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Mobilization after Repression: Reconsidering The Role of Testimonies and Exiles in Post-War El Salvador

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Abstract

During the civil war in El Salvador, the Salvadoran military engaged in the systematic disappearance of youth and facilitated their adoptions. Presently Found, a Salvadoran human rights NGO, works to reunite these youth with their surviving biological families. However, a key difference between Found and other similar organizations, is that the former was established in the post-war context. Through a case study of Found, and placed in comparative light with a similar phenomenon in Argentina, I will show that traditional mobilization strategies face new obstacles in a post-war context. Specifically, while Found engaged in many of the same movement tactics that have bred other major transnational networks, the post-repression context complicated their use in El Salvador. For example, the literature points to the importance of testimonies as a resource during times of contention. Found's use of testimonies in the post-repression context changed the *impact* of this practice. And, unlike the case of Grandmothers in Argentina, in which exiles were key for the organization, Found did not have this same type of support network. By considering the implications of the post-contention environment for Found's organizational efforts, contributes to the growing literature on transnational advocacy and solidarity networks.

Keywords

Transnational Networks, Human Rights, Latin America

The 1980s was a time of tremendous political, social, and civil unrest in El Salvador. Much has been written about the systematic repression, killings, massacres and disappearances of civilians by the government during the civil war there in that period (Armstrong, 1982; Danner, 1994; Fisher, 1988). However, the forced disappearance of children and adolescents and their subsequent adoption are a largely unknown part of the Salvadoran conflict.

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Families in the United States and Europe adopted many of the disappeared children.

Presently Found, a Salvadoran based transnational human rights NGO established after the Peace Accords, works to reunite these youth with their surviving biological families.¹ Like other organizations in Latin America that focus on appropriations, its goal is to give appropriated youth their human right to a name, identity, culture and history.² Previous research on transnational organizations would lead us to expect that Found's post-war mobilization, coupled with the large population of Salvadoran exiles, and the relative extensiveness of this human rights violation, would have facilitated the organization's ability to garner allies. But, this has not been the case. Through a case study of Found, and a shadow comparison to a similar phenomenon in Argentina, I will show that traditional mobilization strategies face new obstacles in a post-war context. Specifically, Found's post-repression mobilization has limited its ability to appeal to allies and this context has changed the nature of the exile community, which might otherwise have been very important for the success of its work.

Most studies of transnational mobilization focus on the effects of immediate sources of contention such as: state violence and repression (Ball, 2000; Bayard de Volo, 2001; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Perla, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) or issues of neoliberalism and globalization (Borras Jr., 2008; Edelman, 2008; McMichael, 2008; Tarrow, 2005). But, there is little theorization of the effect of mobilization tactics when an organization is established post-conflict or if the issue of contention has seemingly been "resolved." Found, unlike past transnational human rights organizations, was established and operates outside of the context of governmental repression, yet its work is centered on violations that took place during the war. This provides a distinct lens through which to explore the impact of traditional tactics of mobilization. By considering the implications of a post-contention environment and identifying the obstacles that Found has faced in its transnational organizing efforts this article contributes to the growing literature on transnational advocacy and solidarity networks.

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THE CONFLICT AND THE ORGANIZATION

Found was established in 1994, two years after the official end of El Salvador's civil war. Early members of the organization included families searching for their children, members of the Catholic Church, and international scientific organizations. Found's goal was to locate the missing children and help them access their name, identity, culture and history (Field Notes 2009). Estimates of the number of children appropriated during the war range from 800 (an estimate of the current head of the organization) to 2,354 (Personal Communication 2012). Found has termed the children disappeared during the war "*jovenes*," literally meaning young people. The *jovenes* currently range in age from 18 to 35, depending on their age at the time of appropriation. It is important to highlight that the *jovenes* Found has worked with are young adults. This means that, unlike in other reunion movements, such as those in Argentina, custody is not an issue. Further, in many instances the biological parents of the missing youth have been the ones searching for them. This contrasts with the situation in other organizations in which those searching for appropriated children were their grandparents.

Found identified two common paths to appropriation during the war. First, the military would take the child, either by literally snatching the child from the family or by taking children who survived military led-massacres to army garrisons. Second, many children were relinquished under duress to various government institutions, hospitals, or orphanages. In other cases, the biological family was told their child would be put in foster care in a safe location until the end of the war. In reality, lawyers, in most cases working with the government, sold the children into adoption. Regardless of how the child was separated from the family, the military government, along with international adoption agencies, facilitated their adoption either within El Salvador or abroad.

