



Remaking transnational solidarity in the twilight of neoliberalism: US anti-imperial activism with Latin America

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Abstract

The tactics of U.S. activists working in solidarity with communities and organizations in Latin America have undergone distinct transformations since the 1960s. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork and a decade of personal involvement, this paper examines how the tactics U.S. activists employ to support anti-imperial work in Colombia have been contoured by the rise of human rights, diminishing practices of democracy in the U.S., and the normalization of neoliberalism. Informed by leftist activists and communities across Latin America, U.S. solidarity activists often reference goals to build transnational communal solidarity that counters top-down power with communal care. However, they simultaneously engage in individualized tactics such as petition signing and personalized education that do not embody the same theoretical ideas of solidarity they admire. Using the distinction between allyship and comradeship, this paper examines how a group of U.S. activists have negotiated a desire to move beyond the limitations of allyship but struggled to reach a fully embodied comradeship witnessed in Colombian peers. The lack of cohesion between activists' theories and practices is a site of struggle indicative of conflict inherent in processes of solidarity.

Introduction

A group of 12 U.S. travelers sat in a warm and brightly decorated room in Medellín, Colombia. The Red Feminista Antimilitarista (Anti-militarist Feminist Network/RFA) had just completed a presentation about their organizational efforts to heal from the trauma of the U.S. supported civil war and to preserve memory through art and community. The two women giving the presentation led us through some physi-

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cal movements to help remove stress from our bodies and then opened the room for questions. Two U.S. travelers asked questions about their involvement of children in their healing practices and inquired more about stories of success. Maria, one of the speakers, responded by noting the importance of incorporating children and telling a story of a woman who, due to personal losses during the conflict, had difficulty leaving her house before coming to the community of the RFA. Now the room was energized but starting to feel a little too warm. We began to shuffle in our seats as Maria asked for one final question. A young woman in our group asked the question delegates raise at almost every meeting. “How can we be in solidarity with you?”

Maria smiled and chuckled. “How can you be in solidarity with us?” She shook her head. “What are you going to do about Trump?” It was December of 2016, and Trump had just been elected for the first time. As Maria spoke, U.S. travelers sighed and nodded. “You have to get your own house in line. What are you going to do about Trump?” she repeated. We nodded and began to mumble amongst ourselves, mostly referencing our horror and disappointment that he had been elected. Throughout the rest of the delegation many of us continued to wonder how others had voted for him. How and why could they do that?! We’d bemoan. But we were missing something found within Maria’s response. Maria indirectly referenced both the impact of U.S. policies in Colombia, but also our need to assess our own democratic practices. *Our* democracy. She did not place the blame on those who voted for Trump, but instead asked what *we* had done and what would *we* do? Said differently, how had our actions or lack-there-of supported his election? We too were complicit in the erosion of democracy.

“Getting our own country in line” meant solidarity activists retraining themselves for what democratic participation really was, and much of this learning took place by observing our comrades in the South. This article examines how diminished practices of democracy in the U.S., intensified by neoliberalism and the rise of human rights discourse, have influenced the tactics of US solidarity movements with Latin America, particularly Colombia. Using Jodi Dean’s distinction between neoliberalized allyship and a mutually accountable comradeship, I examine how a group of US activists have negotiated a desire to move beyond the limitations of allyship but struggled to reach a fully embodied comradeship witnessed in Colombian peers.

Since the 1960s a variety of socio-economic and political shifts have gripped the Americas. From the normalization of neoliberal economic policies and rationality, shifting conceptions of democracy, and the growth of human right discourse, these shifts influenced how U.S. activists came to understand and frame their political projects with activists across Latin America¹. Neoliberalism itself has been widely theorized, from its complex assemblages to its impacts on individual thought and group action (Monbiot 2016; Ortner 2016; Slobadian 2018). In addition to the economic and political changes imposed by neoliberal policies there has also been a neoliberal-

¹ US solidarity activism and the broader US left has been influenced by far more than neoliberalism and democracy. The rise of identity politics, the criminalization and repression of much of the US left, and the decline of labor movements have all created shifts in activists’ imaginations, resistance techniques, and the broader political landscape. I emphasize neoliberalism and democracy in this paper as they were most central to my interlocuters’ experiences.

