

Race and Privilege through a Sister City Lens

In 1991 a Bangor group undertook a relationship with Carasque, a village in the department of Chalatenango, El Salvador. At the time, other cities were doing the same, under the auspices of the U.S.- El Salvador Sister City Network. Our intent was to provide accompaniment to people at risk of human rights violations during an armed conflict. Civilians were being targeted by “search and destroy” missions of the Salvadoran military in order to “drain the waters to catch the fish” This counterinsurgency language mirrored that of the Vietnam era because it was the United States, still in a cold war fever, that was training and arming those soldiers. The sister city project’s motivation at the time was a sense of complicity, to help mitigate in what small way we could the abuses in which we felt implicated.

Since the Salvadoran peace accords now 28 years ago, this people-to-people relationship has flourished. We have been engaged with Carasqueños as they have contended with subsequent challenges: damage to their subsistence farming due to free trade policies; threats to their land from international metallic mining companies; loss of youth due to issues of forced migration; most recently crop failures and water shortages as climate change poses existential threats to their community.



Carasque in the mountains of El Salvador

Over these years, we were heartened to forge a relationship of solidarity, as we each have offered valuable support to the other. At first glance, this seems problematic: Most every year, sister city delegates with North American roofs over our heads and enough disposable income and time to board a plane, come to visit. Invariably the first thing that strikes us is the privilege we enjoy, created by global disparities of wealth. We are partnered with people who these days struggle just to subsist. They are people for whom a trip north in search of menial employment at sub-minimum wages would mean a harrowing journey through the desert, literally a thousand times more expensive and dangerous than the flight we just took to get here. What can solidarity mean in situations so unequal?

We have always maintained that the lessons and inspiration we gain from our relationship is easily equal to whatever support we have been able to provide. From early on, we learned that Carasque had created a form of community unlike anything we knew in the U.S. and that its model had much to teach us. Over the years, this is the story we have most often told upon our return: How remarkable and inspirational are the accomplishments of people who organized themselves as though their very lives depended on it, into a resourceful, resilient and sustaining community. Because, during a harrowing time of war, that was exactly the case.



**Sister City Delegates with
Carasque friends December 2019**

Carasque offers other lessons for us, as well. But as we ponder the enormous material advantages we enjoy compared with our Salvadoran sister villagers, one seems to have particular relevance for our own country, so polarized by issues both of economic and racial privilege.

Carasqueños inhabit a world infused with Historic Memory. The particulars of their mindscape and the factors that created it are foreign to much of our North Americans’ experience. But they powerfully influence how our sister city brothers and sisters see themselves and their community. The fabric of their Memory situates them in a community through time as well as in their mountain home. It’s woven of many strands. And their historical outlook suggests a new lens through which we might better appreciate our own struggles back home.

Most recently and still raw, they are a people who have suffered together. They are bound by blood to those martyrs who have preceded them and who have been taken from them. This connection is one they share with a network of their neighboring villages in the area and across the country. It's also one they share more broadly with peoples across Central America who, they know, have also incurred parallel losses, and by the same hands. Carasqueños well understand that our country has their blood on its hands, even though the direct agents of their suffering were Salvadoran military.

Like similar calamities endured by others, these wounds are seared into their memories. Unlike many communities, however, Carasqueños and their social network consciously weave cyclic memorial commemorations into their lives. Annual gatherings on May 14 at the banks of the Sumpul River, site of a large-scale massacre in 1980, are sacred time and space, where an open-air mass is held. More local collective remembrances recalling other communal losses are calendarized, as well.



Martyrs war exhibit, National Museum of Anthropology



Nueva Trinidad church rebuilt by the "hanging tree" in the town center

Carasqueños' historical consciousness places the war they suffered in a longer time frame, as well. In 1932 when the global depression radically deflated the price of coffee and day laborers' pay was slashed in kind, the rural population organized against starvation wages. The military's brutal response later became known as "la matanza", the slaughter in one week of 30,000 mostly indigenous peasants, roughly 4% of the country's population. The resurgent Salvadoran struggle for land and bread 50 years later took its name from that uprising's martyred leader, Farabundo Martí.

In the town square of Carasque's municipality of Nueva Trinidad stands a majestic and grimly historic copinol tree. During the years of repression, villagers were routinely hanged from it, as exemplary executions ordered by the military commander, with mandatory attendance for the local population. The crime of the family member hanged was not infrequently a daughter's failure to comply with the sergeant's "invitation" to appear when summoned for his sexual pleasure. After the army was finally expelled from the territory, the "hanging" limb was amputated, but the tree preserved, as a living monument to their ordeal. The community's church was rebuilt in its shadow.

