
Through the Lens of Solidarity: Pictures of Conscience from the Salvadoran Conflict Zones, 1979-2019

A través de la lente de la solidaridad: fotografías de conciencia
desde zonas de conflicto salvadoreñas, 1979-2019

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Abstract: This exploratory article examines “pictures of conscience” from a unique private archive of materials from Salvadoran refugee and displaced person camps throughout Central America and repopulated zones in El Salvador from the last quarter of the 20th century. Rather than focusing on the aesthetics of the photograph-object, we emphasize the relational dimensions of solidarity photography. By tracing how the photographers’ backgrounds and activist contexts shaped the creation of images, how these images worked in solidarity networks during the 1980s and early 1990s, and how Salvadorans and US Americans engaged with the same images decades later, we demonstrate that photographs were dynamic historical actors that played a key role in developing and maintaining grassroots leftist activism across borders.

Keywords: Photographs, Solidarity, El Salvador, United States, Refugees, Archive

Resumen: Este ensayo exploratorio examina las “fotografías de conciencia” de un archivo único de materiales históricos proveniente de los campamentos de refugiados y desplazados salvadoreños en Centroamérica y las repoblaciones en El Salvador. En lugar de enfocarnos en la estética del objeto-fotografía, nosotras destacamos la dimensión relacional de la fotografía solidaria. En trazar cómo los antecedentes personales y el contexto activista de los fotógrafos informaron la creación de las imágenes, cómo funcionaron las imágenes dentro de las redes solidarias durante la década de los 80s y al principio de los 90s, y cómo los salvadoreños y los estadounidenses interactuaron con las mismas imágenes décadas después, nosotras demostramos que las fotografías eran actores históricos dinámicos que jugaron un papel importante en el desarrollo y mantenimiento del activismo izquierdista a través de las fronteras.

Keywords: fotografías, solidaridad, El Salvador, Estados Unidos, refugiados, archivo

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Introduction

In 1989 Steve Cagan, a photographer from Ohio (USA), traveled to the Colomoncagua refugee camp in south-central Honduras to document the lives of campesinxs who had fled the civil conflict in neighboring El Salvador (late 1970s-1992). While in the camp, Cagan made thousands of photographs of Salvadorans living there. On previous journeys, he had documented life in Mesa Grande, another camp further west.

Around the same time, a group of other US Americans, members of the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project, traveled back and forth between their home state of Massachusetts and Chalatenango, El Salvador. Northeastern Chalatenango was the heart of a remarkable grassroots rural repopulation movement; between 1986 and 1991, dozens of communities that previously had been abandoned due to the Salvadoran state's scorched earth campaigns suddenly were reborn as campesinxs emerged from their places of refuge and began rebuilding villages. Like Cagan, the Cantabrigians made many photographs of Salvadorans.

These US Americans were just a few of hundreds of professional and amateur photographers who spent time accompanying displaced Salvadorans during the late cold war. Coordinating with local leaders, they created visual records of the refugee camps and repopulated villages and then used the images in exhibitions and publications designed to denounce human rights abuses, condemn US government intervention in El Salvador and Central America more broadly, and promote the efforts of Salvadoran revolutionary change agents.

Despite their widespread circulation, little is known about these "pictures of conscience." This is partly because many of them remain in private collections, unavailable to researchers. It is also because many scholars approach images uncritically, using them, as Peter Burke notes, "as mere illustrations, reproducing them [...] without comment" (10). Pictures of conscience from refugee camps and repopulated zones are further sidelined because observers generally consider displaced people as victims, not as protagonists in their own right.

This essay examines pictures of conscience from a unique private archive of materials from Salvadoran refugee and displaced person camps throughout Central America and repopulated zones in El Salvador. Rather than accept the photographs at face value, we excavate them; that is, following scholars like Deborah Poole and Julia Thomas, we "uncover the network of connotations, practices, and relations of power" (Thomas 153) that gave rise to these images and through which they moved. By tracing the varied contexts and lives of the images, we seek to better understand the role that photographs played, in the last quarter of the 20th century, in forming and maintaining trans-American solidarity networks, that is, networks of grassroots activists who literally and figuratively crossed national borders in the Americas in their collaborative work to construct a more just world.

Our interest in pictures of conscience stems from our work coordinating Proyecto Solidaridad/Project Solidarity, a public history initiative involving

formerly displaced people, social justice activists, photographers, scholars, and students in El Salvador and the United States. Formalized in 2014, Project Solidarity aims, among other things, to collect and preserve materials and memories relating to displacement, repopulation, and transnational solidarity; and to facilitate events through which activists can engage with these materials. At the time of writing, the Project Solidarity Archive includes more than 40 archival boxes of documentation and 6,600 photographs. Materials have been activated in at least five interactive exhibits, twenty oral history workshops, and nine round table discussions in both the U.S. and El Salvador.

The Project Solidarity photographic collection consists of black-and-white and color photographs and 35mm slides, donated or loaned by professional and amateur photographers. As we worked with the collection, our curiosity deepened: What led to the creation of these images? How were they used? What can they tell us about solidarity, as sentiment, ideal, or practice?

In this exploratory article, we offer initial answers to these questions. For the most part, we set aside aesthetics of the photograph-object to emphasize the relational dimensions of photography. These pictures of conscience give shape to what Ariella Azoulay calls the civil contract of photography, “a space of political relations” (12) beyond the control of the nation-state, where photographers, photographed subjects, and spectators create possibilities “for contesting injuries to citizenship” (132) and for imagining alternative futures. In similar fashion, these pictures allow us to expand recent discussions about art and cultural production in cold war-era solidarity networks in the Americas (see Stites Mor and Seuscun Pozas; Adams; Bassnett et. al.; Diack; Duganne; Donoso Macaya). More specifically, we examine the photographs from Salvadoran refugee camps and repopulation zones as a means of constructing what visual culture scholar Thy Phu and colleagues identified as transnational visual alliances: the “affinities, collaborations, and solidarities that circuits of production, remediation, and circulation [...] were meant to conjure and the futurities and political formations these solidarities sought to bring into fruition” (12). Far from static reflections of the Truth, these photographs were “dynamic objects whose mobility and contingency could empower viewers to think differently about the present, the past, and, by extension, the future” (Duganne 137).

We find also that the pictures of conscience (and their associated alliances and contracts) share much in common with testimonio. As literary scholars like John Beverley, George Yúdice, and others have explored, the power of testimonio—as practiced in the Central American context during the 1970s and 1980s—rested in both its subject matter and its methods. Central American *testimonialistas* revealed what conservative cold warriors intentionally obscured: violence and suffering as well as resistance and survivance. They did so in collaboration with academics and activists (typically from the Global North), in texts designed primarily for audiences outside Central America (again, typically in the Global North). These texts served to raise consciousness about inequalities and injustices of the reigning order and the possibilities of alternative formulations. As the Uruguayan poet and essayist Hugo Achúgar put

it, “El testimonio latinoamericano contemporáneo denuncia y celebra [...] Narra en paralelo no para identificar sino para confrontar, distingue y no asimila. Su deseo es desmontar una historia hegemónica, a la vez que desea construir otra historia que llegue a ser hegemónica” (62). Testimonio constructed this “other history” through the text itself as well as through the collective experience, the collaborative process of knowledge-making. In the words of George Yúdice, “su *modus operandi* es la construcción comunicativa de una praxis solidaria y emancipatoria” (221).