ization of daily life through the internalization of principles such as market efficiency, individual responsibility/self-management, and de-emphasis on the communal whole (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, Brown 2018; Ong 2006; Harvey 2003). Solidarity activism has been neoliberalized through the rise of human rights discourse and decreasing practices of democratic engagement in the U.S. such as broad participation in community meetings, communal discussion, debate, and advocacy around political issues. This paper does not seek to retheorize what neoliberalism is or how it operates but rather demonstrates that while still hamstrung in their own attempts to confront neoliberalism, U.S. activists have begun to and desire to think beyond its limitations. Through deeper understandings of how socio-political and economic shifts have influenced strategies of resistance, we can continue to answer the pressing question of “where, and with whom does revolutionary agency lie?” (Striffler 2024, 246). Moreover, we can further examine how and at what interstices revolutionary consciousness is built, contested, and imagined.

Latin America is a productive site for exploring these questions. Most recently, Latin America has returned as a critical site of U.S. foreign policy. The reanimation of the Monroe Doctrine through the “Donroe” doctrine is an attempt for a dying empire to reassert its power amidst a region long under its thumb (Grandin 2026). From election interference in Honduras, kidnapping Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Celia Flores, to threats against Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and President Gustavo Petro in Colombia, the Trump administration’s imperialism unmasked has recentered questions of solidarity. By further examining how and why specific imaginings and tactics of transnational solidarity between the U.S. and Colombia have emerged since 2000, this article demonstrates how changing configurations of U.S. empire and imperialism work to inform resistance and agency. These insights can further guide activists on what has been successful and what can be built upon in this present moment.

This article focuses specifically on activists who have been raised predominantly in the U.S. and inculcated into a U.S. worldview. I draw on my personal experience of 10 years of involvement in US-Latin American solidarity efforts and on ethnographic research I conducted between 2019 and 2021 with U.S. activists involved in solidarity work. The first section provides a brief introduction into the setting of transnational solidarity while detailing how historical socio-economic shifts have informed U.S. activist’s tactical repertoire for confronting U.S. imperialism. I then examine the specific case of U.S. solidarity with Colombia assessing how the movement began to intensify as a result of Plan Colombia and the tactics U.S. activists turned to in their advocacy efforts. In the final two sections, I contrast how U.S. activists have learned from Colombian anti-imperial resistance efforts, reflecting their desire to engage in more transformative practices of solidarity or comradeship with the limitations they continue to face. Through an exploration of how U.S. activists responded to and navigated calls specifically for Colombian solidarity over the past twenty years, I demonstrate both the contextual specificities to Colombian solidarity and broader trends among U.S. activists imagining and practicing anti-imperial solidarity.

Setting the scene: how history made allies

In many ways, completing fieldwork on transnational solidarity mirrors the complexity of solidarity itself. There is no concrete “site”. My interlocutors were dispersed across the Americas. Rather than a physical location, my fieldwork emerged through years of volunteering alongside US solidarity activists—planning speaker tours while in graduate school, organizing delegations, and recruiting for educational events. While most of my personal advocacy focused on Colombia, as a volunteer I was also involved in planning and strategic discussions for solidarity projects in Honduras, Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua. I was primarily embedded in the non-profit organization Witness for Peace (WFP) which formed in 1983 during the central American solidarity movement². However, through my work with WFP I was also introduced to a variety of activists working through other NGOs, primarily Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ), School of the Americas (SOA) Watch and the InterReligious Task Force on Central America and Colombia.

The NGOs with whom I conducted the majority of my work responded to Latin American activists’ requests for transnational solidarity. Said differently, the existence of transnational solidarity relied on an already existing campaign or struggle that local activists thought could benefit from inviting transnational solidarity to support. For activists abroad, transnational solidarity was just one of many of their tactics of struggle. While it is imperative to understand the context from which the requests for solidarity arise, my work focuses more so on what U.S. activists did with those requests, how they understood the asks of activists abroad or had them interpreted for them, and thus how they enacted and imagined projects of solidarity. How foreign activists interpret and enact solidarity can be a crucial component of the fruition of U.S. activists’ campaigns (Gill 2009).