Salvadorans' historical memory has older roots still. Though now living in a more modern economy, the population is no more than a generation or two removed from the hacienda labor system, dating from colonization in the sixteenth century. Granted by Spanish regents to conquistadores and their progeny, the land they inhabit was devoted by turns to the plantation production of cacao, indigo, coffee or cane sugar. These haciendas were worked by the communities' forbears, laborers who themselves were similarly "gifted" to Spanish overlords by royal decree, a feudal system from the medieval era imported into the New World. So while Salvador independence dates from 1821, those who live on the land here understand the roots of the injustice they have endured to extend back for centuries.



Here came trouble

A final thread that laces together these different strands of our sister community's historic memory is religious. The powerful influence that liberation theology brought to their region by Jesuits in the late 60's and 70's has them identify as yet another community through time: The Poor.

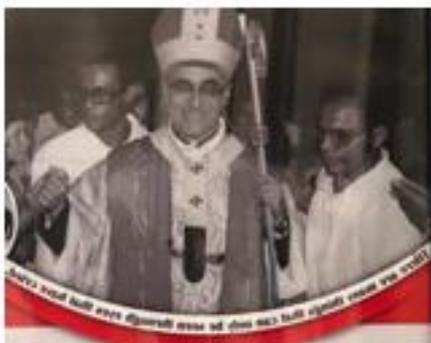
Through this empowering theologic lens, "Los Pobres", though long suffering, are agents of history with dignity, agency and vision. Carasqueños see themselves as walking together in Jesus' steps for freedom and justice, and regard their Bible as an action manual for how to proceed.



Carasque's church dedicated to its Patron Saint Francis of Assisi

Carasque's journey as a "Christian base community" is a tale of martyrdom and rebirth. Popular songs are a ubiquitous, free and oft-visited auditory museum of the people's Historic Memory. The hymns that church choirs sing chronicles their collective story: "El veinte quatro de Marzo, la iglesia no olvidara..." *The twenty fourth of March, the church will never forget*, begins one of many songs recalling the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, shepherd of the poor. The people are in search of the time, say the lyrics of El Salvador's best-known popular song,

Never to forget is but one element of the commemorations of the tragedies they have suffered. A second is to consecrate communal loss with life going forward.



ArchBishop Oscar Romero, slain in 1980

*"en que florezca la tierra/por los que han ido cayendo/
en que venga la alegria a lavar el sufrimiento"*

"when the earth will flower for those who have fallen,
when joy will wash away the suffering."

When one spends time with people who have lived these experiences and been purposeful about preserving them, it hardly seems odd that the person in front of you is both an individual in her own right as well as part of a community whose painful history is essential to who she is.

Our Salvadoran friends, thankfully, are able to see us in this same way, as well, despite our own country's heavy hand in the repression they suffered. From the same song, the lyrics pull no punches ...

*Al verde que yo le canto
es el color de tus maizales
no al verde de las boinas
de matanzas tropicales*

*Los que fueron al Vietnam
a quemar los arrozales
y hoy andan por esta tierra
como andar por sus corrales*

The green of which I sing
Is the color of your pastures
Not the green of the berets
Of tropical massacres --

Those who went to Vietnam
to burn the rice fields
And now swagger about this land
as though it were their own corrals



Salvadoran soldier juggling oranges

Our Carasqueño hosts know where we come from. And we both know that working at least in modest ways to continue to repair our own country's role in their lives is part of the solidarity we share. We are humbled that they embrace us in this redemptive work.



El Salvador's airport renamed for the martyred Archbishop 25 years later

It would be easy to romanticize how much this Historic Memory work has penetrated throughout Salvadoran society. For example, a process of peace and reconciliation in their nation has never been truly consummated. Yet, much of the country is on the same page in acknowledging and honoring important touchstones of their historical legacy. If nothing else, the name of the martyred archbishop Oscar Romero now graces the National Airport. And El Salvador's experience with constructing a shared Historic Memory certainly offers therapeutic possibilities for our own society, clearly in need of mending these days.

For us in the U.S., the collective experience of non-white populations would be essential chapters in a Historic Memory that could heal and instruct. For El Salvador's history of conquest, colonization, haciendas, massacres, and repression, one could substitute the Middle Passage, slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration for African Americans. Or for Native Americans, substitute genocide, Manifest Destiny and



"The First Thanksgiving" Jean Gerome Ferris oil painting

the Trail of Tears, cultural extermination, reservations and team mascots. Acknowledging these legacies would help us recognize how injuries borne by exploited communities over generations continue to bleed into the conditions of their lives today.