Our discussion of pictures of conscience focuses on Steve Cagan and the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister Cities Project. Their work represents a range of motivations and styles, providing insight into different trans-American visual alliances and networks of solidarity. We proceed in three parts. The first part explores how the activists’ backgrounds and contexts shaped the creation of images. The second part examines how the images worked as they circulated through solidarity networks during the 1980s and early 1990s. The third part examines how Salvadorans and US Americans engaged with pictures of conscience in the late 2010s.

Activist Photographers and “Recklessly Bold Public Witness”

In this section we excavate the backgrounds and motivations that shaped the production of pictures of conscience. Steve Cagan and members of the Cambridge committee were part of long-standing activist movements; their connection to Central America arose from these earlier experiences. They began traveling to El Salvador in the mid-1980s to witness events as they unfolded and to gather testimony—visual and otherwise—with the goal of supporting Salvadoran social movements. In short, activism was a way of life for these individuals and photography, a central tool of that activism. They were, in essence, activist photographers. Although our image-makers came from different geographic regions—east coast, Midwest—they shared the same US national context. More to the point, they all connected in various ways with Leftist movements. The mid-20th century marked a turning point, labor historian Van Gosse argues, as a “movement of movements” surged across the country, “redefin[ing] the meaning of democracy” (2). Laborers, students, women, and gays organized in defense of their rights alongside nuclear freeze proponents, anti-Vietnam protesters, and the civil rights, Black Power, American Indian, and Chicano movements. The US context intertwined with emancipatory movements elsewhere in the world, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For those on the Left, it was a time of promise. As the famous folk balladeer Bob Dylan declared: “The order is rapidly fading / And the first one now / Will later be last / For the times they are a-changin’.”

Cagan and the Cantabrigians were embedded in this context. As a budding professional photographer in the 1970s, Cagan modeled his work on that of labor photographers from the 1930s. His early exhibits, in venues across the

United States and Europe, explored factory closings and homelessness in Ohio and the effects of the US war on people in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.¹ Cagan's early work demonstrated the values that would thread through his life's work; it was here he began to define himself as an activist photographer. "My goal," he explained years later on his website, "has always been to integrate my photography and the social or political activism which it is intended to be a part of, to produce work that contributes to the struggles of the communities where I am photographing" ("What Is").²

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Cagan turned a critical lens to US interventions in Central America. His first trip to the region came in 1982, inspired by a "weak" slideshow presentation he had attended about the growing Salvadoran refugee crisis. He knew he could do better, so he traveled to Honduras and Nicaragua to gain a first-hand understanding of the situation and to produce quality images that could be used by Salvadoran activists and their network of allies in the United States (Message to Molly Todd). After that, he traveled frequently to Nicaragua, Cuba, and, especially, El Salvador, with visits ranging from one week to one year in length. At home in Ohio, he and his wife Beth helped initiate several US-El Salvador solidarity organizations.

Like Cagan, the Cambridge-based donors to Project Solidarity came to Central America through previous activist experiences. Among the US-based founders of the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project was Susan Freireich who, in the early 1960s, spent six months studying in Guatemala. As she explained in a 2017 interview,³ the CIA-sponsored coup had occurred a few years earlier, Kennedy had just launched his Alliance for Progress, and Freireich gained direct experience with the Alliance's "hearts-and-minds" objectives when her Spanish professor, a conservative Cuban expatriate, concerned that she "was hanging around with the wrong people," spent Sunday mornings lecturing her on the ills of communism rather than going to church (Interview). Travels to Cuba and Nicaragua over the next decade made her more "irate" about US interventionism, and she became active in the anti-Vietnam war movement in Cambridge. In the early 1980s, when state repression escalated in El Salvador—matched by aid from the Reagan administration Freireich took notice: It "just sounded more and more like what happened in Guatemala... [I]t touched me" (Interview).

¹ See, for example, the photography projects listed on Cagan's home page for the descriptive titles of both his early and his more recent photographic collections. Among the earlier projects is "Industrial Landscapes –Cleveland." See the hyperlink on his home page ("About") for his article "What Is 'Activist Photography'"; the hyperlink on the same page to "Mi Resumé" for a complete list of his articles, photoessays, photographs and activism; see also the hyperlink to Cagan's article "Visual Stories Exploring Global Themes" (Social Documentary Network). Additional information may be found in Cagan's "Industrial Hostages: Photoessay" (published in *Society* 25.5 [1988]: 82-85) and in the interviews of Cagan by Molly Todd, Jayce Anderson and Rachel Dunlap, conducted in 2019 and 2021, audio recording in the authors' possession.

² See note 1, above.

³ Interview by Molly Todd, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 28, 2017, audio recording in the authors' possession.

Another Cambridge resident, Judith Somberg, an attorney, was always “involved in local political things”.⁴ After graduating from law school, she became active with the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive bar association. As a Guild representative, Somberg traveled to El Salvador in 1984 to attend a major human rights conference. Shortly thereafter, she found herself living in Mexico with her young family, learning Spanish in order to support her growing international work.

In 1985, Somberg and Freireich learned that a group of displaced Salvadorans were organizing to return home. They joined with a half dozen other Cantabrigians to support the movement, forming the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project (see Todd). In addition to monitoring human rights and providing material aid, explained staffer David Grosser, the project “*can raise questions about the US role in El Salvador that will translate into h[e]lightened opposition to US policy*” (emphasis in the original).⁵

All of these US Americans shared a sense of admiration for the Salvadoran repopulators who so boldly challenged the status quo. On a broad scale, repopulators demanded respect for rights, pressed for reforms to exclusionary structures, and presented irrefutable proof that US aid brought horrific consequences for civilians. On a narrower scale, they developed leadership structures, an alternative economic system, popular health and education programs, and workshops to produce furniture, clothing, and other necessary items. “It was,” Cagan said in a 2019 interview, “idealistic”.⁶

Even as they shared a sense of admiration, the US Americans had distinct experiences on the ground based on Salvadoran geopolitics. Cambridge activists allied with repopulators in northeastern Chalatenango department, the birthplace of the repopulation movement in 1986, where the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) reigned. Cagan came to focus his work in northern Morazán department, where the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) dominated, and where a second hub of repopulations appeared beginning in 1989. The two groups were members of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), an insurgent coalition formed in 1980. They collaborated in a general sense to topple El Salvador’s authoritarian regime, but tensions undergirded their relationship—and reverberated in the US-based solidarity movement as well.

The Salvadoran and US contexts combined in interesting ways to influence the production of photographs. Photographs were an important part of what Cambridge committee member Jim Wallace referred to as “recklessly bold pub-

⁴ Interview by Molly Todd, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 25, 2017, audio recording in the authors’ possession.