The longer I participated in solidarity work, the more I began to question the meaning of the word and who (including myself) could be in and do solidarity. Indeed, definitions of solidarity vary depending on who you ask. The term has been broken down into types, problematized, theorized situationally and differentiated from charity or allyship (Binford 2008; Scholz 2008; Stites Mor 2013; Hooks 2000, Frank 2012). The varied imagined and enacted manifestations of solidarity leave it wanting. In its place I utilize Jodi Dean’s distinction between the political relationship of comradeship with the neoliberalized activism of allyship. Dean contrasts comradeship to allyship noting that allyship is the neoliberalized and individuated “activism” grounded in allies’ difference to the oppressed. Allyship relies on individualized actions—educating oneself, signing petitions, following the lead of the oppressed. In many ways transnational solidarity is primed for allyship due to the clear difference of place, culture, language and experience; the inability for many activists to consistently meet in-person, and the ease of leveraging individuated petitions and what Dean calls “communicative activism”.

Allyship as activism began to emerge as a commonplace through a series of political and economic shifts from the 1960s onwards and intensified with the rise of

² For a detailed overview of the movement see Christian Smith’s “Resisting Reagan” (1996) and Sharon Erickson-Nepstad’s “Convictions of the Soul” (2004).

neoliberalism, human rights, and communicative capitalism in the 1980s and 2000 respectively. Human rights as a mainstream mode of contention began to intensify across the Americas in the 1970s/80s and relies on calling out individuated harms de-linked from broader political realities and does not call for structural reforms to address their causes. A myriad of scholars and activists have highlighted that human rights language has been ineffective in countering current issues due to its decontextualized nature, its focus on victimhood, and its absence of suggested political alternatives (Binford 1996; Gill 2016; Striffler 2019; Tate 2007). Human rights intensified alongside the normalization of neoliberalism and its increasing emphasis on the individual as a primary political and social actor. In Colombia, human rights as a modicum of contention emerged as violence intensified between left-wing guerillas, specifically the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), right-wing paramilitaries, and the government. For those in non-governmental organizations in Colombia, visions of human rights went beyond individual accountabilities; they dreamed of addressing broader structural reforms and redress for State, paramilitary, and guerilla harms (Tate 2007). However, under intensifying violence and international contextualization, deeper structural understandings of “rights” often did not translate onto the international scene.

To my interlocutors, human rights language wasn’t a new way of framing activist claims. It just “was”—an ahistoricized way of doing things, that often performs a moralistic narrative, but that gets swept away in the vast chasm of individualized calls for change delinked from mechanisms for holding those in power accountable. My interlocutors frequently referred to human rights as though they were a normalized mode of contention rather than a historical creation. At the same time, they often viewed advocacy-through-non-profit or non-governmental organizations emphasizing technocratic expertise in human rights as the norm. As the rise of human rights converged under a technocratic shift to activism, activists began to move within a model of scarcity—scarcity of time, resources, and peoples—that informed their tactics, demands, and understandings of what could actually be achieved (Striffler 2019; INCITE! 2007). More centralized and professionalized organizations led calls for policy changes, delinking broader “everyday citizen engagement” with the practice of politics, and most notably, with basic democratic training (Skopol 2004, Kivel 2017)³. This delinkage set the stage for the rise in communicative capitalism which emphasizes access and inclusion to global communicative practices but does not impact the material roots of capitalist exploitation. Under the system of communicative capitalism, practices of democracy become watered-down and individualized sound bites or tweets. Yet, the “intensive global communications networks actually relieve top-level actors (corporate, institutional, and governmental) from the obligation to answer embedded in the notion of a message” (Dean 2019a, b, p. 21). The atomization of social life and resistance encouraged through neoliberalism and human rights lend themselves to allyship, or activism framed as an individualized identity and expressed through communication platforms.

³ For an excellent review of the role of non-profit organizations, see INCITE’s collection of essays on the non-profit industrial complex entitled “The Revolution will not be funded: Beyond the Non-profit Industrial Complex” (2007).