Sadly, our own challenge is more complicated: The very history of our nation is itself disputed, not shared. Historic revisions and wholesale erasures compete with historic preservation. From schoolbook depictions of the first Pilgrim Thanksgiving, to the TV era of cowboys and Indians, to the persistent belief in many quarters that the cause of the civil war, pure and simple, was not actually slavery, the truth of the experience of non-white populations in the U.S. has been whitewashed.

Here, for example, are excerpts from three Confederate states' Articles of Secession, echoed state by state by the rest:

Yet, comforting counter-narratives abound. For the South, that theirs was a lost but noble cause, of states' rights against the tyranny of federal intrusion. That slavery also had its benevolent aspects. And for the North, that slavery was only a Southern sin, ignoring that slaves were foundational to Northern wealth, as well: A Northern maritime industry whose fleets transported slaves to this country and the cotton they picked to England. And New England mills that relied on slave labor for their raw material.

Articles of Secession

South Carolina:

"They have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery"

Mississippi:

"A blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization"

Texas:

"The servitude of the Africa race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and abundantly authorized as justified by the experience of mankind"



**There were 4700 lynchings in the U.S. between 1882 and 1968
27% of them were in non-Southern states**

The racism baked into these legacies that both North and South would prefer to disavow originates from earliest colonial times. Specifically, it dates from the day in 1676 that black and white indentured servants in Virginia's Jamestown Colony jointly staged an insurrection against the Colonial governor. Alarmed at this inter-racial alliance, the Virginia legislature ended the system of white indenture and enacted laws specifying that all people of African descent would hereafter be slaves, as would their descendants.

Historian Edward Morgan describes the Virginian's strategy: "Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class." Lyndon Baines Johnson put even more plainly the dynamic still at work two centuries later: "If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."

This brand of privilege on the cheap afforded by Virginia planters to lower class whites has confounded our issues of race, class and grievance ever since. These issues were not resolved by the civil war or reconstruction and continue to fester today.



**"The Burning of Jamestown" by artist Howard Pyle
depicts a bi-racial insurrection**

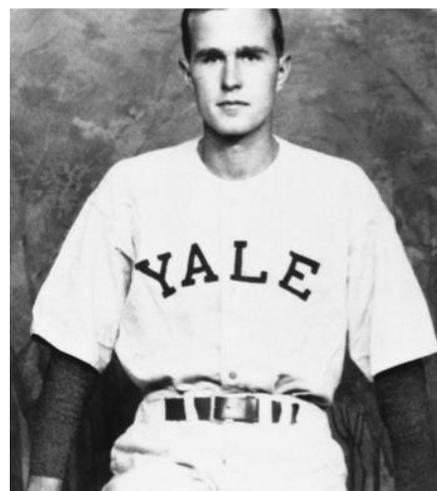


**Panel from "Punch cures the gout,
the colic and the tsick"
James Gilray 1799**

Privilege and Racism are politically volatile terms. In Europe "privilege" usually connotes class privilege. The aristocratic strata have long been regarded, even satirized, as a pampered, often useless lot, nursing their gout from over-indulgence in too much wine and too many rich sauces.

Class privilege in the U.S. is most commonly family-linked. And people who inherit it not infrequently ascribe their good fortune to such personal virtues as hard work, pluck and foresight. Jim Hightower famously lampooned George H.W. Bush as a man "who was born on third base and thought he hit a triple." Whether one's political bias tends to red or blue, most people in the country take a dim view of "trust fund babies" and don't appreciate being tagged as "privileged."

This popular attitude towards class-based wealth helps explain white resistance to entertaining the reality of racial privilege. Race-based discrimination does not feature identifiable dynastic groups of families but creates a more broad-based, unevenly distributed, advantage. While racial privilege provides a full spectrum of perks, it doesn't necessarily include hefty stock portfolios one generally associates with entitlement. Indeed, racial privilege and economic disadvantage often co-exist. So, white folks who themselves don't enjoy a life of leisure might reasonably bristle as being portrayed as privileged.



George H.W. Bush, baseball captain

Centuries distant from Virginia's early legislative acts to relieve whites of indentured servitude and consign blacks to hereditary slavery, 21st century Americans can all safely say that we had nothing to do with it. White Americans, like all Americans, have personal and family history struggles which they regard as shaping the circumstances of their own lives. They don't generally perceive themselves as having been handed any special advantages by the country's foundational events that, for most, long predate their own forbears' immigration stories.

