine than in masculine discourses because the post-war transformation of femininities involved novel work for women altogether. It “sealed” for them a new way of being in the world, including building networks outside the home and participating

actively in self-led social/political initiatives—an activity that has been traditionally related to masculinity. Women speak of redefining the meaning of “being political” in multiple ways, as this is a question they have all problematized to some degree. Some of them have embraced a feminist identity or continued their revolutionary struggle in other less conventional ways; for example, through church or spiritual dedication, work to empower women and secure their rights, or efforts to achieve justice and reparation for abuses they experienced.

A powerful example of how women redefined femininity around politics is the rupture that a group of women in my sample describe with their original guerrilla organizations. These women, who identify as feminists, realized women’s needs were at odds with the methods and objectives these organizations set forth for the political transition to democracy. They began to hold conversations about women’s experiences, needs, and traumas. In the process, they discovered the depth of women’s experiences that had been invisibilized up to that point, finding ways to turn that newfound “togetherness” into a deeper sense of self-direction and identity.

This process, described eloquently by Estela, has also been studied and documented by scholars (Kampwirth 2004, Viterna 2013). The interviewee had a crucial role in founding DIGNAS, one of the first feminist organizations in El Salvador.

“[We asked ourselves] what have we lived through, what has happened to us?” We came together around April. There were about twenty of us there, planning how to organize the women’s effort. We began to talk, you know, about our lives. For the first time, I heard from others how painful rape could be. My compañeras spoke about rape. It shocked me, it really shocked me. In those meetings, we began to gather strength and started to become aware, in a more intuitive way, of what it means for women to be in this world: what it means for women to be in politics; how our lives have been positioned and what that means; and how up to that point we had obeyed, obeyed, obeyed. Based on those ideas we created the DIGNAS (...) an organization that dignifies us and dignifies women. And because we love life, our slogan became “women

for dignity and life.” And since we wanted to speak out, we also added “for dignity and life, let’s break the silence.” Those were the two slogans (...)

From then on, our compañeros [male comrades] began to question us. They began to slander us (...) I left my organization because I didn’t want to go cry in front of [a comrade in a leadership role]. I would go cry with the compañeras. When they [their masculine counterparts] could no longer fully control the effort, they tried to screw us over, as we say. Of course I still have compañeras [female comrades] who don’t speak to them. They’re not going to speak to them because of all that. I believe that both men and women—we all have to liberate ourselves! But there are some compañeras who are still pretty hurt. They haven’t returned and will not go near them [the men] (...) Sometimes I see them [male counterparts] and in some ways I feel sorry for them because they believe there’s nothing wrong with them. At least we realized what’s going on with us and we do our work.

The effort congregated many types of women involved in the war, and this led to new discoveries about the positive meanings that building a community with other women could hold:

We shared our stories and our experiences, as women involved in the war... whether they were guerrilla fighters, part of urban cells, union workers, peasants, or just urban women. We put them all in there. We made different groups. I was in a group too. To be honest, when I heard others’ stories that were so intense, I began to feel my own stuff was more manageable. My pain became more manageable. We were able to talk about many situations we hadn’t been able to talk about, that we hadn’t been able to share with anyone (...) I was somehow able to minimize what was happening to me and what had happened to my family (Daniela).

Gabriela, another interviewee who participated in the founding of DIGNAS, also describes this crucial moment as a watershed in her life. At the time, she grew aware of what a feminist struggle meant to her:

Our confrontation was no longer only with the government, but also with our political compañeros. We decided to create women's organizations... and we began to fight for our autonomy. We began to differentiate ourselves from our compañeros and to make demands. My main revolutionary motivation became the feminist struggle, women's struggle. I got more involved, and that brought more confrontation with my political compañeros and with my life partner. We [women] began to understand our rights. We understood that we didn't only belong to the party and the community; we also had a life of our own. We began to understand many things. The struggle we had been involved in became a struggle for feminism. I mean, we continued the struggle, but it was our own struggle. It was no longer a struggle for all men and women. It was for our demands as women.

Here, reclaiming political participation involves claiming ownership over their political project and over their ability to determine the course of their lives. Participating in the public/political sphere increasingly becomes a choice that is grounded in the democratic freedom to exercise citizenship (Beck-Gernsheim 2002) by associating and establishing a shared sense of direction: “empowered through their participation in guerrilla and revolutionary organizations, yet excluded due to sexism, those women helped extend the revolution to one of its logical conclusions” (Kampwirth 2004).

As femininities and masculinities are built in relationship to each other, interviewees' narratives here stress how reinterpreting the self and post-war political participation is constructed vis-à-vis the masculine role. The new struggle for femininities also involved reclaiming the body,

sexual rights and sexuality, and freedom from being treated in violent ways by men. Gabriela continues:

...the feminist struggle makes demands that are not general (pertaining to a community or to a social class). It makes demands specifically related to women. We began to learn about things like our femininity and reproduction. The class struggle we focused on previously didn't touch on those topics. We were diluted in the class struggle. That's when we began to learn about women's demands around sexuality, around our body, around violence, around being treated in violent ways by our compañeros [male comrades or companions] and even by the party itself. Previously, we hadn't been able to see that. After participating in workshops and developing awareness, we realized that women continued to be subjugated.

New conversation and collaboration spaces created the opportunity for women to understand the forms of exclusion affecting them and the forms of liberation they wished to pursue. By being created by and for women, these spaces fostered the trust, emotional safety, equality, and understanding that participants' shared experiences provided. As described by interviewees, workshops and meetings became spaces where the language of emotionality and the language of rationality could equally come forth. In this way, political participation took on a collective therapeutic dimension that was able to make visible a myriad of issues that had not yet found a vehicle for expression and transformation. Some of these were: sexual violence, women's subordinate political position, women's role in politics, the preeminence of gender concerns over class concerns (i.e. ideals of dignity and hope that women in particular wished to embrace), displays of emotion that were unwelcome in masculinized organizations, and their general feelings towards dominant masculinities (i.e. criticism on how men handle victimization, resentment towards men's position of power during the revolutionary years).

Even though not all the women in my sample explicitly identify as feminist, all of them express in their narratives and descriptions the idea of gender equality and women's empowerment vis-à-vis male comrades. In one way or another, all their lives were significantly altered as a result of their political participation in the revolutionary movement, leading them to experience extreme feelings of victimization but also to be socially involved and contribute to a nation-wide revolutionary process. As a result of this, many of them were able to take ownership of their lives and connect with abilities and talents that took them outside the home and beyond the traditional gender roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers (Kampwirth 2004, Shayne 2004, Viterna 2013):

Out of all the most difficult or important moments, I like to highlight the fact that participating in the armed conflict took me beyond the four walls of my home. From being a housewife with a limited view of the world, [in the revolutionary movement] I began to participate and play an important role. I felt valued and understood I was strong. I learned I wasn't only a housewife. Up to that point, I had been secluded at home with my young children. [When the revolution started], I finally came out of that small world I was trapped in. I had changed when I returned from the war. I wasn't the same submissive, obedient, fearful woman anymore. I had learned to value myself a lot and I had realized all the potential I had. That was the main lesson I took away from the war.

█ Seeking Justice and Healing: Commonalities and Gendered Tensions

While the following chapters will focus more thoroughly on key aspects of how former political prisoners reclaim power over their lives, in this section I explore specific gendered tensions that arise in the process. (Chapter 4 explores how they seek justice and healing, and Chapter 5 explores the impact of ties to the collectivity in the process of moving forward.)

As described in the case of women above, most interviewees seek some measure of healing and justice to deal with the “brokenness” that imprisonment created. They work with COPPES, which was re-founded in 2008, and participate in labor unions, church organizations, and other civil rights organizations. The possibility of coming together with other people was and continues to be key in former political prisoners’ lives. More than half of the men who participated in my research continue to be involved in the same revolutionary organizations or even work for the government¹⁰. However, individuals who are most actively engaged in COPPES express disillusionment around what they call the “old political structures,” and prefer to focus on their own justice-seeking work. In any case, most interviewees speak of the past and their political involvement past and present with a sense of ownership.

While achieving a sense of togetherness and collectivity seems crucial to claim power over one’s life in this context, when it comes to collaborating with others as victims in therapy and justice-seeking spaces like COPPES, gendered differences get in the way. As shown by the data, femininities constructed around victimization seem to place greater emphasis on experiences of vulnerability while masculinities prefer to emphasize strengths. This difference creates gaps that still mediate individuals’ ability to work through victimization experiences together.

A paradigmatic moment of tension I witnessed during COPPES’ weekly therapy sessions sheds light on this. By coincidence, these began soon after I arrived in El Salvador and it was the only kind of “thick” social interaction between men and women I had the chance to witness. The significance of gender seemed to crystallize and become keenly apparent in this exchange. This space bore important emotional weight for all participants precisely because it brought up issues that lie at the core of how they elaborate their most personal, political and ethical struggles.

¹⁰ The executive power in El Salvador at the time of my fieldwork was in the hands of the FMLN, the revolutionary coalition that became a political party following the 1992 Peace Accords. The FMLN was in power from June 2009 to June 2019, when President Nayib Bukele from the GANA party took office.

Initially, there were about fifteen individuals who committed to participating in ten weekly sessions of group therapy organized by COPPES. The sessions were led by two young women who were senior Psychology students in training. By the third week, a few of the women who have been active participants in COPPES (and founded the feminist organization DIGNAS), decided to no longer participate. I do not have verbatim transcripts of the conversations that took place because the sessions seemed too intimate to audio record, but I attempt a reconstruction of events based on my observation notes.

During one of the sessions, a woman brought up the issue of not feeling emotionally safe in the group therapy space. She had noticed in the previous session that her male counterparts were not displaying the emotional vulnerability she would have expected when discussing experiences of torture and imprisonment. A discussion ensued her comment, in which male participants continued to assert their perspective on the meaning of torture and imprisonment in their lives. In turn, the woman continued to emphasize her own view, increasingly becoming angry, and stating that her point was not being validated and understood by her male peers.

The woman's position was something like this: she expressed that men were putting up "ideological walls" around their pain, and questioned whether anyone could possibly assure that torture had not "messed them up" at a very serious level. This is what she understood her male counterpart to be claiming. She argued that any of the people in the room—regardless of their gender identity—could visit a university classroom and lecture students about the ideological reasons they had espoused in order to engage in revolutionary combat. She assured she could "put on that mask" and speak in an academic context about the subject of torture any day, adding that her political work often required her to do that. However, she claimed, a therapeutic space with fellow torture survivors should be different—in it, you were supposed to show your emotional vulnerability and forget rational justifications, accepting the horrific nature of what had been done to you. You

were supposed to talk about your trauma, your pain, and things that made you feel exposed and vulnerable—she claimed. A couple other women agreed and supported her assertions.

The men responded, not agreeing with what the woman and her peers were expressing. They tried to assure the women: if that is the way they felt, they understood and would support them in their own healing. But they could not be forced to say they were traumatized. Again, they repeated in various ways that their torturer had not gotten the best of them and had not destroyed them. They assured it was all worthwhile thanks to the learning experiences that ensued and the opportunity they had had to be revolutionaries and to take up arms in the name of a more just society. The tension escalated, both parties trying to find some resolution, but the effort only caused more frustration. Men's attempts to reassure the women began to generate further angry reactions. Women interpreted their words as a patronizing effort to portray women as the "weaker sex."

The straw that broke the camel's back was an image that is sealed in my mind. In his most earnest effort to achieve reconciliation, one of the men who had participated in the conversation put his arm around one of the women and said something like, "don't worry, *compañera*, we will support and help you." The woman sat stiffly in her chair, clearly upset. The issue only cooled off because the conversation ended, but the most vocal women during this tense exchange were no longer present at the remaining group therapy sessions.

The following excerpt summarizes the men's perspective on the issue, and hints at why the women's position may have been too much for them to acquiesce to. At least for this group of men, identifying their war experience mostly as traumatic would feel dishonest. The text comes from the men-only focus group that I co-led with a male psychologist, in which a different kind of rapport was built in comparison to individual interviews and the mixed gender therapeutic sessions.

I really don't want to feel like the war is a trauma. I don't drag that along with me as trauma. On the contrary, I think if that hadn't happened (...) maybe I'd have who knows how many children,

and I'd continue being the tenant farmer at the Girona estate. Who knows! So I feel that, speaking for myself... I'm completely satisfied. I view all this [justice-seeking activity that I'm involved in] as a demand [we make] to avoid further abuses, but not as trauma. I feel like it's our payment for— just like when you're in love with someone... all the suffering that comes afterwards is part of your payment for the happiness you enjoyed during a period of time [with that person]. Whenever I'm having a shitty time, I tell myself, "damn, I've had such a great time, and the last thing I'll have to do is pay for it." I feel that torture and the other stuff was just the bill for everything I got out of this. Look, my knees are all screwed up, my feet are ruined [where torture was applied], yes (...)

But if I could, I would gladly give someone the chance to be a guerrilla if they got to experience the badass stuff we lived through, because I think it's all fascinating. I don't think there's a more badass profession than being a guerrilla. Definitely, you get to have the time of your life... Despite all the darkness it creates, there are also incredible moments.

The sincerity and enthusiasm with which this participant shares his interpretation of the past highlights the rich narratives that healing spaces can accommodate when participants feel comfortable to openly share their experiences. A sense of gratitude and awe infuses this survivor's narrative; while he recognizes elements of vulnerability as a result of his war experiences (including torture), to him the overall balance is positive. What propels him forward is not to dwell on his experience of victimization but rather to focus on the positive lessons he derived from what he lived through. His words imply that he prefers to frame his identity as former political prisoner as a service to others, rather than as fixated on trauma. In other words, he prefers to emphasize the strengths he derives from his past experience rather than the vulnerabilities. By doing so, he asserts his agency in refusing to dwell on pain or speak about his experiences publicly in the fashion his *compañeras* would have liked during the therapeutic sessions. Just as researchers have spoken of the

danger of appropriating women's discourses by eliciting testimony in pre-scripted ways, men in this case are resisting a similar kind of appropriation.

Daniela, albeit not present in the group therapy sessions, spoke during her interview to the kind of experience that women in the group therapy sessions probably yearned for in the mixed gender therapy space—being able to safely work through painful experiences with fellow torture survivors. Daniela does not currently participate in COPPES, and she was one of the founding members of DIGNAS. Describing a sense of togetherness she has felt around other women when discussing victimization, she explains how that experience allowed her to move on. Her words also emphasize the interplay of vulnerability and agency, of brokenness and empowerment present throughout discourses:

I think DIGNAS and their work helped me a lot... a lot. I was able to get things out that I had never been able to talk about even with people that were close to me. And it was healing. At the time, it was healing and liberating to a certain point. But going to therapy, [which is] something more serious (...) sometimes I feel that would prolong the pain and sadness. That's just my perspective. I really do think about it a lot.

At a certain point I came to say, "this happened to me and that's it. It didn't happen only to me. It happened to many people in this country. We can keep surviving and we can continue moving forward." Sometimes I think I have overcome it, but when I speak about it, my voice still cracks. I don't know, there are definitely things that still linger inside of me. Obviously, I may have to do more exhaustive and deeper work to be able to— I don't think "forget" is the right word, but maybe just "re-elaborate" the experience. And those re-elaborations might take me to—maybe it's not really acceptance, but something like valuing the experience for what it was... for what happened, what I lived through.

Daniela also elaborates through a very rich description how she deals with painful experiences of the past. Recognizing that building community with other women around healing was fundamental to come to terms with torture, she even prioritizes this form of collective-based healing over the idea of individual therapy.

There is ample richness in the ways that women and men find to process the experience of torture and political imprisonment. It is certainly not my interest to take a side, but rather to identify a core issue here: how gender representations allow individuals to make sense of their painful experiences and therefore access reparations. In this case, understandings displayed by the gender identities represented in my sample did not allow for any bridges to be built in the mixed gender therapeutic space.

These gaps may reflect what scholarship in social work and psychology, specifically Relational-Cultural Theory, concludes about the gendered displays of self-conscious emotions like shame (Hartling and Lindner 2016, Hartling et al. 2000; Tangney and Dearing 2002): social messages of shame are organized around gender (Brown 2006, 2008; Else-Quest et al. 2012). Research on the gendered effects of shame in victims of sexual violence also point to significant gender differences (Weiss 2010a, 2010b). For men, showing weakness is typically a source of shame; for women, shame typically results from not fulfilling a wide-ranging set of social (and often contradictory) expectations around family, work, community, etc. (Brown 2006, 2008; Weiss 2010a).

Therefore, in this case, engaging in displays of vulnerability may seem especially risky for men. On the other hand, while femininity is also surrounded by negative messaging around social displays of vulnerability, research shows that building a safe community around sharing this emotion is key for women's achievement of wellbeing (Brown 2006, 2008). While this research stems from a United States context, the comparable definitions of traditional/modern gender roles in Global North societies and Latin America suggests the plausibility of these interpretations. In the

Salvadoran context, and as a result of prominent social-cultural ideologies on gendered behavior, the masculinities-vulnerability link may be doing very different work for survivors than the femininities-vulnerability link.

The views expressed above reflect the best way that individuals have found to face their “brokenness” and vulnerability, whether they call it that or not. As far as I could observe, women in my sample have found safe spaces with other women to discuss their painful experiences. Men, to my knowledge, have not yet to the degree that women have. In both accounts mentioned immediately above, however, symbols of brokenness (knees, feet, a cracking voice) manifest themselves in equal measure. Women and men may have to continue working separately in order to achieve a productive level of comfort in the presence of others, because all survivors carry with them considerable sequelae. Mental health experts I worked with claimed that a fruitful path forward involves holding healing spaces separated by gender identity; in this way, it would be easier to generate rapport, feel included, and exert voice in equal measure. Once individuals reflect on the gender representations that shape their lives, they would be able to hear their peers across gender divides without demanding that they express themselves in any given way. This would be an important task for COPPES to consider, and should be a crucial element of any reparation program or policy targeting political violence survivors.