Conversely, comradeship however, “indexes a political relation... highlights the sameness of those on the same side.... comradeship binds action, and in this solidarity, it collectivized and directs action in light of a shared vision for the future” (2019,2). Comradeship is grounded in a relationship of practical action, discipline, and accountability. It is an active political relationship rather than an identity. Using Dean’s distinction between allyship and comradeship more fully illustrates the tension that US solidarity activists have been navigating over the past 20 years. U.S. activists have negotiated a *desire* for comradeship amidst structural and historical pushes to engage in tactics of allyship. A great deal of experimentation and reimagining must take place between the gap of allyship and comradeship. Informed by their experiences in Colombia, my interlocutors were filling this gap, with results often unseen by the public.

Nevertheless, as human rights arose across the Americas, in Colombia the internal armed conflict intensified and U.S. solidarity was concomitantly beginning to grow, often through connections with the same non-profit institutions that were leading human rights initiatives in Colombia. As the U.S.’s closest ally in the region, the government certainly couldn’t let it fall to leftist guerillas. In response, the U.S. and Colombian governments constructed the future target of transnational activism—Plan Colombia—to maintain Colombian State hegemony. Initially conceptualized by Colombian presidential administration of Andrés Pastrana in 1999, Plan Colombia, was altered by the Clinton administration and solidified in 2000 as a militarized plan with 80% of funds earmarked for military and police aid, training, and weaponry (Lindsay-Poland 2018). Under these conditions, Colombians called on U.S. residents to decry militarized U.S. involvement and its impacts on Colombian residents. In the U.S. many of the activists who responded to this call were previously involved in the 1980s and 90s Central American Solidarity movement and had solidified the framing and tactics through which they would elicit their demands amidst the intensification of the socio and economic shifts discussed above. As the next section discusses, this intimately informed their tactical decisions.

Plan Colombia-calling U.S. activists in

We sat haphazardly scattered around a Bogotá apartment, a small group of eight travelers who had been escorted around Southwest Colombia for the past ten days. Two long-term activists with the non-profit organization Witness for Peace verbally guided us through a tour of our trip, reminding us of the communities, activists, and the landscapes we traversed. Then, over the next couple of hours we were instructed to work with one another to come up with a plan of what we would do with the new information we learned on the trip- with our new political consciousness. We took turns writing our plans on a small whiteboard. By the end of the session there was a trend scribbled across the board— write-op-eds, complete a report we would share widely, call our congresspeople, host a movie night or get together and share our knowledge with our community—communicate. The tactics we each listed and drew haphazardly on the white board were those that had been developed and mainstreamed by activists in the Central American solidarity movement and reflected the primary repertoire of

contention for solidarity activists throughout the 2000s. In Colombia, they began to take root after the ratification of Plan Colombia.

From its inception, communities and activists in Colombia warned that increasing military aid of the package was incompatible with their security. Plan Colombia was not a plan for those most affected by the violence. Its intentions were geared to benefit military and ideological hegemony in the region. Colombian and U.S. activists quickly mobilized to highlight the above issues. This section reviews how grassroots U.S. solidarity with Colombia emerged and how the historical and extant context informed the tactics activists gravitated towards as well as those they most desired. The coalition that emerged to contest Plan Colombia adopted many of the tactics solidified during the 1980s Central American Solidarity movement including organizing protests, Congressional lobbying, educational events, and delegations underscoring the harm caused by U.S. aid. Following the trends of decreased democratic practices and communicative capitalism, pushes against Plan Colombia focused heavily on professionalized advocacy more akin to allyship, that happened through NGOs located in DC, such as the Latin American Working Group and the Washington Office on Latin America. When activists became discouraged by the intractability of advocacy to the State, they began to experiment and place increasing emphasis on building alternatives.

Solidarity against Plan Colombia emerged under much different circumstances of the Central American Solidarity movement but with the same tactical arsenal. Following momentum created by Colombians living in the United States, a broad coalition of activists and university organizations, church groups, and drug policy reform groups united to strategically resist Plan Colombia. In total, about “sixty organizations came together in the Colombia Mobilization... [and] called for ending U.S. military aid and serial fumigation, expanding drug treatment in the United States, and increasing U.S. support for sustainable economic development, efforts for negotiated peace, and aid to Colombians displaced by the conflict” (Lindsay-Poland 2018, 133–134).