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**

Not surprisingly, black people, historically on the bottom rung, have a different and more clear-eyed view of what racial privilege has meant. Someone who sincerely responds to "Black Lives Matter", by saying "No, All Lives Matter", may intend this to mean, "Your life is worth no more or less than mine." Yet someone living a "black life" understands that for most of our country's history, it was specifically *black* lives that *didn't* matter. And that *that past* saddles her, *in this present*, with the reality of dangers and disadvantages not on the radar of those whose lives are white.

**ALL
LIVES
MATTER**

Or when someone announces, "I don't see skin color" to people of color, intending this as an egalitarian statement, those being addressed may reasonably feel that the speaker is dismissing essential elements of who they are. And that far from being seen, they are being rendered invisible.

The privileges that some enjoy and others don't are most evident to those who can't take them for granted. And they are paradoxically hard to recognize for those who can. Entitlements typically don't feel special, but rather, things one simply assumes are to be expected: To be listened to when you offer an opinion; to be taught as a child that policemen are your friends; to not be regarded as suspicious when walking down the street; to be given the benefit of the doubt; to have dessert after supper; to have teachers not view you as a potential troublemaker; to not need to look in the supermarket's ethnic aisle for what you usually eat; to be considered strictly on your merits for a job; or any of a hundred things, large and small.

If you don't
have to think about it,
it's a privilege.

These are the conversations we could disentangle if as a country we could share a Historic Memory that honestly reflects the experiences of who we are, how we got here, and what that means going forward. We could recognize that we all belong not only to a present, but also to a past bequeathed to us to our benefit or to our detriment. We could grant that all of us, but especially historically disadvantaged populations, lead our individual lives partly shaped by the racial inequities that have characterized our country from the beginning.

An honest Historic Memory could teach us that the racism imbedded in our national history is not just a matter of some people's individual bigotries. It could help us acknowledge and redress a structural reality: In terms of race-based inequities in housing, employment, education, criminal justice, and social mobility, for starters, African Americans still bear scars that began with their enslavement. It could focus us finally on what as a nation we have never had the willingness to unflinchingly face: that the theft of tribal lands across an entire continent, followed by what can accurately be called a genocide, is not simply a regrettable episode in the past with no implications for our present.

A historic lens that refracts our present by the light of our collective past can help unravel things that otherwise might not make sense. It could help us see that one needn't have a lavish lifestyle to have inherited privileges that come as a birthright from being born white. It could make clear as well that such a "jumpstart" doesn't always protect from an economy, which is stacked in favor of the wealthy and abuses the rest, black, white and brown.

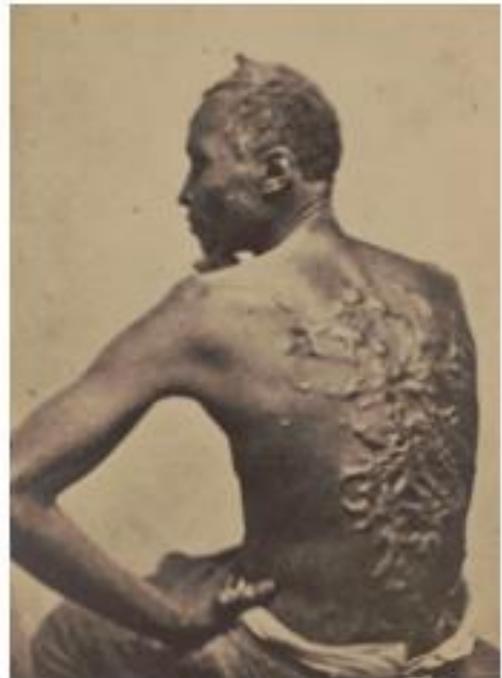


photo of "whipped Peter" published in Harpers Weekly 1863

"Sometimes you have to go a long distance out of your way," wrote playwright Edward Albee, "to come back a short distance." We've traveled to El Salvador to appreciate the potential value for our own frayed society that a widely shared Historic Memory as practiced there might have. If it could help us acknowledge present day privilege on the one hand, and the continued impact of past historical oppression on the other, we could start to heal the rifts that afflict us.



