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Travesía Crítica

*Unearthing the Graves: a Forceful Approach to Historicizing
Insurrection and Oppression in El Salvador, 1920-1932*

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Gould, Jeffrey L. and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago. *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. 368 pp.

In *To Rise in Darkness*, Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago offer a comprehensive yet detailed history of the massacres that occurred in El Salvador in 1932. More than a chronicle of events, *To Rise in Darkness* attempts to analyze the events leading up to the massacres and hypothesize why the insurrection and related oppression occurred. The authors historicize, often by using oral sources, the lives and deaths of people that have been largely absent from histories surrounding this area.

In the preface, Gould and Lauria-Santiago set forth the book's project and their analytical strategy while admitting certain biases inherent in their work. The authors say that this book has an "ethno-historical dimension" and that it "dialogues with the historical and ethnographic literature on *mestizaje* in Latin America" (xv). Setting up this construct in the preface is helpful to the reader, as later in the book the authors discuss how socio-economic classes were racialized; these concepts were necessarily involved in events leading to the insurrection. The authors purport that the discussions and debate regarding *mestizaje* offer historians "an analytical tool for understanding the success of the Salvadoran mobilization" and that such study is helpful when looking at similar social movements (xvii).

Much of the book's strength lies not only in its depth of information but also in the authors' insistence on situating their study within a particular analytical framework. Aside from the attention given to this in the preface, virtually every chapter begins with a section that outlines the goals of the chapter and the authors' approach to achieving them. Still, the authors avoid a narrative that is overly didactic or factual by including anecdotes and stories of individual people and families that played integral parts in the insurrection. In fact, the book opens with the story of a young Reynaldo Patríz whose father showed him where all his dead uncles were 'buried.' The anecdote also relates how the history was relayed to him by his father, thus setting up book's approach of directly facing the atrocities involved in the insurrection while still maintaining its human connection.

A particularly strong point in the book comes quite late in the narrative; in Chapter 7, the authors discuss the skewed "official Salvadoran discourse" regarding the slaughter of thousands of unarmed people (234). This discourse involved journalism that intentionally "elided, distorted, or falsified descriptions of the killings in such a way that either perpetrators and victims were transposed

or at the very least the distinction between them was made ambiguous” (234). Thus, argue the authors, the survivors’ memories of the events was shaped (or even obliterated) as there was no ‘room’ for other stories amid such different ‘official’ accounts. As the subtitle of the book involves “memory,” this point regarding memory being *shaped* by an oppressive force would be made even stronger were it mentioned more clearly in the book’s preface and alluded to throughout the narrative. Chapter 8, “Memories of the Massacre,” offers more detail on the mourning (or lack thereof) after the massacre and how this affected survivors’ ability to process their grief. Without public acknowledgement of all the massacre’s events, argue the authors, survivors were essentially silenced and the lives of their loved ones virtually erased from history. Here, Gould and Lauria-Santiago make excellent connections regarding how politics, ‘official history,’ and social recognition can be directly tied to trauma, mourning, memory, and affected survivors’ capacity to move forward. In essence, the book’s final chapter tells the reader how and why such historicization matters on a fundamentally human level.

Though photos of the people help to ‘give life’ to this history, and small maps allow the reader to better situate events geographically, the text swims with vast amounts of dates and events. At times, these events are not narrated in a linear fashion. Including such things as timelines would help the reader to trace the series of events involved in the authors’ ambitious project. Another helpful addition would be a list of key terms and phrases involved, as the history involves many words that take on specific meaning in this particular historical context. *To Rise in Darkness* is essential reading for anyone studying the complex factors (economic, geographic, social, political, etc.) involved in labor movements in Latin America and elsewhere. It would also be of interest to graduate students in literature and other fields who work in trauma theory and repressed memory. Overall, *To Rise in Darkness* achieves its goal of ‘unearthing’ the mass grave in the

intellectual landscape surrounding the insurrection while avoiding “the assignment of grades of ideological purity to actors in the past” (xxiii). Though the authors’ project is clearly academic, that is not their only focus. Rather, Gould and Lauria-Santiago – through the use of oral history, deft analysis, and acute understanding – have effectively depoliticized this history enough to allow the *human* aspect to shine through.