⁵ See his Letter to a Friend (of Sister Cities), circa fall/winter of 1986, in Freireich Papers, Project Solidarity Archive, box 1, folder S.C. Delegation. Private collection in the author’s possession. Hereafter, referred to as the Freireich Papers.

⁶ Interviews by Molly Todd, Jacey Anderson, and Rachel Dunlap, Cleveland, Ohio, January 2019, audio recordings in the authors’ possession.

lic witness”.⁷ Whereas the US government used the press to mystify the public in order to justify military intervention (see Andersen 112), solidarity activism, Wallace explained, “is not a secret act at all. It’s so people can learn what’s really happening in Latin America, and Salvador in particular” (Interview). The Sister City Project “was a great idea,” Freireich said, precisely “because we could get information” that reflected the reality lived by the majority of Salvadorans and share it with a broader public (Interview).

And, so, sistering activists recorded the Salvadorans’ stories with pens, tape, and film with the goal of sharing them with other US citizens. To reach the broadest possible audience, Freireich explained, committee members downplayed the political nature of their work, instead “appealing to the humanity and the human condition of people in Las Flores” (Interview). These were “just people who want the best for their kids and they would like their kids to do better than they did in life. You know . . . have enough food, have shelter, clothing, but also education” (Interview). Once people in Cambridge or other US locales could relate to Salvadorans on a basic human level, the activists then could introduce alternative political narratives, drawing attention to “all the guilty parties” (Freireich Interview).

The kinds of images captured by the lenses of Cambridge activist photographers reflect this witnessing strategy, as evidenced by three patterns that appear across the committee’s corpus of photographs. The first pattern is an emphasis on the human rights and humanitarian crisis gripping El Salvador and specifically Las Flores. Photographs documented the militarization of society: armored vehicles, troops, helicopters. They also documented the consequences of this militarization: the smoldering aftermath of scorched-earth campaigns, razed crops and infrastructure in ruins, wounded bodies. A second pattern highlights how Salvadoran repopulators went about their everyday lives in the midst of it all: making tortillas, fishing, tending crops, carrying out religious celebrations, spending time with family and friends. A large number of these photographs focused on children: with parents, in school, swimming, climbing trees, posing for the visitor’s camera. A third pattern in the Cambridge photographs is the authentication of the sistering relationship between Cambridge and Las Flores: the presentation of the formal Sister City declaration passed by the Cambridge city council, for example, and the delivery of donated supplies.

⁷ Interview by Molly Todd, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 2017, audio recording in the authors’ possession.



CAMBRIDGE ACTIVISTS WITNESS THE MILITARIZATION OF SALVADORAN SOCIETY. GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS FORCE CITIZENS TO DEBUS IN ORDER TO CHECK THEIR PAPERS. CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



THE SALVADORAN COUNTRYSIDE IN THE AFTERMATH OF A SCORCHED EARTH CAMPAIGN. CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



IN A REPOPULATED VILLAGE, LIFE GOES ON AMIDST RUINS. CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



A MEMBER OF THE SAN JOSÉ LAS FLORES TOWN COUNCIL (RIGHT) RECEIVES THE FORMAL SISTER CITY DECLARATION PASSED BY THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL FROM JUDY SOMBERG (LEFT) AND SUSAN FREIREICH (MIDDLE). CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

The photographs that Steve Cagan produced were also a form of testimony, reflective of the contexts of their production. Cagan described in the 2021 interview how he always explained to Salvadorans that his goal was “to be able to tell your story to others who should hear it” and “to provide visual resources that you can use.”⁸ By the late 1980s, he had established such a reputation that ERP leaders recruited him to document life in the Colomoncagua refugee camp in Honduras and, later, to help launch a US-based organization to accompany

⁸ Interview by Molly Todd, Jacey Anderson, and Rachel Dunlap, n.p., March 21, 2021, audio recording in the authors’ possession.

these refugees as they returned, en masse, to northern Morazán. While Cagan's work does acknowledge crisis and suffering, it is far more concerned with the strength and resilience of Salvadorans in refugee camps and repopulated zones.

Like the Cantabrigians, Cagan documented the range of daily activities that Salvadorans engaged in: from music and construction to haircuts and funerals. Within his corpus of work, three themes emerge. First, Cagan's photographs emphasize community spirit. Whether in camps or repopulated villages, residents joined together to take care of business: together, they raised corn and beans as well as chicken, cows, and pigs; prepared and served food at communal kitchens; educated children in popular schools; made and repaired machines and household goods at workshops; and made decisions and kept everyone informed through meetings and a radio station.

A second theme in Cagan's work is the Salvadorans' civic engagement. This is clear in the local community projects they supported and in their actions vis-à-vis authorities. Many of Cagan's photos portray mass meetings and demonstrations where Salvadorans take stands on human rights, reconstruction, and other matters. Banners and signs abound: "NECESITAMOS QUE SE NOS DA LA OPORTUNIDAD PARA DEMOSTRAR LA CAPACIDAD Y DESARROLLARNOS"; "LA AVUNDANCIA DE UNOS POCOS MICERIA DE MUCHOS"; "QUEREMOS QUE EL GOBIERNO NOS PERMITA LA PRESENCIA INTERNACIONAL."⁹

These first two themes feed into a third: idealism. Cagan's photographs underscore the hopefulness of the moment. As one banner proclaimed, "SOMOS LA ALTERNATIVA PARA EL FUTURO DE EL SALVADOR."¹⁰ This relates in part to the new collective society being built from the ground up in repopulations like Comunidad Segundo Montes. But Cagan also was stirred by the ways that Salvadorans were rewriting traditional gender roles. His photographs show men and women laboring side-by-side to construct a new building, sew clothing, and make ceramic pots; girls playing soccer; and women welding.

⁹ Slides, Project Solidarity Archive, binder 2, images 041, 082, and 106. Private collection in the authors' possession.

¹⁰ Slide, Project Solidarity Archive, private collection in the authors' possession.



IN THE COLLECTIVE KITCHEN, WOMEN PREPARE TORTILLAS TO FEED COMMUNITY MEMBERS. PHOTO BY STEVE CAGAN, CA. 1989. CAGAN PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



SIGNS PREPARED FOR A DEMONSTRATION IN CIUDAD SEGUNDO MONTES. THE LARGE BANNER AT LEFT ANNOUNCES, “WE WANT THE GOVERNMENT TO ALLOW AN INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE HERE.” PHOTO BY STEVE CAGAN, CA. 1989. CAGAN PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



REPOPULATORS IN CIUDAD SEGUNDO MONTES, IN FRONT OF A BANNER PROCLAIMING “WE ARE THE ALTERNATIVE FOR THE FUTURE OF EL SALVADOR.” PHOTO BY STEVE CAGAN, CA. 1989. CAGAN PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Neither Steve Cagan nor the Cambridge activist photographers were entirely free in their production of images in the Salvadoran refugee and repopulation zones. The kinds of photographs that they made were deeply influenced by their backgrounds: Cagan as a professional photographer in the social documentary and labor genres; Freireich as a public health professional; and Somberg as an attorney interested in collecting evidence for legal cases relating to human rights. Their creation of images also was informed by the networks of which they were part. As in the civil contract of photography detailed by Azoulay and the collaborative production of testimonios, in partnering with Salvadoran activists, Cagan and the Catabrigians shouldered a responsibility to produce photographs that could be mobilized in constructive ways, whether in defense of human rights or to celebrate revolutionary ideals. And, more often than not, the photographs they could make were circumscribed by their intended audience in the United States. In other words, only certain kinds of images would translate well to the general public and, thus, successfully meet their activist objectives.