3.4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter explores how the lived experience of former political prisoners in El Salvador is shaped by gender. Structured around the double character shaped by vulnerability and agency, these experiences reveal the “work” that gender does in three key moments: (1) involvement in the revolutionary struggle, (2) torture and imprisonment, and (3) reclaiming the self after the war. In

various ways, gender proves to be significant in these narratives by shaping behavior and understandings of reality.

During the revolutionary struggle, the tension between traditional and modern gender roles defied individuals to find a balance between their family lives and their political engagement. On one hand, women began to question their traditional gender roles as mothers and wives in the home through their new political participation, which implied substantial managing efforts. On the other hand, men adopted revolutionary identities consistent with traditional “hegemonic masculinity” roles which more often than not implied fully abandoning their modern-type roles as present fathers/husbands, thus creating painful family fissures in their lives.

Regarding torture and interrogation, a tension between signifying the experience versus describing it in factual terms characterizes the “pull” of gender. While feminine narratives focused more on the meanings and feelings attached to this experience, masculine narratives gave greater attention to describing facts and physical effects on the body. Women also mentioned elements of shame and intimidation that men did not.

Regarding the post-war period and the process of reclaiming the self, women experienced a significant moment that did not find a comparable juncture in men’s experience: the fuller questioning of traditional gender roles (initiated with revolutionary participation) that eventually grew into a new way of defining Salvadoran women’s participation in politics. This is an experiential background that women bring to their current participation in COPPES, a space in which gender seems to create certain tensions around healing and therapy in mixed gender spaces. As suggested by the data, in this context victimization intersects with femininities and masculinities in significantly different ways—women generally emphasize aspects of vulnerability in a healing/justice-seeking context, while men prefer to emphasize aspects of strength.

This difference deepens a gap I observed between gender identities, since vulnerability—precisely the substance of therapeutic spaces—generally associates with different social meanings in the case of femininities and of masculinities (Brown 2006, 2008). While showing weakness in a mixed gender space for former political prisoners may seem risky for men (who are socially sanctioned for displays of “fragility”), for women sharing vulnerability more openly is not only more socially acceptable according to prevalent gender norms, but seems vital in finding a sense of community and wellbeing (as shown by women’s experience in my research and by academic research on shame). This, of course, does not imply that women should bear the social burden of being the more “vulnerability-prone” gender group, but rather points out ways in which prevalent gender norms may facilitate or hinder the construction of justice-seeking/healing spaces based on honest and respectful relationships.

By exploring these questions through the data above, I have spoken to five important challenges that persist for transitional justice theory and practice in regards to gender: equating women with gender, equating gender with sexual violence against women, leaving masculinities out of the gender question, neglecting to see structural continuities in gender inequality between “times of war” and “times of peace”, and engaging the risk of appropriating survivors’ discourses in detriment of more dignifying public truth-sharing.

By analyzing femininities and masculinities relationally, my results highlight how interviewees’ narratives build themselves by continuously referencing their otherwise gendered counterparts. More specifically, the roles women adopted as mothers, wives, revolutionaries, and post-war political activists throughout time were defined in relation to masculinities, and vice-versa. This finding also highlights the need to adopt an understanding of gender that transcends a narrowed focus on women and on sexual violence. In fact, the gendered dimensions of political violence appeared through the myriad life situations that interviewees found themselves in, such as:

engaging in politics, staying/leaving the home, being a parent, being a spouse, improving a national population's access to wellbeing, being tortured and imprisoned, expressing woes and pains, and reinterpreting their identity in the war's aftermath. All these moments happened through the lens of gender and in relation to others' gendered behaviors and expectations.

Furthermore, providing thick description on the process by which former political prisoners reclaim power over their lives allows us access to nuanced understandings of victimization and empowerment in survivors' own terms. For example, these kinds of understandings may illuminate the reluctance of women and men documented in the literature—each in their own fashion—to discuss sexual victimization in pre-ordained ways. Results also emphasize the continuities of gender inequality throughout times of war and times of formal peace. For example, in this context, the sociocultural roots of prevailing norms that frame women as “physically weak and sexually vulnerable” (Weiss 2010b) arguably shaped their torturers' intimidating and violent behavior as much as their male political comrades' adversity when women broke off from revolutionary organizations after the war. Arguably, the same underlying sociocultural norms defining men as strong, self-sufficient, and powerful (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Weiss 2010a) that led male research participants to leave home as revolutionaries now condition their post-war vulnerability of feeling separated from family.

The thick descriptions provided here offer insight into how survivors may desire to exert voice in public instances focused on reparations and justice-seeking. The key question is *how* these opportunities are created and constructed. Women in my sample expressed the need to feel emotionally safe in order to speak out about traumatic experiences. While men did not explicitly express this as the women did, their refusal to participate in the therapeutic space in the terms that women desired convey the same fundamental need. For different reasons, men and women represented in my study seem to be engaging in what anthropologist Audra Simpson calls

“ethnographic refusal”¹¹ (McAllister 2013; Simpson 2007, 2014). On their part, women refuse to bear the burden of victimhood and vulnerability alone in their collective mixed gender spaces, while men simultaneously resist describing their experiences in a predetermined way (through the lens of victimization and vulnerability) that does not feel honest to them. But the meaning of “feeling safe” also relies on dominant gender scripts, and until these gender scripts are interrogated, such a sense of safety will unlikely happen automatically. Men’s refusal to discuss any element of sexual victimization during my research likely speaks to the extreme position of vulnerability that discussing this topic would put them in vis-a-vis a female interviewer, the weight of shame around these issues in Salvadoran/Latin American society (Mantilla Falcón 2005, Neumann and Anderson 2014, Porter 2016, Theidon 2013), and the little practice men seem to have in speaking with others about situations that made them susceptible to harm.

At the same time, most women avoided the topic of sexualized forms of victimization with me, even when they suggested there was a gendered dimension to repression that caused them considerable suffering. I interpret their silence to also be a form of agency. This silence is likely a way to resist the prevalent shame around sexual victimization and the stereotypical image of a victimized woman. In the Guatemalan context, scholar Carlota McAllister has found a similar choice made by women to remain silent (McAllister 2013)—a silence that only in recent years has been pried open by two key trials placing victims’ needs at the forefront of justice initiatives (Burt 2019).

These results highlight that gender intersects with victimization in challenging ways for survivors; these moments of tension need further clarification and work. They can be fertile ground to further learn how to elicit victimization narratives. Which spaces are adequate to discuss vulnerability? In what ways can justice efforts empower victims as opposed to re-victimize them?

¹¹ Audra Simpson defines “ethnographic refusal” as a rejection to a settler colonial structure of research that manifests itself in the right to speak and not to speak (Simpson 2007, 2014). It involves the refusal to be ranked, governed, possessed, or governed.

Such questions can continue to expose what gender equality means in this context. Might it involve sharing the burden of political glories and the shame of political imprisonment more equally? Or, to redistribute that shame onto other societal actors (i.e. particular perpetrators and corrupt political elites?) Might it mean sharing the burden of vulnerability and agency more equally, or in ways that feel more honest and respectful to all gender identities involved? Based on my empirical data, a few clues to foster safe spaces for survivors' voice would be: (1) exploring the elements that make individuals feel empowered (i.e. working with others, creating reflection spaces to explore the limiting/empowering aspects of their gender identities); (2) promoting spaces that fuel survivors' self-image as rights-bearers who are able to work with the state, other victim and civil society organizations, international parties, and their peers in order to fulfill justice; and (3) creating healing spaces separated by gender identity; in this way, it would be easier to generate rapport, feel included, and exert voice in equal measure.

As I was told by mental health practitioners working with COPPES, these tensions might find some resolve when women and men do their own individual work to recognize the gendered constructions shaping their identities. This idea was also proposed by a few of the women in my sample. While it is not necessarily my role to be prescriptive, I found the focus groups with men to be especially productive in prompting participants to openly and earnestly discuss their experiences of emotional pain and articulate their narratives of suffering and empowerment. Instances like these can pave the way for new collaborations in justice-seeking and healing spaces for survivors across contexts and gender lines.

Chapter 4. EXPANDING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE: SURVIVORS' DEMANDS FOR A FULLER SPECTRUM OF JUSTICE, RIGHTS, AND MEMORY

Despite the myriad accomplishments of transitional justice (TJ) as a field of knowledge and practice, there is an ongoing debate about its efficacy in Latin America and the rest of the world¹². Around the globe, there is mixed evidence regarding its success (Grandin 2005; Hazan 2006; Kutnjak Ivkovic and Hagan 2011; Mendeloff 2009; Mutua 2015; Nagy 2008, 2009; Olsen et al. 2010; Savelsburg 2010; Sharp 2014; Sikkink 2011; Sikkink and Kim 2013; Skaar et al. 2016; Struett 2008; Theidon 2007, 2018). As a result, critical scholars identify three aspects around which TJ can further develop: (a) expanding the focus from civil and political rights to include economic, social, and cultural rights (McGregor 2013, Mutua 2015, Nagy 2008, Sharp 2013); (b) questioning whether the current approach, generally emphasizing a legalist perspective¹³ (i.e. through truth commissions and trials), actually delivers reparation for victims (Cassese 2002, Clamp 2014, Mallinder 2007, McEvoy 2007, Schabas 2006, Sharp 2014, O'Connell 2005); and (c) producing a “thicker” understanding of transitional justice that supports and represents victims’ interests (Clamp 2013, McEvoy 2007, Sharp 2014).

¹² As defined in the Introduction, this field of knowledge and practice encompasses measures, practices, mechanisms and concerns that “arise following a period of conflict, civil strife, or repression and that are aimed directly at confronting and dealing with past violations of human rights and humanitarian law” (Roht-Arriaza 2006).

¹³ By “legalism”, I refer to the predominance of the law and legal discourse in post-conflict societies and transitional justice. Democratic transitions, including those in post-Cold War Latin America, have tended to prioritize state reconstruction programs of the “normal” criminal justice systems through programs designed to rebuild the rule of law and secure a more efficient delivery of justice (Brooks 2003). In the best-case scenarios, legalism in transitional justice translated into truth commissions and human rights trials. They helped breed important advancements by culturally sanctioning impunity across countries, create legal tools to punish crimes against humanity, and produce vital research on violent histories to avoid their future repetition (Hayner 2011, Mani 2005, Neier 1998, Thakur and Malcontent 2005). In less optimal scenarios, these mechanisms became standard-setting references. Legalism generally refers to how the law tends to shape and regulate our behavior, our political relations, our language, and the way we think (Ewick and Silbey 1998).

Speaking to those dimensions, this chapter addresses my third research aim by describing the notions of memory and justice that Salvadoran former political prisoners draw from to memorialize their experience and claim rights. In a context of state-supported impunity and negligence, survivors desire to see a full spectrum of rights and a full spectrum of justice; in this kind of environment, a multiplicity of solutions are due. Survivors' diverse notions of justice and memory suggest the possibility of expanding justice initiatives and rights conceptions, proposing promising pathways for further development in the realm of TJ.

Considering the overarching scope of the transitional justice arena, “memory” and “justice” are two dimensions that emerge under its umbrella. At times, they may overlap in practice. However, I try to separate them as much as possible by understanding justice as related to initiatives that establish a sense of balance and fairness in social relations, and seek to undo the social harm caused by some unto others. By memory, I understand efforts directed at promoting truth about past abuse, knowledge of history (in terms of the social harm done by some unto others), and a sense of shared belonging and identity based on a common history (Alexander 2003, Halbwachs 1992, Hall 1997, Olick 1999, Schwartz 1996).

4.1 HOW SALVADORAN FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS CAN SPEAK TO PREVAILING TJ PRACTICES

As explained further in the Introduction chapter, the Salvadoran example is apt to understand the challenges facing TJ mentioned above for three main reasons: (1) First, it highlights the contradictions produced in the Latin American region by liberal democracy-building in the transition period, which has tended to prioritize civil and political rights over social, economic, and cultural rights (Andrieu 2010, Arthur 2009, Clamp 2014, Ekern 2018, Mani 2005, Ní Aoláin 2012, Mutua 2015, Sharp 2014, Turner 2013). In El Salvador, even while the democratic model has not

been applied all that successfully, it reflects a generalized trend in Latin America whereby subpar human development indicators have accompanied liberal transitions. In El Salvador specifically, the transition democratic model applied unquestionably by political elites accompanied a “forgive and forget” approach to the past that has simultaneously produced high criminality levels, limited access to healthcare, and elevated levels of inequality and poverty (Acosta and Montiel 2018, Moodie 2010, PAHO 2018, Silber 2011).

While post-war access to political and civil rights such as freedom of expression, association, and participation in fair and free elections has ameliorated in the country, public participation in the country is largely limited to voting (Martínez Barahona and Gutiérrez Salazar 2016, 197; UNDP 2010): a population that could barely access secure levels of social and economic wellbeing has hardly been able to participate in the democratic political process as expected by the guarantees of a procedural democracy transition model. In tandem with that, outcomes for transitional justice have been unfavorable. Today, El Salvador is an extreme case within Latin America for its degree of institutionally-sanctioned impunity, lying at the low end of the accountability-impunity spectrum in the region (Skaar et al. 2016).

(2) Second, the case of former political prisoners in El Salvador provides insight into how post-conflict societies can implement transitional justice measures and practices that complement or go beyond the standard legalist approach in TJ—such as reconciliation or reparation measures—especially in the absence of a strong state. Survivors’ views are important to consider in light of the impunity they face and the mixed evidence we have about whether and how conventional TJ mechanisms (trials and truth commissions) actually deliver the reparation that victims require (Akhavan 2001; Mallinder 2007; McEvoy 2007; Mendeloff 2009, Minow 1998, 2019; O’Connell 2005).

The truth commission in El Salvador was valuable and remains a vital source of truth and information regarding human rights violations committed during the country's armed conflict. But it has also been criticized for generating limited effects (Call 2003, Cavallaro and Albuja 2008, Ekern 2018, Hayner 2001, Martínez Barahona and Gutiérrez Salazar 2016, Popkin 2000, Schermerhorn 2015)¹⁴. Despite significant efforts by victim communities and human rights groups, legal trials have generally not yet worked due to corruption and a weak judiciary.

(3) Third, through thick description of survivors' experience, the Salvadoran case can help us consider the multiplicity of victims' positions in society, revealing that access to rights is mediated by power: aspects like gender, class, type of involvement in the conflict, or social bonds shape victims' experience and needs (Ní Aoláin 2012). Thus, the possibilities for post-conflict restitution can pry open if we focus on exploring how, in the state's absence, survivors imagine a more heterogeneous and participatory TJ landscape. For example, justice practices that originate in the state's absence focused on local-truth recovery, victim and ex-combatant support, and community reconciliation can create space for non-state actors and non-state-like institutions to emerge (Arriaza and Roht Arriaza 2008, Lundy and McGovern 2008, Nagy 2009).

¹⁴ At the time, the Salvadoran truth commission was critiqued by people in government for having established truths that would allegedly lead to vengeance and threaten a feeble democratic order (Hayner 2001, Popkin 2000, Silber 2011). Other critics at the end of the spectrum disliked its neglect of relevant aspects of the country's war violence, such as the participation of death squads and the role of the United States government (Hayner 2011). Some scholars found it an incomplete task lacking depth, which failed to produce, through judicial reform, the justice outcomes it had promised (Sprenkels 2012); this was mostly due to successive governments' deficient political will, which resulted in a weak prosecutor's office and a weak court system (Barahona and Salazar 2016). Others have criticized the TRC report's limited focus on civil and political rights violations, leaving out the structures of inequality or corruption as important culprits of political violence, and applying a script that did not suit the local context (Cavallaro and Albuja 2008). Civil society was not involved in designing its mandate or methodology; human rights groups provided important information but were not otherwise involved (Popkin 2004). Despite any pitfalls, however, at this point in history the Truth Commission remains a key source of truth and information regarding human rights violations committed during the country's armed conflict. Considering the Commission was only given six months to fulfill its mandate and received very limited funding in comparison to similar cases, its contribution continues to be highly valuable (Popkin 2004).

4.2 RESULTS: FORMER POLITICAL PRISONERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF MEMORY AND JUSTICE

The array of ideas about historical memory and justice that I explore in this section speaks to the importance of generating thick description of victims' interests and needs in a post-conflict setting. The absence of competent state action in El Salvador significantly reduces victims' access to the fundamental human right of reparation. By surveying these wide-ranging types of desires and demands, victims' discourses simultaneously expose the multiple and sometimes conflicting layers that shape citizens' powerlessness in society (Mutua 2015).

By exploring emerging notions linked to desired forms of reparation, my results speak to the core issue underlying transitional justice practices in any context: how to restore the victim's "injured soul" and repair the nation's corrupted "moral fiber" (Mutua 2015, 7). Transitional justice scholars pushing for a continuous improvement of the field contend that beyond punishing the guilty, more can be done to ask who has been harmed, what the injury is about, why the offense happened, and what the injured parties' needs are (Zehr 2002). In this process, we may find that actions by international organizations and the state can actually be at fault for citizens' harm (Robins and Wilson 2015): "The question is how to repair society by deepening the legitimacy of public power and the democratic polity" (Mutua 2015, 5).