Many of the organizations and activists mobilized were formally engaged in the Central American Solidarity movement and struck by the connections of U.S. intervention in the region. For those who did take up the case of Colombian activism anew, many were propelled by the stories of human rights abuses and/or their work against the U.S. war on drugs as indicated by a common delegation theme comparing the impact of the so-called “war-on-drugs” in the US and Colombia. A 2008 report back from a delegate noted that:

Through Plan Colombia, the US funds the destruction of crops and coca fields on the Colombian-Ecuadorian border zone of Putumayo, a sparsely populated region of the Amazon. In the drive to eradicate coca crops (the raw material for cocaine), however, the U.S. gives billions of dollars in aid to a Colombian military rife with corruption and boasting one of the worst records of human rights abuses in the world.

Seasoned and new activists joined the mobilizations for Colombia. Their hired policy and regional experts would (and still do) meet with congressional officials to lobby

for decreased aid by reporting what activists and communities in Colombia were sharing and trying to leverage pressure by demonstrating the human rights abuses that were taking place.

In addition to working through professionalized NGO's, activists tried to highlight the harms of U.S. aid by writing publicly accessible "report backs" following delegations, blog posts, and op-eds to inform public opinion. For example, one such report from a delegation in 2002 noted that "more U.S. military aid will only bring more violence to Colombia and will do nothing to enhance democracy in the country." These tactics, while maintaining an important focus on educational awareness, were also individualized, discontinuous, and often met with legal loopholes. For example, much congressional advocacy was framed using the 1997 Leahy Law which prevented the U.S. from providing funding to armed units who had committed human rights abuses. However, the President could waive the Leahy Law, the Colombian government found workarounds by moving human rights abusers to different units, and even if the Leahy Law was applied, it operated independently from how much aid was given to Colombia (Lindsay-Poland 2018).

Limited policy shifts frustrated U.S. activists and highlighted the need to reimagine their tactical choices. The discursive approach—communicative allyship—of producing good amounts of educational materials, public reports, op-eds, and congressional lobbying was individually time intensive but also subsumed by the 24-hour news cycle. The overemphasis on individualized media-as-democracy was de-moralizing and marginally effective. Meaning, the tactics lent themselves to allyship—individualized statements that denote one's own position on political issues without requiring deeper and ongoing engagement— and fed into limited democratic training and participation through a focus on communicative capitalism. While some did participate in long-term involvement and maintain ongoing relationships with activists, they often did so out of a deep personal drive and commitment. Similarly, the professionalization of advocacy did allow for more strategic and targeted appeals to congressmembers through well-trained NGO's representatives. However, circumscribing actions to "experts" also excluded everyday people from ongoing action and weakened or eliminated the accountability practices comradeship requires.

As activists worked through tactical limitations, scandals continued to erupt in Colombia including the para-politics and false positives scandals and ongoing human rights abuses⁴. Activists used these scandals as increasing leverage to call for an end or at least decreasing aid to Colombia. However, over time many felt the futility of organizing for rather minimal political gains, such as negligible cuts in military aid, and turned to emphasize other actions that didn't target the State (Lindsay-Poland

⁴ In 2005, as the AUC underwent official and largely fraudulent demobilization, the para-politics scandal erupted into the spotlight indicating financial and political ties between paramilitaries and elected officials, from congresspeople to local mayors. Around 60 congresspeople since been formally imprisoned with over 150 under investigation (Alsema 2016). Then in 2006, the false positives scandal broke. Under increasing pressure and incentivization to increase kill counts Colombian soldiers—heavily trained and funded by the US— were luring impoverished or mentally handicapped individuals away, murdering them, and dressing them up in guerilla fatigues to inflate kill counts. Following the peace accords, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) has confirmed at least 6,400 people killed. The additional statistics of those who have been internally displaced, estimated at 6 million, disappeared, or impacted by the conflict, particularly State and paramilitary violence, is staggering.

2018). activists felt circumscribed by allyship. and turned to tactics that worked to foster more personal connections among U.S. activists and between them and their counterparts in Colombia such as delegations, sister cities, and accompaniment. Though these tactics were far from perfect, as I will discuss next, they indicate activist's *desire* to move beyond individualist allyship to sustained alternatives.

