

Letter from El Salvador,

Andrea, baby Sofia Elena, and I are doing extremely well here in San Salvador, El Salvador. *Gracias a Dios*. Next week, we leave for Costa Rica to spend the holidays with Andrea's maternal extended clan. The weather here is amazing. It seems to always be sunny and within 75 to 80 degrees (I don't mean to brag). Because we're close to the equator the sun always sets at, more or less, the same time, 6 pm. If the weather is a constant, everything else about El Salvador isn't. Change is in the air and people are, literally, on the move.

I want to share a little of my observations of life down here as we near our four month anniversary in El Salvador. In many ways it already has been an amazing journey, full of wonder, welcoming individuals, and extraordinary unsung heroes like the Poor Clare Sisters working in marginal neighborhoods wracked by grinding poverty and unspeakable violence. Already we've learned so much about El Salvador—its history, people, challenges, its out-migration, and its close, intimate relationship with the U.S. In the process we've learned much about our country, the U.S., what it represents, what it exports (good and bad), and the impact our governmental and economic decisions have on countries considered “developing”.

In many ways the U.S. is the center of the order of things. And to see it from this vantage point, which a friend recently labeled as the periphery of the periphery, is eye opening. Sometimes the US feels like a crystal ball that outsiders can see in, vis a vis the massive entertainment industry and consumer engine, but can never access it. They can only imagine the copy of the copy of the real thing, which in the end ceases to be real. This illusory cultural product/image that is packaged for domestic and world consumption (through movies, music, fashion, cable TV, politics and war, etc.) undergirded by very dire economic conditions, draw and compel many Salvadorans to leave their families and ancestral lands, cross the Guatemalan border, traverse all of Mexico, and cross the U.S. border without proper documentation in search of a better and more dignified existence (approximately 33% of Salvadorans live abroad, mostly in the US—see narrative on economic conditions of Salvadorans below). After much hardship and financial costs (up to \$6000 to migrate across land) Salvadoran migrants end up in places like LA, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Houston, New Jersey, and even East Hartford, CT.

The implications from this massive movement and uprooting of peoples in our hemisphere are many and complex for our countries (500-700 Salvadorans leave every day for the US—figures from US embassy). Social scientists, in the economic, cultural, political, and educational realm, are trying to understand the impact of this 21st century phenomena and its consequences on families, children, identity, cognition, citizenship, local economies (both here and back home), and human rights, to name only a few categories.

According to Carola Suarez-Orozco et al (2002) one fifth of U.S. children are growing up in immigrant households. Many immigrant children experience family and community dynamics that span multiple nation states and cultures. This reality challenges older notions of assimilation and acculturation, of culture and identity, and the way we approach diversity. Realizing that these older constructs increasingly lack explanatory power, many educators and social scientists here in El Salvador and around the globe are attempting to find new ways to examine a world that's on the move and changing rapidly.

What strengths do migrant children bring to the “education table”? What challenges do they face? What does it mean to be an immigrant child today? What does it mean to be in a family or in a community that spans multiple nations states, one that maintains relationships and connections across borders? What must we know about the intersections of cognition, culture, identity, telecommunications, and schooling in a modern transnational context? How do we prepare educators for this 21st century reality when subjects don’t “belong” to any nation state? These are just a fraction of the concerns in need of our analytical attention, not to mention policy.

That brings us to our study. Andrea and I are co-investigators in an ethnographic study on the multiple impacts and intersections of global migration, broadly speaking, in two schooling communities here in San Salvador, El Salvador. The first one is a private elite school serving children of wealthy and privileged families (70% of its students go on to study in US colleges, including Trinity College in Hartford). The second school serves a very poor and excluded community, where the Poor Sisters of Clare do their work, and where most have family members working and living in the US. There are many interconnected layers impacting the learning enterprise at these two school sites (AND in the US)—which are two sides of the same coin.

We want to understand and capture how these two schools, at opposite ends of the socioeconomic and political spectrum, are socializing students to be part of a larger community and nation (or nations) in the context of severe inequality and high mobility? How are global forces impacting the families and communities at both schools? How are they reacting to those globalizing forces and preparing their students for a world that many are unsure of? How are youth seeing themselves as citizens? How are they participating civically and democratically, or not? What identities are they creating in this context? In short, how are educators, youth, activists, and parents responding on the ground to an increasingly transnational, global world? We have much to learn about the human condition here (which is connected to our reality back home) and of the promises and challenges of a 21st century education.

As you can see, this is a monumental and timely undertaking. It helps to have time to observe, think, read, write, and talk with social actors on the ground. But we have a long way to go.

I’ll say goodbye for now. For a little more context to what I mentioned above, I’ve provided below a brief narrative snapshot of life for a vast majority of Salvadorans. I wish you all a very merry Christmas and happy holidays in the company of family and friends.