Reunions are focused on a youth's right to know his/her past and identity, rather than custody. With the help of international human rights and professional associations, Found has been able to reunite 312 young adults with their surviving family members in El Salvador (Personal Communication 2009). At least 20 of these reunions were international (Ibid). And, it has located an additional 50 youth abroad who are waiting to be matched with their respective

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biological families (Personal Communication 2009). Found, along with its international partners, has created a genetic databank of over 800 profiles of biological family members and appropriated children (Field Notes 2009). However, the organization still faces major obstacles in reuniting the appropriated youth, given the post-repression context.

In order to highlight the difficulties of post-repression mobilization, I will compare my finding with the research of others studying a similar movement in Argentina—the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (the Grandmothers). The Grandmothers emerged during the "dirty war" (1979-1983) in Argentina (Arditti 1999, 2002; Arditti & Lykes 1993; Guest 1990; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Lazar 2006; Robben 2005), and are an early example of transnational collective action (TNCA). Like Found, the Grandmothers formed to search for their missing loved ones, and one of their main goals was to facilitate reunifications of appropriated youth with their biological families (Arditti 1999; Arditti & Lykes 1993; Martínez 1996). As in El Salvador, the Argentine government engaged in the systematic appropriation of children of those thought to be dissidents (Arditti 1999). However, in this case, Grandparents were the most closely biologically-affiliated relatives, as the parents of appropriated youth had been permanently "disappeared." Through various means the Grandmothers have been able to document the disappearance of 88 children and estimate that the actual number of appropriated children is closer to 500 (Arditti 1999:50). They worked with geneticists to use scientific matching to prove the identity of appropriated youth (Arditti 1999; Arditti & Lykes 1993; Guest 1990; Robben 2005; Sikkink 2008), and were instrumental in the passing of human rights legislation on the rights of the child in the United Nations (Arditti 1999; Guest 1990). A decade later, the same technology, scientists, and physicians who worked with the Grandmothers, were also employed by Found.

Both organizations sought to mobilize transnationally. They relied on information from allies abroad and used international networks to reach out to other advocates. Further, each organization used the same model of transnational mobilization, the boomerang (Keck & Sikkink 1998), to carry out its respective work. The goals of the organizations and methods for locating children were similar.

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Both organizations centered their efforts on the notion that the denial of one's identity, and awareness of one's history and origins, is psychologically damaging (for information on this and the Grandmothers see: Arditti 1999). The reunion of an appropriated youth with his/her biological family is important in overcoming the emotional and psychological damage of living under a false identity (Arditti 1999). Reunions are also seen as ending an ongoing form of torture for the biological families. Even the simple knowledge that a child had survived the war helped families begin to heal from some of the suffering inflicted upon them during that time period. Both organizations worked hard to document the various forms of government terror. They have seen their work as a form of healing, for both the families, and for society as a whole, from the trauma caused by their respective wars. Members of these organizations believe that bringing these violations to light will ensure that it will not happen again and will avoid what Arditti (2002) discussed as a "culture of impunity."

Despite their similarities, we would expect that Found would have much more success and ease in using some of the classic strategies of transnational mobilization. Because Found mobilized during a period of democratization, it had a much larger political opening to take advantage of (Rothman & Oliver 2002) as the blockage between the state and civil society was alleviated (Keck & Sikkink 1998). This political shift not only expanded the possibility of documenting information about appropriations, but it also allowed for the use of testimonies in public forums without the fear of reprisal. In addition, the nature and extent of human rights violations had been well documented by solidarity organizations and the U.N. Truth Commission by the time Found became active. This should have allowed for the organization's claims to resonate (Benford & Snow 2000; Keck & Sikkink 1998) with larger cultural understandings of the war. In contrast, the Grandmothers had to organize in the face of repression, and the suppression of their movement.

Given that exiles were key resources for the Grandmothers, the large number of Salvadorans living abroad- nearly a quarter of the population lives outside of their home nation (Cordova 2005), exiles should have been a key resource for Found. Most of these Salvadoran migrants have gone to the United States (World Bank n.d.). Hence,

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Found potentially had access to a tremendous number of exiles who could act as mediators. In contrast, in the case of Argentina, outmigration between 1970 and 2000 has not exceeded 2% of the population (World Bank n.d.). And, while the largest group of migrants leave for the U.S. or Europe, a notable proportion of them move within South America (World Bank n.d.), limiting the Grandmothers ties to more powerful actors in the North. However, as I will show, the post-repression context restricted Found's ability to use the exile community to further its work.