Raising Consciousness, Creating Spectators

As activist photographers, the US Americans intended for their photographs to contribute to the struggle for progressive change. Of the thousands of photographs they made, however, few circulated widely in mainstream print media. In many ways, this reality mirrored what late 19th and early 20th century social reformers found. Jacob Riis, the police reporter turned social reform advocate who gained fame for his pictorial work on New York City’s tenements, recalled in his autobiography, published in 1900, that he spent more than a year attempting to sell his photographs to magazines, “proposing to tell them how the other half lived, but no one wanted to know” (qtd. in Yotova 98). In the 1980s, likewise, US-based Central America solidarity activists found it diffi-

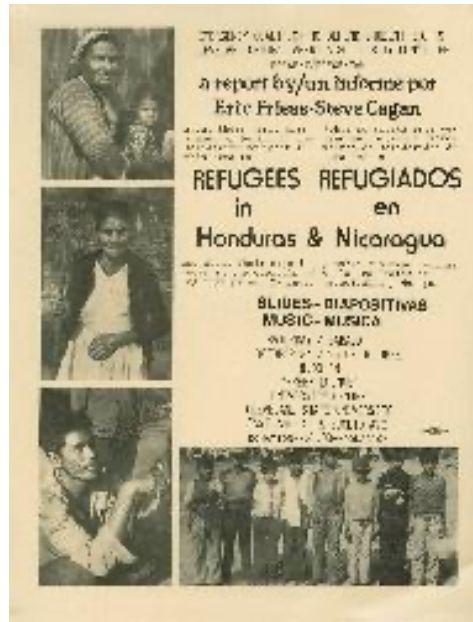
cult to publish their work in magazines and other mainstream print media. As President Reagan's new Office of Public Information took charge of "defining the terms of the public discussion on Central America policy" (Grandin 124), editors grew increasingly wary of publishing material that questioned Reagan's Central America policies. So, like Jacob Riis, these late 20th century activists captured audiences in other kinds of public spaces, including schools, churches, and community centers.

This section examines how solidarity activists mobilized photographs in the public sphere. Like the visual geographer David Campbell who studied imagery from the conflict in Darfur, we are less interested in the "facts" illustrated by the photographs than in "what they do, how they function, and the impact of this operation" (379). We find that US American solidarity activists strategically deployed pictures from the Salvadoran refugee and repopulation zones as "ciphers that prompt[ed] affective responses" (Campbell 379). They used images, typically combined with testimonies, to elicit emotional responses and empower viewers to see and understand in new ways the Salvadoran conflict, and the US government's role in it. This altered consciousness and, in turn, "create[d] new conditions for moral action" (Azoulay 144).

Some of the pictures of conscience, particularly those made by professional photographers, did circulate quite widely in print. Several images by Van Hardy, a photographer affiliated with the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project, for example, appeared in mainstream publications like the Boston Globe Magazine and the Cambridge Chronicle. It was more common, however, to see such images in more overtly activist contexts. Steve Cagan's work appeared in the FMLN's publication *Venceremos*, and both Hardy and Cagan provided images for newsletters, fliers, T-shirts, calendars, and other publicity for US-based community action and solidarity groups. Cagan's photos also appeared in Spanish- and English-language books about the repopulation movement, including ones that he and his partner Beth produced about Ciudad Segundo Montes.

If some pictures were mass reproduced, far more were mobilized in face-to-face meetings. Delegates to El Salvador used photographs from the refugee camps and repopulated communities to press their points in meetings with US and Salvadoran officials, for instance, and to illustrate their travels in exchanges with family, friends, and colleagues. In this vein, on February 14, 1988, Judy Somberg invited a fellow Cambridge resident to a "word of mouth event for people in the project" featuring recent photographs from Las Flores (Letter to Dan).¹¹

¹¹ Letter to Dan, Somberg Papers, Project Solidarity Archive, box 1a, folder Steering Committee. Private collection in the authors' possession. Hereafter referred to as the Somberg Papers.



A BILINGUAL FLYER FOR A SLIDESHOW ABOUT REFUGEES IN HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA, 1982. STEVE CAGAN, PERSONAL PAPERS. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Public meetings with slideshow presentations were an especially popular use of photographs. In a time before the internet, cell phones, or social media, these visually-enhanced informational lectures were one of the most important mass communication strategies of solidarity activists in the 1980s and early 1990s. Typically prepared and presented by people who had recently traveled to Central America, slideshows involved sequences of diapositives –35 mm positive images on a transparent base mounted in a cardboard or plastic frame—projected onto a large screen. Presenters combined the images with story-telling to create compelling messages for their audiences, which included a range of community members who gathered in church basements, libraries, schoolrooms, and other publicly accessible locales.

The messages of these slideshows were paramount: to appeal to the largest possible cross-section of the Cambridge and greater Boston public. The Cambridge-El Salvador Sister Cities Project steering committee advertised their events on community calendars as “talks” and “concerns” rather than “benefits” or fundraisers. And each slideshow had its own “pitch,” as Susan Freireich referred to in a 1988 memorandum.¹² At any given time, the committee had multiple slideshows in operation, each geared toward a particular audience and theme. For instance, Freireich, after a year working in Chalatenango with a public health team, presented several different slideshows focused on health concerns.

¹² Memorandum to Alan, Andy and Delegates, August 9, 1988, Somberg Papers, box 1b, folder S.C. Delegation.

Solidaristas strategically constructed their pitches on several levels. First, like testimonio, they relied on personal narratives to explore the complexities of the Salvadoran war in ways that raised audience members' consciousness about the problem and motivated them to take actions to address it. They shared stories from Salvadorans they knew who had survived their government's depopulation campaigns and who worked as community leaders, teachers, and health care workers. They detailed their own experiences traveling to the refugee camps and repopulated villages, including stories of harassment by soldiers at military checkpoints and their own feelings of terror while taking cover during bombing campaigns.