Paz y bien,
Enrique

A Brief Snapshot of Economic and Social Reality for Salvadorans Through the Lens of a *Vigilante*

I want to introduce the economic situation of everyday people in El Salvador through the lens of William (a pseudonym), our *vigilante*. A *vigilante* is a night and day watchman. He’s an armed guard who supervises the apartment complex where we live. I’ve become friends with William and have had on-going conversations about his life and economic struggles.

Williams earns, approximately, \$6 a day (that's \$90 every 15 days or \$180 a month). According to the national census agency here, it costs at least \$685 to meet basic monthly needs of a typical family (la canasta básica). William spends approximately \$17 in transportation costs to get to work in that same time period (a gallon of gas was \$5.50 in August, but it has dropped since the global financial crisis hit). Much to our surprise many of the costs of goods and services here are comparable to US prices.

William brings food to work but it doesn't last all day and he often goes hungry. At home he has no electricity or any utilities to speak of. They simply cannot afford it (Electricity here is privatized and expensive. We pay anywhere from \$65-85 a month for a two bedroom apartment. Our water bill was \$23 last month). He says that with his salary he cannot provide for his family. His wife works as a domestic worker, but it's not regular work, nor well paid. He says that sacrifices are constantly being made, whether it's nutrition, health care, or school supplies for his children. (When I shared this information with Andrea, we decided to send him a plate of dinner on a nightly basis).

Salvadorans do have access to some basic health care services but the quality and consistency is spotty and the wait is long. But, what really breaks their budget is the medication. According to William, and others we have spoken to, public clinics are regularly out of medicine, forcing patients to fend for themselves. Private commercial pharmacies are very expensive, even for our budget. So, while Salvadoran may have access to a general medicine doctor, they simply can't follow through with the treatment. (This is particularly true if access to private specialists is required for more in-depth medical treatment. They typically charge \$25-30 cash for each visit). William says that he cannot afford to get sick. I asked him what would happen if he called-in sick to work one day, he says that his company would not only not pay him for that day, but also dock him an additional days wages. He said, with an air of resignation, "It's one of the many policies the company has." At a glance many of the policies seemed to overly favor the company or corporation over the rights and welfare of workers. For example, foreign companies operating factories here, called "maquilas", have a lower national minimum wage.

William represents the working poor. These are individuals who do everything possible under the sun to eke out an existence on a daily basis. Depending on the sources they, along with the desperate poor, represent about 60% of the population (a conservative figure). These are the social and economic conditions that force many Salvadorans to pack up and migrate.

While the individual migrant bears all of the costs of migrating—financial, emotional/psychological, cultural, and physical (in terms of risking his/her life along the way)—with no help from neither nation state (Salvadoran or the US), they nonetheless contribute to both economies. Migrants provide cheap labor, become consumers, and create market niches in the host country (US), while sending remittances back to their families on a regular basis. Remittances are monies wired home by migrants abroad. These remittances are the number one source of revenue for Salvadorans today, more than any other economic activity, including agriculture, mining, tourism, etc. In effect, migrants prop up two economies, first by alleviating the socioeconomic condition of their country by leaving, and secondly, by infusing new economic activity in both the US and El Salvador through cheap labor, consumption, and

remittances. Experts on international migration and globalisation call these new arrangements part and parcel of the new global economic order. In other words, it's structural.

The governing class at the national level here is dominated by what they used to call the "14 families". These historic, traditional elite families have been joined by others outside of their social group, labeled by some as "new money". This "old" and "new" wealth have formed economic alliances with US corporations and the larger global business community. They own much of industry, prime real estate, and the visual and print media (TV outlets and the two major conservative newspapers). They see themselves as "forces of wealth creation" and believe they're the only viable hope to developing their country. From my vantage point they are free market fundamentalists, that is, they believe in unregulated markets, "free" trade agreements, small governments, and minimal social investments. They believe that unbridled markets will solve the social ills of the day (this may be changing given the historical global financial crisis and the growing strength of the leftist political party). They're aligned with the Republican party in the U.S. and were profoundly disappointed that Barack Obama and the Democrats won the presidential elections and control of both houses of Congress.

Members of this class, and to a smaller extent, the middle class are in a state of fear with the national presidential elections in El Salvador only three months away. The leftist party, the FMLN, which was formerly part of the armed guerrilla movement during the civil war in the 1980's, is poised to win the presidency. They're also afraid of the repercussions of the historical financial crisis on Wall Street. Many working class Salvadorans are questioning the existing economic ideology that sharpens income inequality and concentrates wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of social investments for the many—hence the migration. Many wealthy and privileged Salvadorans at the elite school have personally told me that they're getting their passports ready to leave the country if the rightist party loses. Some have expressed fear of violence if the FMLN wins. The governing elites have never been out of power at the national level and the country has never experienced a peaceful transfer of power. It's both fascinating and unnerving to witness

Andrea and I have landed in a very polarized society, not unlike the US, but in sharp relief on all fronts. We are privileged to be here to observe, document, and analyze. We'll keep you posted as the events unfold. *Paz y bien.*