Organizing the Transnational: Labour, Politics, and Social Change

Edited by Luin Goldring and Sailaja Krishnamurti
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The Institutional Landscapes of Salvadoran Refugee Migration: Transnational and Local Views from Los Angeles and Toronto

Patricia Landolt

This chapter draws on ten years of research conducted by the author on Salvadoran migrant organizations in three urban settings to explore the relationship between transnational practices and immigrant settlement dynamics. The detailed study of the transnational and incorporationist practices of a single refugee population settled across very different urban centres of North America offers a rich empirical basis for comparative analysis. Focusing on the Salvadoran refugee-migrant settlement experience in the cities of Los Angeles and Toronto, the chapter contributes to the comparative study of immigration by analyzing the ways in which multiple levels of contextual factors and institutional interactions contour the process of immigrant incorporation.

This chapter analyzes three dimensions of the relationship between migration, settlement, and transnational practice. First, it considers national-level differences in the conditions of exit, modes of entry, and contexts of reception that organize Salvadoran migration to Canada and the United States. Second, it considers the ways in which the urban form—a city's political and cultural history, its immigration patterns, and its labour market dynamics—emerges as a second-tier context of reception for immigrant incorporation. Third, it conceptualizes settlement as a process of institutional interlocution in which an immigrant group engages with and is engaged by different state and nonstate institutions. Tracing various constellations of institutional interactions in which Salvadorans take part, the chapter explores how these interrelationships lead to the production of different notions of collective identity and distinct patterns of transnational and incorporationist political practice.

A Transnational, Multilevel Framework for Analyzing the Immigrant Experience

A context of social exclusion and limited economic opportunities in host societies coexists with new possibilities for sustaining meaningful relationships...
with people and institutions in places of origin (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 2001). Constant exchanges and interactions between migrants and nonmigrants tie together societies of emigration and settlement. Circuits of contact between migrants and stayers lead to the production of transnational social fields – sets of interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are exchanged, organized, and transformed (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Variation in the scope and character of transnational practices across and within immigrant groups is associated with differences in the contextual factors that frame the migration process and with differences of gender, religion, race, national origin, legal status, and network resources.

A multilevel approach is required to capture the border-crossing dynamics that frame migration patterns and immigrant settlement processes. Three threads of this multilevel framework are worth identifying. First, contextual dimensions such as the conditions of exit and reception that organize a migration flow produce a guiding framework of material and symbolic resources for an immigrant group. Whether a migration is forced or voluntary, the sending state’s relationship to the migrant population, the responses of the host government and civil society to the newcomers, labour market conditions in the place of settlement, and so on combine to produce different settlement outcomes across immigrant groups even when these groups have similar demographic profiles (Portes and Borocz 1989; Portes 2003).

Second, cities can be read as dynamic contexts for immigrant incorporation. Newcomers always necessarily adapt to the structure and order of the city into which they enter and in so doing transform the city’s social, economic, political, and cultural landscapes (Brettell 2003b). Certain dimensions of the urban form that are particularly important for shaping immigrant settlement outcomes include a city’s relationship to its immigration history and its ethnic and racial diversity; its labour market structure and the kinds of economic niches into which it channels newcomers; its political culture and traditions of civic participation and oppositional politics; and the patterns of residential settlement and social interaction produced by its built environment.

Third, immigrants are continually engaged by and interact with a variety of social, economic, and political institutions, which may originate in the country of origin, the place of settlement, or elsewhere. This includes both state and nonstate actors such as community organizations and settlement agencies, religious organizations, local school and neighbourhood organizations, professional associations, social movement organizations, lobby and advocacy groups, as well as home and host country political parties. Each such organization or institutional actor provides immigrants with a set of material and symbolic points of reference that may encourage or discourage the maintenance or revival of ties to the home country or to co-nationals settled in other locations of the globe (Levitt 2001b).