Second, presentations often involved powerful juxtapositions that encouraged audience members to reconsider what they thought they knew about events in El Salvador and the role of the United States in those events. In this vein, Cambridge sistering committee slideshows presented a grand narrative of good versus evil. The repopulators of Las Flores were good; they were poor, hard-working subsistence farmers, people of family and faith. They were not combatants; in fact, they flew "a white flag of neutrality" above their town, according to a slideshow script from early 1988.¹³ Also good were sister cities activists and *solidaristas* in general, who provided material aid and defended human rights. Somberg's notes on a February 1987 slideshow put it this way: "Accompaniment—helps survival—good."¹⁴

On the other end of the spectrum were the Salvadoran rich who controlled the nation's economy, government, and armed forces. Through concentration of land ownership, military dictatorship, and depopulation policies, they caused immeasurable human suffering. The US government occupied a position at this end of the spectrum as well. According to the 1988 slideshow script, the US sent \$1.7 million a day to the murderous regime, an amount that, absurdly, "constitutes one half of the Salvadoran government's budget."¹⁵ These were the true authors of the war against the people, not the FMLN.

Images played a key role in formulating this grand narrative, helping to make visible specific aspects of the Salvadoran conflict that US mainstream media and government messaging obscured. The introduction to the aforementioned 1988 slideshow, for example, included a series of four images of houses. The first three offered different angles on campesino housing: exterior, interior, and roofs. As audience members examined shacks cobbled together with sticks, scrap metal, and plastic, they listened to statistics about rural illiteracy, unemployment, and child malnutrition and mortality. The punch line came with the fourth image, "House of a wealthy family," and its context: "Less than 1% of the population owns 90% of the land."¹⁶ And in a section on the repopulation

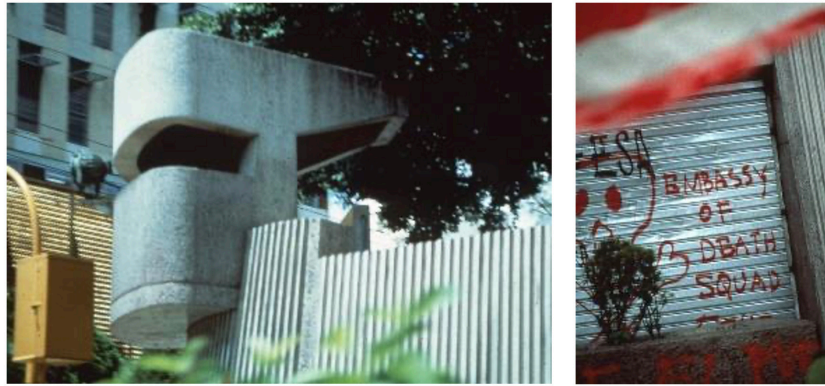
¹³ Slideshow Script, Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project, circa early 1988, Somberg Papers, box 1a, folder S.C.-Slideshow Script.

¹⁴ 2/5/87, February 5, 1987, Somberg Papers, box 1b, folder S.C.-Resources-Slide Show.

¹⁵ Slideshow Script. See note 13.

¹⁶ See note 13.

of Las Flores, photographs of buildings in ruins, a road impassable by vehicles, and women carrying supplies on their heads contrasted with a description of the town as it used to be before the military struck: a bustling trade center with over 3,000 inhabitants, electricity, running water, and regular bus service.¹⁷ Another pattern, common in all slideshows, was to juxtapose images of unarmed civilians against heavily equipped and uniformed soldiers, and the fortified guard post at the corner of the US Embassy against graffiti denouncing US intervention.



CAMBRIDGE ACTIVISTS CONTRASTED THE SELF-IMPORTANCE OF THE FORTIFIED US EMBASSY IN SAN SALVADOR (LEFT) WITH GRAFFITI CRITIQUING THE US GOVERNMENT’S INTERVENTION IN THE COUNTRY (RIGHT). CA. 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

This combination of narrative and visual juxtapositions called attention to the long history of injustice that gave rise to protest and insurgency in El Salvador and made explicit the human consequences of US intervention in Salvadoran affairs. The personalized, ground-level, historically-contextualized perspective contrasted sharply with the official narratives that circulated in the mainstream media, which focused exclusively on “the communist threat” associated with the US-USSR contest. Slideshows made visible an “other” reality, “undermin[ing] the apparently stable conditions of domination” (Azoulay 142). Like testimonio, then, the solidarity slideshow confronted state violence by naming it and, in so doing, delegitimized the state’s own hegemonic narratives.

Emotions were key to the consciousness-raising process. In this, the solidarity slideshows echoed the lantern slide exhibitions of Jacob Riis and other social reformers nearly a century earlier, examined by Michelle Lamunière, Maren Stange, and others; they were “spectacles” that relied on “visual and aural drama, along with the emotional appeal of the images [as] strategies that exploited sentiment to make a moral argument for reform” (Lamunière 143). And

¹⁷ See note 13.

while empathy and compassion were important layers of the desired emotional response, *solidaristas* sought more, including ire that translated into a sense of civic obligation. They wanted to transform their audiences into spectators, in Azoulay's sense of the term: spectators called to take part in the "restoration of the conditions of visibility" (143) for the Salvadoran campesinxs who had been literally and figuratively injured by the state.

This links to another layer of the carefully-constructed solidarity slideshow pitch: using visual and oral testimony to build sentiments of connection and appreciation. Presenters regularly integrated stories from Cantabrigians who had traveled to Las Flores. An early story came from the first formal sister city delegation, in December 1986. Their vehicle made it only to Guarjila; after that, they continued on foot for hours up the ruined and rocky road. When the group finally arrived at Las Flores around midnight on Christmas eve, Freireich recounted in our interview, "the entire village was there to greet us". To emphasize these warm beginnings of the sister city relationship, later slideshow instructions, including Somberg's notes from the February 1987 show, urged presenters to address "How they were greeted—don't leave out."¹⁸

Other delegations scripted powerful stories about government soldiers occupying Las Flores just as the foreigners arrived with much-needed supplies, and even their own detention, frightening flight in a blood-stained helicopter, and interrogation by an army colonel. The pictures that accompanied these stories symbolized the injustice of such treatment while confirming the concern that local residents had for the Cantabrigians. When audience members at the slideshow in 1988 learned about their compatriots' forced helicopter flight, for example, they not only heard that the villagers "were greatly concerned for their safety," they also witnessed the Salvadorans' witnessing the foreigners' detention, thus bringing the public into an expanded circle of witnesses.¹⁹

¹⁸ See note 14

¹⁹ See note 13.



BOB BRAUER, SENIOR AIDE AND SPECIAL COUNSEL TO CALIFORNIA CONGRESSMAN RON DELLUMS (LEFT) AND SUSAN FREIREICH (RIGHT), AFTER BEING FORCED ABOARD A US-SUPPLIED HELICOPTER, IN ROUTE TO THEIR INTERROGATION BY AN ARMY COLONEL. CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.



REPOPULATORS AT LAS FLORES, WITNESSING THE DETENTION AND FORCED REMOVAL OF THE FOREIGN VISITORS, AS SEEN FROM THE HELICOPTER. CA. APRIL 1987, SOMBERG PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Connection-building happened through images of a happier hue as well. Examples include Freireich and Somberg presenting the Cambridge city council sister city resolution to a member of the Las Flores town council; children displaying new school supplies donated by Cambridge residents; and people from Las Flores wearing T-shirts and caps with Boston-related logos.