In sum, the literature would lead us to expect that Found should have had success in using the tactics of mobilization employed by the Grandmothers. Yet, the post-repression context presented new challenges for the organization's efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on TNCA relies heavily on the literature on social movements and examines how resources (Caniglia 2002; Wood 2005), political and institutional opportunity structures, and frames impact TNCA.^{3,4} Many scholars argue that globalization is the driving force behind TNCA.⁵ Other scholars have demonstrated that TNCA has worked to enforce international norms (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink 2002). One example of the spread of international norms has been that of human rights (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez 1997). The explosion of human rights movements in Latin America since the 1970s (Ball 2000; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 2005) suggests that, in the face of increasing state repression during this time period, many Latin Americans used international norms to confront their government's actions. The movements they formed often relied on transnational mobilization and international pressure to change state practices (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Perla 2008b). The effect of this was to give the international community more leverage over offending government's and force an end to conditions that caused the violations (Keck & Sikkink 1998).⁶

One of the classic models of international norm enforcement was the boomerang, which was first theorized by Keck and Sikkink (1998). Within this model, when domestic actors could not make claims on the state due to repression, they turned to international audiences and allies for help (Keck & Sikkink 1998). By sharing

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information about actions of the offending state with foreign audiences, mobilizers simultaneously drew more people to their cause and called into question the government's version of events (Ibid). Eventually, through transnational mobilization, activists were able to generate enough domestic and international pressure to force the government to contend with the movement's initial claims (Ibid). Transnational activism has been a crucial way for human rights organizations to bring about an end to violations, and to enforce international standards for government practices (Ibid). Both of the cases under study used this model of activism. But, the impact of their usage differed because of the distinct moments, vis-à-vis the conflict, when they were employed.

One of the key parts of TNCA has been the use of information provided by networks. For example, testimonies have been central in the case of human rights struggles (Arditti 1999; Ayres 1982; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Robben 2005). These first-hand accounts were important for three reasons. First, they were an essential source of information about the actual human rights conditions in an offending nation (Guest 1990; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Perla 2008b; Robben 2005). The offending government often tried to deny accountability for violations and/or the culpability of the state in them. Testimonies were first-hand information that demonstrated the extent of government responsibility for violations (Keck & Sikkink 1998). Second, they served to humanize and dramatize (Ibid) a set of events, which is a crucial part of garnering allies (Benford and Snow 2000; Keck & Sikkink 1998). Finally, first-hand accounts used larger cultural understandings of what is right and wrong to galvanize international audiences to oppose the offending regime and its lack of respect for human rights (Keck & Sikkink 1998).

Activists used testimonies to frame a human rights issue (Ibid). Framing entails the identification of an issue, its cause/perpetrator, and the solution to it (Benford & Snow 2000). This tactic has been employed extensively in contexts of repression, in which the obvious cause of violations has been a military government. The solution was political, and involved the removal of military figures and their replacement with democratically-elected representatives of the people. In sum, first-hand accounts have provided information and framed the issue and solution for

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international audiences, who have then been compelled to act (Brysk 2000; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Nepstad 2001; Perla 2008b).

Past research also points to the importance of exiles in TNCA. Scholars have highlighted the role of Argentine exiles in generating international mobilization for reuniting the disappeared children with their surviving family members during the “Dirty War” (Arditti 1999; Keck & Sikkink 1998). Specifically, through the efforts of those who remained in Argentina, exiles, and allies abroad, international attention was called to the military’s repression and disappearances of Argentinean citizens (Keck & Sikkink 1998).

In addition, Héctor Perla Jr., (2008) argues that diasporic networks were crucial to the formation and solidification of transnational solidarity and mobilization against government repression during the civil unrest in Central America. Perla (2008) shows how migrants and exiles, themselves, were the brokers for the movement between El Salvador and American activists (Ibid). The exile community created and cultivated the larger solidarity networks that gained so much prominence during the 1980s (Ibid). And, Smith (1994) discussed the centrality of that community’s bi-cultural knowledge in helping the movement work towards a transformation of political life in El Salvador. However, while exile networks have been crucial to mobilization during repression (Hawkins 2002; Perla 2008b), we know little about how they might be utilized in the post-repression context.

While previous research serves to illuminate the successes and shortcomings of transnational human rights work, much of it is temporally specific. Though some of it does examine movements that have been active after the official end of repression, most of the literature continues to concentrate on organizations formed during periods of contention. Analyzing the obstacles faced by Found as a result of this difference has the potential to complicate, existing literature on transnational human rights work. Specifically, contrasting the case of Found with that of the Grandmothers will highlight the difficulties of post-repression mobilization in garnering international allies and in using exiles as a key resource for the organization.

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DATA

This article relies on two sources of data. First, I conducted eight weeks of participant observation at Found in 2009, in San Salvador, El Salvador. During this time, I observed activities in all four of the major departments at Found. I accompanied Found representatives on home visits, to workshops, and to community events throughout El Salvador. Over the course of my time with the organization I observed all 15 of the full-time employees, and 5 of the regular volunteers and took extensive field notes daily. Also, during my fieldwork, two appropriated youth came to the office, and I accompanied them into the field, and, in one case, to her reunion. In addition, I conducted and recorded interviews with 4 organization affiliates, one from each department in the organization. In these semi-structured interviews all of the interviewees were asked to describe their role in, and the reunification process of cases, with *jovenes* outside of Latin America.