Nevertheless, increased emphasis on more personal relationships with Colombians through delegations, accompaniments, and sister cities indicates a desire for tactics that reach beyond allyship to more mutual engagement and understanding. These worked to foster personal relationships between Colombians and U.S. residents while also raising U.S. awareness about the impacts of their policies. Delegations are short-term and encourage U.S. residents to return to the States with an advocacy plan. Accompaniment can be more long-term. Organizations such as Peace Brigades International host six-month to yearlong volunteers who “accompany” threatened communities or activists in hopes that their presence will decrease acts of aggression against them. While delegations and accompaniment can have powerful impacts on politicizing U.S. residents and birthing a desire for ongoing political action, when travelers return from Colombia without a broader social movement structure and community to plug activists into, they gravitate towards the individualized communicative tactics⁵.

Sister communities are perhaps the best example of this. Formed between US and Colombian churches, cities, unions, and other organizations, sister communities worked to build mutual relationships through visits, conversations, and advocacy that held U.S. groups accountable and or waiting and alert for any immediate actions they may need to take on behalf of their “sister”. These relationships also helped activists from both countries to understand the importance of collaborating and working together for the changes they sought, not seeking them unilaterally. And they used the partnerships for learning in both directions, with the aim of transforming their realities, not tinkering at the edges (Lindsay-Poland 2018, 137). U.S. communities were thus held directly accountable to Colombians and each other through these relationships. This accountability and mutual relationship building for a desired political project is a critical feature of comradeship, though is more difficult to maintain transnationally. As activism against Plan Colombia shifted, U.S. activists also faced additional challenges reframing and publicly explaining the goals or overarching desired political project of solidarity making these relationships even more difficult to maintain.

Despite some powerful mobilizations and connections, U.S. funding and influence in Colombia was soon overshadowed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Eventually in 2007, military aid to Colombia did see a marked decrease and began to steadily decline (Lindsay-Poland 2018). Witness for Peace credits this as a win from sustained Colombia organizing (website). At the same time, U.S. policy ana-

⁵ A broad swath of literature has been written on the limitations of accompaniment, particularly its reliance on global power imbalances, and inability to address the structural causes of violence. Koopman (2010) has written extensively on the decolonizing potential of accompaniment and the inherent power imbalances it relies on—ie that only a foreigner witnessing harm makes it count. Accompaniment can also be seen as a last resort, a tactic that is used when activists haven't been able to stop or alter systems of violence and so focus instead on using international bodies to pause violence.

lysts were calling the interventions a vast success. In 2009, For example, “according to then- U.S. ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield, ‘Colombia has been the most successful nation-building exercise by the United States this century.’ But what kind of nation did the United States help build?” (Tate 2015, 225). The answer varied depending on who you asked, but one thoroughfare ran through them all—it was a nation open for business. Amidst all these injustices another nefarious shift was occurring in Colombia, the intensification of neoliberalism. As the focus on Plan Colombia began to ebb, US and Colombian activists had to find a new hook through which to frame their appeals and approach solidarity.

Solidarity activism under neoliberal “peace”: learning from Colombia

“It was a little bit of a struggle to transition from the shooting wars and focus on human rights. I think we still struggle with that today a little bit because it’s so much less visible.” (Kathleen McTigue, interview with author February 21, 2021).

In 2012, four months before the Colombian government and FARC agreed to enter peace talks and after a six-year chill, the U.S. and Colombia began to enforce a free trade agreement. As Colombia weathered scandal after scandal and strove to survive intensified violence, neoliberal policies Colombian activists previously contested sidled into the nation. The “shock” of the unremitting State and para-state violence delimited organized action against increasing neoliberalization and allowed neoliberal policies including foreign direct investment to continue unabated. Between 2000 and 2016 U.S. foreign direct investment increased from \$202.5 million to over \$2 billion. Companies benefitted from the violence and uncertainty generated from the militarized tactics of Plan Colombia— seizing land from which rural communities would flee (Banco de la Republica n.d.).