To further ease connections across national and cultural borders, slide-shows turned to children, the universal symbol of innocence. Image after image showed children's bodies bearing the brunt of the government's war: feet bare and bellies distended by malnutrition, legs and backsides torn by shrapnel, corpses in tiny caskets. Pictures of children's drawings featured helicopters, guns, and blazing fires. Other pictures featured the children themselves hiding from helicopters, or living as orphans after their parents had been cut down by machine-gun fire from a helicopter.

But because children also symbolized hope, slideshows were well-supplied with portraits of boys and girls smiling, alone and in groups, arms flung around each other's shoulders. Action snapshots showed them bathing, playing, and sitting on rocks or, later, rustic desks, studying the chalk lines on the blackboards before them. Freireich's June 1992 slideshow closed with the following words, read against the backdrop of more than 20 images of kids: "We hope that the peace will allow an opening for the changes in the economic and social structures of El Salvador so that the children we see tonight will have a better chance to develop and contribute to their society."²⁰ Compassion for the Salvadoran children primed US audiences for a deeper appreciation for the actions taken by their parents to protest the government's war, to defend their rights, and to reconstruct their society along more democratic and egalitarian lines. In short, when confronted with evil, good people fight back.



PHOTO BY STEVE CAGAN. CAGAN PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

²⁰ Freireich's Notes from a Slideshow Presentation, St. Mary's Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 26, 1992, Freireich Papers, box 1, folder 1992-1994 Slideshow.



CHILDREN’S BODIES BEARING THE BRUNT OF THE GOVERNMENT’S WAR ON THE PEOPLE. AN INFANT SUFFERS FROM MALNUTRITION (LEFT), AND BOYS, INJURED, ON A STRETCHER (RIGHT). PHOTO BY STEVE CAGAN. CAGAN PAPERS, PROJECT SOLIDARITY ARCHIVE, MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Given the central role that photographs played in slideshows, activists carefully curated the pictures to feature images that would best elicit the desired affective responses. One document from Somberg’s papers, likely from 1988, offers insight into this process.²¹ It is an assessment of 91 slideshow images; next to each number there is a description of the content of the photograph followed by a brief assessment of its value. Among pictures of a theme, an objective and a ranking order become clear. Images of the Salvadoran army, for instance, should instill discomfort. The list dismissed images that did not meet this requirement as “not as good” (image 13) and “n.g. [not great]” (image 50). Other images offered some promise, including image 12 depicting “good general army maneuvers.” The best images, however, really packed a punch, as evidenced by descriptions like “blackened faces – gruesome” (42) and, simply, “OOF” (14). A similar ranking existed for images of the consequences of the government’s war. Image 40, “cleaning house after bombing–OOF,” trumped an “out of focus” bombed house (72). And rather than a “washed out” bomb shelter

²¹ Judith Somberg’s List of Slides with Commentary, circa 1988, Stromberg Papers, box 1b, folder S.C.-Resources-Slide Show. Following this reference and cited in parentheses in the text are individual image numbers and the page numbers of brief comments in the archival document.

(33), it was better to show images of displacement: “kids living in woods—good” (78) and “refugee camp—looks good” (68). The children, too, were curated. Images of children labeled “sad” (87), “poor” (89), “scared” (86), and “on stretcher” (91) were preferable to “children marching with toy guns,” which was “too militaristic” for a public show (16). Such commentary illustrates how activists selected images to amplify the symbolism of children as good and innocent, and in need of protection from the government’s evil soldiers.

By choosing the “right” photographs, activists guided spectators into “becoming a citizen in the citizenry of photography,” which, according to Azoulay, “entails seeking [...] to rehabilitate one’s citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it” (117). One measure of the impact of a slideshow was the level to which audience members responded to the presenter’s call to action, usually invitations to support a specific activity sanctioned by the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister City Project. When Cantabrigians returned from a health care-themed delegation in summer 1988 and presented their experiences to an audience at the Cambridge public library, for instance, Somberg lauded their performance as “EXCELLENT,” in large part because it brought in “generous” donations for medical equipment.²²

As this exploration illustrates, solidarity activists pursued a very particular “politics of exposure” (Reinhardt 18). For their slideshow presentations and print communications, they selected images that they believed would capture the public’s attention and, even more importantly, perform as symbols of injustice and provocateurs of emotions and actions. Thus, like the social documentary and war photographers of the turn of the century, solidarity activists mobilized visual testimony to “play an important role in the articulation of moral concerns and the making of political claims” (Reinhardt 14).

Reflecting the Past

This section traces how activists mobilized and interpreted pictures of conscience in interactive events in El Salvador and the United States in the late 2010s. In January 2019, we helped to facilitate oral history workshops in the re-populated community of Arcatao, El Salvador. The workshops were inspired by local formulations of Latin America’s popular education and historical memory methodologies. Three months earlier, in October 2018, we used similar methodologies for an interactive exhibition during a meeting of the US-El Salvador Sister Cities network, held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In all events, participants used photographs to spark memories and to draw connections between each other’s experiences and stories. In both sites, events resulted in a collectively-curated poster or exhibition panel with photographs and commentary.

Elsewhere, we examine the political nature of these events and the collective histories that arose from them (see Todd and Anderson). Rather than repeat that analysis here, we shift attention to how participants related to and

²² Judith Somberg, Handwritten Notes on Fundraising Events, Somberg Papers, box 1a, file Steering Committee.

engaged with the photographs. In these events, spectators participated as part of Azoulay's "photographic citizenry" by interacting with and interpreting the images (117). In general, we found that the spectators' comments and interpretations of the photographs were more reflective of the spectators' own self-images than that of the original maker of the photograph or the photographed subjects. The specifics of these observations revealed ways in which these photographs worked or could work to fortify solidarity relations between Salvadorans and US Americans, expanding the ability to make claims about human rights and social justice. An image's unique ability to foster what Azoulay called a "civil contract" allows ideas to transfer through space and time. "As long as photographs exist" she explained, "we can see in them and through them the way in which such a contract also enables the injured parties to present their grievances, in person or through others, now or in the future" (Azoulay 86).

Furthermore, these pictures of conscience are "archival slivers." According to the South African archivist Verne Harris: "[I]n any circumstances, in any country, the documentary record provides just a sliver of a window into the event" (135). In other words, if a metaphorical window offers a panoramic (i.e., omniscient) view of the landscape of the past, then an archive is akin to a shard of that window, now broken by time's passing.

Observations from the events in Arcatao and Philadelphia allow us to extend Harris's metaphor. In these events, these pictures of conscience are not cleanly edged, transparent glass; rather, they are chipped and uneven, causing them to reflect and refract light, shadows, and figures in interesting ways. How they do so depends on a viewer's point of view. Especially intriguing is that Salvadoran perspectives prompted more literal interpretations of photographs, while US American perspectives elicited broader, abstract interpretations ("Nuestras memorias").