4.2.1 *Understandings of Memory*

Interviewees share ideas about historical memory that reflect an underlying expectation mentioned across the board—that memory will restore something important to its due place. Historical memory is expected to leave a record of something that does not exist in public discourse or that has been rendered invisible. Survivors' wish to restore the political and historical legitimacy

of their experience, victims' dignified place in society, women's place in society and in histories of struggle, and the place of worthy social justice ideals in Salvadoran collective thinking.

Memory as Political History: Vindicating the Politics Punished by Victimization

Interviewees widely agree on how they would like society to remember their political motivations to join the armed revolution. These political beliefs were at the core of their victimization, and still give meaning to the pains they had to endure during the revolutionary years. While not one of my interviewees has stopped believing in the goals of egalitarianism and social justice espoused by the revolutionary effort, they do hold differing opinions about the extent to which these objectives were achieved. However, interviewees continue to find a powerful source of motivation in the old revolutionary political project destined to disarm social inequality in El Salvador.

In fact, they believe this to be a central component of historical memory. As explained by Ricardo,

I can remember the dead and I can remember my comrades who are still alive. But what about the ideals for which they fought? If we talk about peasants, they fought for their food security. They fought for fertile lands. They fought for a place to live. If we talk about workers, they fought for dignified work and for a fair wage. If we talk about professionals, they fought for good employment that would allow them to display their technical abilities... To me, historical memory means—if we're going to remember them, let's remember them through these concrete facts. That's what historical memory means to me.

Ricardo's words reflect his desire to express the political ideals he fought for in concrete terms. He links his political motivations to seeking dignified living and working conditions for the average laborer in El Salvador.

In a similar vein, Cecilia proposes the need to remember important social struggles throughout history and the repressive responses they were met with:

First of all, memory should help people know about the past and raise awareness... They should be familiar with at least a few critical perspectives. They shouldn't just conform so we can all keep on walking forward. People should know about those times of submission, about processes of struggle, about how [social] movements have been squashed. They should know about workers', students', and peasant uprisings. The causes of injustice should be known. The causes of people's disposition to struggle should be known. They should know that sometimes due to exclusion, mistreatment, and bad [wealth] distribution, people come to say things like "a person who owns [things] gets to have them because they work a lot." But look at peasants and workers and see how much extra time they do! No one pays them for that. Plus, it's extra hours they haven't chosen to work. But if they don't do it, they get fired, and there are lots of people lined up waiting to take the job.

This may be a response to the historic criminalization of social organization and protest in El Salvador (and Latin America more broadly), and also an attempt by torture survivors to validate the reasons underlying their political participation. Interviewees hope that if younger generations understand the roots of the struggle, they will also see the connection between past and current social problems.

Complementing the above quote, many interviewees believe in the educational purpose of historical memory, which could allegedly allow younger generations and society at large to understand the legitimacy of the revolutionary movement. In the following quote by Bárbara, we see an even stronger articulation of the same idea. This research participant would like memory to offset the historical criminalization and stigmatization of the political engagement that brought about repression.

This entire experience [memory and justice efforts by former political prisoners] becomes meaningful for educational purposes. It makes sense to systematize our experience and recover a bit of legitimacy for what we did. It's important to convey that I acted in self-defense. It's not just about justifying ourselves. It's about vindicating that we acted in full conscience but also because it was our last resort. In a way, we are also responsible for the war. But I think it's important to register that legitimacy. If you don't have any other alternatives to defend yourself, then you use whatever resources you can grasp. We believed in what we did and that was the highest value in our effort. It wasn't for any political party, for a better government post, or to obtain political gains. It was due to a host of injustices and instances of abuse that couldn't go on. If we didn't do anything, [those injustices] could even grow and worsen. I think it was all a good demonstration of how peoples can bring about their freedom, in the full sense of the word.

The idea of reestablishing a symbolic social balance seems key here, and appears throughout survivors' discourses. Individuals' sense of reparation is tied to vindicating the meanings that led them to engage in considerable risk-taking. Bárbara emphasizes that violence by the popular movement was exerted in self-defense and adopted as a last resort against brutal government violence. Also, she proposes that the movements' legitimacy lies in its participants' full awareness about engaging: not because they sought selfish gains but—on the contrary—because they defended their freedom and stood up against abusive situations.

Memory as Present: A Vehicle for Resistance and Political Awareness

The above is related to another goal that interviewees associate with collective memory—becoming a tool for political awareness and resistance to injustice. When discussing the social problems that led to civil war violence, interviewees draw connections with current social issues like gang violence and criminality, posing that knowledge of the past could help current youth who are seemingly aloof and disconnected find a sense of purpose within society.

For instance, Damián expresses his view on how becoming acquainted with history could help younger generations take charge of the nation's future, resisting the influence of foreign powers, technological distractions, and consumerism. He views memory as a source of Salvadoran identity and a roadmap to lead the country on a path to locally-defined "peace" and "development":

It's important that young people know history... and that they know what led to the different processes we went through. They should know why we went through them and to what ends. They should be able to know what moment of time they're living in. By knowing history, they would understand their responsibility better. They should know... who the young people were then, and what those young people did. That would help them understand their responsibility in the current moment so they can lead the country through a path of peace and development—not in the way that transnational corporations and the United States embassy propose, but in the way that we Salvadorans want it.

We have been confronted with learning not to fear anything—threats, repression, or letting ourselves be drawn to consumerism. The technological revolution might be good in some ways if you know how to use it but it also draws young people away from reality. Youth need to place themselves in the current moment, in the right space. They need to make a sacrifice and define the future. Otherwise, if they don't take the lead in carrying our society and our country forward, it's like we're all on a ship that's off course. We're headed towards an abyss and, for many people, that works better... It works better for the haves.... It all works in their interest.

For Damián, as for many other interviewees, remembering the past can help resist the influence of foreign powers in defining desirable outcomes for the country. Consequently, interviewees propose memory to be a vehicle in support of youth finding a path to conscious citizenship and continuing social struggles wrought by past revolutionaries.

María conveys a similar view of memory as a means of resistance and awareness because she sees it as an important mechanism to dissuade Salvadorans from accepting abusive and unequal conditions:

I think historical memory is very important. It's important for it to be written down, for people to remember, for people to tell stories about why things happened. That way others will learn to not only keep accepting, to keep bowing their heads. Are we always going to be this way? Will there always be rich and poor people, will there always be some who own cars and yachts while others don't own anything? (...). "Why did we do it?" we usually ask ourselves. So that things wouldn't repeat themselves. We did it so that our children would know we are not passing them down a world we did nothing to change.

Like the previous interviewee, María expresses the drive for historical memory to be a means to transmit awareness to her children and to youth in general about the extreme inequality that prompted massive social sectors in El Salvador to rebel. Her intention is to convey to younger people a similar spirit of inconformity with the status quo and questioning of severe class divisions. With this, she adds a new dimension to the common theme of “Never Again” in Latin America. In order for abuses not to be repeated, María suggests that citizens need to be aware of and tackle extreme wealth inequality, which she views as the source of political violence.

Estela complements this view by suggesting that memory should raise awareness about how unacceptable authoritarianism is, because it implies exclusion on different levels:

People need to know about the most serious human rights violations, which include torture. Our country needs to know that we struggled for a country of all men and women, based on equality and fairness. Our struggle was for a country without excluded and marginalized people. That's what

justice and truth mean—that no dictatorship should exist, because that always brings silencing.

Rights don't exist in authoritarian governments. That's what memory needs to do.

Her rejection of authoritarianism implies rejecting repression as well as rejecting a country made up by large masses of socially marginalized and excluded people. While she does not mention it directly in this quote, Estela asserts that all rights violations need to be remembered. Memory must translate into the elimination of social exclusion in its various forms; it implies freedom of expression and organization (freedom from “silencing”) as well as freedom from poverty and discrimination.

Memory as Public Commemoration: Restoring Victims' Dignified Place in Society

In addition to wanting their political project to be remembered, interviewees express their desire to commemorate all individuals who died in combat and gave their lives to a “greater cause.” Interviewees want to make visible what still lurks in the shadows—the massive number of victims of systematic abuse during El Salvador’s civil war. This would serve the role of restoring their proper place in society.

The following quote illustrates survivors’ prevalent feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration around the government’s inaction. This research participant demands a stronger commitment by the government towards victims by honoring and commemorating them:

For example, we should hold important ceremonies on Torture Day [International Day in Support of Victims of Torture], which is on June 26. Here, when the International Day for the Right to Truth comes around, nothing major happens. For Torture Day, nothing major happens. So it would be important to commemorate all these dates and ask victims to be there. We still have a lot of work to do around victims, because they still experience a lot of frustration. Many of them ask, “why did I do what I did?” That happens because we don't have a government agenda that considers all major human rights violations. We need a national agenda that includes

agreements from the Peace Accords. We didn't get any of that. We had the Truth Commission on one side and the Peace Accords on the other. And victims have been treated like scum. Victims have been pushed to the side and the quieter and more hidden they remain, the better. It shouldn't really be that way, it shouldn't be that way.

Interviewees demand a state policy focused on providing public space and time to acknowledge victims and the types of abuse they experienced.

Some interviewees also express frustration because they feel forgotten, either by their previous comrades, the government, or society in general. Ricardo, for example, strongly dislikes that his previous political comrades who currently occupy positions of power seem to “forget the people” and take political action that goes against their interests:

All those people who died shouldn't be forgotten, all those people who gave their lives. Individuals who are in government now... those who were part of leftist [revolutionary] tendencies... they shouldn't forget the people. They're actually in power thanks to all those people, you see. But I think they have forgotten about people a lot. Historical memory should keep track of all that.

Roberto also expresses his fear of leaving people in oblivion and calls for a better record-keeping effort by the government. He believes this would help give a due place to all people who died and invested their life energy in the war effort:

It would be fair for the government to have a census of all the people who fought [in the war]. Those people gave up their time, their youth. They went to prison, they endured torture and all types of— you know, all those things they did to us. We should have a census and a record of all those people... if the person who fought isn't there anymore, then their family should receive a benefit. The government should see how to help these people. But in reality the opposite has happened. During the Final Offensive [military operation in November 1989], we took out

truckloads of dead people from either side. So that's what I'm saying. All that effort, all the struggle by those people, it just stayed there.

What troubles Roberto the most is the idea of leaving behind a history of suffering, violence, and political engagement that thousands of forgotten Salvadorans share.

Memory to Deconstruct Gender Inequality

Women who participated in my study point out the importance of including women's experience and struggles in historical memory. They generally believe that historical memory should make amends for an attempted social revolution that neglected gender equality. For example, Raquel points out the veil of silence covering women's struggles. She thinks memory should be responsible for exploring women's experiences and passing them on to future generations:

I believe we need to somehow pass on women's history. Well, it's possible we may write it in our favor, but that's also important to pass on... I mean that regarding the armed conflict. The same is true about feminism in general and how we pass on women's history, how we restore our history and women's struggles. At times, we forget we [women] struggle just because we haven't been to school or studied [feminism]. But... we do struggle. Often, women make small vindications and you think, "this woman right here doesn't need to call herself a feminist. She's already doing feminism!" We need to look at all that and pass it on, because everything is linked. You see? We need to change these capitalist systems. I don't know how. Don't ask me. But if we don't change them, we'll be going from one crisis to the next, and we won't vindicate women's rights or poor people's rights.

While Raquel is aware that memory might be biased, she values the opportunity for women's subjective positioning to be expressed, especially in relation to their particular forms of social participation and vindication. It is also noteworthy that Raquel, like other interviewees who identify with feminism, view gender inequality and capitalist economic structures as part of the same problem.

Estela speaks about how the history of women's struggle should be portrayed in public spaces like museums. She is frustrated by the way that official memory-making, as conveyed through books written by men, often portrays women in a stereotypical way that helps to perpetuate sexist behavioral norms:

I think we need women's museums too. There are lots of books on memory but they always stereotype women. There's a book by one of our fellow Mexican internationalist scholars who has written other good books. I actually consider him my friend and he's getting his Master's degree in History. When I started reading his book, it made me mad, it made me tear up when I got to the part about a female comrade's rape, and he concluded that she ultimately brought it on to herself. So I realized... men still think like that! I ask myself, what social changes are these people [male political comrades] talking about? What changes are they still talking about?... I think rape is so related to harassment, to that idea that women have to be "picked" by a man. We don't have the right to choose and any of them feel they have the right—and not all of them do it, of course—to grab a woman by force. So, I think we definitely have noteworthy women to put a good museum together.

For Estela, as for other interviewees, deconstructing sexist notions about women, their role in the armed conflict, and their role vis-à-vis men should be an integral part of rendering history more truthfully and critically.

4.2.2 *Understandings of Justice*

Exploring survivors' understandings of justice sheds light on the invisibilized spaces that remain in the aftermath of El Salvador's only partially-implemented peace-building model, which has very little legitimacy in the eyes of victims of crimes against humanity. Tackling the consequences of impunity and a weak rule of law seems key to expanding a democratic culture and polity that is able

to confront the large-scale abuses of the past. Survivors' ideas on justice in this context speak to which rights matter, how rights can be negotiated and secured, and what possibilities of justice can help expand democratic possibilities vis-à-vis the democratization model's infertile results.

Interviewees imagine and desire a wide spectrum of justice initiatives, reflecting different modalities of justice: retributive justice, restorative justice, gender justice, and social justice. Imagining them as complementary and coexisting models, interviewees emphasize a multidimensional view on abuse, violence, and fairness. These views support TJ scholarship pushing for an expansion of the more conventional TJ legal-type practices and mechanisms (i.e. truth commissions and human rights trials). They help open up a conversation about the “thicker” goals that these mechanisms could achieve; for example, further representing the voices of women, socioeconomically marginalized populations, rural survivors of civil war repression, and individuals whose identities lie at the intersection of “former combatant” and “victim”. These multidimensional views on abuse, violence, and—by the same token—of wellbeing and justice speak to the full spectrum of culturally-meaningful ideas that interviewees hold. They view rights-bearing as a process, which seems especially productive for empowerment and social engagement in this context.

Retributive Justice and Trials: the Valued Promise of the Courtroom Dock

In a country whose judicial institutions are highly questioned by social movements and by my interviewees in particular, I expected their focus to deviate from aspirations related to formal justice. However, this is not the case. Interviewees do in fact value punitive justice. Even in a setting of learned hopelessness and lack of trust in formal institutions, interviewees view a court of law as an important and legitimate source of justice for systematic human rights abuses.

The following quote reflects this trend. While individuals highly value the delivery of justice through a court of law, they are also keenly aware of the inefficacies and inequalities implied by the

system. This interviewee in particular values the international pressures that generated attention towards a few prominent cases while lamenting the lack of such attention to cases involving more socially disenfranchised victims:

Some things about justice have worked out, because some cases have been resolved. But how many have been resolved in comparison to all the abuses that took place? I mean cases in which we know exactly what happened. For example, massacres for which we have clear culprits. But no one will do anything about them, because if we make one problem visible, that will expose others. There's an entire chain of culprits and people who are accountable, but there's no interest in going deeper. There's a few cases being cleared up now but only thanks to international pressure. For example, the Jesuits case. It hasn't been closed yet because there are ongoing pressures from the congregation in Spain. I think they're actually behind a lot of these cases. There's even pressure coming from the US. But why does that work? Because that [pressure] makes our political elites understand. But tell me, what about a peasant whose son was disappeared from the hamlet? That case isn't visible. Those cases live in the oblivion of historical memory and only exist in the family's recollection. But they are still there.

An interviewee portrays his satisfaction whenever he sees a member of the military in the courtroom dock and describes how he anxiously awaits justice:

I've seen a few cases that have given me satisfaction. At least they have given me energy to keep fighting to see a member of the military in the courtroom dock. That would be a great victory for the Salvadoran people and especially for political prisoners... We want justice, we want to know. At least I want to know why they captured me, if I was only a student at the time. I want to know who gave the orders, because since that moment my aspirations were... they were slashed... I don't feel

like a defeated person because up to now we've found a way to survive, and here we are. We want to continue seeking justice. We won't tire until we see justice.

As this quote illustrates, the interviewee considers that seeing high-ranking perpetrators in a court of law is a worthwhile goal to fight for, and views the promise of redress in this possibility.

Felipe, another interviewee, states in simple terms that formal justice holds great value to him:

Personally, I've always claimed that justice needs to work based on the legal system. The amnesty that was set up needs to be eliminated in all practical ways and culprits need to sit at the courtroom dock.

Restorative Justice: “Forgive and Restore”

In addition to valuing legal trials as a way of rendering justice, interviewees propose notions of restorative justice as a way to generate redress for survivors. While there is currently no single and agreed-upon definition of restorative justice, it generally emphasizes repairing harm and restoring losses, which contrasts the retributive justice precept of punishment being objective and proportionate to the damage done (Clamp 2014). In retributive justice, crime is viewed as a violation of the law but restorative justice views and responds to crime in a different way (Zehr 2002).

Restorative justice sees crime as an offense against people, not the state, which makes victims, offenders, and the community the primary stakeholders—not the state and its practitioners (Clamp 2014). Victims and communities are central to restorative justice and are expected to be involved in responding to wrongdoing, which allows offenders to take responsibility for their actions and help answer victims' questions. This restores a sense of moral order and disarticulates the victims' position of powerlessness and vulnerability (Clamp 2014). Based on the victim's input, offenders are expected to provide a symbolic or material reparation to compensate for the inflicted damage. But

restorative justice goes beyond “victim-centered” justice because it equally considers the interests of all stakeholders. It asserts that victims’ needs must be met while simultaneously promoting the accountability and well-being of offenders (Clamp 2014).