The immigrant experience is spatially complex and multidimensional. Immigrant families, the institutions they build, those in which they participate, those that engage them – each has a distinct spatiality. The settlement experience may emphasize incorporationist practices at one moment and transnational practices at another. Involvement in local institutions may be a stepping-stone toward greater involvement in the country of origin or may produce a seemingly irreparable break in an immigrant’s ties to her place of origin. Transnational and incorporationist practices are rarely mutually exclusive, and their interrelationship is constantly being renegotiated. The networks that immigrants sustain can be global, transnational, and local, where the global arena is associated with networks and processes that are decoupled from any specific location and the transnational with practices that are anchored in but always cross and transcend the borders of two or more nation-states (Kearney 1995; Kivisto 2003). The “local” and its boundaries are thus no longer so simple to define since people, in this case transnational migrants in Toronto and Los Angeles, can imbue it with global and transnational meanings and materiality (Gieryn 2000).

**Contrasting Salvadoran Refugee Migrations to the United States and Canada**

In the 1960s, El Salvador had a century-old tradition of largely unauthorized and unregulated regional labour migration tied to the seasonal demands of Central America’s agroexport economy (Villas 1995). International migration to the United States was initiated during the Second World War when labor contractors recruited workers to fill temporary labour shortages in California’s shipping industry (Hamilton et al. 1988). In the 1960s, Salvadoran women were informally recruited to work as private domestic workers, typically for US government officials based in Washington, DC (Repak 1995). In contrast, labour migration from El Salvador to Canada was effectively nonexistent.

In the late 1970s, the violence and economic disruptions of the civil war prompted a massive refugee exodus that ruptured El Salvador’s regional labour migration system. Thirty percent of the country’s population, estimated at just over 5 million in 1980, was forced to abandon its place of origin. The lion’s share of the refugees left the region and made their way to the United States and in smaller numbers to Europe, Australia, and Canada (Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo 1989; Hamilton and Chinchilla 1996b). The pre-civil war networks of labour migration played a defining role in setting the pace and direction of early refugee flows. Migration networks to Washington,
DC, Los Angeles, and San Francisco served as important beachheads for refugee migration during the war.

El Salvador's refugee exodus takes place against a highly politicized backdrop. Regional and international actors—the Salvadoran government and its guerrilla opposition, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), the US government, the United Nations, and different international humanitarian organizations—compete to define the situation of the refugees who are alternately lauded as radicals, identified as subversives, or patronized as victims of a distant conflict. Given this hyper-politicized context, the modes of entry of Salvadoran refugee migration to Canada and the United States exhibit dramatic differences.

In the case of the United States, the US government refused to recognize El Salvador as a refugee-producing country, financed the Salvadoran government's war effort, and questioned the legitimacy of asylum applications. As a result, Salvadoran refugees typically crossed from Mexico into the United States undetected; expecting to have their refugee claims rejected, they often applied for asylum only if and when they were apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Today, close to three decades after their initial arrival and in spite of intense lobbying by Central American immigrant rights advocates and the presentation of at least three federal government initiatives meant to facilitate the regularization of their status, an estimated 50 percent of the 2.2 million Salvadorans in the United States remain undocumented or have only secured some form of temporary immigration status (López, Popkin, and Telles 1996; Popkin 2003). In other words, more than a million Salvadorans now live and work in the United States without full legal status.

Salvadoran migration to the United States before, during, and after the civil war has been organized around the informal social networks of the migrant population and follows a classic pattern of chain migration. Migrants draw on the resources and examples of friends, family, and co-villagers to make the trip north and, once in the United States, to find housing and employment. This pattern of unauthorized chain migration under conditions of resource scarcity has encouraged residential concentration and the creation of labor market niches. It has also enabled groups of extended kin and co-villagers to re-create and reinvent premigration social institutions. Contact with co-villagers, translocal social obligations to nonmigrants, and hometown nostalgias are important material and discursive points of reference that orient the process of Salvadoran identity formation.

The modes of entry and status upon entry of Salvadoran refugees entering Canada are markedly different. In the first years of El Salvador's refugee crisis, the Canadian government was reluctant to accept Salvadoran refugees and agreed to do so only in response to lobbying by Canada's unions, refugee rights advocates, and more established Latin American immigrants (Ferris 1987; Kowalchuk 1999). In the mid-1980s, the government finally recognized El Salvador as a refugee-producing country, prompting a steady flow of regulated and authorized refugee entry into Canada. In addition to high acceptance rates for asylum seekers, the government created several emergency programs to facilitate the accelerated entrance of high-risk refugee populations, including political prisoners and refugee camp populations facing deportation from Costa Rica and Honduras (Montes 1989; Basok 1993).