The second source of data for this project is a review of existing research conducted on the Grandmothers. This case is not the primary unit of analysis and there has been extensive research done on the organization and its work. It is used as a shadow comparison to bring to the fore the issues of post-repression mobilization. Among the reasons that the case of Argentina is a prudent comparison case is because the counterinsurgency tactics used by the Argentine military were exported to Central America in the 1980s (Armony 2005). In fact, the Argentine military trained the Salvadoran armed forces and provided them with supplies during the 1980s (Ibid).

FINDINGS

Testimonies: Losing the Child to the War Again

Like many other transnationally-oriented human rights organizations, Found and the Grandmothers used testimonies as an important way to reach international audiences. Yet, their respective contexts of mobilization impacted the effectiveness of this tactic. Testimonies that were given in contexts of repression—as illustrated by the Grandmothers—have a different *impact* than those first given in a post-war environment -as demonstrated in the case of Found.⁷

The Grandmothers used testimonies to counter the Argentine government's denial of human rights abuses and the existence of

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appropriated youth (Arditti 1999; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Robben 2005). In order to call attention to repression activists from the Grandmother's movement traveled to the U.S. and Europe to share their testimonies (Arditti 1999, 2002; Ayres 1982; Keck & Sikkink 1998). The Grandmothers' audiences included foreign heads of state and international activists (Arditti 1999; Ayres 1982). Because their testimonies were given in the context of the war, the Grandmothers exposed appropriations as another tactic of government repression and, thus, made it a part of a larger frame (Arditti 1999, 2002; Robben 2005) of human rights violations in Argentina.

Given this frame, the resolution to appropriations was two fold and the first step would lead to the next. First, the repression had to end, which would mean the end of military rule and the return to a democratically elected government. In essence, the Grandmothers framed the solution to appropriations as an end to the conditions that were causing them and government impunity in the matter. The way to reach that goal was through international attention and political pressure (Keck & Sikkink 1998). The effectiveness of this approach was evidenced by the international attention that appropriations received, both during and after the war (Arditti 1999; Ayres 1982; Guest 1990; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Loveman 1998). The second step in the resolution process, which would result from the return to democratic rule, was the opening of a political space that would allow for the Grandmothers to locate and reunite appropriated youth with their biological families. Arditti (1999) shows that, the Grandmothers' national and transnational work during the war, carried over into the transition to democracy and peace. For instance, members of the incoming democratic government met with the Grandmothers to discuss how to deal with human rights issues (Arditti 1999). Further, appropriations were the only war crime that military officials could initially be prosecuted for (Arditti 1999; Bonner 2005). In sum, the Grandmothers' use of testimonies during the war simultaneously defined appropriations as a tactic of government repression and framed their resolution as an issue that required coordinated international political action.

In contrast, Found's members spent much of their time and effort trying to prove to international audiences that the organization's work centered on human rights violations that had begun during the

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war and had carried over into peacetime. In the words of Raquel, one of Found's affiliates and a *joven* herself, she felt the organization needed "to show them, the people in the north, that we are a real organization. We are not trying to take money, but we are doing real human rights work" (Field Notes 2009). Visits from international audiences were an opportunity to use testimonies to lend credibility to their work, and Found made sure to have reunified *jovenes* on hand to have them share their stories (Field Notes 2009;2009;2009). This, coupled with the use of testimonies and other materials internationally were important ways the organization tried to show that its claims were accurate. For instance, Don Marco, whose child was disappeared during the war, did a speaking tour of Europe. On another occasion he was asked to share his testimony with a group of international visitors to El Salvador. His testimony was as follows:

"Well, during the war we lived in the campo. In 1980 the army killed my father...Between 1980 and 1984 I had to flee. I would leave my family at the house and go to the hills to hide. But then they started to come and burn down our houses. They started to kill women and children. Where I lived they started to take women and children out of the house with the basic necessities, and then they would burn down the house. That is what they did to us. So we started to flee. You have to understand that we were not on one side or the other, but if you were a campesino they assumed that we were part of the guerilleros. So we had to run, we had no choice.

We were fleeing when the army surrounded us. They made a circle around our group and started to shoot. They did not care that our women and children were there. They killed one of my daughters, the bullet went through her head and came out of her eye. Her sister Imelda, was shot twice in the leg. I don't know how, but we managed to get out of the field. We took her to a

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hospital in the hills. There they said that we needed to take her to a hospital in the city. The reality is that if we did this they would kill all of us because they would think that we are part of the opposition. But we were not. To stay safe we left her there, what else could we do, we did not know how to take care of her, we did not have the materials.... So we left her there. We had to leave to avoid the army. They were coming to surround the camp, everyday they would get closer and closer, circling the camp. So we left, and when we went back to look for her she was gone.