The following interviewee implicitly proposes a mixture of retributive and restorative justice by asking to face her capturer and tell him directly that he made a mistake with her. In so doing, she demands having a direct connection with the offender and describes a generally unfair social context in which perpetrators have been protected. In this first quote, she describes such social order, and in a second quote she describes her ideas about restoring the harm done:

We need to know who is responsible for abuses, of course. They need to be accountable. We ourselves had to be accountable. Just by being imprisoned we were made accountable too, even if it didn't happen through official justice. We were made accountable but I still don't know the person who captured me or the one who gave the order to do it. I would like to meet him so I can say, “well, you made a mistake with me.” We think there should be practical justice, a true justice that sets a precedent. But I feel that the state and most recent administrations have privileged those men instead. They have rewarded them by sending them off to other countries, enjoying privileges and good salaries. In the meantime, we stayed here, working hard to earn a fair wage and withstanding hunger.

Rita’s words convey a sense of marginalization and unfairness regarding how the political system and judicial institutions have treated those with reduced economic power. She believes political prisoners like herself have already been disfavored by having to settle accounts before a corrupted justice system during the armed conflict, which denied them a fair trial. Why would the perpetrators not have to do the same? She expresses the need to restore balance in a history that has become lopsided.

She continues her description of justice, emphasizing the importance of its restorative aspects:

Justice is a very complicated topic. It's not just about holding a trial and that's it. There has to be awareness-raising and apologizing... because this is not about forgiving and forgetting, it's about forgiving and providing some restitution. How apologies for human rights violations are offered is important and it's important that we legally try those who committed abuses. I was frustrated because [former president] Funes was the one to apologize and not the administrations who violated rights¹⁵. Actually, I was satisfied to know someone was doing it, but I wasn't one-hundred percent satisfied, because he didn't have anything to do with human rights violations. It's the [political] right that should apologize and that will happen when they become aware they have violated human rights. Instead, they go through life as if they hadn't done anything. That's where I really want them to apologize. I want everyone involved to apologize.

Look, I compare this a lot to a personal situation. My eight-year-old nephew was killed in a road accident. We know the man personally and I tell myself, "it was an accident and it's even possible that my nephew was at fault. But we don't want this man to go to prison." We want him to face us and apologize. We want him to say, "I'm sorry because it wasn't my intention to take that child's life." You see? Something similar happens with human rights violations. People shouldn't say "I'm sorry" just because they have to but because they are actually sorry this event happened under unequal conditions. That's where it gets complicated and that's why I think it's not just about holding a trial. If someone goes to trial and is sentenced, that gives you a certain satisfaction because that case no longer lives in impunity.

But to me, it's not enough. It's enough if they become aware of what happened... about what was done to me and thousands of other people. It's about saying "our actions were wrong and we would like to make amends to you and provide the means to make amends for all this". I don't know, to me the topic of justice seems very complex because it involves reparation, or restitution, or—I don't know what to call it. What I'm saying is a

¹⁵ See the Introduction for a brief description of public apologies made by Salvadoran authorities since 2010.

lot more complicated than just saying “we have justice because they sentenced these people who violated human rights.” I think that would be important too. If we have nothing else, we welcome it. But justice goes beyond only that.

An important component of this version of justice involves an acknowledgement and apology by the offender. It involves restoring a social relationship, based on the offender’s recognition of the offense’s severity and the harm done to the victim. Rita admits how a judicial conviction could create some sense of redress, but proposes that justice will be fulfilled only when those accountable apologize and make amends. Therefore, she rejects the “forgive and forget approach,” but instead proposes a “forgive and restore” approach grounded on mutual understanding and recognition of the harm done.

In expressing her idea of justice, Rita speaks of restitution as the “potential to repair the financial and perhaps relational harms that crime has left in its aftermath” (Center for Justice and Reconciliation 2018). Her description of justice corresponds to a notion of restitution as aimed to repair the victim and make the offender a productive person, providing a sanction that helps to restore a victim to the place they occupied before the offense (Center for Justice and Reconciliation 2018).

Focusing on similar elements of restorative justice, another female interviewee explains,

Sara: To me, justice means knowing who were the people who tortured me and beat me up. It means having them acknowledge what they did, having them acknowledge it was wrong. That would be fair.

Ursula: What about anything else? Would you want a legal trial, for example? Or not necessarily?

Sara: At this point, many of those torturers are no longer alive. Some are very old. So I would ask for them to acknowledge what they did, for society to acknowledge it and to know who they are. That would be enough for me, even though I have also sued the State for violating my human rights.

Sara is clear in explaining that she would not necessarily require a legal trial in her case but that a public acknowledgement by her offenders would be enough.

Another form of restorative justice that about one-third of interviewees mention is psychosocial and medical reparations. In this case, an interviewee focuses on the actual physical damage done to the bodies of former political prisoners through torture:

All victims who were trampled on should be given generalized medical treatment. Many of our comrades had their limbs removed, so they should be compensated. I'm not asking for financial compensation for myself but for all my comrades who were political prisoners... Some of them even had their fingers or fingernails removed.

In this case, making amends for the offense would involve the State taking responsibility for the physical damages that its security forces inflicted upon citizens' bodies.

Multiple other interviewees also speak about psychosocial support—forms of psychosocial therapy to help counter the psychological effects of torture—as a form of desired reparation.

It would be helpful to create centers that offered psychological support for so many people. Today we still see many people who are traumatized and that kind of support would help all those left with psychological scars. That would also add to justice. That kind of help would motivate us to keep moving forward and, you see, any additional motivation would be welcome.

While Rodrigo does not talk about his own psychological scarring, he indirectly expresses his personal need to access psychological support to help him move forward more easily. Multiple interviewees mention cases of people they know who have been physically and psychologically traumatized and who struggle to find a space that brings them some sense of redress and reparation.

Another aspect around which interviewees make demands of the state is materially tangible reparations. Most interviewees mention economic hardship as a result of civil war violence. Ricardo in particular expresses the duty of government institutions to provide economic support to *compañeros* who gave so much of their lives to the country:

Historical memory doesn't only involve claiming, "for our fallen comrades, we swear to vanquish our enemy!" No. It's not about that anymore. We need a new principle. Today we have comrades who are passing away and they need help, their families need help. Sometimes people turn their backs on them. What kind of help do they need? Look, it's not easy to cover funerary expenses. As simple as it sounds, you might need at least five-hundred dollars and they don't have them.

While interviewees seem hesitant to demand any sort of financial or psychological compensation directly for themselves, they do indirectly ask for different kinds of restitution for former political prisoners in general. Of those who mention financial compensation, about one half of them see it as a part of justice. Other interviewees also mention it to say that no financial compensation will make up for the harm done to them and even reject the idea altogether.

████████ Social Justice: An Underlying Prerequisite

In addition to expressing ideas about justice regarding specific civil and political rights violations (imprisonment, torture, political persecution) during the armed conflict, interviewees speak about justice more broadly. Even when referring to justice from the perspective of a former political prisoner, their views are strongly informed by notions of social justice. For most of them, even if punitive or restorative justice were served regarding their arbitrary imprisonment, justice with a capital “J” would not be served until Salvadoran society became more equal and fair for all.

For example, Carmen illustrates her idea of justice by describing an ideal society based on the fair distribution of wealth and the absence of oppression by more affluent groups:

I want every person, every family, to have everything they need in order to live a dignified life. I want the distribution of wealth and goods to be equitable. Conditions and all types of relationships between women and men should also be equitable. I don't want to live in a society or any [social] space where some people lack the basics while others live in opulence. Resources should be better distributed. If we're talking about a business—whoever owns the raw materials, equipment, and machinery should not subdue the (male and female) worker. There should be respect and adequate working conditions—conditions that are dignified for a human being. To me, that's what justice means.

Carmen reflects most other interviewees' views on social justice and the importance of living within a society free from exploitation and stark economic inequality.

Fernando also expresses a similar sense of frustration around the current state of affairs while valuing the political project defended by leftist armed groups during the armed combat period:

Look, I think justice means the same thing we've always been demanding. We shouldn't forget those principles. We began our fight because of exploitation, because of disrespect towards the people, and because justice didn't reach everybody... But we still haven't been able to satisfy what we fought for. Nowadays we see even more acute injustices, more crude injustices... we believed that once we had our own government, all of this would change... but it hasn't been possible. People now have new ideas, though, and they'll continue to fight for them. Things will improve as the general population understands, reads more, and accesses education.

Fernando defines justice as the absence of exploitation and disrespect towards the general population. He views justice globally as something to be achieved through education, knowledge, and general understanding by the citizenry. Ideas of fairness and general wellbeing are implied in his definition of justice.

A female interviewee proposes a comprehensive concept of justice that combines material wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, physical health and active citizenship. She acknowledges that justice is often equated with justice in economic or material terms and while she values that interpretation, she argues for broadening the definition:

Often, people think justice refers to material things. I do think we all have a right to basic human living conditions. All women and men should have them. We should have a decent dwelling, dignified work, and a dignified profession. That's one part. But the other part is psychological, emotional, it's about living a full life. That's the human part. Here, they've taught us that justice means building roads or new homes. That's valuable, but people's lives come before everything else. People's lives have to do with mental health, but here we don't work on mental health... If we don't have mental health, how are we going to have physical health?

Hospitals are full of people hoping to get pain relief. Clinics for women... and women have been more screwed—before, during, and after the war... What these women need is to not be single mothers to a bunch of kids who they're not sure how to feed at dinner or the next day... Or a bunch of kids who will eventually get killed... As long as we don't have mental health, we won't break the cycle. Mental health is not convenient because it's a business for pharmaceuticals, for private clinics, for private schools. Do you understand? What does integral human development mean? We have no ethical references for it here. There's no ethics to understand the integral development of people. We're so threatened, so pushed to see how we can walk over others, learn how to trip others up, how to screw others over. What justice are we talking about? I think it's about harmonizing society, it's about solidarity. Our society's starting point should be justice and mental health. But people are pretty busy with other things, so that doesn't matter anymore (...). Justice is a comprehensive term.

For example, I don't have a house. I don't have a lot of material possessions. But I am a fulfilled woman. I feel happy because life... yeah, I won't deny it, sometimes I want more. But there are hundreds of people in this country living in similar material conditions to mine.... and I have a privilege that others don't. I feel like I have the freedom to say whatever I want in regards to my history, in regards to criticizing the government, in regards to criticizing political authorities. I have my own thinking about what's going on in my country. I have the ability to establish relationships using academic and political tools. But a lot of people don't have that and we should all have that. We should also have material things. But if you have this other stuff, you can figure out how to deal with material conditions. If you have material conditions, though, that won't solve your psychological and emotional situation (...). If they did, rich people wouldn't commit suicide. People with money wouldn't have all the issues they do. Do you understand me?

In her detailed exploration of justice, she discusses the importance of basic decent living conditions for all but argues for the need to broaden the definition of justice to include citizens' emotional and psychosocial wellbeing—which she equates with political wellbeing. By arguing that justice should also include the free exercise of political and civil rights (“freedom to say whatever I want...”), she pushes for a new ethical model and understanding of social development in Salvadoran society.

She finds freedom in owning her history as a former political prisoner and her political activism, even when these freedoms may have come at a high price. While she does not directly mention it in this extract, the interviewee was imprisoned three times for her political activism—once during the armed conflict and two other times after El Salvador transitioned to democracy. All in all, she believes justice should be redefined so as to establish a new moral compass for society based on solidarity. In her view, such a concept should include economic justice, access to physical and mental wellbeing and the freedom to fully exercise one's civil and political rights without fear of

repression. As she suggests, justice is a comprehensive term that includes different aspects of human wellbeing.

Gender Justice: A Key Aspect of Women's Demands

Women emphasize that justice should include gender equality, especially as regards being a former political prisoner. For Genoveva, social justice encompasses finding ways to dismantle exploitation and exclusion produced by class, but also by gender. She refers to her position of exclusion as a woman and believes that justice involves deconstructing patriarchal structures. She specifically refers to the victim community and the political organizations she shares with fellow male torture survivors.

Being a woman means fighting against everything, against so many frameworks that we ourselves have developed. We know theory but in practice we keep repeating patterns. I think both men and women are exploited and excluded from certain social classes. But within that social class and within every family, it's always the woman who bears the biggest burden. So there is a difference between men and women regardless of whether a person suffered torture or imprisonment... we have had the same experience and we have coexisted, we have organized, we have lived with male comrades and female comrades.

We have very revolutionary [male] comrades but they're so sexist! [Laughs]... We the women have participated in so many seminars, workshops, different processes... sometimes we don't see changes in our homes, though. We have many examples of female leaders in women's organizations. They're professional and everything but they still experience subjugation in the home.

Like the majority of women in my sample, the interviewee is acutely aware of gender inequality and believes that justice involves both men and women taking responsibility for their role in creating unequal relationships and organizations.

The following quote from Genoveva's interview shows the connections most women find between class and gender inequality. This is not the case for men; none of the men in my study construct notions of social justice based on gender equality like the women do. Only women's narratives give rise to critiques about gender injustices in the home and in political spaces. In casual conversation, men may show openness towards the goal of gender equality but they do not organically focus on such elaborations like most of the women do during interviews. For women, views on justice result from long years of work and attempting to come to terms with the injustices that war brought to their lives.

Genoveva states,

I'm aware there are two antagonistic groups that will never walk together—the large poor masses and the owners of wealth. They took over different means of wealth and now they don't want to lose their privilege. It's just like relationships between men and women. Even if a man is poor he doesn't want to lose his privilege at home and he won't want to lose his privilege when this sexist culture breaks down. In his mind, a man still believes that women are there to do the cleaning, to set the table, to do the laundry... and a woman must ask him for permission to leave the house. It's been difficult to break those patterns of male chauvinism and to break loose from the capitalist system. I think we should at least try to minimize damages for the large masses. If no one organizes or says anything, things will continue like this or get worse.

In both of these quotes, the interviewees describes the unequal (capitalist) economic order as being closely linked to patriarchal social structures. In both cases, however, she considers social justice as a

guiding principle that should orient both those in power and those who are disenfranchised in society.

For example, when Genoveva states, “*if no one organizes or says anything, things will continue like this or get worse*” she conveys a sense of duty and empowerment in the construction of a social order that may be more equal and respectful for all. Earlier, she had mentioned women’s participation in various seminars and workshops about gender equality, which does not portray women as victims but rather as co-constructors of an unequal order. She suggests that if women harbor knowledge and intellectual awareness about these inequalities—even while there may be challenges to implementing real changes in power relations between gender identities—it may be a first step towards generating desirable change.

Esperanza describes gender inequality more generally, and how social injustice weighs down on women more heavily than men:

I used to know all these things but when I started working with women’s organizations and especially with marginalized women, I realized injustice was deeper than I expected. There is a lot more injustice and discrimination towards women in those conditions [of marginalization]. It doesn’t mean men don’t face it too [...] We still maintain the class struggle we sustained during so many years. I mean, we haven’t overcome class injustice. But that class injustice becomes deeper for women because of gender injustice. We can see it in their lack of access to employment, in the wage gap between men and women performing the same job, and the expectations put on them to do the care work, since we’re usually responsible for supporting a family... Women face maquilas¹⁶, bad jobs, they are poorly paid domestic workers with no social safety net. There are so many things.

¹⁶ Maquilas refers to the female-dominated garment sector based on unprotected labor. “In Central America and the Caribbean, private sector manufacturing has been largely reduced to maquila production, much of which is located in free trade zones where labor unions are mainly banned and the flexible/individual labor contract reigns supreme (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005), while much of the remaining urban labor force scrapes out a living in the informal economy or migrates to the United States” (Almeida 2008, 184).

Esperanza highly values the revolutionary project's focus on class struggle and she claims to uphold that struggle. However, she mentions that gender inequality makes class inequality more dire for women, as they face unfavorable conditions in the home (with expectations to do the care work) and in the public sphere (experiencing precarious and unprotected work conditions).

Besides referring to gender inequality more generally, some interviewees also analyze how gender differences affect their specific situation as former political prisoners. Esperanza, for example, deems that some spaces available to her as a former political prisoner are sexist but she also believes in women's responsibility to deconstruct or transform such spaces. She is more specific than the previous interviewee in claiming she does not feel included in the justice-seeking and therapeutic spaces that COPPES (Committee of Former Political Prisoners of El Salvador) creates. Having said that, however, she also continues to propose changes that both women and men could enact in order to make these spaces more inclusive for everyone:

On one hand, bringing back memory is difficult. Hmm, how can I say this? COPPES, for example, is an organization that is full of men. I mean... as women, how included do we feel in the effort to build ourselves a "former political prisoner" identity? We can only minimally feel included if we don't transform those structures [COPPES]. I know it's not only their responsibility, you see. I know we are co-responsible. I went to a COPPES assembly a while ago and I was disappointed to see the same people there. The same men who were my party leaders! [Laughs] Those same people want to be my bosses at COPPES. I would like to try and see how we can bring this up. It's our [women's] challenge to see how we can transform those patriarchal structures, those structures of patriarchal domination. It's probably our big challenge as female former political prisoners.

The interviewee sees COPPES as a heavily masculinized space but is also comfortable describing women as "co-responsible" for that outcome. In her mind, building herself an identity as former political prisoner seems problematic: it implies giving way to patterns of behavior with old political

mates that perpetuate patriarchal patterns of domination. Like other women in my sample, since the end of the armed conflict, she has been involved in dismantling the grip of male-dominated social relations. While asserting her disappointment in this current state of unequal representation within COPPES, she also presents it as a challenge for female former political prisoners to take on.