Table 12.1 provides a breakdown of Salvadoran migration to Canada. There are currently an estimated 68,000 Salvadorans in Canada, of whom 38,000 entered the country legally during the civil war (CIC 1994). The remainder were either born in Canada or emigrated later under the family reunification or independent class immigration arrangements. The table shows that, of the Salvadoran population that arrived during the war, 58 percent entered Canada as convention refugees selected abroad, 17 percent arrived through family reunification provisions, 13 percent entered as independent skilled workers, and 11 percent applied for asylum at the US-Canada border. Until recently, there has been no unauthorized Salvadoran migration to Canada.

The federal government's involvement in the regulation of the refugee flow is a defining feature of Salvadoran migration to Canada. Informal chain migration is not an organizing principle of this flow. The state-assisted mode of refugee entry produces a social organization of the Salvadoran population in Canada different from that found in the United States. In Canada, few Salvadorans are bound together through informal social networks formed prior to or in the course of migration. Instead, nuclear family ties and friendships forged with co-nationals after arrival are the most common point of departure for social exchange and collective action. In this context, the symbolic common denominator for community formation is not home village ties or paisanaje but premigration political activism, national identity, and the refugee experience. Refugeehood and in some social settings the discourse of political exile become important elements of Salvadoran identity formation.

Urban Landscapes as Contexts of Reception: Los Angeles and Toronto

North American cities experienced a set of dramatic structural shifts beginning in the 1970s. This sea change in urban life was characterized by an increase in international migration flows, deindustrialization, the restructuring and bifurcation of labour markets, and a reorganization of state institutions in a climate of fiscal austerity (Sassen 1991; Cross and Moore 2002). Two features of this structural transformation are of particular relevance to the context of reception that frames Salvadoran migration, including each city's immigration and labour market dynamics.
### Table 12.1
Salvadoran immigration to Canada, 1980-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugee</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>.9%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>58.5% (27,494)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reunification</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>16.9% (7,965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled worker/self-employed</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>12.2% (6,217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backlog</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>11.0% (5,174)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deferred removal order</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>3.3% (131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur/investor</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>0.0% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live-in caregiver</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total % (N) = .9% (405) 7.4% (3,467) 11.5% (5,426) 14.0% (6,584) 12.0% (5,635) 24.6% (11,570) 18.5% (8,706) 4.1% (1,948) 2.9% (1,346) 1.9% (901) 2.2% (1,011) 100.0% (46,999)

Source: Longitudinal Immigration Database 1980-2001 (BMIR).
Structural differences across the two urban economies produce important distinctions in Salvadorans' social location in the local labor market. Undocumented immigrants are a pillar of the Los Angeles economy. They constitute one-third of the Los Angeles workforce and produce a downward pressure on working conditions (Bobo et al. 2000). In Toronto, an increase in subcontracting and temporary work arrangements signal a trend toward the deregulation of the labor process and an erosion of working conditions and workers' rights (Cranford, Vosko, and Zukewich 2003). However, because they are not undocumented, Salvadorans in Canada have access to an important set of state provisions, such as healthcare, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation in case of injury, that are not available to a large number of Salvadoran Angelinors.

The Local and Transnational Dimensions of Institutional Engagements

Each settlement location presents Salvadoran refugees with an institutional landscape of material and symbolic possibilities for building community. While this institutional interaction is axiomatic of the immigrant experience, perhaps because of the highly politicized character of El Salvador's refugee crisis the intensity of this interaction emerges with great clarity and poignancy in the Salvadoran case. Of particular importance is the fact that in both Los Angeles and Toronto varying constellations of local and transnational nonstate organizations loosen allied with or sympathetic to the political project of El Salvador's guerrilla opposition sought to engage with and/or assist the refugee population (Gosse 1988, 1996).