When the war ended I went to the Truth Commissions to tell them my story. I went to Father Cortina. And somehow, thanks to god, they found my [missing daughter]. We wrote a few letters recounting certain memories and then the DNA match came. She came down in July... I remember everything about that day, everything I have in my head. Father Cortina was there, he was there and that was the day he asked me to be a part of the organization. And I said "sure." That day was hard because she did not speak Spanish, so we had to communicate through another person. But that day... (he smiles and seems to be thinking about that)." (Field Notes 2009)

In this excerpt from Don Marco's testimony he is clearly trying to place appropriations within the context of war. Additionally, the testimony showed the nature of the violence and conditions that made many families powerless ("*impotente*") to keep their child during those times. Testimonies were often coupled with books, videos, and other materials the organization produced, in an attempt to show the systematic nature of appropriations.

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It is important to notice that much of Don Marco's testimony centered on the conditions of war and reinforced what was documented elsewhere.⁸ In this testimony, his reunion with his daughter, a topic he mentioned at the end, became secondary and a much less significant part of his story. First-hand accounts of *jovenes* fell into a similar pattern. For instance Romeo, a *joven* who often spent time at the office though he was not an official affiliate of the organization, was asked to share his story with visitors. Each time he spent most of his time discussing the conditions that led up to his appropriation. He briefly discussed his reunion and how often he was able to see his biological family. The emphasis of his story was not on the appropriation itself, it was on the war and its impact on his life.

A secondary issue that this testimony raised is the possible solution to the issue. Found sought to use a boomerang strategy (see the next section) to pressure the Salvadoran government into opening records that would identify appropriated children and to whom they were adopted, and it has even gone so far as to demand the release of military archives in public gatherings and on national television. But, their testimonies did not discuss this as a part of the solution. The solution that they emphasize was, instead, the process that led up to appropriations and the physical reunion of a *joven* with their biological family.

The result was that the post-repression context that Found worked within changed the impact of the testimonies. Because the testimonies centered on other aspects of the war, such as the massacres, fleeing the army, and being caught in a war zone, these first-hand accounts showed that appropriations were a consequence of *other* government "counterinsurgency" strategies, rather than a tactic in and of themselves. Instead of working to influence the creation and expansion of national and international understandings of the war, like the Grandmothers did during the "dirty war," Found's work reinforced existing frames regarding the tactics of repression during the conflict, and the issue of appropriation became secondary. The effect of this was to lose the child to the war all over again. That is, the war became the larger frame of the issue, and appropriations simply happened within the context of what we already know about the military's brutality.

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A second reason that the impact of testimonies for Found was profoundly different than for the Grandmothers, had to do with the obvious solutions to this violation during war versus peacetime. That is, the peacetime context in El Salvador did not lend itself to garnering a similar resolution to appropriations because the conditions causing appropriations, the war and the dominance of the military in matters of governance, had long been over. In El Salvador the political resolution had already been reached with democratic elections following the war and the curtailment of the role of the military in government. Hence, while the issue of appropriations carried over into the post-war context, it was not a matter that clearly required a political solution. The opening of a political space to confront the issue of appropriations had been accomplished. But because the organization could not rely on the momentum of framing appropriations as a tactic of repression, and on international attention on the issue, the primary solution to Found's missing *jovenes* became a matter of solving cases through private investigations rather than a coordinated political response. While Found pressed for political solutions, these demands were separated from their testimonies, further obscuring the political nature of their work.

Exiles: Another Missing Link

According to the literature on transnational networks, the exile population has served as an important resource for human rights movements (Arditti 1999; Hawkins 2002; Perla 2008b). This population has resulted from the government's tactics of repression (Hawkins 2002; Perla 2008b). And, overtime, exiles have come to serve as transmitters and translators of information for international audiences (Perla 2008b).

This population was crucial to organizations in both Argentina and El Salvador in launching what Keck and Sikkink (1998) term a "boomerang." The Grandmothers used this strategy to overcome the initial lack of response from, and continued impunity of, the Argentine government. And, while the conflict in Argentina started in 1976, by late 1979 and early 1980 disappearances had significantly decreased (Arditti 1999). Diffusion, the process by which contention or claims move from one location to another (Tarrow 2005), played an important role in their ability to launch a boomerang.

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One of the ways that the Grandmothers accomplished diffusion was through exiles, who provided information about the conditions in Argentina to international audiences (Arditti 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) use the Grandmothers as a classic example of how a boomerang is launched. The organization gained much of its momentum because of first-hand information that grandmothers received from exiles (Arditti 1999; Keck & Sikkink 1998). For instance, exiles, who were at some point disappeared to detention centers, witnessed the birth of children in captivity and could identify individuals who took possession of the children in the process of appropriation (Ibid). Given their direct experience with government repression this population was an important source of information for the Grandmothers. In other words, government repression inadvertently created an international population that was personally versed in the structures of appropriation.