Therefore, as the last three female interviewees eloquently articulate, justice involves the opportunity to exert voice and to participate in justice initiatives, but on women's own terms. This may first involve getting to develop their identity as female former political prisoners, which may later lead to building a greater sense of empowerment and confidence vis-a-vis men. Consequently, justice to them involves having and creating the space and time to elaborate their own categories and narratives around victimization and survival.

4.3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In all their varying interpretations and voices, my interviewees convey that historical memory needs to adopt a critical approach. In a post-conflict context characterized by state negligence when it comes to taking charge for past atrocities and implementing comprehensive reparation policies, Salvadoran former political prisoners demand that historical memory fill important gaps. According to interviewees, historical memory needs to provide much-needed awareness about social injustice, especially as a tool for youth to gain a sense of identity and a sense of direction for the future.

Going beyond what the well-known TJ mechanisms (legal trials and truth commissions) have done in Latin America, interviewees demand that their human rights violations be remembered along with the political and social contexts they occurred in. On one hand, they demand the commemoration of specific civil and political rights violations—torture, political imprisonment or persecution, and the absence of due process, etc. This experience of victimization continues to be a source of kinship and identity for them as former political prisoners, so they wish for it to be

remembered and honored. At the national level, they fear having the wartime experiences of thousands who fought, were harmed, or killed, disappear into oblivion. They demand the nationwide and public commemoration of victims and all atrocities committed, as the Salvadoran government has made minimal strides in this direction. Former political prisoners who actively engaged in the armed political movement and survived human rights violations view themselves as citizens who are socially-, historically-, and politically-situated. To them, this is not merely a rhetorical preference: it is the very substance that gives meaning to both their political engagement and their political victimization. In seeing themselves as part of a larger whole and a history of social struggle, their victimization becomes a worthwhile “sacrifice”, a political cost they have learned to pay in order to secure their rights. In that way, the suffering and pain experienced through torture and illegal imprisonment becomes shared and potentially useful to others (as explored further in Chapter 5).

On the other hand, their expectations transcend the commemoration of particular civil and political rights violations, because they wish their political undertaking to be remembered and engaged with critically. They demand that memory be a vindication of their political effort against glaring historical inequalities in El Salvador and heightened violence from government forces towards its people starting in the 1970s. They hope memory to become a roadmap for youth and for the country as a whole, so it may help generate social development and growth in Salvadorans’ own terms—separately from the influence of foreign powers like the United States and international corporations. Some female interviewees add a second dimension to this goal—that memory be inclusive of women’s history and the injustices experienced by them. In their view, memory should not only remember and remind society about class struggle but also about gender struggles.

Finally, they expect memory to help shift an historical imbalance in symbolic terms. Their desire for vindication arises in a social context of stigmatization and criminalization of prisoners.

Besides vindicating their political project in itself, interviewees expect memory to vindicate their position in history. They would like to be remembered as individuals and groups who engaged in armed combat consciously, but also because it was the last recourse against a brutally authoritarian state. This legitimacy would infuse both their past political action and their past victimization, helping to connect their political and social ideals with ongoing challenges in Salvadoran society. In other words, interviewees wish to be remembered in part as victims of abuse but most importantly as active political and social agents of change. This would help undo a tendency in state-centric transitional justice projects that treat victims as passive subjects rather than active agents involved in rebuilding society after conflict (McConnachie and Morison 2008, McEvoy and McConnachie 2013).

When it comes to justice, interviewees demand multiple versions of it. Even in a context of heightened distrust in justice and government institutions, interviewees tend to value legal trials as a form of due justice. However, it does not all end there. In expressing their ideas of justice regarding their experience of political imprisonment, many of them offer versions of restorative justice, suggesting the possibility of forgiveness, restitution and reparations. Their ideas of justice become restorative when they speak of offenses as injuries against society and the social relationships that make it up, not as aggressions against the state. They speak of awareness-raising and restoring the harm done through sincere apology, recognition of misdeeds, and ultimately taking responsibility for harms inflicted (Clamp 2014). Instead of procuring punishment that is measurably “equal” to the harm done, restorative justice notions proposed by interviewees assume that sanctions will provide moral redress to the victim by symbolically or materially restoring them to the place they occupied before the offense (Center for Justice and Reconciliation 2018). In this case, many interviewees speak of wanting to know who their capturers were, why the orders to imprison and torture them were given, and most importantly, wanting perpetrators to acknowledge that their deeds were indisputably morally wrong.

More broadly, interviewees understand justice not only in reference to civil and political rights violations committed against them, but also as social justice. Many of them speak about different manifestations of social inequality—wealth disparity, social marginalization, and unequal access to material wellbeing for large sectors of the population. Some interviewees even go further in conceptualizing wellbeing, by including material, psychological, and emotional security in their definitions. They understand social justice as multi-sided and multi-dimensional. These perspectives are crucial to consider and could be foundational for future research and policy work on reparation policies based on these ideas of holistic reparation and redistributive justice.

It is also noteworthy that many interviewees describe the context of political persecution they experienced both during and after the armed conflict as an uphill battle. Despite the costs experienced, they speak of their attained ability to secure certain civil and political freedoms like the right to organize and express themselves freely regarding government action. They express no longer being afraid of retaliation because they have nothing else to lose, since they already experienced political imprisonment and were physically hurt to an extreme. In this experience, they find a source of empowerment and rights-bearing. Ultimately, this makes rights and justice something they have fought hard to achieve and which has served as a moral compass in their lives. Thus, rights or justice become an ideal that individuals work towards reaching; it is not a static or binary status, but an ongoing and nuanced process for which they take responsibility.

A crucial dimension of justice that most female interviewees mention is gender justice. Overall, male interviewees only rarely mention this dimension. Women tend to talk about women's situation particularly as regards social justice and in instances of justice-seeking. They are affected by male chauvinism in the home and in the public sphere, which expresses itself through comparatively more precarious working conditions and expectations on women to do the care work. Particularly as former political prisoners, female interviewees would like to have access to a more inclusive and

respectful shared space with male comrades. These observations do not necessarily amount to a complete rejection of such spaces but rather become a call for transformation and change.

More broadly, these demands speak to gendered subjectivities in transitional justice contexts (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013). Even when allegedly “victim-centered” initiatives like truth commissions attempt to atone for wrongdoings, the past may be remembered and interpreted in limiting ways. These spaces may do symbolic violence to individuals by narrowing the manifold meanings violence may have for them. Research has observed this can apply especially to women. For example, Fionnula Ní Aoláin and Catherine Turner have studied how El Salvador’s truth commission contributed to privileging male conceptions of conflict by excluding socioeconomic crimes. In the post-war landscape, versions of harm, loss, and violence experienced predominantly by women have been generally left out (Ní Aoláin and Turner 2007). However, my data suggest that symbolic violence in the realm of reparations can be done to women and men in equal dimension, even if in differing forms (see Chapter 3 and Conclusion). It is important for research to continue considering how these forms of violence may operate for varying gender identities.

All in all, what do these results speak of? They speak of survivors’ desire to see a full spectrum of rights and a full spectrum of justice. A full spectrum of rights reflects interviewees’ comprehensive understanding of wellbeing, including psychological, emotional, material, political, and social aspects. They imagine different freedoms from a life lived amidst various social problems like violence, inequality, economic injustice, social/gender/economic discrimination, and aggressions from the state against its citizens. In a context of state-supported impunity and negligence, interviewees express that a multiplicity of solutions are due.

We can apply the same logic of a full spectrum of rights to a full spectrum of justice. Survivors imagine and desire different modes of justice, such as retributive justice, restorative justice, gender justice, and ultimately social justice. These models do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Imagining them as complementary and coexisting models emphasizes the multidimensional view on abuse, violence, and justice suggested by interviewees. This comprehensive view transcends the more prevalent notions on peacebuilding as liberal democracy-building suggested by the most utilized transitional justice approaches.

Prying open the question about what post-conflict justice is and who it is for must not be in detriment of formal justice, but can rather result in the expansion of justice initiatives and rights conceptions. While social sanctions for wrongdoing are important, it is crucial that transitional justice studies move towards expanding the “moral and social universe” of the field (Mutua 2015, 5). An important step in that direction is to begin by questioning which groups in society have been harmed, what their needs are, and why this has happened (Clamp 2014; Theidon 2007a, 2007b; Zehr 2002). We must move towards dealing more effectively with the outcomes of conflict and oppression for those groups and individuals directly concerned.

Chapter 5. LESSONS FROM PRISON: THE SOCIAL “ANTIDOTES” TO TORTURE AND IMPRISONMENT

Although not much social scientific scholarship has focused on exploring political prisoners’ lived experience and the role of community in helping them reclaim power over their lives (as explained in the Introduction), my previous work in El Salvador and various literatures suggest the importance of interrogating this phenomenon. Empirical results offered in this chapter highlight how social organization and collective notions of the self are key to countering the detrimental effects of torture. This sheds light on how social bonds and community can shape access to human rights in the absence of competent state action and institutionalized impunity for systematic human rights violations.

This chapter analyzes the role that social and political organization have played in Salvadoran former political prisoners’ lives, especially as relates to their time deprived of liberty. My data confirm the weight of subjectivity (defined, in short, as people’s different ways of thinking, feeling and desiring) in understanding the repercussions of torture and prison for these individuals. Following Voglis’ idea of subject-positions and “subjects in the making” (Voglis 2002), I explore three moments of resistance to oppressive action. I find that notions of the collective— such as belonging and solidarity—have strongly informed survivors’ elaboration of the self, serving their sense of recovery and their ability to claim power over their life at various points in time. I focus on three such moments: (1) interrogation and torture, (2) the experience of imprisonment, and (3) the later process of drawing lessons and a sense of empowerment from their time in prison. I argue that the “antidotes” to the annihilating effects of torture lie in a subject that ties itself to the collective. This happens in at least two ways: (a) by finding a connection to something that is greater than

themselves (that they belong to); and (b) the ability to produce a new emerging collective order in which individual interests and group interests align.

5.1 POLITICAL PRISONERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: WHY COMMUNITY MATTERS

Various literatures suggest the central role of community and the need to further understand its effects in procuring human rights following torture and political imprisonment. In his editorial address of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, a prominent scholar in the TWAIL camp (Third-World Approaches to International Law), Makau Mutua, highlights the need to undertake this task, especially in sociogeographical contexts where individualism is not primordial (Mutua 2015). He proposes that the human rights corpus focuses excessively on the individual. So in order to enhance the legitimacy of human rights as a useful framework globally, it behooves scholars and practitioners to further explore the power of social bonds in countering abuse.

Additionally, the concept of “psychosocial trauma” stemming from liberation psychology—a current of social psychology that emerged in El Salvador and is prominent in Latin America—proposes the necessary link between the individual and the collective when exploring the effects of political violence (Leslie 2001, Martín Baró 1989). It views political violence as a “traumatic crystallization in persons and groups of inhuman social relations” (Martín-Baró in Leslie 2001, 53). Political violence disturbs social relationships by promoting distrust, silence, and violence as a conflict-resolution mechanism (Faúndez et al. 2014). It disrupts the possibility of establishing sincere communication with others, the ability to empathize with others, and of being hopeful about the future (Faúndez et al. 2014). Since violence is not endemic or inevitable (Martín-Baró 1989), this opens up the possibility that recovery is not impossible or predetermined by the “gravity” of abuse either. This should hold true even vis-à-vis extremely hostile social conditions like a weakened rule of law and extreme impunity. Exploring how former political prisoners rebuilt and continue to

rebuild humane social relationships can therefore teach us vital lessons on how to counter the negative effects of violence and abuse (Martín-Baró 1989).

Work in neurobiology and psychology focusing on torture survivors also suggests the importance of community and social bonds, and calls for further study on the effect of context (Hinton and Lewis-Fernandez 2011, Kirmayer 2012, Maercker et al. 2013). To study the aftermath of torture, recent scholarship in neurobiology has proposed an ecosocial approach to cultural phenomenology, which looks at the interaction between biology and culture in experience (Kirmayer 2015, Kirmayer et al. 2018, Silove 2007). This approach contends that “although pain and fear are universal responses to injury and the threat of injury, their relationship to suffering is complex and mediated by meaning and context” (Kirmayer, 2008). However, in the area of PTSD and torture research, very few studies have focused on political prisoners (Maercker et al. 2013), so the influence of historic-cultural contexts has been rarely investigated. It remains an open question how these “specific predictors” are effective, even while scholars consider this a promising avenue of work (Maercker and Horn 2013). For example, some research identifies the effect of social factors such as socioeconomic status and social support on the presence of PTSD (Bailey et al. 1997; Emmelkamp et al. 2002; Maercker et al. 2013); additional studies claim that torture alone (without the mediation of social factors) is not a predictor of PTSD (Hollifield et al. 2011, Kira et al. 2006). Other scholars in this discipline propose that survivors’ commitment to a social cause or ideology can mitigate the effects of stress and torture (Barber et al. 2014; Bailey et al. 1997; Willis, Chou and Hunt 2015), which underscores the power that social bonds can have in shaping this phenomenon. Some argue that the broader implications of torture will be clarified by studying the meanings that survivors, their families, and their communities attribute to violence (Kirmayer et al. 2018, Rousseau 1995).

These literatures also suggest that torture insists on the individual's powerlessness, which may be "deliberately organized to be maximally disruptive to the person's sense of agency, order, coherence and the possibility of meaningful action" (Kirmayer et al 2018, 88). The detrimental effects of torture include losing a sense of control, disruptions in interpersonal functioning, and denigrating and destroying individual and group identity (Nickerson et al. 2014). These insights coincide with sociological and anthropological scholarship on the phenomenology of torture which speaks to the annihilation of the individual. Torture has been described as a mechanism used to destroy the individual, her voice, and her agency (Brown 2016, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten et al. 1995, Graziano 1992, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019). As the ultimate performative act of state power, the body and identity of an individual are targeted directly to destroy their individuality while building the power of the state (Crelinsten et al. 1995, Scarry 1985). Pain becomes a "medium through which society establishes its ownership of individuals" (Das 2000, 101): torture silences bodies, words, ideas, and appropriates any language generated by the victim by transforming it into the power that destroys them (Graziano 1992, Treacy 1996).

Studies on the detrimental effects of torture suggest, by logical conclusion, that their absence would associate with fostering the individual's power, their ability to maintain ties with their social milieu, maintaining a sense of identity, and ensuring the possibility of meaningful action. Survivors' lived experience and subjectivity—defined, in short, as people's different ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring (see the Introduction)—is therefore crucial to comprehend how survivors counter torture's damaging consequences. As Giorgio Agamben has argued, justice and restitution is a matter of subjects (Agamben 1999, Chare 2006). The subject "becomes witness to its own disorder" and "its own oblivion as a subject" (Agamben 1999, 106) when social relationships are torn by violence. Reconstituting a subjective order and escaping from oblivion therefore requires transitional justice theory and practice to concern itself with subjectivity. Redistributing responsibility and shame for

the harms inflicted and achieving a sense of restitution and recovery is necessarily a symbolic, narrative endeavor.

While there are not many studies on political prisoners and subjectivity, this intersection offers a valuable entry point to explore not only the consequences of torture as a phenomenological curiosity, but also to access ethical-political knowledge that may enhance transitional justice outcomes. As shown in other contexts (notably Argentina and Northern Ireland), former political prisoners can be important actors in helping societies move forward after conflict. They can help push the boundaries of restitution and reparations, contributing important knowledge on the post-authoritarian healing process of individuals, groups, and societies (Brewer and Hayes 2015, Joyce and Lynch 2017, Park 2014).

Taking on the insight that subjectivity is a productive concept to study this population, my research finds consistency with and builds on two studies on political prisoners' subjectivity that explore similar questions in other geographical, temporal, and political contexts. These cases are comparable to the Salvadoran case in that prisoners in both cases belonged to political organizations opposing an authoritarian government and were subjected to similar human rights violations. In Northern Ireland the imprisoned were Irish nationalists (Irish Republican Army and Irish National Liberation Army) standing up against the British government. In Greece, the imprisoned were members of a leftist guerrilla movement (the Democratic Army of Greece, the military branch of the communist party) battling the Greek Government Army. Both studies analyze mechanisms through which the individual and the collective articulated to resist oppressive action and assert their subjectivity vis-à-vis a despotic institution.

Focusing on 1980s Northern Ireland, Begoña Aretxaga (1995, 1997) proposes the “deep play”¹⁷ of subjectivity, in other words, the weight of subjectivity in shifting oppressive contexts (Aretxaga 1995, 1997). Political prisoners’ subjectivity underscores the possibility that individuals face to engage in practices that shift and defy dominant discourses and practices. Following Elaine Scarry (1985), she argues that because the pain of torture (and other forms of abuse) is ultimately incommunicable, the path to recovery should include ways to objectify the pain in order to comprehend it. This makes it expressible, visible, and ultimately socially real (Aretxaga 1997). The publicity of pain plays a crucial role in “reordering the real” (Corcoran 2019, 11) and constitutes the power of subversion. In the so-called Dirty Protest of 1980 in the Armagh prison, prisoners found a way to re-elaborate a repressed history of Irish-British relations, expressing the historical neglect experienced by working-class Catholics in Northern Ireland, and claiming “deep existential recognition, the acknowledgement that one’s being-in-the-world mattered” (Aretxaga 1995, 133).

