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"Labor for Love, Labor to Heal:" Human Rights Activism as a Politics of Refusal

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Abstract

The literature on social movements centers demands made on the state and theorizes collective action as rooted in specific times and the nation-state. I ague that this literature is analogous to "the veil," a concept developed by W.E.B. Du Bois. Indigenous theorizations of a "politics of refusal" provides us with a foundation see beyond the veil. This paper brings together "Du Boisian Sociology," Latina Feminisms, and indigenous theories of collective action to develop a robust theorization of human rights activism, and social movements more broadly. This paper asks: What can we gain from analyzing movements from beyond the veil by world-traveling? I draw upon 15 years of engagement with human rights work in El Salvador and an analysis of key documents that established official accounts of the war, peace, and reconciliation. By focusing of the human rights activism of two organizations, Presente and Cipotes, I show how refusal allows us to see the politics of a movement beyond the state. Each organization refused the idea that human rights abuses were bound to a particular time and space. In doing this, they assert a truth that precedes and has a deeper embodied and territorial reach than the nation-state. This refusal challenges temporal and geographic histories of war, peace, and reconciliation established by state structures. Through alters, exhibits, forums, testimonies, these movements seek to build community, to love, and to heal. Thus, social movement activism exceeds the state. This reveals the dual political and social impact of collective action and develops a robust theorization of human rights activism.

In November of 2019, people from across the Americas gathered in San Salvador to commemorate the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and the housekeeper's daughter. This was part of an annual tradition at the *Universidad Centroamerica José Simeón Cañas* (known as *la UCA*), which is a large, gated campus in central San Salvador. Each year, *la UCA* opens its campus to host events to commemorate victims of the war and to promote historical memory. This November, the gathering marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Jesuit

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massacre that took place during the civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1993. The war left 75,000 dead and thousands disappeared.

The 2019 commemoration brought together human rights activists from the civil war, students, and survivors from across the Americas. Predictably, some commemoration participants represented human rights groups formed during the war and that continue their activism decades later. Yet, *Presente* and *Cipotes* formed after contention.[2] *Cipotes* was founded in 1994 in El Salvador; members of the Salvadoran diaspora established *Presente* in the United States in 2014. Both operate transnationally and continue to seek justice thirty years after the end of the war.

One question that audience members repeatedly asked of these organizations at events at *la UCA* was: "Why continue this work so many decades after the end of the war?" One of the members of *Presente*, Raquel, explained why she carries on this work nearly four decades after her father was taken by Salvadoran security forces. Raquel immigrated to the United Sates during the war. Now in her thirties, she returns to El Salvador to engage in human rights work and to visit her community. Raquel explained her ongoing transnational activism as "a labor for love, [and] a labor to heal" (Fieldnotes, November 14, 2019). This statement, along with my engagement in interdisciplinary spaces, led me to rethink theorizations of human rights activism. Raquel's words, and events that I recount later in the paper, represent something yet to be captured by Western-centric accounts of activism.

The literature on collective action focuses on a movement's engagement with the state, and efforts to mobilize resources to increase political power. Activism is bound to a particular time—a period of contention—and space—a nation-state. Studies of collective action in Latin America focus on movements formed during periods of repression and their tactics for altering state policy (Arditti 1999; Guidry and Sawyer 2003; Eckstein 1989; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 2005). Activists are either successful or unsuccessful in getting the state to meet a movement's demands. Yet, Raquel's labor is rooted in love, community, and healing. This raises the question, How can we see the work of human rights activism beyond the state? Thus far, approaches to movements rely on Western-centric ideas of time, space, and the state. In this paper, I ask, What tools do we have to develop a view of human rights activism, and social movements more broadly, rooted in an "other" epistemology and ontology?

To answer this question, we must draw on subaltern ways of knowing, seeing, loving, and healing. In this paper I bring together what Itzigohn and Brown (2020) call "Du Boisian Sociology," Latina Feminisms, and Indigenous theories of collective action. I argue we must recognize the veil

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[2] All names are pseudonyms.

(Du Bois 2009) that limits Western-centric modes of inquiry. The centering of the state, I argue, is rooted in conceptions of activism and justice and are limited by "the veil" (Du Bois 2009) of Western centrism. This view elevates the nation-state as the central locus of activism and relies on linear notions of time progress. Movements are bound by a beginning, middle, and end, and are bookended by examining a state's actions. Further, we must seek ways of knowing beyond the veil. To do this, we must engage with what Lugones (1987) calls "world-travel." This allows us to see and understand the rules of different spaces from the perspective of our interlocutors, to see and speak with them, rather than for or about them. Thus, in this paper I ask, What can we gain from seeking analyze movements from beyond the veil by world-traveling?