Los Angeles emerged as an active hub for the FMLN and the Central American solidarity movement. The FMLN organizations developed a successful model of local, cross-country, and transnational grassroots activism and formal political lobbying. One faction of the FMLN created the Central American Refugee Centre (CARECEN), while another founded El Rescate. These two organizations undertook fundraising, lobbying, and educational programs consistent with the strategic priorities of the guerrilla movement. In part because of the absence of state settlement assistance for Salvadoran refugees, these organizations also provided emergency relief and legal services to refugee families. They also focused considerable resources on the political education and mobilization of Salvadoran Angelinos.

As discussed previously, chain migration and paísanaje or "ties to the home village" are the first and perhaps most obvious material and symbolic point of reference from which Salvadorans sustain social exchanges and construct collective identities. The effort by the FMLN – via CARECEN and El Rescate – to organize the refugees of Los Angeles around a radical political project emerges as a second element of collective identity formation. However, in contrast to the high costs associated with political loyalty to the FMLN, the expectations tied to paísanaje are perceived as more innocuous in part because they are easily folded into the social obligations and normative expectations associated with kinship ties.

While much less is known about the relationship between globally networked grassroots organizations and Salvadoran refugees in Canada's settlement cities, preliminary research suggests a dramatically different situation from the one found in Los Angeles. In the case of Toronto, three types of institutional engagements framed the Salvadoran refugee experience.

First, institutional engagements revolved around the FMLN, which had a weak, unstable, and often fractious institutional presence. In the mid-1970s, efforts to develop an FMLN base in Toronto produced important contacts with academics and led to the maintenance of working partnerships with Canadian unions, human rights organizations, and refugee rights advocacy groups. The institutional weakness of the FMLN reflected both its failure to "capture" the city, as it were, and a decision by the FMLN to relegate Canada to a second tier within its transnational advocacy agenda. The FMLN's relationship with Toronto's Salvadoran refugees was quite weak and sporadic. In sharp contrast to the situation in Los Angeles, and in part given generous state settlement assistance for refugees in Canada, FMLN organizations played no role in the immigrant settlement process.

Second, faith-based and ethnospecific immigrant settlement service agencies emerged as important interlocutors of the Salvadoran refugee population. Upon arrival in Canada, Salvadoran refugee families received a range of social services, including free healthcare, subsidized housing and in some cases a family spending allowance for a period of up to one year, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Private organizations, particularly faith-based groups, were encouraged by the state to sponsor refugee families, and in such cases some elements of the settlement process occurred via the religious congregation. The Quaker Refugee Committee (QRC) was one such institution. It welcomed the refugees and served as a meeting place for what emerged as an active cluster of Salvadoran families that offered each other mutual aid. This group was also able to tap into the networks of the Canadian Quaker membership to expand its knowledge of the Canadian system and diversify its resource base.

Third, Salvadoran refugees received significant solidarity from Latin American political and cultural organizations, notably the city's politically savvy Chilean exile organizations. For instance, Latin American artists joined forces to organize weekly peñas or cultural evenings that featured poetry, live music, and plenty of political discussion. In this context, Latin American radical left politics and mobilization against dictatorships and US imperialism became central elements of Salvadoran identity for a core group of highly politicized refugees. This loosely organized, dynamic, yet underfunded cluster of grassroots political initiatives emerged as a third point of reference for
Salvadoran community organizing. It dovetailed discursively, if not institutionally, with the ecumenical and progressive religious framework that cloaked much of the Salvadoran immigrant settlement process.

Building Community in the Postwar Era
In 1992, the government of El Salvador and the FMLN signed the UN-brokered Peace Accords of Chapultepec, ending a civil war that had claimed over 80,000 lives. The process of national reconstruction and reconciliation brought about dramatic changes in the institutional landscape of El Salvador, its migrant settlements, and the web of transnational relations that brought together these locations. Ideological polarization grew less stark, and political spaces, once sharply defined and defended with force, were more openly contested. The FMLN largely withdrew from its global network of commitments and turned to the task of reconstituting itself as a national political party. In contrast, the government of El Salvador, which had established few if any transnational contacts during the war, launched a US-centred campaign to bring the country’s migrant citizens – the hermano lejarto or “distant brother” – back into the national community (Landolt, Aufer, and Baires 1999). An unplanned consular-based strategy of holding meetings with local community activists and business leaders was eventually consolidated into a full-fledged program for migrant citizens in 2000 with the creation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a new office called the General Secretariat for Attention to the Community Abroad (Dirección General de Atención a las Comunidades en el Exterior, or DGACE).