Studying the aftermath of the civil war in Greece (1946-1949), Polymeris Voglis notes that following imprisonment, political prisoners found meaning by developing an identity that was enmeshed in the collectivity (Voglis 2002). During imprisonment, individuals found productive ways to participate in a political prisoners’ organization, engaging in solidarity that gave them strength. Following imprisonment, the nostalgia of losing this community was highlighted by the loneliness individuals felt after being released into a society that stigmatized and shamed them (Voglis 2002). As their political faction lost the Civil War, former political prisoners suffered most in the aftermath of imprisonment as they faced the disillusionment of a national political loss in addition to the rupture of their personal relationships.

¹⁷ “Deep play” is a concept coined by Jeremy Bentham, which anthropologist Clifford Geertz reinterpreted to define high-stakes activities such as the cockfights he studied in Bali. These involved such little monetary rewards that no seemingly rational person would engage in the risk of playing (Geertz 1973).

Like Aretxaga, Voglis' contribution aptly emphasizes subjects are always "in the making", theorizing subjectivity as a process and a relationship (Voglis 2002). This underlines the need to look at subjects as embedded in history, not as determined by social structure, but as having multiple subject-positions (Voglis, 11). This is an insight I take on in my research. Within various historical restrictions and in different moments, the individual finds diverse positions with respect to the collective agent in order to become the "subject of its own history" (Voglis 2002, 13). In Voglis' research, resisting the detrimental effects of torture and repression consisted of reconstructing both the self and the collective subject, which had been "stigmatized, distorted, and silenced for many years by the regime, the press, legislation, declarations of repentance, and official anticommunism" (Voglis 2002, 232). The individual finds meaning in the collective, as evidenced by the replacement of the autobiographical "I" by the plural self in prisoners' memoirs. Voglis finds that the significance of former prisoners' testimony lies not in documenting the individual experience but rather the experience of thousands of individuals (Voglis 2002, 232).

5.2 RESULTS: THREE MOMENTS OF RESISTANCE

5.2.1 *Surviving Torture*

While I did not ask my interviewees to relate the specifics of their experience of interrogation and torture, I invited them to share what had kept them alive through the experience and provided them strength to endure it. All interviewees describe holding on to something that gave them meaning and endurance: they held on to ideas of family, political community, divine powers supporting them, and many times they held on to the conviction that they were doing the "right" thing. Experiences of belonging, in one way or another, helped them feel connected to others—avoiding feeling alone—and have kept them believing they had the upper hand in an oppressive situation.

Vis-a-vis their torturer, seeing themselves in a morally superior position ultimately gave them strength. In other words, being victimized for a political and social struggle they were convinced was on the “right” side of ethics, even while extremely painful on a physical and emotional level, gave them strength to withstand the abuse. Also, being able to see their torturer as a person and engage with them on equal terms during conversation gave them validation and strength, as they knew their oppressors were engaging in a very unethical activity. In this way, even when a person’s body was at the utter mercy of repressive forces, sticking to a cover story, trying to outsmart their torturer, and holding on to their revolutionary ideals (their connection to a broader political community) became a source of meaning and empowerment.

Vanessa describes the struggle between life and death that took place at every moment of the torture experience. Her political conviction helped her stick to a cover story without deviating from it, regardless of the pain that torture inflicted on her body.

Every moment that you feel you’re still alive is a struggle between life and death. It’s terrible, because after that you’re always left with a feeling—you just don’t know how much to hold on to death or how much to hold on to life. For me, I think I only recently decided to choose life, after all those years. In fact, we came out alive, but it’s been a life of.... [chuckles nervously]. Well, that’s the struggle, that’s our struggle... We had to learn a cover story that we had to stick to no matter what, and we had to repeat it over and over and over again. A thousand times! There was no possibility of getting confused, or else... and you had to keep telling yourself, “hey, I’m still alive, I’m still alive.”

The other thing: every new torturer who showed up, you thought he was the one who was going to—
... [breaks off].

While Vanessa’s pain and sense of hurt emerge from her description of life during and after torture, a sense of persistence appears throughout her account as well. Many interviewees fiercely stuck to some form of unquestionable “truth” in order to survive torture. In this case it was a cover story

that guarded her comrades' security and political project beyond all possible harm done to her. This is a key element of "the struggle" for her.

Arnoldo recounts an episode during which he felt he had moral authority over his torturer, because he was fighting for a fair collective cause:

We had political training, but it wasn't easy to remember everything you learned. Sometimes you hear the concepts, but they don't stick. One thing really stuck with us, though, and me particularly. It made me stronger. At the point when a lieutenant was interrogating me, I told him "you know, I'm the son of a military man. He was in the 1932 massacre and he killed poor people, people who fought like I'm fighting today. How's that? I'm his son and today I'm one of the fallen. What does that mean? Does that mean children have to pay for what their parents do?" Well, the man stopped what he was doing [laughter], he stopped hurting me. That helped me! And the guy didn't say anything else. Maybe you just develop your own strength, because you see that you're being mistreated for doing something respectable. That's what makes you stronger.

Arnoldo references an indigenous peasant uprising in 1932 that was met with brutal violence by Salvadoran state forces (described further in Chapter 2). In the excerpt, he highlights that he derived strength from his political convictions and from putting his torturer in an uncomfortable position. In some measure, Arnoldo was able to make his torturer question the morality of abuse, forcing him to imagine a situation in which he would eventually be punished for the wrongs he was committing. He did this by pointing out to his torturer the commonalities they shared: Arnoldo belonged to the same social class and was also close to the military, as Arnoldo's father had been a military officer. His laughter expresses his satisfaction with this moral triumph.

Gabriela reflects another example of how individuals survived torture thanks to their ability to outsmart a torturer and put them in an uncomfortable ethical position. Like many other interviewees, she relates drawing strength from unknown places within herself:

They put me in a room and brought a young woman to interrogate me. I was blindfolded and sitting in a chair. But when I lifted my face, I could see her legs and her clothing. She was in military uniform. She was interrogating me and I don't know where I gathered the strength to start hitting her. I began to pester her, asking if she had children, how many children she had, and telling her to imagine what her children would think if they found out her mom was mistreating another person. At that point, people outside realized I was yelling at her. She also told me that she knew where my children were, that my husband had said such and such. Well, I just don't know where I found the strength to handle that situation. I had never been trained for that.

Like Arnaldo in the previous quote, Gabriela found strength and power within herself during moments of physical abuse by being able to address her torturer, in this case a woman, and appeal to her sense of morality around the abusive acts she was committing. She grounded this attempt in her torturer's imagined identity as a mother, suggesting that a good mother would be ashamed of these actions. Just like Arnaldo, Gabriela appealed to a sense of larger social belonging—both the victim and the torturer's—in order to ground the idea of wrongdoing and to therefore regain some power in a vulnerable situation. In both cases, the victim reminded the torturer that the apparently isolated interaction between two people in a lonely room had foreseeable repercussions on their social relations. In both Arnaldo's and Gabriela's case, the idea that the torturer's misdeeds might create suffering for their children—either through punishment or shame—allowed them to gain strength vis-à-vis their torturer. This interpretation continues to infuse their recollections of the past with a sense of empowerment.

Another female interviewee describes the factors that gave her strength during interrogations, which lasted for three days and included extreme and repeated forms of abuse.

"You're wrong", I would tell them. "You're making a mistake, because I know there's an entire people out there behind me..." By then it was the third day [of torture]. I tried to just be in the

moment and tell my brain to think straight. My brother used to say, "you can organize your brain in such a way that you can set aside what's not good for you and you can focus on what you want." (...) I've never felt the spirit of God as close to me as in that moment. Some people can call it energy, some people can call it breath, other people can call it God. But I felt protected and that's what gave me the wisdom to face them. At certain moments in the interrogation, I was even able to defeat them. They would hit me but then they would just throw their things down and leave. So, it's possible for a person to do it. That's how three days went by.

Mónica's words underscore the strength that came to her by connecting to others and to the belief of a higher power in the most difficult moments. She mentions her connection to her brother, her connection to the general Salvadoran people (who she believed stood behind the fight she was putting up), and her connection to God. Despite the pain that was visible in her bodily expressions as she recounted this episode to me, her words reflect a sense of moral victory, of having successfully come out on the other side of a near-death experience that could have destroyed her. She continues to hold faith in God and finds meaning in a church group today, where she carries out work with women.

Below, Teresa explains how her subjectivity was shaped by her sense of belonging. Like most interviewees, her experience as a political activist and torture survivor are shaped by a relationship to immediate family members and to others who share similar political and social ideals. Teresa narrated an episode during which her older brother, who she looked up to as a political activist, explained how he viewed the revolutionary struggle:

He said to me, "sit down, I want to tell you something." "Look," he said, "I am one of those people who will fertilize this earth. I'm not fighting for myself. I'm fighting for your children, for your grandchildren. That's what. I'm fighting so they can live in a better society. Me? I'm not going to die. Who told you I'm going to die? Every time you see other fists in the air and you put your arm

down, whenever you don't fight, I will die. But if you keep your arm high and fight too, then I will live on." So, imagine that! How can I possibly leave [my struggle] after hearing that?

As explained at greater length in Chapter 2, all interviewees express a similar sense of duty towards the collective as a reason that prompted their political involvement. Even while torture caused them great suffering, they also frame it as part of their political struggle. In that way, it becomes part of a larger social and political history. This gives meaning to their suffering, which they often frame as a sacrifice or a cost associated to obtaining a higher good. Though individuals are faced to make sense of their individual lives, like Teresa in the quote above, they tend to embed these trajectories within notions of collective entities such as family, Salvadoran society, "the people", the impoverished classes, and those who have fought for just causes in El Salvador and Latin America.

5.2.2 *The Prison Experience: Collective Organization*

████████ Main Activities and Solidarity

As narrated by many interviewees, the Committee of Political Prisoners of El Salvador, COPPES, was created in 1980 out of the Centro Penal de Santa Tecla, a detention center near San Salvador. Later it extended to a detention center in Mariona (*Centro Penal de Mariona*), a women's prison in Ilopango (*Cárcel de Mujeres de Ilopango*), and a prison in Santa Ana (starting in 1987). It remained active throughout the civil war, helping prisoners communicate with their families, organizing hunger strikes to protest mistreatment, supporting the revolutionary cause, and standing up for human rights.

As explained in Chapter 2, transitioning from the interrogation period to imprisonment at Ilopango, Santa Tecla, Mariona, or Santa Ana, implied a significant improvement in terms of living conditions for political prisoners. In general, torture and interrogation no longer occurred after a person arrived in the prison (except for a few raids that interviewees recounted in the Mariona

prison, when the National Guard “invaded” the prison and punished inmates for planning an escape). The organization of political prisoners within the penal institution had its own leadership and planned activities that structured people’s daily lives, focusing on meeting their needs.

Interviewees describe that the organization took care of food needs, economic sustenance, physical health and discipline, helping newcomers recover from torture and interrogation, and keeping active communication with groups outside the prison who supported them. Various groups of family members collaborated with COPPES to speak out against human rights violations, one of which was COMADRES, the Comité de Madres y Parientes de Prisioneros, Desaparecidos, y Mártires Políticos de El Salvador [*Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Prisoners, Disappeared Persons, and Political Martyrs of El Salvador*]. The political prisoners’ committee also organized hunger strikes to demand better living conditions and to protest against the inhumane treatment of other prisoners. COPPES constituted a deliberate economic and political organization supporting itself through work cooperatives that sold products to prison visitors and outside consumers with help from family and other organizations. As an organization, COPPES allowed inmates to stay in contact with the revolutionary struggle, earning the label of “fifth revolutionary front.” As scholars have also pointed out, they became a key part of the popular movement (Hammond 1996, Schirmer 1993).

Many of the “freedoms” they accessed within the prison had been secured through hunger strikes. In general, being part of this collective effort allowed the prisoners to feel part of a well-organized community that gave them a purpose and required them to actively engage; people took turns cooking, organizing workshops and classes for their prison mates, doing theater or music, running exercise drills, and making handicrafts to sell at markets with help from family members.

One of the organization’s founders describes the significance of COPPES’ relationship to outside organizations. COPPES maintained active communication with outside groups, which is where, he argues, the strength of the in-prison organization stemmed from:

On the inside, we were always strong. I would like to make that clear because sometimes, in other countries, people are surprised by that and say, “well, you had a lot of space to do things inside the prison.” Well yes, but we had a lot of space because outside there were a bunch of people fighting too. That was key. We found support in the popular struggle happening outside, everywhere, and tried to utilize that struggle to gain internal strength. That was key to accomplishing so many things within the prison. If we hadn’t had such a strong popular movement outside the prison, we would have never had the strength we had inside. That helped us a lot. We knew how to catalyze and channel it appropriately and that gave us strength inside the prison to do what we did.

This founder continues,

Yes, we were locked up in there. But after they realized how much popular support we had, it affected how they treated us. If no one had been concerned about us, they would have probably hung us all up from somewhere. I don’t know how, but they knew we weren’t alone. The mothers, the women of the markets, the mothers’ organizations—Oof! They gave us amazing support. They were there all the time, all the time, all the time. Sometimes many of them weren’t even our relatives. The women from the market came because they had really come to appreciate us, they loved and supported us. They didn’t want anything to happen to us, they were always with us. It was amazing, it was amazing.

Knowing that organizations like COMADRES were speaking out against injustices, and could garner support from other human rights groups within and outside the country, gave COPPES the strength and freedom to continue its activities.

A former political prisoner at Ilopango who held a leadership position describes how female political prisoners were able to access a variety of goods that were generally unavailable to them thanks to efforts by non-governmental organizations:

We taught them how to read and how to make handicrafts. The NGO I collaborated with provided us with a monthly ration of rice, beans, sugar, and sanitary napkins. Food at the prison consisted only of rice, beans, rice, beans, rice, beans... and tortillas. We were able to eat a variety of things thanks to solidarity work.

In another leader's words, Camilo, the organization at Santa Ana was still alive and strong around 1989 when he was in prison¹⁸. He is one of a few people in my sample who was detained during the latter part of the armed conflict, much later than most other people I interviewed—a majority of which were detained between 1980 and 1985 (this also reflects the general population trend). Despite a reduction in numbers during the later years, political prisoners continued to organize and kept COPPES alive throughout the armed conflict.

Camilo describes COPPES' multiple functions: it was an operations center, a means for prisoners and others to communicate, a reception center for complaints and abuse reports, a school for different skills, an organization effort to bring all prison inmates together (including non-political prisoners), and a hub for artistic and cultural development, among other things.

When I arrived, Santa Ana [prison] was already well organized. The story of inmates at Santa Ana is a story in itself. We also put up fights and began to organize the entire prison. There were about five hundred, six hundred prisoners—regular, military, and political. We were able to organize the three groups and put up a fight to improve living conditions and visitation rights... Inmates were actively and constantly engaged. That made life in the prison more entertaining. We had cultural, political, artisanal, and artistic

¹⁸ As mentioned in Chapter 2, after a 1987 amnesty law, most male prisoners were taken out of Mariona (a prison in the capital, San Salvador) and dispersed to other departmental capitals, especially Santa Ana, San Miguel, and San Vicente (Hammond 1996).

activities going on. We did a lot of political work in the prison too. We put out propaganda and our family members helped us with distribution in Santa Ana [city].

We were in touch with people who were looking for family members that were up “on the mountain” [engaged in armed combat]. We helped people reconnect with others. That type of thing. The prison served many purposes. It was a place to exchange information, to file reports. Every weekend we had cultural activities including theater, music, comedy, everything. All visitors came on Sundays to hear the messages we put out and to participate in our cultural activities.

This description illustrates a place that was full of life and endeavored to create a humane and enjoyable environment for political prisoners and their families. According to interviewees, the prison was converted into an active social space that kept COPPES connected with the outside world. It was a site of protest, reporting, and connection between different groups speaking out against human rights abuses.

Damián, another prisoner who was held at the Mariona facility, provides a similar description of the organization and the solidarity that inmates depended on. Family members would bring them various goods:

Our relatives visited us. They would bring us food, fruit, and money. But at the prison we all shared things equally. We held principles of brotherhood and camaraderie, so each cell had a shared basket of goods. Some of our prison mates never had visitors. People didn't bring them anything and they could have starved to death. But because of solidarity, those of us who had goods delivered to us decided to share so that everyone would have enough to eat.

Multiple interviewees describe that food and monetary resources brought in by outsiders were equally shared by all inmates. Women who worked in street markets brought them food supplies,

whether they were family members or not. The organization was also able to negotiate with prison directors so they could cook their own meals:

We secured the ability to make our own food, to cook the corn, make rice and beans, and bake tortillas. We also had corrective measures around this. If anyone left their dish at the table without washing it, they would get punished. They would get sent to the kitchen for three days to do all the dishwashing. That stuff is impossible to forget! [Laughs] (...) After we secured the food, we decided we would share it with our visitors. Five people were stationed in the kitchen for three days and we rotated. Whoever did not do the job well and burned the beans or the tortillas would also get punished [laughs]. We had visitors on Saturdays and Sundays. We had forty, even fifty families at once waiting to be fed, plates in hand. And we fed them all. In turn, many of those people brought goods that we used during the week... We lived happily.

Another interviewee explains prisoners' living conditions, as they were bound to small and overcrowded cells. While other descriptions of relatively successful organization efforts may depict the prison experience as more idyllic, these facts serve as a reminder that it was hardly a fully pleasant experience. In this excerpt, Damián also illustrates COPPES's empowerment during a crisis situation generated by an earthquake in 1986. In order to safeguard inmates' physical wellbeing, the organization commanded all prisoners to remove their cell doors in order to prevent being locked in during aftershocks.