To answer the questions driving the paper, I draw upon 15 years of engagement with human rights work in El Salvador and participant observation of events surrounding the commemoration of the Jesuit massacre. Additionally, I analyze key documents that established official accounts of the war, peace, and reconciliation. My intellectual world-traveling impressed the importance of using Indigenous scholar Audra Simpson's (2014) analytic the "politics of refusal." Refusal disrupts Western views of collective action rooted in the state and linear notions of time. The formation of these organizations after the war and their persistence, I argue, represent a refusal of national (Salvadoran), US, and interstate views of time as linear, truth, and the geography of the conflict. In so doing, these movements seek to build community, love, and healing, acts that far exceed making a demand on the state. This reveals the dual political and social impact of collective action.

LITERATURE
Social Movements

Social movements theories examine why people mobilize and the trajectories of (un)successful movements. While McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that social movements operate at a societal level, theories center the state. Movements are often studied using linear notions of time: there is an event, policy, or state practice that generates opposition (Tilly 1979; McAdam 1982, 1996; Wood 2003; Zald 1996). Then, actors engage in a range of political actions from voting, to protest, or outright revolution to agitate for a change in state policy. Once the issue is resolved, either through a change in state policy or regime change, then contention dissipates. This approach is grounded in one side of the veil. The historical exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) intellectuals haunts our interpretations of movement action and obscures the aims and impact of movements beyond the state and policy.

For marginalized communities, mobilizing against violent state policies is a matter of life and death. Thus, the focus on the intersections of the state and activism is clearly warranted. The roots of this literature

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in studies of Civil Rights activism necessarily highlight the local, state level, and national policies that facilitated violence against Black communities in the United States. Similarly, studies of human rights activism in Latin America often focus on periods of military rule or dictatorships when human rights abuses were at a peak. Thus, examining the intersections of the state and movements is a much-needed part of the scholarship. Yet, these movements also agitated for larger social changes alongside policy changes, such as confronting anti-Blackness, colonialism, imperialism, and other social structures and practices that enforced inequality.

Studies of human rights activism in Latin America reflect the above view of collective action. State (in)action galvanized constituencies to protest human rights abuses (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tabbush et al. 2019). Movements demanded the state cease abusive practices and act to hold abusers accountable. Human rights activism is rooted in a particular time-space. For instance, studies of the "Dirty War" in Argentina examine how the military regime's practices of disappearances galvanized national and transnational action to end impunity and human rights abuses between 1973 and 1976. Even theories of transnational activism center the Argentine state as the locus of claims making (e.g., Arditti 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Loveman 1998). Thus, cases are bound by a timeframe and place, and activists target the nation-state. There is a beginning, middle, and end to state policy. Once the policy ends, movements may disband or shift their focus to challenge other state polices or practices (Arditti 1999; Schoultz 1981).

Studies of transnational activism apply many of these theories of collective action to transnational movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2004; Smith and Johnston 2002; Tarrow 2005). Studies show that a state's decision to adopt certain policies, like human rights norms, will be shaped by international political structures (Cole 2005). Thus, both domestic and international political pressure are key sources of leverage in collective action.

In sum, theories of social movements emphasize the lifespan of collective action: groups mobilize during a period of contention because they oppose a state policy and/or state actors. Mobilization is bound to a particular time and space. Movements target a rights-violating regime through domestic or transnational political pressure. Furthermore, we often see human rights activism as "successful" or unsuccessful in getting the state to meet a movement's demands. While McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that social movements operate at a societal level, theorizations of movements center the state and linear notions of time and progress. While the centering of state action obscures the larger context of mobilization and action and impact, the historical exclusion of BIPOC women and men from the academy haunts us.

Toward a BIPOC Centered Theory of Movements

Grounding theories of collective action in BIPOC theorizations will allow us to develop a robust understanding of human rights activism that acknowledges a movement's intersections with the state and its larger aims and impact. This intellectual shift contributes to efforts to reckon with our historical "possessive investment in white sociology" (Brunsma and Padilla Wyse 2019) and to recenter the contributions of BIPOC intellectuals (Fillingim and Rucks Ahidiana 2021; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Reyes 2022) and subaltern voices (Connell 2007; Go 2016). This is especially important to understandings human rights activism, as violations often target marginalized *communities*. To do this, I propose that we root this shift in what Itzigohn and Brown (2020) call "Du Boisian Sociology," Latina Feminisms, and Indigenous theories of collective action.