Found also tried to launch a boomerang and to use international connections to carry out its mission, but it was much more limited in its ability to sustain it. According to Juan, a long time employee and Found's head of Public Relations, a major mission of the organization, was to generate solidarity between Salvadorans and actors from the North. It was hoped that, through such a relationship, external pressure could be applied on the Salvadoran government so that it would release records that could help to locate more *jovenes* (Field Notes 2009).

This approach was illustrated during the many visits from international delegations, missionaries, and people from universities in other countries who came to Found throughout my time there. At the end of each visit Juan or Raquel, the other Public Relations worker, asked visitors to go home and tell others about what they had learned. In addition, they often appealed to foreign actors to write letters to their respective government officials and to join the organization's email list so that they could work together in the future. Yet, this effort encountered obstacles. For example, after Juan finished one such presentation to a group of missionaries, he began to talk with one of them. Both Juan and the visitor expressed a desire to develop an alliance to use the political power of the visitor's government to put pressure on the Salvadoran government to complete its

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obligations to the disappeared and their families (Field Notes 2009). But, as the conversation progressed the visitor revealed that she had tried to communicate with the organization before, but her emails went unanswered (Ibid). Juan recalled her name, and explained through a translator that because the email message was in English he could not communicate with her (Ibid). At the end of the conversation, while it was evident that both parties wanted to resolve this issue, neither could offer a solution that would overcome the language barrier.

During the war it was Salvadorans living abroad who were key in transmitting and translating information about the conditions in Central America and the human rights violations being committed by the region's governments to allies in the North (Perla 2008b). The use of this population in the post-war period could have helped Found to maintain connections with international audiences. However, the case of the Grandmothers illustrates that those living abroad must have knowledge and experience with appropriations in order to act as a major international link between the organization and other advocates. The population that went into exile during the Salvadoran war was versed in the government's tactics of repression. But because appropriations did not come to light until after the war, the population that had an enormous potential to carry on the boomerang could not do so. Due to the fact that many of the biological families remained in El Salvador—there were only a handful of cases in which the biological family moved abroad—there is not an established international network of them in the global north. The effect of this was to limit the organization's ability to take advantage of an informed and engaged diaspora. While the economic incentive to migrate remained strong in post-war El Salvador, the cases of Found and the Grandmothers, illustrate the importance of an exile population that is versed in government tactics of repression, that can then launch a boomerang.

An engaged and informed international community of Salvadorans abroad could not only facilitate the reach of the boomerang, but its bi-cultural knowledge could help Found successfully approach families abroad.⁹ Juan, who investigated cases of appropriated youth for Found, recalled a case of a *jovent* in the United States. By the time Found had acquired an address for her adoptive

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family in the U.S., the family had moved. Attempts were made by an English-speaking affiliate to obtain information about the family from neighbors, but all of them refused to give out any information. As Juan talked about the case, he raised the issue of privacy that he believes is unique to the United States. Juan said, "...because in the north people are like 'You have to protect privacy.' You just get doors slammed in your face...." (Field Notes 2009). Juan expressed the sentiments echoed by much of the staff: norms of privacy in the U.S. were much stricter than in El Salvador, and ideas of a family's right to privacy did not match up with the organization's understandings about the public nature of its work and mission.

Mauricio, a volunteer with the organization, was sensitive to the feelings that adoption brings up for the family and child. He also highlighted the gap between Salvadoran and Northern cultural understandings of family privacy. Mauricio went on to say that when a family is approached by the organization regarding their adopted child:

"There is a certain resistance and aggression, and threatening to disown etcetera..., depending, this happens more in [Europe], where the feeling of privacy is very strong, it is a *right*.¹⁰ So then, 'No one has the right to know anything about me or my child,' this is what they think. And the fact of us coming, telling them, 'we know you have a child from El Salvador,' makes them feel threatened, because their right to privacy is being violated." (Interview, June 9, 2009)

One could argue that ideas of family privacy are not unique to people in the United States or Europeans. Yet, the organization only encountered only one case of this type of resistance in El Salvador, which involved a former army general who was on active duty during the civil war (Field Notes 2009).

In order to overcome this resistance, Mauricio, a native of the country that he was the main contact for, tried to contact adoptive families in a way that was sensitive to their cultural understandings of family privacy. Mauricio stated that when he makes

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contact with an adoptive family he tells them “[o]ur proposal is not to call into question the adoption. What is done is done. We know your intention was good—[your intention was] to save the life of a child and you have loved and raised them. But at the same time their natural—biological family wants to know them” (Interview 2009). This approach used his cultural knowledge of both places, and adoptive parents’ attitudes towards families to try to permeate the barriers to privacy there. Mauricio has had moderate success with this strategy in reaching and maintaining some contact with families in Europe. But, because he was working in El Salvador most of the year, he had a limited amount of time and opportunity to employ this tactic in his work.