In the three historical memory workshops in Arcatao, we used photographs from the Project Solidarity Archive to encourage story-telling across generations, genders, and experiential divides. These workshops were a supplement to a pilot project focusing on mental health. Responding to requests from community leaders, we designed the workshops to encourage youth participation and to tease out moments of resilience in times of struggle.

In each workshop, participants selected individual photographs that reminded them of moments of strength or spirit in their own lives. Then, in pairs, they shared the selected photos and stories, and identified similarities. Additional steps in the workshop process built more connections between stories and, ultimately, brought participants together as a large group. Each step fed into the collective curation of a poster, with photographs, drawings, and a title ("Nuestras memorias").

The three-day Philadelphia event was similar in that it resulted in a collectively curated exhibition panel. The event opened on Friday evening with a large public gathering hosted by the Philadelphia-Las Anonas Sister City Committee. The centerpiece of the evening was an interpretive exhibition curated by student interns with the Public History Lab at Montana State University. Entitled

“Flow,” the exhibition consisted of a series of themed panels that chronologized the history of the solidarity relationship between the United States and El Salvador, with highlights on the communities of Las Anonas and Philadelphia. Panels featured photographs of various sizes, with very little text. In addition to marking their preferred images with stickers and commenting on images with sticky notes, participants engaged in roundtable discussions, also inspired by photographs, on solidarity, immigration, health, the environment, and other themes. During the two subsequent days of meetings, the exhibition panels remained present so that meeting participants could place stickers on the images they found to be most engaging, inspirational, or striking. On the final day, we arranged the twelve photographs that had received the most “votes” onto a new panel, and invited participants to share their thoughts: What did this photographic panel represent, as a collective? (“Flow”)

A major pattern at both sites was that Salvadoran participants tended to interpret photographs as representations of truth, evidence that their experiences and memories actually occurred. For example, in Arcatao, one participant, Adela Dubón, became attached to a photograph of children in the Mesa Grande refugee camp because, she said, pointing to the fuzzy profile of a young girl, “That’s me” (“Nuestras memorias”). Like most rural Salvadorans displaced by the conflict, she did not have any photographs from her childhood; in that context, this photograph carried deep meaning. She asked if she could keep the photograph, explaining that it, along with the other images from the workshop, confirmed that the events she remembered were true. Due to the perspective, distance, and quality of the image, it was impossible to tell for certain whether the child in the photograph was indeed her. But that “fact” was far less important than acknowledging the photograph as literal evidence of her experience as a child refugee.

Like Dubón in Arcatao, Salvadoran participants in the Philadelphia event connected individual photos to very specific, personal experiences. During the final panel reflection, Zulma Tobar, a Salvadoran organizer with US-El Salvador Sister Cities, pointed to a photograph of children holding large stones above their heads. She related it to a specific memory of carrying rocks from the river as a ritual to bring rain to her community’s crops. Likewise, Bernardo Belloso, another Salvadoran attending the event as part of his work for a partner organization, pointed to a photograph of a woman wearing an apron, holding a basket, and walking on a road. According to the photographer, Adam Kufeld, this image documented the repopulation movement. Belloso, however, interpreted it as evidence of the *guindas*: mass flights to escape the Salvadoran government’s scorched earth operations. He connected it to his own lived experience of fleeing home as a child. “We would hold onto our mother’s apron so we wouldn’t get lost leaving in the night,” he explained (“Flow”).



TWO WOMEN LOOK THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS TO CONNECT TO THEIR OWN MOMENT OF RESILIENCE (LEFT) DURING AN AFTERNOON HISTORICAL MEMORY WORKSHOP IN ARCATAO. PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUTHORS.

Many scholars in the oral history field have explored the tension between personal truths and historical accuracy. As Alessandro Portelli explained, oral history is something that “tells us less about events than about their meaning” (52-53). Oral history narrators (and here we include *testimonialistas* as well) may confuse dates, their timeline, or who said what, but everything they share, “errors” included, contributes to our understanding of the past. The same is true when people reflect on these pictures of conscience. It may be true that Dubón correctly identified her child-self in the background of her selected photograph, or it may be a different girl. Belloso remembered fleeing his home when viewing a photograph of people returning to their homes after years in exile. The “facts” may matter when applying metadata to the photographs in the Project Solidarity archive, but when developing the general historical record of displacement and repopulation, the “errors” and question marks are irrelevant. The photographs—and what is real or imagined in them—spark and confirm memories of very real lived experiences; these memories, in turn, play a vital role in expanding our understanding of an often-hidden history.

Unlike the concrete experience-based interpretations and stories that Salvadoran participants shared, US American participants’ interpretations tended to be much more generalized, abstract even. One pattern along these lines was that US Americans viewed them through an aesthetic lens, as “Art.” The aestheticization of photographs, explains the political scientist Mark Reinhardt, can draw people to an issue while at the same time allowing viewers to maintain distance from the reality depicted in the image (see 14). This played out among US American participants in the Philadelphia event. One man, for example, was drawn to one of Cagan’s black and white photographs depicting women washing clothes in a river; he described the image as “biblical,” and ultimately ordered an official print from Cagan to frame and hang in his home (“Flow”). It

is worth noting that the aestheticization of these photographs began even before the exhibit opened, as student curators spent weeks determining what size to print which photographs and debating how best to arrange them, accounting for vertical/horizontal and color/black-and-white representations.

The previous section of this essay examined the ways in which US Americans employed images of children to help pitch a grand narrative of “good” versus “evil” in order to reach a broader audience and recruit support by focusing on the humanitarian crisis rather than overtly unpacking the complicated politics of war. Interestingly, these same kinds of images drew the attention of many participants in the Philadelphia event. Indeed, the final twelve photographs all depicted women and children. Pointing to a photograph of a young girl laying bricks in the early 2000s, one participant said that seeing youth engaged in rebuilding in this way proves that the struggle was for the good of future generations. Another participant was drawn to a photograph with children holding a sign that read “LOS NIÑOS DE ARCATAO SALUDAN A LOS NIÑOS DE MADISON.” She remarked, “It’s just amazing how children reach across to children” (“Flow”).

The final reflection in Philadelphia offers another example of the US American tendency toward more abstract interpretation. During that activity, most US American participants commented on the twelve-image panel as a whole, rather than selecting and unpacking a single photograph as the Salvadoran participants did. Interpreting the panel as a whole, one participant said two words came to mind: “irrepressible” and “indistinguishable.” Another participant chose the word “courage,” Yet another said “innocent hopefulness.” Just one US American participant delved into her own internal experience as she viewed the panel. “It’s hard to describe the feeling I have inside,” she said, “but it’s deep. . . I feel more connected to the past” (“Flow”).



DURING THE PHILADELPHIA EXHIBIT, PARTICIPANTS VOTED ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS THEY FOUND TO BE MOST STRIKING (LEFT) AND COMMENTED ON SENTIMENTS AND MEMORIES THAT AROSE WHILE LOOKING AT THE FINAL TWELVE PHOTOGRAPHS (RIGHT). PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUTHORS.