The peace accords effectively ruptured existing transnational networks, opened the doors to the proliferation of new types of transnational interests and relationships, tested well-worn local and global alliances, and reoriented the possibilities for transnational and incorporationist participation by Salvadoran immigrants. In this context, Salvadoran immigrant organizations in Los Angeles and Toronto, as elsewhere, sought to redefine their postwar role in El Salvador, their local and transnational political alliances and agendas, and their relationship to the local Salvadoran immigrant community.

Los Angeles: Combining Local and Transnational Concerns
Two events frame the transformation of Salvadoran-Angelino organizations: the signing of the peace accord in El Salvador and the LA riots of 1992. The restructuring of Salvadoran-Angelino organizations was propelled by an effort to bring together transnational and incorporationist Salvadoran immigrant concerns into a more compatible platform and organizing agenda. The goal then was to guarantee a place for Salvadoran migrants not only in El Salvador but also in local LA institutions.

After 1992, Salvadoran migrants’ desire to participate in the postwar project of reintegration and reconciliation encouraged the formation of a new generation of Salvadoran-American organizations, including professional and business organizations, youth groups, workers’ centres with union ties, and hometown associations that focused on financing improvement projects in the members’ places of origin in El Salvador. The more established organizations – such as CARECEN and El Rescate – responded to this postwar renaissance by trying to forge relationships with the new groups. For instance, El Rescate helped Salvadoran hometown associations (HTAs) to constitute the group Communities United to Provide Direct Aid to El Salvador (COMUNIDADES). This umbrella organization brings together more than sixty HTAs and encourages them to share best practices and allows El Rescate to facilitate HTA access to project funds with US organizations and, more recently, Inter-American Development Bank loans that are disbursed through the Salvadoran government.

Old guard Salvadoran organizations also initiated a strategic dialogue with the Salvadoran government and its consular representatives, mobilizing together to regularize the migrant population’s legal limbo. Joint lobbying by Central American state officials and the grassroots Central American Immigration Task Force enabled the successful passage of NACARA, the Nicaragua Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, which allows Guatemalans and Salvadorans who had arrived in the United States prior to 1990 to apply for permanent residency (Popkin 2003).

In the period following the LA riots of 1992, new political and social concerns emerged in the city, and a new set of funding priorities was established by government institutions (Johnson, Farrell, and Jackson 1994). Salvadoran community organizations capitalized on the new context, often playing a leading role in designing community-based responses to the root causes of the riots. Given their geographical location in “troubled communities” or “riot hotspots” such as Pico-Union, the heart of the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, Salvadoran organizations received state funding for youth leadership programs and economic development initiatives. Groups with a history of denouncing human rights abuses in El Salvador and along the border turned to denouncing human and civil rights abuses perpetrated by the INS, the Los Angeles Police Department, and the National Guard. Salvadoran organizations also became active members of several postriot coalitions, including Rebuild LA, the Coalition of Neighbourhood Developers, and the Latino Coalition for a New LA.

During a ten-year period of intense activity, the Salvadoran organizations of Los Angeles redefined their mandates and developed new alliances that bridge the local, national, and transnational concerns of Salvadoran Angelinos. The LA riots marked an institutional watershed as Salvadoran organizations were pushed to refocus their work toward inner-city neighbourhoods of Salvadoran concentration, city politics, and interethnic alliance building. The simultaneous proliferation of hometown associations
with strong ties to Salvadoran places of origin and the extraterritorial presence of the Salvadoran state prompted Salvadoran organizations to engage with institutions and individuals in El Salvador.