The international population of Salvadorans could use their bi-cultural knowledge to help Found contact adoptive families abroad in ways that respect both countries’ ideas of family. Those living abroad, with experience or knowledge of appropriations, could act as not just a mediator of information (Tarrow 2005). They could also use their bi-cultural skills to help the organization approach adoptive families in a way that takes in to account all sides of the appropriation and reunification process. However, in the post-repression context, because so many exiles were not versed in the phenomenon of appropriations and because so many post-war migrants leave El Salvador for economic reasons, Found’s access to this bi-cultural resource was severely limited. The consequence was that Found would have to first inform them, before it could employ the diaspora to connect with the broader international community.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Found engaged in many of the same movement tactics that the Grandmothers did, tactics that have bred other major transnational networks, the post-repression context created a set of obstacles for it. Specifically, while the literature points to the importance of using testimonies as a resource during times of contention, using this same tactic in the post-repression context changed the *impact* of this practice. During contentious times, as the case of the Grandmothers illustrated, testimonies created a human rights frame, called attention to specific violations, and showed that appropriations were a tactic of repression. The post-repression

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context changed the impact of testimonies expanding the frame of human rights during a period of repression, to reinforcing what was already known. Because of this, Found's human rights claims were subsumed under larger frames generated about the conflict. The effect of this was to lose the child to the war all over again.

A second consequence of the use of testimonies in the post-war period was to change the obvious solution to actors' claims. The case of the Grandmothers illustrated that during the war the solution to appropriations was to end the conditions creating them. Hence, a return to democratic rule was called for. This required international political pressure to oust the military government and to create space to carry out their work. Although Found also saw the solution to appropriations as one that involved placing international pressure on the Salvadoran government in this case to release information that would identify and hopefully locate the missing children the peacetime context of these demands lent itself to making this a non-political issue. That is, the conditions that had caused appropriations ended in 1992 with the signing of the peace accords. Further the mobilization of the organization and its actions, coupled with multiple free elections in El Salvador, was evidence that there was an open political environment to discuss these issues. As a result, the resolution to appropriations was seen to be through private investigative work to locate, and reunite children with their surviving biological family members. This idea was reinforced in testimonies because *jovenes* were located through the organization's investigative work. Rather than foregrounding a political resolution to appropriations, the impact of testimonies in the post-war context was to depoliticize the nature of Found's work.

Perhaps one way the organization could overcome the obstacles presented in using testimonies in the post-repression context would be to discuss the impact of appropriations on all of the parties involved. In other words, rather than highlight the conditions of disappearance, they could foreground the pain of loss and the significance of reunifications in the lives of families, *jovenes*, and their communities. In 2010 the Salvadoran government acknowledged the phenomena of disappearances for the first time. This shift coincided with the election a president from the leftist party. However, the impact of this move seems to be largely symbolic. The government

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created a “Day for the disappeared children,” and a commission to search for them in their search. But, its commitment to facilitating reunions is specious. First, the Commission has, as of the writing of this article, yet to meet with all of its members present and to have steady funding. Second, the military still refuses to open up records that could identify *jovenes*. Third, the commission has assumed no responsibility for facilitating reunions. Found is still responsible for conducting investigations, gathering information, and carrying out DNA tests and analysis. So, unlike the case of the Grandmothers, in which, the state made DNA testing and the data bank public (Arditti 1999; Bonner 2005), in El Salvador this issue is still considered a private matter. Although the government’s acknowledgement of the phenomenon was an important symbolic step, it has yet to yield any significant changes for the organization and its work.

Found’s access to exiles as allies was also constrained by the post-repression context. So, unlike the case of Grandmothers, in which exiles were sources of information and engaged with the human rights struggle of their sending country, Found did not have this same type of support network. While migrant networks were pivotal during the Salvadoran civil war in mobilizing to end repression (Perla, 2008b), in the post-war context they were not an accessible constituency for the organization because most of the people with first-hand knowledge of appropriations remained in El Salvador. Further, those who went abroad needed to be educated as to the nature and extent of the problem. Finally, by virtue of their appropriation, the other victims—the *jovenes*—were no longer a part of the politically—and socially—engaged Salvadoran diaspora. Found had to spend tremendous amounts of time and effort educating them as to the context of their appropriation. For instance, each time a *joven* came from abroad members of Found spent almost 5 full working days taking them to important sites of civil war history around San Salvador and the outlying area. So, instead of being able to exploit existing ties between the diaspora and El Salvador, Found must spend time, money, and human capital (by taking the only English speaking staff member at that time away from other pressing tasks, like preparing reports for international funders), to create a politically engaged expatriate population.