There were about fifteen to twenty of us in a cell. It was smaller than four by four meters [thirteen by thirteen feet]. We had bunk beds and some of us even had to sleep under the beds. It was tremendously overcrowded. When we had the earthquake on October 10, 1986, I had been in prison for a year and a month.... With the earthquake, we were forced to leave our area of the prison and we didn't sleep during the entire night. Our building had three floors and COPPES

ordered us to leave the building right after the earthquake began. We ended up sleeping outside for many nights, under the moonlight. After we all agreed to return to our cells, COPPES ordered us to take out our cell doors because the guards were going to lock us in at six o'clock [like every night]. At six, they usually counted all the inmates, called roll, and locked up a big gate with a chain and padlock so we could no longer go out on the yard. After the earthquake, thinking there could be aftershocks, we said "No! What we'll do is take out all the doors and make a pile of them outside the building." That way, if they [prison authorities] tried to put them back in place, they would have to go through all the floors finding which door fit where [laughs]. It was pretty funny. All the doors were piled up outside and they were all different.

As in other examples, Damián's laughter reflects a moral victory over his imprisonment situation, where threat and repression were a constant. In this instance, prisoners' organization and collective effort allowed them to uphold their physical integrity despite orders by prison authorities. This is yet another instance of how collective action permitted individuals to feel safer than they otherwise would have on their own, and to push back on rules and policies implemented by authority figures.

Both female and male interviewees describe a similar scenario regarding how well organized COPPES was, regardless of the facility in which they were held. A former prisoner who participated in the initial stages of COPPES provides two examples that underline the collective's ability make decisions and act as a whole. First, he describes the importance of the organization's human rights labor, and then he explains how political prisoners worked on their relationship with regular prisoners within the correction facility.

When I arrived at the Santa Tecla prison, the thirty-seven or thirty-eight people that were already there as part of COPPES explained all the tasks we had to do. We had tasks related to maintenance and cleaning, healthcare, legal assistance, and welcoming new inmates. We kept a record on their capture, of who had captured them and why. One day we shared all that information

with the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission. We also had committees for education, propaganda, discipline... those are the most relevant ones (...)

The fact that we were able to manage our own food brought certain consequences... like resentment from the regular prisoners. It's not like we had a lot left over, but all the food we processed and didn't get to eat, we would typically beat up and eat the next day. And we would share that with the regular prisoners. But some of them... what they did one time was they banged on their cell bars from eleven o'clock at night until five o'clock in the morning, saying they were going to kill us because we were giving them our leftovers. When they opened our cells, the first thing we did was to confront their leaders and ask what was going on. They answered, "it's so and so [individual people] who have been creating a hassle." "Well, let's call an assembly then", we said. And we did. We asked them what their problem was, and explained that we had access to food because our families brought it to us. We had food because we were united and we each paid our dues to supplement the food bank. We told them we weren't just giving them leftovers. We were sharing what we had instead of saving it for ourselves the following day.

This apparently mundane episode reveals COPPES' ability to operate as a collective when it came to various forms of problem-solving—in this case, food sharing and relationship-building with regular prisoners held at the same correction facility. Many interviewees portray the tensions that initially surfaced between political prisoners and regular prisoners. But in all facilities where COPPES developed, political prisoners worked on their relationship with other inmates and eventually smoothed out any tensions. This was achieved through the habitual practice of resolving issues in assemblies. During these instances, inmates collectively made decisions that would later shape the guidelines for daily

life. This created a durable sense of belonging that many interviewees reflect on in a positive way when they look back on their prison days.

Healing

An important dimension of prison organizing was the opportunity to receive moral and emotional support from peers after coming out of torture and interrogation. Prisoners usually found themselves in dire physical condition following days of sustained beatings, abuse, and general cruel treatment. But once they came out of this situation, individuals arrived at a prison and were welcomed by a community of people who had undergone a similar experience. This was viewed with relief and perceived as a moment of healing.

For example, María says:

Being in prison helped me to forgive, it helped me heal my mental health and also my physical health (...) It helped me heal because they had given me a pretty strong sexually transmitted disease... Then I developed gastritis because I was food-deprived, sleep-deprived, and water-deprived for three days. My stomach weakened, and it's been sensitive since then.

Interviewees frequently view healing in both emotional and physical terms. Once they arrived at the prison, they often received medical care that was delivered professionally and ethically. This contrasted the medical interventions they usually experienced during the interrogation period, when doctors would provide false information about a patient's state of health or prescribe medication meant to hamper with their mental abilities. COPPES had secured this medical attention for inmates through their collective bargaining processes.

Peers at the prison also helped facilitate emotional healing for incoming prisoners. Men only speak of it in terms of camaraderie and feeling part of a community of friends and *compañeros*, which was a very welcome change after the dark days of interrogation. Women's descriptions seem to take

this idea a bit further. They created *colectivos de sanación* [healing groups] which adopted the role of giving newcomers a massage and listening to their testimony. I do not know for sure whether men had these groups or not, but it was not discussed during interviews.

A female former prisoner explains:

Then we began to organize groups for reading/writing, reflection groups, healing groups... we called it massage groups, to welcome our incoming peers. We talked to them and heard their stories because that really helps. I didn't have that when I came in. That happened later. We asked them where they were coming from. But it wasn't easy either because the women were suspicious too, you see. They distrusted [the incoming women] because they could be telltales. Telltales would always seep in. But then you got to know each other. I would say, "they're not telltales, they've just been tortured. If we don't give them a good welcome, it wouldn't be right." I was in charge of welcoming them first. When we gave them a massage, I would go to them and ask, "how was it for you?"

María took the initiative in creating some of these “healing collectives” by convincing her peers that women just entering the prison needed support. She describes that female inmates would at first regard newcomers through suspicious eyes, because of the possibility of newly arrived inmates being *orejas* [“ears”] or informers. Eventually, however, she assumed a role of support for newcomers and garnered support to provide physical and emotional forms of care to them.

A male interviewee describes the “*recibimiento revolucionario*” [revolutionary welcome] he received upon arrival to the prison:

We arrived, we were eleven people. They put us all in the same cell, with bunkbeds for up to three people... We were all crowded in there. Our comrades gave us a revolutionary welcome. They made us feel that we were no longer in the enemy's claws, that we had more freedom, that we could express ourselves without fear (...). Our comrades had planned a first hunger strike. I didn't participate,

though, because I was still ignorant at the time. Yeah—I wanted to resist, but I wanted to resist with food in my stomach.

As this interviewee narrates, a crucial part of feeling welcome by peers at the prison was a significant change in their psychological and social environment. Even though individuals arrived at a place where their physical comfort was far less than ideal, they also came into a pre-existing group structure created to support them and safeguard their most basic living standards. Even though as prisoners they continued to face a situation of vulnerability, newcomers had immediate access to moral support, an increased sense of freedom and protection from abuse. They would have to learn to negotiate their participation in the group organization, but all interviewees would eventually see the benefits of participating. I was told of cases where individuals did not want to participate, but none of my interviewees personally represented this scenario.

████████ Hunger Strikes

COPPEs' primary mechanism of struggle, used at first to find unity as a group and then to secure certain rights, were hunger strikes. For example, according to interviewees, between 1980 and 1982 the organization led three major hunger strikes to denounce abuses taking place in detention centers, countless disappearances, and extralegal killings occurring throughout the country. From then on, hunger strikes became a way to give voice to a nameless mass of victims who could not otherwise speak out. Hence the label of “fifth revolutionary front” earned by political prisoners: they viewed the need to defend comrades who were experiencing systematic human rights abuses as a duty.

One of COPPEs' founders describes the concerted effort it required to carry out a hunger strike involving 400 prisoners. Since he followed a career in government after the end of the armed

conflict, he greatly values what he learned at the time about conflict resolution and generating agreements among diverse groups of people.

He states,

Getting four hundred prisoners to agree to go on a hunger strike takes an awful lot of psychological work. It takes an unbelievable amount of preparation. For me, that was the hardest thing to do. People may be willing to die in war, or in military action. And they do that. But to stop eating, that's really difficult! It's very complicated.... We weren't going to pretend to stop eating. No! We actually stopped eating. And our teaspoon of honey was a small teaspoon. We had one in the morning, one at noon, and another one before bed. Period. It was only one. It wasn't like we were drinking honey. No! It was rationed, controlled, and administered in a controlled way. You need discipline to be able to do that. Otherwise, it wasn't a hunger strike. That's a tough action to take because it involves internal suffering. It's about willpower. And you have to convince a bunch of people to get behind it.

His words eloquently depict the difficulty involved in attempting to unite people behind a specific goal by depriving themselves of food. Political prisoners found meaning in this experience of personal sacrifice to achieve a common good, often to regain their rights and access more freedoms for all political prisoners residing in a facility. Andrés emphasizes the willpower and internal suffering this involves: in order to get every single prisoner on board, he described spending a lot of time convincing people. As part of the COPPES leadership committee, he personally had to negotiate during extensive one-on-one conversations with those who were unwilling to participate. In the end, everyone's participation amounted to a considerable collective achievement. These negotiations and victories earned them greater voice in the outside world, greater bargaining power with prison authorities, and increased freedom to organize their activities inside the prison (workshops, classes, economic activities, and cooking their own meals).

5.2.3 *Lessons From Prison*

The way in which interviewees refer to their time in prison was different to my own initial imaginings about what being a political prisoner entailed. Considering the various aspects of prison organization outlined above, however, in which a strong sense of unity and belonging helped to attain relatively optimal living conditions for all, it becomes more logical that former political prisoners regard this as a positive time in their lives. They generally view it as an experience that taught them multiple lessons, even if learned through discomfort and disease. They continue to draw meaning and strength from the experience of having been part of a collective that represented and aligned with their individual interests. Even when they continue to experience family separation and trauma (as described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), many regard this phase as one of the best times in their lives because of the camaraderie they encountered. Some of them even view the prison organization as the ideal society, in reduced proportion, that they fought their whole lives to live in.

For instance, Roberto describes with enthusiasm:

I could say that's where I got to know socialism. Oh yeah. I could categorize the life created by COPPES in prison as the real socialism many of us desire. Yeah. I haven't found anything else like it and I don't wish to be a prisoner again, but I would sure like to live that life of socialism. I'm certain that I lived through socialism. Yes I did... Proudly, I can say that socialism is a more humane system, because it helps you care for others while taking care of yourself. We led a good daily life. I can't complain and I'm not ashamed. Those were good times in my life—very good, very good. There have been others too, but in my life as a youth, I think that was the best time.

Their successful participation in COPPES leads interviewees across the board to believe that imprisonment and war were not all detrimental to their health and wellbeing. They find strength in those memories to move forward and continue to seek a similar sense of recognition and belonging

in other forms of social participation they engage in. That does not cut the trauma out or eliminate the painful memories. But it allows individuals to hold those experiences in a very different way than if they had experienced imprisonment in solitude or been immersed in less favorable social relationships.

I don't remember prison with sadness. I remember it as one of the best times in my life. It was a time of great learning and personal development. The things I learned there have been useful to me until today. For example, within the leadership committee, I was in charge of conflict resolution and social conflict management. The experience of living with imprisoned people, including all their difficulties and their worries, and managing those human relationships without external intervention... all of that helped me deal with social conflict in the country, to understand people, to put myself in someone else's position, to understand the situation they are in. In prison, anything can be a reason for conflict. Prison helps you get to know human beings in their toughest moments and to understand human psychology. It helped me a lot. I think it was a fabulous school in all ways. Fabulous. In conflict management, in coming to agreements...

With these words, Andrés looks back on the prison experience as a great time of learning, an insight shared by many interviewees who took on a leadership role in COPPES at one point or another. As this excerpt suggests, part of COPPES' success was building relationships founded on understanding and the intention to accommodate members' needs. Interviewees reflect back on this time by mentioning themes related to unity among prisoners and lessons learned about social organization.

Another interviewee describes a similar experience,

[It's remarkable] that prison taught me... [how to] generate dialogue. It's not too difficult for me to establish a relationship with a group of people, and bring together their positions [on a given issue]. It's not about sacrificing things but about learning to work with a group, with a team. Some people

call it management.... I developed those abilities during my time in prison and the armed conflict.

It's hard to imagine I could have achieved this degree of development in the absence of that experience. Those events required a lot... a lot of creativity.

This interviewee emphasizes how the prison experience demanded that he, like other people, step up in difficult scenarios and tap into his hidden potential. While pondering on the adverse circumstances that prisoners faced, he also concedes that without them he may have never found the creativity and push to develop new abilities. In his case, he learned how to negotiate and work with a group of people to foster dialogue and reach agreements in the face of conflict.

Many interviewees had to expand on their creative faculties almost out of obligation. The prison environment was rough and political prisoners were subjected to an authoritarian regime that was killing and torturing people by the thousands, so they were constantly required to step up and serve the collective. Rodrigo offers another example of this. He recounts how he unearthed his artistic abilities and put them to use for the first time in prison:

In our [my] case, prison helped us discover facets... it helped us discover new things we didn't know about ourselves. In my specific case, the armed conflict and prison helped me discover a facet—I can't exactly call myself a poet, but I like to write a lot. I write narratives and poems. I don't know if I would have been able to discover that artistic part of me if it weren't for prison (...) I [also] like to handle a puppet. But I never studied the arts. I have always been self-taught. Everything happened through practice (...) From then on, I've continued with the puppet. Its shape has changed, but there it is.

Rodrigo not only speaks for himself when concluding that the prison experience helped individuals develop unknown qualities and talents that have continued to serve them throughout time. In addition to becoming a writer and a poet, Rodrigo used the puppet in prison as a tool for consensus-building. He utilized humor and theater at assemblies to gather support for initiatives or explain

ideas that COPPES leaders were discussing for collective action. As for other interviewees, the newly discovered skills became a source of confidence. They still serve as reminders of a time when their character was tried, when their beliefs were put in practice, and when they found a meaningful way to serve their group in a situation where everyone's lives and safety were on the line.

Below, I include four other examples of various skills that individuals learned, among them cooking, making handicrafts, singing, and accounting.

That helped educate us, and to learn that [house] work is not only for women, but for everyone. We also tossed tortillas! He who had never done it before had to learn and couldn't say no. Even if you developed callouses while trying, you had to do it! [Laughs] Otherwise...."

*

At that time we were almost 1,300 prisoners... 1,300 prisoners! And only five people were in the kitchen cooking for everyone. I thought, "I have to go through that too?" Well, you had to go through it and you had to try it. After my first month, they called me in. "Look, Roberto, tomorrow it's your turn to cook." Wow! I started to wonder, "what am I going to do? What am I going to do?" But they always sent someone to help, to tell you to do this or that. We split up the work. Then I wondered, "would it be enough food? Or would there be too much left?" You just never knew, but in the end it was a beautiful experience. To be honest, I think I've never forgotten what I learned in that kitchen. Nowadays, I still cook.

*

A comrade taught me how to make macramé. He taught me how to make baskets and other miscellaneous stuff too. My comrades helped me a lot and then my family helped me sell everything I made so they could bring my everyday bread to prison, so we could support our daily lives in the penal facility.

*

For me, it was an experience, a unique experience. I was impressed by COPPES when I arrived because I felt good around them. I always participated in artistic activities. I sang. I even got to be the finance secretary. We had secretaries for different things. I came to earn people's trust so they gave me everyone's money to handle. I did the accounting for a small grocery store we had.

These interviewees reminisce on their various learning experiences at the prison through an overall positive outlook. In their words, they convey appreciation for the experiences they had and even seem surprised with their accomplishments. Many of the prison-acquired aptitudes continue to serve them today. In this way, the prison experience lives on with them and serves as a source of power and meaning in their lives.

5.3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The interview data shared above demonstrate how former political prisoners drew from notions of the collective as an “antidote” to the negative effects of imprisonment and torture in three significant moments: (1) interrogation and torture, (2) the experience of imprisonment, and (3) the post-imprisonment process of drawing lessons from prison. During moments of torture, interviewees emphasize the value of sticking to some sort of unquestionable “truth”. This allowed them to achieve a sense of connection that they could hold on to in order to withstand the physical and emotional pain being inflicted on them. Whether they persistently held to a cover story, embraced the idea of being on the right side of ethics, felt the spirit of God with them, maintained a sense of duty towards the collective, or remembered they were part of a larger political struggle they deemed worthwhile, this made them feel like part of something that could not be easily destroyed. This way they could assert their existence in connection to something larger than themselves. Similarly to what Voglis’ study on former political prisoners’ subjectivity suggests, individuals create a sense of individuality that is enmeshed in the collectivity (Voglis 2002). In the Salvadoran case,

being able to embed their individual trajectory in collectively-defined realities or entities (i.e. the family, Salvadoran society, “the people”, a broader ethical framework that condemns abusing others, the historically impoverished classes fighting for social justice) allowed them to assert their own individuality and “being-in-the-world” (Aretxaga 1997).

Political prisoners’ modes of resistance during imprisonment may be one of their most noteworthy accomplishments. Reminiscing on their collective organization in prison, their narratives spoke of a high degree of internal organization and solidarity. This included the creation of an entire society within confinement that was capable of multiple functions. Through great internal discipline and coordination, they successfully utilized the mechanism of hunger strikes to gain increasing freedoms for self-government. Through their contact with the outside world, they secured their livelihood by maintaining relationships with their family members, with supporting human rights organizations, with NGOs, and with street market vendors. That transformed the prison organization into an epicenter for filing reports on human rights abuses and a strong force to pressure the Salvadoran government to uphold human rights standards. It also allowed them to guarantee their economic sustenance by selling their handcrafted products to outside consumers.