**Toronto: Bifurcated Local and Transnational Agendas**

The Salvadoran community of Toronto does not exhibit the organizational renaissance and diversification of transnational exchanges that characterize Los Angeles. The Salvadoran government and the country’s business sector remain remarkably absent from the Toronto scene. Perhaps because of comparatively small numbers, lack of entrepreneurial activities, and perceived political radicalism, there is little interest among the Salvadoran state or capital elites in courting or recapturing Salvadoran Torontonians as “distant brothers” of the nation. In turn, rather than a reorientation of transnational and local political engagements, in Toronto the postwar period has been characterized by a process of institutional erosion and an inability to bridge local and transnational realities to create a more coherent platform of concerns.

In 1992, there were just over a dozen Salvadoran organizations in the city. The majority were aligned with one of the five political movements that constituted the FMLN, had a small but devoted membership, and relied on informal fundraising for support. While these organizations were slowly dissolved and memory of their existence faded, Salvadorans in Toronto still considered contact with the FMLN to be an important part of their political engagement. The FMLN representatives, particularly comandantes and ex-combatants, continued to visit the city and would draw a sizable audience of well-informed Salvadorans anxious to continue engaging in El Salvador’s political process.

Efforts to reinvent the community’s transnational institutional commitments in the postwar period have tended to follow one of two paths. On the one hand, a large number of ad hoc and short-lived transnational initiatives have appeared. Without fail, natural disasters and elections in El Salvador tend to produce a flurry of fundraising activities — concerts, raffles, educational events, Sunday dinners, and so on. As they renew the cross-border exchange of resources and ideas with institutions and people in El Salvador, these projects are well received by many Salvadorans. They are also important moments for Salvadorans to stage large public gatherings, and as such they allow the group to reconnect and renew the highly politicized boundaries of membership that have been so central to their definition of “the community.” However, the projects that give rise to these activities are commonly initiated and maintained through small networks of individuals. The resources of the activist cluster are often exhausted long before their work has been institutionalized or they have been able to consolidate a broad membership.

On the other hand, more institutionally stable and successful transnational grassroots projects initiated from within the Salvadoran community have ended up being absorbed into Canadian institutions or falling into Canadian hands. I offer two examples of this pattern. First, the SALVAIDE is a grassroots development organization that has its roots in the FMLN and the Salvadoran community in Canada. One of its main activities has been the coordination of sister city relationships that pair rural communities in El Salvador with a municipal or community group in Canada. Many of these sistering relationships were formed during the civil war and have continued to exist in the postwar era. The SALVAIDE survived the institutional erosion that affected most other Salvadoran organizations in Canada in part because it was able to tap into funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Yet as it has secured state funding, the organization has also distanced itself from Salvadorans, except for the annual fundraising party that brings out a Salvadoran crowd.

Second, a grassroots transnational partnership has been organized around the Caravan of Hope, begun by a group of Salvadorans in 2001 after earthquakes destroyed many urban and rural communities in El Salvador. The group found an institutional home in a small Anglican church in north Toronto. Their project has grown into an annual pilgrimage of buses that make the trip from Toronto to El Salvador to deliver in-kind donations to select rural communities. Unfortunately, the growth of the project has meant increasing costs for participants, increasingly hierarchical decision making, and a bureaucratic formalization of activities, with the result that the Caravan of Hope appears to have left behind its founding Central American membership. While Salvadorans continue to help meet the donation targets in Toronto, today’s pilgrims are by and large white, nonimmigrant Canadians with little connection to El Salvador.

A second arena of activism has focused on local concerns such as affordable housing, children’s performance in the school system, and issues associated with working poverty more generally. In this realm, two patterns of institutional development are evident. There is evidence to suggest that Salvadorans have learned to successfully navigate the Canadian system. For example, in the early 1990s, Salvadorans were able to establish two housing cooperatives in Toronto. This has been a major victory for them. The cooperatives guarantee affordable housing for a significant number of families and allow the group to finally claim a physical space as a meeting place of its own. In a city where there is limited residential concentration among Salvadorans, and hence face-to-face contact is restricted, the establishment of a gathering place is fundamental. However, neither the successful establishment of housing cooperatives nor the production of a distinctly Salvadoran gathering place has sparked any further organizing activities.
Finally, Salvadoran efforts to penetrate the social service agency sector have met with mixed results. A small number of important leaders and activists of the Salvadoran community have been able to gain employment within the city's state-funded community centres and social service and immigrant settlement agencies. Yet Salvadorans have been largely shut out of leadership positions within these organizations. This is considered a fundamental stumbling block for a long-term political voice in city politics since these organizations are seen as a training ground for political leadership (Bloemraad 2003). Salvadoran invisibility within the social service sector is a source of heated debate among Latin Americans. In particular, it is believed that South Americans and Chilenos in particular have maintained an unreasonable monopoly on paid and executive board positions within immigrant service agencies. Indeed, organizations dominated by South Americans have had a difficult time analyzing and acting effectively in ways that recognize the specificities of the Salvadoran refugee experience (Chute 2004).