A Du Boisian approach requires that we consider the racial and colonial contexts of both our site of study and ourselves. The veil, or the ways that race shapes subjectivity and interpersonal relations. For members of the dominant group, whites in the metropole, the veil limits what they can see, understand, and interpret about communities of color (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). For those of us trained in historically white disciplines, this also limits our ability to conduct research and build theory. For members of marginalized racial groups, the veil allows us to see the world from multiple perspectives—both how whites see us, how we see ourselves, and how we see our community members.

The veil is the foundation for Western-centric focus on how state (in)action creates the conditions for mobilization. Studying movements from the dominant perspective presumes the nation-state is the only place to make claims and portrays time as linear. That is, the deep historical conditions of imperialism, colonialism and settler colonialism are marginalized and relegated to the past. A Du Boisian approach demands that we consider how historical conditions create the present state and social structures. For instance, the focus on civil rights activism at the state level obscures the ways that movements challenged larger structures of anti-Blackness and how these structures were left intact despite changes in state policy.

In terms of studies of Latin American movements, the focus on the nation-state obscures the structures of global race relations that have shaped colonialism, repression, and resistance. Western attention focused on Latin America because of egregious human rights abuses. Yet, the everyday conditions of local, national, and global inequality that undergirded conflict were often left intact once abuses ended. Further, this perpetuated a view that largely non-white governments perpetrate human rights abuses and that only Western states could help "fix" the situation (Mutua 2001; Williams 2010). This fleeting attention roots theorizations in a specific time and place, outside of larger systems of global race

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relations that shape unrest, movement aims and claims, and their impact beyond state politics.

One way to see through the veil is María Lugones's (1987) idea of world-travelling. World-travelling is rooted in loving and requires traveling into another woman's world to understand how she experiences and sees things, to understand another's sense of self, and how you fit into that world. World-traveling illuminates aims, critiques, and impact of movements beyond state policy. For instance, Teresa Gonzales (2020) shows the ways that Black and Latina activists' subjectivities are shaped and reshaped through world-traveling. Further, Gonzales reveals that women disrupt and subvert negative claims about their communities as they engage in community building. Hence, collective action brings together histories, subjectivities, and claims making beyond state politics. We must see the world through the eyes of the communities we work with, but also through epistemologies rooted in BIPOC.

Politics of Refusal

My own world-traveling brought me to the rich literature on "the politics of refusal," an analytic developed by Indigenous scholar Audra Simpson (2014). Simpson's work focuses on the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke to propose the "politics of refusal" to understand collective action. Simpson argues that this is a politics that "predates and survives the conquest" (2). The Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke assert ontologies and epistemologies that existed before and continue despite the settler-state. That is, rather than seek state recognition, the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke assert their own truths and identities formed before the settler-state. Simpson's work is a powerful analytic that foregrounds a different kind of political engagement that exists beyond Western conceptions of the state and collective action.

Broadly, a theory of refusal allows us to complicate theories of movements, which are rooted in time and a win/loss binary, to see the humanity of actors. Collective action is more than resistance to state structures—it is insistence on the truths, self-determination, and hope, and it is generative of new social connections (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014; Wright 2018). As Wright (2018) states, "refusal may be a way of resisting, reframing, and redirecting colonial and capitalist logics, constituting both an important political strategy and an assertion of diverse sovereignties and lifeworlds" (128). This is rooted in the knowledge, love, and hope that communities hold as they refuse to accept current social relations.

The idea of "truth" is a key aspect of refusal. The truth that settler-states impose is a regime designed to erase native ways of being and knowing. While settler-states try to impose a past, present, and future, refusal begins history and grounds the present before the formation of the settler-state (Fanon 1963; Simpson 2014; Tuck and Yang 2012; Wood and Rossiter 2017). The politics of refusal asserts a truth that preceded the

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settler-state and that exists despite attempts at erasure or extermination. It is rooted in an entrenched truth rooted in *community* ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies.