This exploratory piece does not allow us to unpack the full meaning and implications of these pictures of conscience, but the above examples do indicate that people in both El Salvador and the United States were drawn to the photographs as symbols or evidence that their history mattered. The experience of viewing the photographs brought participants beyond provocations of empathy and toward a deeper understanding of their entangled pasts. For the Salvadorans, this meant photographs served as tangible proof of their experiences from the conflict era. For US American solidarity activists, seeing images that came from a time and place that initially drew them into solidarity work inspired feelings of satisfaction, the sense that their actions mattered. In other words, participants from both countries and in both event sites interpreted photographs in ways that created or confirmed their own narratives about themselves. These event spaces—and the historic photographs themselves—thus allowed participants to write themselves into a longer historical narrative as change-makers.

Although the photographers did not directly participate in these events, they, too, point to such events as confirmation that their actions mattered not only during El Salvador's conflict period, but again later, in the 21st century. Steve Cagan, for instance, discusses Project Solidarity events in relation to his concern about "the possibility of a serious kind of activism through photography" (Message to Molly Todd). Of particular importance to Cagan and the others is their legacy; that is, that their photographs, and in some cases accompanying documentation, are continuing to contribute to *la lucha*, in part by recording for the official historical record their decades of solidarity work, and in part by informing and inspiring the next generations of social justice activists and activist photographers in the United States and El Salvador.

Conclusion

In this exploratory essay, we have begun to excavate the pictures of conscience from the Project Solidarity photographic archive. We have sought initial answers to questions about the creation and uses of these images, and what the images reveal about relations of solidarity between Salvadoran and US American activists in the 1980s and beyond. We found that the photographs were far from static objects; rather, they were dynamic historical actors that played a key role in developing and maintaining grassroots leftist activism across borders. But, like all historical actors, these images are complex—paradoxical even—because, in spite of all the utopian dreams of their creators and subjects, the images are infused with unequal power relations.

The kinds of images that Steve Cagan, Judy Somberg, and other US Americans made of Salvadoran refugees and repopulators in the 1980s and early 1990s were highly circumscribed. National contexts and the photographers' personal backgrounds, activist networks, and intended audiences all influenced how they wielded their cameras. Two expressive angles guided image creation: anger toward the Salvadoran regime and their backers in the US government who so blatantly violated peoples' rights, and admiration for the Salvadoran

rural repopulators who strived to build a new El Salvador from the ground up. Making pictures that could transfer these same sentiments to US audiences was a key aspect of their public witness work.

Toward this end, activists chose only certain types of images to circulate. They carefully deployed selected images as visual testimony to capture public attention, provoke intense emotions, and encourage action in favor of Salvadoran change-makers. This visual testimony relied on a form of what Julia Thomas refers to as “the strategy of recognition” (158). She explains, “Our trust in the photograph’s ‘likeness’ is rooted in visceral sympathies, in preconscious functions of the brain. To recognize ‘likeness’ is to have the sensation of connection” (158). Yet, Thomas continues, “[E]stablishing ‘likeness’ is more problematic than is often acknowledged. Before recognizing, say, a face, our brain unconsciously accounts for all the differences between the current patterns it perceives and previous ones [...]. Likeness depends on an evaluation of difference” (153). While solidarity activists relied on images of Salvadorans that were easy for the average US American to connect with (e.g., mothers with children, people hopeful for a better future), the chosen images also marked Salvadorans as different (e.g., displaced, malnourished, victimized). Such framing was often intentional: activists wanted to disturb their viewers. According to Mark Reinhardt, “Our feeling of disturbance will in all likelihood confirm, in a gratifying way, our sensitivity and our compassion.” But unlike many of the images of analyzed by Reinhardt, which he argued suffered from “a failure of acknowledgement,” the pictures of conscience mobilized by US American solidarity activists (e.g., in the context of slideshows) invited viewers to “assess [their] relationship to—[their] complicity in the situation” (32). In sum, as with Azoulay’s civil contract of photography and Latin American testimonio texts, the visual testimony mobilized by solidarity activists was intended to have moral and political effects.

If photographs served as tools to construct activist attitudes in the 1980s and early 1990s, by the 2010s, they served as sites of reconstruction, of personal memories as well as marginalized histories. In interactive events in El Salvador and the United States, participants used images from El Salvador’s conflict years as touchstones for story-sharing across generational, gender, experiential, and national divides. Although patterns of interpretation varied depending on participants’ positionality, Salvadorans and US Americans alike considered the historical photographs to be highly symbolic, evidence that their experiences and actions mattered, and that they were part of a longer history of change-making. In the decades that followed their creation, then, these pictures of conscience continued to have moral and political effects.

The pictures of conscience from El Salvador’s refuge and repopulation zones offered an alternative photographic experience to that provided by the mainstream media in the United States. Although infused with power asymmetries, these pictures could not have been made as they were without the willing collaboration of Salvadoran refugees and repopulators. Cagan, the Cantabrigians, and other US American activists depended on Salvadoran community leaders and, in some cases, revolutionary cadres for access to the zones as well

as guidance on the issues that rural Salvadorans found most pressing at any given time. To be sure, just as testimonio is “implicada en una continúa historia de la alterización de las comunidades y sus mundos para la acumulación de conocimientos y poder de la clase burguesa dominante anglo-americana y sus descendientes” (Carr 88), the pictures of conscience were not fully co-created images; rural Salvadorans did not control their own cameras, they were not responsible for selecting pictures to be featured in slideshows or other public events in the United States, and they received no direct tangible benefit from the use of their images. Yet, following Azoulay, they willingly entered into the civil contract of photography, understanding that solidarity photographers helped them to break the state-imposed isolation by bringing the images and accompanying narratives to spectators, thus transforming photography into “a social, cultural, and political instrument of immense power” (129).

In a similar vein, recent historical memory workshops that revive these pictures of conscience have created spaces for people who lived through the conflict era to offer their insights or, as Harris might put it, allow us to peer through their shards of the broken window onto the past. In El Salvador, where government authorities have failed to pursue meaningful post-conflict reparations and, in fact, continue to deny accountability for violations of human rights, such spaces are important contributions to community leaders’ efforts to “rescatar la historia.” Images, Peter Burke argues, “allow us, posterity, to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of [the] past [...]. They bring home to us what we may have known but did not take so seriously before. In short, images allow us to ‘imagine’ the past more vividly” (16-17). During the interactive events in Arcatao and Philadelphia, images elicited knowledge of the past from those who directly experienced it. Testimonio, combined with photographic images, are important tools for 21st century activists, potent antidotes to silencing and forgetting.

The images in the Project Solidarity Archive await further research for more nuanced understandings of the different levels of engagement, as well as the relationships and power dynamics that undergird them. For now, however, our initial excavation of the pictures has begun to expand available knowledge about the role that photographs played in the formation and maintenance of solidarity networks between displaced Salvadorans and US Americans in the last quarter of the 20th century and into the new millennium.

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