The postwar period of Salvadoran activism and community organizing is marked by institutional weakness and resource depletion in a context of continued political radicalism. A continued moral and political commitment to participating in El Salvador's struggle to build a more just society has produced a series of small ad hoc initiatives. But there has been a constant failure to consolidate the work of small clusters of active individuals into a more broad-based and institutionalized effort. Ironically, the institutionalization and growth of transnational projects, particularly when they involve building bridges beyond the Salvadoran community, have resulted in a loss of control over decision making and resource allocation by the group. Salvadoran organizers have also not made any explicit connections between local and transnational modes of political engagement, and participation in local issues has remained highly individualized.

Conclusion

This comparative exploration of Salvadoran refugee migration to Canada and the United States advances our understanding of the relationship between transnational migration and the institutional dynamics of immigrant resettlement. A transnational lens of inquiry, which considers the contexts of both exit and reception that frame a migration system, offers a more complete understanding of settlement outcomes. In this case, the forced character of the refugee flow plays into the refugees' interpretation of their migration as largely temporary or partial. In turn, differences in the contexts of reception that frame Salvadoran migration to Canada and the United States are associated with distinct modes of entry and settlement.

To summarize, Salvadoran migration to the United States was organized around the informal social networks of the migrant population and followed a pattern of chain migration based on social network ties among kin and co-villagers. These dimensions of identity become important for resource sharing and patterns of collective action. In contrast, the Canadian government's eventual willingness to accept Salvadorans as refugees and grant them settlement support upon arrival has limited the formation of chain migration patterns. In this case, nuclear family ties and political affinities form the basis for the formation of networks of friendship and mutual aid and the organization of community projects.

One of the fundamental differences across the two case studies has to do with the institutional framework within which the early years of the settlement experience are organized. This chapter suggests that state and nonstate institutional engagements with a newcomer population vary across settlement locations and are a critical determinant of outcomes. In the case of Los Angeles, settlement assistance, however limited, was organized throughout by highly politicized, often FMLN-affiliated community organizations (e.g., CARECEN and El Rescate) that linked emergency reception assistance to political education. This kind of partisan settlement assistance initiated the construction of an important institutional bridge that bound Salvadoran refugees together with politically astute and increasingly well-connected Salvadoran community organizers. In the case of Toronto, the state plays an active role in the settlement process, which is seen as an institutional gateway to long-term civic engagement and formal political participation (Chute 2004). State mediation of settlement and its organization and delivery through Canadian institutions have not been conducive to the production or strengthening of Salvadoran-centred social networks. Instead, this mediation has tended to encourage incorporation into Canadian institutions.

Finally, a set of broader conceptual and methodological insights has emerged from this exploration of Salvadoran transnational migration and institution building. The study confirms the value of a comparative mode of analysis. This mode has allowed me to draw attention to the ways in which purportedly similar immigrant populations experience profoundly different processes of incorporation as a result of contextual and institutional differences across settlement locations. The discussion also suggests how we can begin to merge effectively our concern for global and transnational processes with a grounding in the particularities of the local.

Note

1 Data for this chapter come from two research projects in which I have participated: the Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurs Project (CIEP), Principal Investigator Alejandro Portes (http://www.ciep.princeton.edu/ciep.shtml), 1996-2000; and the SNRGC-funded project Social Cohesion and International Migration in a Globalizing Era, Principal Investigator Michael Lamplier (http://www.vorka.ca/cohesion-LARG.html/Eng/index2.html), 2002-5.