Theorizations of refusal clearly outline that it is neither a rejection of politics nor resistance to the state, as this would accept a hierarchy (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014; Wood and Rossiter 2017). Refusal asserts a relationship between equals (McGranahan 2016:368). McGranahan (2016) points to an additional benefit of theorizing refusal to our understandings of social movements: the content of refusal can change with time and where communities are located. Thus, rather than seeing a shift in movement strategy as an act of "tactical innovation," a "win/loss," or stalemate, we foreground the hope, new subjectivities, relations, and how the aforementioned are bound to a collective goal rooted in persistence and hope.

The analytic of refusal is particularly useful in thinking about social movements. Refusal provides us with a rich opportunity to theorize and understand the ways that movements operate to preserve histories rooted in community. Refusal is an intervention in politics and relations of power beyond the state (Weiss 2016), and challenges imposed ideas of what Anderson (2006) calls "imagined communities" (Simpson 2014). This also highlights the need to consider abuses as part of an ongoing structure rather than merely an event. Refusal foregrounds the truths that communities preserve despite attempts at extermination and erasure.

While the social movements literature ties activism to a time and space—for instance, the Salvadoran Civil War from 1980 through 1992—refusal offers robust ways to theorize collective action by linking past and present as coterminous. These movements challenge the national and international temporal and geographic ideas of war, peace, and reconciliation, which is not captured in social movement frameworks. There are important traditions in social movements that have fought for decolonization and against imperialism. Liberation theology heavily influenced human rights movements in Latin America and their "success" (Loveman 1998). Refusal allows us to theorize within and beyond this context to see through erasures and apologies that leave social relations intact (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2012). For human rights movements, it pulls back the veil of transitional justice, peace accords, and being "post-war." Refusal allows us to understand movements beyond the state, movements grounded in hope, truth, and insistence. Thus, refusal opens the possibility to expand scholarly understandings of social movements beyond the state and to grapple with the ongoing work of activism.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: WAR AND THE TRUTH COMMISSION

Traditionally, the Salvadoran Civil War took place between 1980 and 1992. The war was between the Salvadoran government and members of

the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a front comprised of different opposition groups. During the war, the Salvadoran government engaged in egregious human rights abuses that included illegal detention, torture, extra-judicial executions, and the forced disappearance of children and adults (Betancur, Planchart, and Buergenthal 1993; Crandall 2016; Fillingim and Zawadi 2021). Throughout the war, both national and transnational groups mobilized against state-sponsored human rights abuses (Coutin 1993; Nepstad 2001, 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The war ended with a negotiated agreement between the government and the armed opposition, which culminated in the signing of the Peace Accords and the remaking of the FMLN into a political party.

One of the first steps in establishing the post-war government was the Mexico Agreement of April 1991. Eventually, both sides agreed on the need for the Truth Commission (Burgerman 2000). The agreement outlined the commission's charge to investigate "serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society demands that the public should know the truth about the circumstances under which they took place" (United Nations General Assembly 1991:5). The agreement stipulated that the 3 members of the commission would be appointed by the Secretary General of the UN, and that it would have 6 months to gather the data for a report that would cover the prior 12 years of the war.

The truth asserted in the report, which I detail below, purports to tell the history of when the war took place, how the war was conducted, and where the war was experienced. The report became a form of imposed "truth" that was disseminated and reproduced around the world. Given that Truth Commission was a key transitional step that warring sides agreed upon, it was a foundation of the post-war society.

The commission's findings examined general patterns of violence, when, and where human rights abuses were concentrated. The report focused on 8 categories of human rights abuses: "extra-judicial executions," "enforced disappearances," "massacres of peasants by the armed forces," "death squad assassinations," "violence against opponents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), and "the murders of judges." The case of the Jesuit assassination was the illustrative case of violence that framed the subsequent eight sections. The report chronicles specific illustrative cases, providing a summary of what took place and any subsequent investigations.

Since the war, the Salvadoran landscape has changed. The conservative party founded during the war controlled the presidency from the mid-1980s until 2009. However, the FMLN held the presidency for a decade, from 2009 until 2019. The FMLN governments complied with international court rulings and officially recognized the state's role in wartime human rights abuses against children. Under the FMLN, the Salvadoran state founded a commission to search for disappeared children

in 2011, and, in 2017 the government established a commission to search for adults disappeared during the civil war and in the present. There are public memorials for the disappeared, and the history of the forced disappearances of children is taught in schools. Despite these steps to reckon with the past, though, much of the investigative work is done by non-profits, or through transnational partnerships. The military archives, an important source of information, remain closed.