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The issue of family privacy also demonstrated the importance of an engaged and informed diaspora. Because the issue of privacy of the family for the Grandmothers is largely discussed on the domestic level or in reference to reunions in the Southern Cone (see: Arditti 1999), it seems as though they did not have to confront the same issues of different cultural notions of family that Found did. In the case of Found's efforts to locate *jovenes* in the United States, someone who could speak to both Salvadoran and North American cultural notions of family was missing. Because of this, to quote Juan, "doors get slammed in your face." The importance of a bi-cultural mediator was further highlighted by the relative success that Found had in maintaining contact with adoptive families by using a bi-cultural advocate to approach them.

A possible solution to overcome the issues that language and privacy pose would be to have more connections with the diaspora. As of this year, Found had begun to explore how to make more connections with Salvadorans in the United States in order to further the reach of the organization. While this population has enormous potential, it remains to be seen whether the issue of appropriations is as pressing to this group as other issues that plague El Salvador such as gang violence, which at times surpasses the brutality and severity of the war.

The case of Found has important implications not just for those who study human rights struggles, but also for scholars of transnational movements and of migration. Found's work challenges our understandings of human rights mobilization and contention. The underlying assumption of most research is that organizations are formed during, and as a response to, conditions of conflict. The case of Found shows that human rights issues continue to matter even after the official end of repression. This suggests that we need to take a harder look at the ways in which transnational organizations, whose claims are based in a seemingly resolved issues, are formed and operate in post-war environments.

For scholars of transnational movements, Found requires us to reconsider the relationship between testimonies and "cultural resonance" (Benford & Snow 2000). That is, during the war testimonies are about creating a cultural understanding of violations. Yet, in the post-war context new testimonies reinforce our

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understandings of the war. Future research should consider how testimonies can be used to re-frame cultural visions of wartime violations to incorporate new issues that come to light in the post-repression context.

This case study illuminates some of the difficulties faced by a human rights organization working 20 years after repression had ended. Academic literature underscores the power and importance of human rights movements since the 1970s. Yet, it fails to fully comprehend that some human rights issues, such as appropriations, are ongoing violations of rights. And, in trying to grasp the complex nature of human rights struggles, it is essential to take into account the context- either coinciding with or following- the conflict in which they are immersed. This is essential for both increasing our understanding of the phenomenon, as well as for helping to bring closure to the pain of those who have been affected by it.

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Endnotes

1. Names of the Salvadoran organization and its affiliates have been changed to protect their privacy and the privacy of families that work with the organization.
2. Appropriation is a term used by Penchaszadeh (1992) to refer to the process and children who were illegally adopted during the Argentine dirty war. This term is intended to be neutral in that it does not assign blame or absolve those who took part in the process.
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6. Keck and Sikkink (1998) discuss two forms of leverage, or influence, that the international community to achieve international norm enforcement. Moral leverage relied on the notion that states would alter their behavior in order to be a member of the international community. While material leverage, used aid or other monetary sanctions, to end violations. (K&S)

7. I recognize that testimonies contribute to writing history and developing memory regarding a particular issue. Testimonies are powerful ways of remembering and inscribing events which government officials would rather ignore. However, I am particularly concerned with their impact on Found's ability to carry out its work. Thus, the key issue is not that testimonies do not matter. They do. But the in the post-repression context their meaning shifts.

8. The brutality of the Salvadoran state has been well documented. And, while, Don Marco did give testimony to the U.N. Truth

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Commission, this issue was not raised as a major violation. This was probably due to the stringent documentation required in order for an issue to its way make into the report.

9. This was an issue that has yet to be fully explored in the case of the Grandmothers. Arditti chronicles the issues that family privacy posed for the Grandmothers through attention to the court cases they fought to gain access to, and sometimes custody of disappeared children. Because, in the case of Found, custody is no longer an issue, the notions of privacy are fundamentally different.

10. In order to protect the identity of the informant and juvenes the country where Mauricio works will not be named.

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Angela Fillingim is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation examines how U.S. Congress framed human rights violations: how Congress defined a human rights violation, determined its cause, and established the appropriate foreign policy solution. Ms. Fillingim uses two case study countries, Argentina and El Salvador, whose gross human rights violations challenged Congress's prohibition on aid to rights violating regimes. These case study countries posed the same foreign policy question to the U.S. Congress, yet garnered different policy responses. By examining transcriptions of Congressional hearings and testimony conducted during that period, Ms. Fillingim argues that these hearings were central places where Congress debated and crafted foreign policy responses to rights violating regimes. Further, Ms. Fillingim proposes that Congressional responses to human rights violations were intrinsically tied to Congress's framing of the human rights violations and the contexts in which they are perpetrated.

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