Generally, former political prisoners regard the prison days as a positive time in their lives. Based on their descriptions of newly-learned skills, they continue to find confidence and strength in the experience of successfully facing trying conditions by fostering creativity and tapping into their unknown personal potential. They share examples of developing artistic abilities, leadership skills, conflict-resolution competence, cooking experience, and accounting expertise, among others, in the face of hardship. They find strength and meaning in the experience of putting these skills at the service of their community. They also continue to find pride in having been part of a self-led and self-held endeavor.

As in Voglis' research, Salvadoran former political prisoners also view their prison organization as an ideal society: "The solidarity, egalitarianism, and commitment of the political prisoners in communal life was a unique experience that was never repeated in their later lives again as free citizens. It was this kind of 'moral communism,' which cultivated the values of comradeship, that characterizes the remembered experience of prison" (Voglis 2002, 234). My empirical results coincide entirely with this observation. By tapping into unknown capacities and being part of a collective that represented and aligned with their individual interests, they gave meaning to their lives and gained a sense of control over their collective and individual fates. Yet, the difference with empirical evidence proposed by Voglis is that here we have accessed how interviewees have continued to apply these lessons throughout time. These Salvadoran former political prisoners have had a chance to continue putting their skills to practice. The kind of recognition and sense of belonging provided by the prison organization has served as a blueprint for their later social and political involvement.

All in all, based on my empirical data, in the context of torture the individual resists annihilation by (a) *being with another* in mind and belief; the subject does not disappear because it belongs to something greater. In this way, it asserts its existence and continually convinces itself of its realness and its being-in-the-world (Aretxaga 1997). Also, subjects resist annihilation by (b) *building something with another*, creating a new emerging social order based on solidarity in which individual and group interests align. The subject resists destruction because it is part of a collective subject. Further, it builds that power which cannot be destroyed by oppressive physical force alone. It exists at the symbolic and relational level, which is what is capable of shifting practices, "action on the world, and thus the world itself" (Bourdieu 1991, 170).

These results confirm that subjectivity is a productive concept to study the experience of political prisoners and torture. This matters for the realm of human rights theory and practice,

particularly the field of transitional justice (TJ), which concerns itself with how societies move forward after periods of widespread conflict and abuse. Subjectivity provides us with insight into how the crystallized effects of political violence can be undone by the reconstruction of humane social relationships (Martín-Baró 1989). This is how political prisoners built social relationships that were physically external to the individual (i.e. the relationships established in the prison organization) and social relationships that were internalized or imagined by them (i.e. during the experience of torture, with ties to family, or to a social/political community). In this way, my empirical results also confirm the importance of developing a sense of self that is enmeshed in the collectivity (Voglis 2002).

Results also confirm Aretxaga's (1997) insight that subjectivity engages productively in the oppositional practices of everyday life (Aretxaga 1997, De Certeau 1988). Subjectivity is able to shift discourses and practices, especially during torture and around torture. As described above, in this case the ability to connect to something larger than oneself was part of a symbolic battle. In it, the individual constantly challenged implicit ideas about being a criminal who was worthy of dehumanized treatment with self-told narratives about standing up for a worthwhile cause, about not being alone, about upholding ethical values, and ultimately about "existing with" others (i.e. family, comrades, God).

Contrary to Aretxaga's work, however, the power of subversion here does not lie so much in the publicity of pain, but rather in the ability to be in (symbolic) proximity with others: either through belonging (in moments of torture) or in creating a new social order based on solidarity (in prison). As in Aretxaga's work, the end goal of subjectivity here is ultimately the same: a claim to self and a deep existential recognition. But the mechanism to claim existence is different. The new emerging social order was capable of restoring that which torture had focused on destroying: mutual support, solidarity, order and organization, a sense of control and agency, connection to an ideology,

interpersonal functioning, individual and group identity, and the ability to engage in meaningful action (Agamben 1999, Brown 2016, Chare 2006, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten et al. 1995, Graziano 1992, Kirmayer et al. 2018, Nickerson et al. 2014, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019). This is comparable to what Martín-Baró identifies as building humane social relationships, which are capable of promoting trust, sincere communication, empathy, and hope regarding the future (Faúndez et al. 2014, Leslie 2001, Martín-Baró 1989).

Creating resistance thus meant creating intersubjective power to push individuals forward, create something new, and deconstruct the seemingly unshakeable venoms of violence. While these were productive movements in the direction of healing and regaining a sense of self, the idea of “subjects in the making” and multiple subject-positions throughout time suggests that, regardless of the hopeful pieces implied by these results, claiming power over one’s life—especially in a country facing an uphill battle against impunity—will be a lifelong process.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, my dissertation has explored and analyzed the lived experience of former political prisoners in El Salvador. By carrying out semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, this **research inquires into how women and men who survived political imprisonment and torture during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) make sense of their experience and reclaim power over their lives in similar and different ways.** In order to tackle this research inquiry, I: (1) described former political prisoners' forms of subjectivity (ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring) and their paths to recovery (reclaiming power over their life); (2) analyzed the role that social and political organization has played in their lives; and (3) described the notions of justice, memory, and healing that survivors draw from to memorialize their experience and claim rights.

By doing so, I have spoken to various gaps in our knowledge and generated empirical evidence that I hope will help fuel desirable social change. Multiple Latin American countries still grapple with the aftermath of Cold War authoritarian regimes that systematically violated human rights. While these countries transitioned to democratic forms of government in the 1990s, they are still working to become fully democratic societies that take responsibility for abuses committed in the past. Efforts to atone for past wrongdoings are encompassed in the field of transitional justice, which includes judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, reparations, prosecutions, lustration, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and dismissals, or a combination thereof (Roht-Arriaza 2006, United Nations 2004). El Salvador was no exception for systematically violating human rights during the civil war. At least 85,000 people were extralegally killed, 95% of them by government forces (Betancur et al. 1993), and widespread torture was applied throughout the country (Hammond 1996, Leiby 2015, Sibrián 2016). Unfortunately, the country continues to be an extreme case at the highest

degree of post-authoritarian impunity in the region (Martínez Barahona et al. 2012, Skaar et al. 2016).

6.1 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE ADDRESSED BY MY RESEARCH

First, my research speaks to a gap in transitional justice (TJ) theory and practice that I divide into three parts. While TJ can count many successes to its avail, the evidence around the globe on whether it has been efficacious is mixed (Grandin 2005; Hazan 2006; Mutua 2015; Kutnjak Ivkovic and Hagan 2011; Mendeloff 2009; Nagy 2008, 2009; Olsen et al. 2010; Savelsburg 2010; Sharp 2014; Sikkink and Kim 2013; Sikkink 2011; Skaar et al. 2016; Struett 2008; Theidon 2007). Critical scholars are pushing for an expansion and betterment of the field around three key aspects: (1a) expanding the main focus of TJ on civil and political rights to include economic, social, and cultural rights (McGregor 2013, Mutua 2015, Nagy 2008, Sharp 2013); (1b) questioning whether the current approach, based on a legalist¹⁹ perspective, actually delivers reparation for victims (Cassese 2002, Clamp 2014, Mallinder 2007, McEvoy 2007, Schabas 2006, Sharp 2014, O’Connell 2005, O’Donnell 2004); and (1c) producing “thicker” understandings of transitional justice that reflect how power relations condition the attainment of rights, in order to represent victims’ interests (Clamp 2013, McEvoy 2007, Sharp 2014).

A **second gap** in our knowledge addressed by this dissertation relates to how the concept of gender is framed and utilized in transitional justice theory and practice. The concept is frequently understood in a limiting way by being equated with women and with sexual violence perpetrated against them (Franke 2006, Hudson 2010, Myrntinen et al. 2014, Porter 2016, Theidon 2007). In addition, the literature exposes concerns around the effect that conventional justice and truth-

¹⁹ By “legalism”, I refer to the predominance of the law and legal discourse in post-conflict societies and transitional justice (McEvoy 2007). This legalism in transitional justice has tended to associate accountability for mass atrocities with individual accountability, instead of, for instance, including broader models of collective or institutional justice that could be promoted through other legal mechanisms and reforms (Sharp 2014).

seeking mechanisms can have on women. Despite their upsides, such instances have sometimes: generated silence and lack of interest from women (Franke 2006, Ní Aoláin et al. 2018, Porter 2016); created disempowering outcomes for them (Aron et al. 1991; Hamber 2016; Theidon 2007, 2012); produced re-traumatizing effects by promoting damaging stereotypes about women as passive victims (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Campbell 2007a; Franke 2006; O'Rourke 2011; Ross 2003; Sjoberg 2011; Theidon 2007); or precluded female survivors from defining their own struggles, needs and realities (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2012, Hamber 2016).

While the TJ literature has thus far largely omitted the study of masculinities in this context, the above-mentioned damaging effects point to a larger issue with how gender intersects with narratives of victimization. The general silences around men's victimization, and sexual victimization specifically, suggest the need for further work on how all survivors' narratives are elicited. Since femininities and masculinities are constructed in relation to one another, a harmful appropriation of women's testimonies ultimately suggests that problematic standards are being applied to all survivors' testimonies (Dolan 2018, Franke 2006). We need to consider how gender conditions the enactment of visible power on individuals' bodies, and produces shame along gendered lines (Franke 2006). Also, we need to consider how gendered narratives of victimhood structure and limit the possibilities of healing. Research can further interrogate what *kind* of access to public voice victims themselves desire and which outlets for their victimization narratives in fact encourage their citizen power.

A **third gap** that my dissertation addresses relates to torture and political prisoners. First, there is a general gap in our sociological knowledge of this phenomenon as a lived experience, especially in Latin America. Second, there is a gap in our general sociological knowledge of how torture and its aftermath may not only annihilate the individual but also prompt productive elaborations of the self, particularly vis-à-vis collective notions and social organization. In general,

torture survivors have been studied from a medical or psychological perspective (Fernandes and Aiello 2018; Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1973; Campbell 2007b; Halvorsen and Kagee 2010; Patel, Williams and Kellezi 2016). Within the Latin American context, research and discourse concerning political prisoners has focused mostly on the institutions that exerted repression and the testimonial rendering of imprisonment and torture (Brooks 2005, Díaz 1989, Freire 2010, Hutchinson 2011, Martínez 1978, Saumell-Muñoz 1993, Smith 2010, Valiente Núñez 2016, Voglis 2002). Official discourses have rendered torture survivors through a legal perspective, considering them important witnesses to the facts of repression (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Franke 2006, Hayner 2011; Theidon 2007, 2018).

Phenomenological studies on torture—a rich literature that serves us to understand this kind of lived experience—focus on how the power of the state destroys the individual (Brown 2016, Corcoran 2019, Crelinsten et al. 1995, Graziano 1992, Scarry 1985, Treacy 1996, Velazquez-Potts 2019). The psychology and neurobiology literature on torture survivors also points out that torture is directed at destroying the individual (Breyer 2017, Kirmayer et al 2018, Nickerson et al. 2014). But the experience of Salvadoran political prisoners complements this view, suggesting the possibility of something else in the aftermath of torture. While they underwent considerable pain and trauma, their narratives show they resisted the full destruction of their individuality in multiple ways, generating space for agency and growth. By engaging with subjectivity, this research contributes to empirical study on the aftermath of political imprisonment focusing on subjects' prospect of creating agency and resistance (Foucault 1988, 1990), as opposed to a subject completely determined by social power.

Another relevant and more specific gap refers to studies on political prisoners in El Salvador. A sociological study on former political prisoners in El Salvador fills an important void in light of the stigma and invisibilization this population has experienced in the war's aftermath. Even

if these individuals were once social and political leaders of a nation-wide revolutionary movement and currently occupy the status of victims of crimes against humanity, their experience hardly finds societal, political, cultural, or legal avenues for expression.

In order to bridge sociolegal scholarship and research on political prisoners, more attention can be directed at understanding the social elements involved in being a political prisoner, thus exploring the links between this experience and human rights-based transitional justice. As evidenced in the cases of Argentina and Northern Ireland (Brewer and Hayes 2015, Joyce and Lynch 2017, Park 2014), former political prisoners can be important actors in transitional justice that push the boundaries on restitution and reparations, contributing important knowledge on the post-authoritarian healing process of individuals, groups, and societies. Yet what is generally missing as of yet in Latin America and El Salvador specifically, are studies on political prisoners' lived experience and the meanings they attach to such experiences—in other words, their subjectivity. How that subjectivity is shaped by social organization and collective notions is also crucial, especially considering that both victimization and survival were socially and politically conditioned.

As Giorgio Agamben has argued, justice and restitution are a matter of subjects (Agamben 1999, Chare 2006). When social relationships are torn by violence, the subject “becomes witness to its own disorder” and “its own oblivion as a subject” (Agamben 1999, 106). Therefore, reconstituting a subjective order and escaping from oblivion requires transitional justice theory and practice to concern itself with subjectivity. Redistributing responsibility and shame for the harms inflicted and achieving a sense of restitution and recovery is necessarily a symbolic, narrative endeavor.

This research also finds consistency with and builds upon two studies on political prisoners, which explore similar questions in other geographical and political contexts. Both studies analyze mechanisms through which the individual and the collective articulate to resist oppressive action and

assert their subjectivity vis-à-vis a despotic institution. Focusing on 1980s Northern Ireland, Begoña Aretxaga (1995, 1997) proposes the “deep play”²⁰ of subjectivity, in other words, the weight of subjectivity in shifting oppressive contexts (Aretxaga 1995, 1997). Political prisoners’ subjectivity underscores the possibility that individuals face to engage in practices that shift and defy dominant discourses and practices. Studying the aftermath of the civil war in Greece (1946-1949), Polymeris Voglis notes that following imprisonment, political prisoners found meaning by developing an identity that was enmeshed in the collectivity (Voglis 2002). Despite their important contribution, these two studies were written about a different historical context to post-Cold War Latin America and were not framed through a human rights-based transitional justice lens.

6.2 FINAL REFLECTIONS

My empirical results confirm the importance of building a link between survivors’ subjectivity and the field of human rights-based transitional justice. While human rights (HR) provide us with a general ethical-political-legal guideline, sociological research considers how those frameworks play out in the real. Human rights violations do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are embedded in historical, political, social, and cultural contexts defined by power. Therefore, it concerns theorists and activists alike to interrogate the specific social and political arrangements that produce and sustain human rights violations. Accordingly, TJ and HR must undertake the social analysis of factors that promote patterns of abuse and those that help to disarticulate them in order to reconsider, redefine, re-appropriate, or expand the TJ and HR frameworks when necessary. In the Salvadoran case, building a bridge between human rights and a sociological analysis of political prisoners pushes our knowledge on how survivors can access rights in an impunity-ridden context.

²⁰ “Deep play” is a concept coined by Jeremy Bentham, which anthropologist Clifford Geertz reinterpreted to define high-stakes activities such as the cockfights he studied in Bali. These involved such little monetary rewards that no seemingly rational person would engage in the risk of playing (Geertz 1973).

This can hopefully generate lessons that help inform reparations and healing efforts for similar communities elsewhere.

This research has attempted to situate itself as a building block to further understand how social bonds can lead to countering abuse. I find inspiration for this intention in critiques from the TWAIL camp (Third-World Approaches to International Law) that problematize the centrality of the individual in the human rights corpus in detriment of community (Mutua 2015). This argument becomes infused with validity especially where the human rights framework may engage the risk of silencing cultures and parts of humanity that value social bonds (Mutua 2015, 4). While speaking to the power of social bonds in countering the negative effects of torture, my dissertation research also builds on social theory that emerged from the Latin American context and El Salvador specifically—liberation psychology. This theoretical approach accentuates the need to study the effects of violence on individuals and groups as the result of particular and contingent social arrangements (Leslie 2001, Martín-Baró 1989), viewing political violence as the “traumatic crystallization in persons and groups of inhuman social relations” (Martín-Baró in Leslie 2001, 53).

My research accepts and confirms liberation psychology’s tenet that violence is not endemic or inevitable (Martín-Baró 1989): even in the face of adverse social conditions, such as impunity and debilitated democracy, my empirical results show that recovery is neither impossible nor predetermined by the “gravity” of abuse. It is possible to undo the effects of violence and, as the political violence survivors I worked with, find ways to reinterpret and reconstruct human relations in a more humane fashion. This means fostering relationships that are capable of promoting trust, sincere communication, empathy, and hope regarding the future (Faúndez et al. 2014, Leslie 2001, Martín-Baró 1989). In fact, for Salvadoran political prisoners, being able to create a new collective order during imprisonment based on these principles became a decisive fueling force in their lives.

From a complementary vantage point, my dissertation research contributes to studies that engage the aftermath of political violence through subjects' prospect of creating agency and resistance (Foucault 1988, 1990), as opposed to a subject completely determined by social power (Leckey 2008, Weberman 2000). As Martín-Baró and liberation psychology suggest, not all has been said and done. This underlines that human lives create "subjects in the making" embedded in history, able to achieve multiple subject-positions throughout time (Voglis 2002). Hence, studying how individual lives are interconnected with sociopolitical, historical, and cultural context reflects not an arbitrary preference but a commitment to sociological explanations that may further victims' sense of redress. Studying the case of former political prisoners in El Salvador speaks to what culturally-meaningful ideas and practices concerning justice and rights can help to disarticulate impunity and inform state action. This is a stepping stone to ultimately repairing severed social relations, deconstructing the venoms of violence, and expanding the "legitimacy of public power and the democratic polity" (Mutua 2015, 5).

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