Cipotes

Cipotes operates out of El Salvador and works with actors, organizations, and international court systems that span the Americas and parts of Europe. Parents with children that disappeared during the war founded *Cipotes* in 1994. The founding families came from the countryside, the rural and poorer part of El Salvador, where the war was heavily waged. *Cipotes* is a non-profit organization that employees over 14 people in full or part-time positions in El Salvador. *Cipotes* relies on DNA and forensic science to match two living relatives that were separated by the war. The organization provides psychological support for families and youth searching for their parent.

Presente

Presente is led by the children of the disappeared and includes their surviving parent and is based in the United States. The organization was founded in 2014 by children in the diaspora. The organization's mission to reunite children (now adults) with the remains of their parent, presumes death. Members' status as US citizens and Salvadorans is key to its work, as members of the organization acknowledge. The organization's core members—those that organize events, campaigns, or participate in public forums—regularly travel to El Salvador and retain strong ties there. The organization does not have any full-time staff and is largely dependent on volunteer labor.

METHOD

I draw on participant observations and the analytic of the politics of refusal to theorize the work of movements beyond the state. I recognize that each of these movements does work with and makes demands on the Salvadoran state. Since social movements scholarship is so deeply grounded in ideas of Western statehood, the work of the politics of refusal provides us with a theoretical foundation to understand the ways that marginalized groups confront power across time and space, and beyond the state.

I draw on weeklong observation of events and over fifteen-years of engagement with this arena of activism in El Salvador and the United States. I focus on two human rights groups formed after the Salvadoran civil war, *Cipotes* and *Presente*. Each organizations maintains transnational ties, each works with government officials, and each

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continues to search for and identify the disappeared during the Salvadoran civil war.

I approach my work with each organization using the idea of "accompaniment," meaning to walk with people engaged in social justice struggles. My work with each organization centers listening and participating in the ways I am invited to. To do this, I carry out tasks that the organization needs accomplished such as: translating, building connections with academics in the United States, helping with campaigns, participating in forums and delegations, and publicizing their work. My position as a person whose life was shaped by the abuses conducted by the Salvadoran government, an academic, and US citizen shapes the roles I play. These identities have allowed me to move between intertwined yet distinct worlds.

I use my 15 years of engagement as a background to contextualize my observations during a weeklong ethnography of events that commemorated the massacre that took place in 1989. I focus on the week of events as this was a time where each organization engaged with each other in public forums, and because the events that took place are illustrative of key social dynamics. My findings rely on recordings of public speeches, ethnographic notes taken on my phone during gatherings, field notes written at the end of each day, and notes taken during forums (when this would not distract from the event itself). My goal in this article is to offer a means to understand the work of these human rights movements and the ways they assert a truth and healing rooted in communal experiences that exist across time and space.

Key differences abound between the activism embodied in the politics of refusal and the activists discussed in this article. Indigenous communities have endured for centuries and confronted settler-colonial states. None of the activists that I work with identify as Indigenous. Rather, they are the product of, and part of, settler-colonial projects in Latin America. The Salvadoran landscape is defined by converging tensions colonial projects and ongoing US imperialism (see Grandin 2006; Rabe 2012). Like other settler-states, Salvadoran national identity is rooted in the erasure and genocide of Indigenous heritage, and on the melding of Spanish and Indigenous bloodlines to create a new population (Tilly 2005).

A key similarity between the context of El Salvador and existing theorizations of refusal are campaigns to eradicate a sector of society through homicide and exile. During the war the Salvadoran state engaged in indiscriminate bombings, massacres, and extra-judicial execution—all of which were designed to eradicate inhabitants in these areas.[3] Disappearances were designed to erase the opposition from society and to

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[3] I focus on the actions of the state because it perpetrated most human rights abuses against Salvadoran civilians.

scare surviving families into invisibility or exile. Thus, the members of these organizations were never meant to be a part of the post-war landscape.

FINDINGS

Refusal is a means to challenge systems of power that is rooted in histories, communities, and ways of being and knowing that preceded the state and continue to exist despite efforts at erasure. The post-war mobilization of each organization, and continued activism nearly 40 years after the start of the war, must be theorized as a "refusal" of the imposition of a post-war state and society and the accompanying imposed truths about the past and present. Thus, refusal highlights the Salvadoran movement's respective political work that is focused beyond a state-centered model of social movements.