At El Salvador's memorial wall monument to those civilians killed or disappeared

A frank conversation about race would be just the beginning. Our challenge at home extends beyond acknowledging black and brown historical realities and their enduring impact, although that alone would be transformative. Race is just one axis in our national history of exclusion. Also in need of daylight and rehabilitation is narrative justice to long traditions of anti-Semitism and anti-Islam, of anti-LGBTQ bias, of a workers' history not just celebrated on union hall murals. "Herstory" vs. "history" is itself still a largely untold and discounted reality. It's no stray fact that after 250 years women still await the ratification of an equal rights amendment to our constitution.

Movements towards pluralism in societies founded on exclusion inevitably provoke reaction. Sometimes the counter-offensive is overtly violent – El Salvador’s matanza and the massacres they foreshadowed, our civil war, the KKK and the normalization of lynchings.

More broadly we see a flare in culture wars. Guardians of the faith issue dire warnings at perceived threats to “our” country and values, and cast themselves as victims. Prescriptions follow: “Build the Wall,” “Jews will not replace us!” “Ban Muslims” “Make Normalcy Normal Again” “Make America White Again” An uptick in hate crimes is not far behind.



Billboard. Available from www.fightwhitegenocide.com

It is no small thing to push back against the intensity of such a backlash. The task is harder still when politicians who peddle grievance and fear fan these brushfires into full blaze for their political gain. But we can begin with the simple but potent principle that constructing Historic Memory, Salvadoran-style, illuminates: Who we are today is both enriched and freighted by our communal histories -- ethnic, religious, racial, gender, all of it. Sharing a country that honors this precept as precious to its national identity is a worthy vision, rather than censoring what the story is and monopolizing who can tell it. Clearly, we have a long way to go. Our country is currently so tribal we can’t even agree on facts. In a country where in some quarters the moon landing is considered fake news, a serious Historic Memory project will be no cakewalk.

The gulf between where we are and where we need to get to highlights a final gift that our Carasqueño brothers and sisters offer us, one in short supply domestically: that of hope, patience and persistence. If ever there were a people who should have been overcome by the unspeakable violence they suffered and the grief they endured, it should be our Salvadoran partners.

Yet, at every commemoration of the most painful of events that have befallen them, they sing. On December 11, 2019, our recent sister city delegation visited the El Salvador’s Memorial Wall, which lists the thousands of civilians killed or disappeared during the armed conflict. Our presence there happened to coincide with the 38th anniversary of the massacre of 800 civilians in the village of El Mozote. This infamous war crime was perpetrated by the Salvadoran army’s ferocious Atlacatl Battalion, a creation of the U.S. Army School of the Americas. On stage were grandchildren of the victims, singing what is sung always, everywhere, on these occasions:

a pesar de los golpes
que asestó en nuestras vidas el ingenio del odio
desterrando al olvido, a nuestros seres queridos,

Todavía cantamos,
Todavía pedimos, Todavía soñamos,
Todavía esperamos

Despite the blows
we’ve been dealt in our lives,
the deviousness of hate
consigning our loved ones to oblivion,

Still we sing
Still we entreat
Still we dream
Still we wait

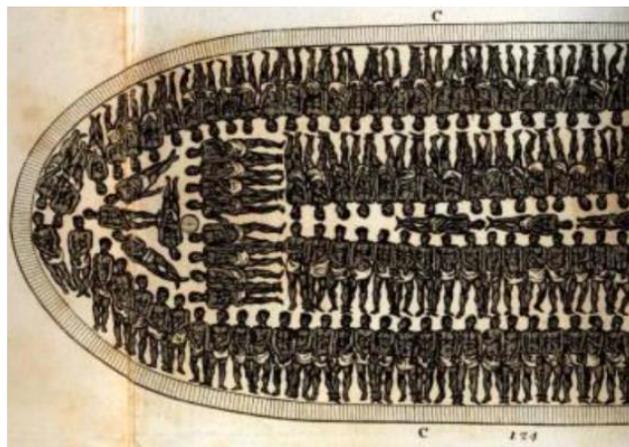


*Man at El Mozote Commemoration
“They will not erase our memory”*

It makes us think: Surely, if these people can absorb this level of tragedy yet remain open, hopeful, and patient, perhaps our own country can navigate the prevailing winds of division and grievance to find some common ground in a shared, honest Re-Membering of our own nation's History. The sooner that happens, the sooner we can finally acknowledge that, as another song goes, "We may have come here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."



Immigrant ship in NY Harbor



***slave ship stowage floor plan, Dutch West India Company
Surinam Directorate for Culture***

Dennis Chinoy
Power in Community Alliances (PICA)
Bangor Area – El Salvador Sister City Committee