Refusal of Truth and Time

Cipotes and *Presente* are united by state-sponsored disappearances and the fact that the war will continue until *all members of society* can access the truth about what happened to a loved one during the conflict and begin to heal. Specifically, each organization's mobilization after the war is indicative of a refusal of the temporal boundaries of war. Each organization relies on testimonies, a common social movement tactic designed to garner allies and capture public attention (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Using the lens of refusal, testimonies serve a larger function than solely garnering allies. Testimonies assert another truth about the war, one that refuses the temporal and geographic boundaries laid out in the Truth Commission and popular accounts.

During the commemoration of the Jesuit Massacre, *la UCA* hosted human rights organizations for a forum on enforced disappearances. This was part of a day long series of events around disappearances. Events took place across campus and ranged from tours of the site of the massacre, to panels on human rights issues. Of particular importance was the panel of forced disappearances, which was held in a central lecture hall on campus. The audience was a mixture of academics, press, allies from the United States, victims of abuses. Many older women came from the countryside wearing their uniform of a dress and frilly apron with two pockets. *Presente* and *Cipotes*, along with other Salvadoran based human rights groups, raised funds so that families of the disappeared from the countryside could attend the event without cost to ensure that all victims present and centered.

The forum created space where each organization could assert their truth about the war, peace, and geography. The panel included people with different relationships to disappearances, including residents of El Salvador and people who became members of the diaspora because of the war. Speakers included children of the disappeared, a person that had both

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been adopted as a youth and found out her father disappeared, and parents of disappeared children. During the panel, members of *Presente* recounted their stories. One member, a member of the diaspora, discussed how having her first child amplified the pain she felt not knowing what had happened to her father. As she spoke, her voice was filled with strength, love, and loss. She was a baby when her father was taken, and her remaining family fled to the US. For her, the war was ongoing because each day the violence and conflict denied her "right to truth, dignity, and the *huesitos* (bones)" of her father. She clasped her hands over her heart as she explained that every day, she wakes up wondering "what happened to my father, where is he." She impressed that she does not have answers or "*la verdad*" (the truth). Her use of the term "*huesitos*" was an especially loving conjugation of the word "bones." She remapped the time and space of the war so that it existed in both the past, present, and the future—for her children—and spanned the geographies of the Americas. The truth recounted in testimonies from *Presente* emphasized that the daily pain of not knowing what happened to a loved one is an ongoing form of abuse, one that society has yet to reckon with.

The events at *la UCA* commemorating the Jesuit massacre were an important opportunity for *Cipotes* to engage in a temporal refusal. Members of *Cipotes* echoed the fact that the war was ongoing so long as they were denied the truth and reunification with their missing children. Thus, neither the 1992 signing of the Peace Accords nor the 1993 production of the Truth Commission Report signaled an end to the war. Rather, it changed the nature of warfare.

Cipotes asserted their truth during events along the main thoroughfare at the UCA that commemorated the Jesuit massacre. *Cipotes* set up a photo exhibit that attendees of the UCA commemoration—and students in general—had to walk through to reach campus. As visitors for the commemoration events navigated this space, they found themselves surrounded by displays of the posters for the prior thirty years of Jesuit commemorations. In the middle of all of this, *Cipotes* placed an altar with the names of victims of war-time violence. A central piece of the alter was a picture of the parents of the two sisters that had disappeared at the beginning of the war. These parents did not find out what happened to their children—the sheer lack of information combined with their placement on the alter represented layers of mourning. The parents' death did not mean healing or an end to the search, merely that it was carried on by community. This epitomized an ethic I observed over my 15 years of working with *Cipotes*: members share a commitment to laboring out of love for communal healing.

Cipotes arranged pictures of reunions in chronological order around the altar, juxtaposing the role of life, death, love, and healing. Each picture showed a parent being reunited with a child, who was often an adult at the time of the reunion. The pictures were blown up to the size of posters and

each had the year of the reunion displayed prominently in the bottom right corner. The pictures selected showcased the complex emotions of the reunion. There was a mixture of joy, relief, mourning, and shock. The reunion photos showed the living evidence of both the ongoing nature of warfare and the love and healing that comes with answers. These pictures appeared next to a sign that read: "*No Borranán Nuestra Memoria* (You will not erase our memory)." The conjugation of the sign is important—using "will not" gestured toward a truth that persists within their community, one that preceded and will exceed external narratives of the war. The exhibit was set up so that those passing through the lobby had to navigate through the pictures to get from one side of the building to the other. This was the same open air-lobby the press had congregated in to conduct interviews about the commemoration.

The juxtaposition of the Jesuits' case with the *Cipotes* exhibit challenged ideas of truth and time established in the Truth Commission Report. The Jesuit massacre was an illustrative case of violence during the civil war, and its commemoration brought together people from all over the Americas in their memory. While the record of disappeared children had been stricken from the official narrative of the war, *Cipotes* injected disappeared children into public commemorations of the war and challenged the temporal boundaries of the war. The exhibit highlighted the lives and communities that existed before the war, ones that persist despite attempts at physical and narrative erasure.

Cipotes engaged in a temporal refusal by asserting their communal truth: the lack of answers prolonged the war. For children, now young adults, the denial of their history was an ongoing human rights violation. In this sentiment expressed by many of the children who are searching for their families, the denial of their roots causes an ongoing trauma. For the families that are searching for a child, the lack of answers was a daily trauma that they endured until they received an answer.[4] Thus, the war did not end in 1992 because it was something that people continually experience as a part of their identities and daily existence.

In sum, the accomplishments of *Cipotes* and *Presente* are important victories for their constituencies. Yet, it is equally important to understand the impact of their work beyond the state itself. The mobilization of each organization holds an important symbolic and political significance: each organization challenges imposed histories that relegate the war to a particular time. For these constituencies, the war is ongoing, in part because the nature of warfare changed in 1992 with the signing of the Peace Accords. Each organization's continued activism around the issue of disappearances challenges the authority of the UN Truth Commission to impose a history of war and peace.

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[4] In my observation, a reunion is not the end of trauma. Rather, it marks a step toward healing.

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Geographic Refusal

Each organization engaged in a geographic refusal. The Truth Commission confined both victims and perpetrators to El Salvador. Yet, each organization asserts their own geography of the war: its victims and perpetrators are all over the world. The commission only operated within El Salvador and focused on regions within the nation. The Truth Commission highlighted the role of the Salvadoran state and the FMLN in human rights abuses and suggests that the only victims of the war were in El Salvador. This makes sense—the war had been conducted there, and after the fighting, refugee populations returned and resettled. Yet, the cartography of victims excluded two major populations: the children that were illicitly adopted to families outside of El Salvador, and those that were forced into exile for survival. Both organizations created a map of pain, trauma, and the potential for peace that extends well beyond the borders of the Salvadoran nation.

The members of *Presente* challenge the assumption of the Truth Commission that the war remained in El Salvador, and the only truth could come from within the nation. The organization's founding in the United States represented another geographic refusal of cartographic ideas of statehood and belonging. Their ongoing work with human rights organizations in El Salvador and United States is a refusal of borders. *Presente's* communal ties challenge the notion that war, peace, and reconciliation are geographically bound to El Salvador. Across commemoration events, members of *Presente* greeted others with hugs and a familiarity that can only be gained with long-term ties. The elder members of *Presente* reminisced with attendees about their youths in El Salvador. Further, members' ongoing connections to human rights communities in El Salvador allowed *Presente* to participate in the making of *alfombras* (intricate carpet-size designs measuring approximately 10 feet by 5 feet, made from natural-colored materials), which blanketed the main road that encircles the campus. This was a deeply symbolic event that brought together students, local community members, and others to create art installations that represent a social issue. *Presente's* roots across the Americas allowed them to challenge the ideas that the war and its victims were geographically confined to El Salvador.

Further, each organization challenges a geography of the war rooted only in El Salvador by calling on the United States to atone for its role in abuses. The Truth Commission Report downplayed the role of the United States in wartime abuses and excluded members of the diaspora from participation. The United States government was deeply implicated in the war and the misconduct of the Salvadoran government. Over the course of the 12-year civil conflict, the United States sent over $4 billion in aid to a country roughly the size of Massachusetts. This aid was given to prevent the economy from collapsing, and to provide the Salvadoran government

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with the military training and materials used to carry out counterinsurgency campaigns (Arnson 1993; Grandin 2006; LeoGrande 1998; Rabe 2012).

The narratives of the war shared at the commemoration implicated US-trained battalions in some of the most egregious crimes of the war, including the Jesuit massacre. However, the Truth Commission Report portrayed the United States as a minor actor in the war, providing aid, pressuring the Salvadoran government to investigate human rights abuses, and investigating sources of violence. The report notes the killings of US citizens—both civilians and military personnel—in El Salvador and the subsequent investigations into their murders. Given the report's mandate, as well as the structure of international power arrangements, the United States is not implicated as a major cause of human rights abuses.

Both organizations challenge a geography of the war that centers El Salvador in distinct ways. *Presente* refuses ideas that the war was geographically bound to El Salvador by constantly referencing the United States as a key actor. A line that was repeated throughout the various forums by multiple members of Organization US was "the US has a historic debt to repay." In the context of *Presente's* work, this embodies a refusal of the geography of the war that only includes El Salvador. This simultaneously asserted that the truth of the war and the role of the United States still needs to be addressed at the societal level so that communities reach answers and can heal.

At the same time, it is a move to expand the geographic understanding of the "civil war" to include the US government and Salvadoran diaspora. *Presente* works to find members of the diaspora and include them, their histories, and their traumas in public reckonings with the war and its consequences. *Presente* works in areas of the United States with large populations of Salvadorans. This act challenges the presumption of the Truth Commission that the effects of the war are tied to the physical space of El Salvador. Simultaneously, the United States is implicated as an actor in the war and a site where the war continues to be a lived reality for the children of the disappeared.

Cipotes also challenges the geographic boundaries of the war and reconciliation. *Cipotes* has located children in the United States, Central America, and Europe; extending the geography of war beyond El Salvador's borders. Children are living evidence of abuses that expand the geography and temporal scope of war. While parents remember the vivid details of a disappearance, children represent the forensic evidence that bring these histories to the present. The war rages both in the parts of the world where the children were taken to, and with the parents that reside in El Salvador. Thus, a history of the war must extend beyond El Salvador as it is simultaneously waged across borders.

Cipotes also shows that reconciliation is about communal answers. That is, the founders of the organization could have ended their work once

they found their own children. However, they understood that reunion or answers for one family are not equivalent to reconciliation. Members of the organization have worked to create transnational ties and infrastructure to continue their work outside of the Salvadoran state. While the Truth Commission focuses on a geography of war in El Salvador, each organization extends this imaginary to include other parts of the world.

CONCLUSION

Each organization engaged in a politics of refusal by challenging imposed histories of war and truth designed to serve as the foundation for the post-war Salvadoran society. Yet, each organization engaged in refusal in distinct ways. Members of *Cipotes* and *Presente* were never meant to be part of the postwar landscape. Despite attempts at physical and narrative erasure from key documents on war, peace, and reconciliation produced by settler-states, members of both groups challenge the temporal and geographic boundaries of war. Each organization refused the idea that the war was bound to a particular time and space. For them, it is ongoing and exists across borders. In doing this, they assert a truth that precedes and has a deeper territorial reach than the Salvadoran state, one that is rooted in their communities, bodies, and futures.

In each instance, *Cipotes* and *Presente* worked to show that the war was still being waged in their minds, bodies, and communities that span the globe. For each, the notion that the war ended in 1992 was a falsehood the organizations challenged in distinct ways. While aspects of its respective work demanded state action, each organization challenged imposed ideas of peace by showing—through alters, exhibits, forums, testimonies, and more—that the war continued and would continue until answers were given to all members of their community. In this sense, each refused individualized resolutions and prioritized the collective well-being of community. This has recently carried on in a Twitter campaign about the twenty-ninth anniversary of the signing of the peace accords. Activists and allies used the #ProhibidOlvidar (We must not forget) to call international attention to the ongoing impact of disappearances.

The work refusal embodied by *Cipotes* and *Presente* offers us a window into a robust understanding of social movements. Traditionally, studies of human rights movements, especially in Latin America, center the claims made on the state. While this is an important aspect of movement demands, the Western-centric focus on the state obscures the other work of movements. By centering a Du Boisian approach to movements and "world-traveling," we can work to see through the Western-centric veil that focuses on the state. This allows us to understand the larger scope of work that human rights movements engage in. That is, their work is rooted in asserting a communal truth as a labor of love for those we have lost, and as a labor for communal healing. A theory of refusal allows us to complicate theories of movements that are rooted in

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both time and a win/loss binary. In turn, to see the humanity of actors, collective action is more than resistance to state structures; it is insistence on the truths, self-determination, hope, and generative potential of new social connections (see also: McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2012; Wright 2018). These movements challenge key Western-centric notions of time, space, and geography and offer a view of movements rooted in subaltern ethics of love, community, peace, and resistance. This approach highlights the robust impact of human rights movements across time and space.

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