In November 2016 I stood in a small hotel in Riohacha waiting my turn to check-in while a TV in the background detailed that congress had ratified the Peace Accords after a failed public plebiscite in October. The Colombian government swiftly capitalized on the accords declaring the country “open for business”. This economic thrust continued to cater to corporate interests over community concerns, fomenting physical and economic precarity by those most impacted by the conflict: Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and campesino communities. On this same delegation in 2016, we were meeting with communities in the North who had been particularly impacted by the conflict. Throughout the delegation, at every community meeting we asked one repetitive question “what are your thoughts on the peace accords?” We were met with the same answer time after time easily summed up by one campesinos response “The peace accords are good. But they are just the first step”. Even as the accords were signed and the media flaunted peace internationally, neither the FARC nor the government addressed the root cause of violence, capitalism. Unlike the narrative circulated in the international media that the accords meant peace had arrived at last,

delegates quickly learned that peace was still waiting and would not arrive under the current neoliberal model.

Without rampant militarization and overt conflict, confronting U.S. imperialism became murkier. Under these circumstances “in which struggle is less clear cut, where collective action aimed at large-scale social transformation seems not to be present, and where power operates in more subtle ways than the blatant physical oppression” ‘doing solidarity’ shifted (Binford 2008:180). This section examines how, in trying to redevelop the framework of U.S. solidarity, my interlocutors drew knowledge and inspiration from those they met in Colombia. Feeling limited by impacts of congressional advocacy, my interlocutors wanted to reimagine what activism looked like if it moved away from technocratic interventions and towards anti-capitalist modes of sociability. When reflecting on their experiences, U.S. activists highlighted how moved they had felt by the communal ideals so central to their Colombian peers. In the United States activists were primed by human rights discourse to call out what they are against. No war! No funding! No intervention! But developing a broad-based project for what they were for was more difficult. Compared to the U.S., the increased democratic participation and communal involvement in Colombia sparked my interlocutor’s imagination for alternative forms of activism that did not rely so heavily on communicative tools.

While the imposition of neoliberal tinged “democracy” in Latin America relied on increasing regimes of securitization using police and the military to criminalize dissent (Paley 2023), local level Democratic practices, such as community meetings, discussion, and broad participation continued (even if in a muted form⁶). U.S. activists who lived and worked with various organizations or communities across the Americas were able to witness processes of democracy that were new and enlightening and informed their ideas of solidarity⁷. When I traveled with activists on U.S. delegations, I was able to witness the democratic processes of local communities as well as U.S. travelers’ reactions to them. For example, on every delegation to Colombia I attended, U.S. travelers would meet with at least one Indigenous or Afro-Colombian community and observe either community training on how to advocate to the government to address local concerns or a meeting in which people from surrounding communities would share their experiences and current concerns. For example, in 2017, after a bumpy bus ride and muddy trek, a group of delegates met at the Afro-Colombian community La Esperanza, a small rural hamlet in the Valle del Cauca department of Colombia. The local NGO Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz (JyP) were our guides. Under a small wooden roof we met with the Community Council of

⁶ In Colombia for example local level community councils remained despite ongoing violent repression. Councils are imperfect, sometimes infiltrated, and constantly under construction, but also provide training in basic democratic procedures similar in some ways to the voluntary associations found earlier in the US. (Lobo and Alejandra Vález 2022).

⁷ One of the reasons democratic practices were able to survive was because of the concomitant rise of multiculturalism which permitted a diminished rights-based approach to engaging with the State. Neoliberal multiculturalism was the simultaneous imposition of neoliberal economics and the governmental recognition of ethnic differences and distinct cultural rights. Combined, these political and socio-economic shifts informed how social movements within Latin America, and Colombia organized and sought change (Sawyer 2001, Hale 2002; Kohl and Farthing 2006, de la Cadena 2015).

La Esperanza. Displaced from their own territory under threat of violence, they too had returned just today under the theoretical guise of international protection. After a brief presentation to the delegates, the meeting transformed into a meeting of the council and JyP who advised the council on the next potential legal steps they could take to counter the incursion of outsiders and council members debated the options. As this proceeded, we casually worked our way through small cups of juice, both learning about the plight of the community and witnessing democratic action. The interaction with JyP illustrated the necessity for this community to have and navigate bureaucratic and legal procedures to make basic claims to their land. The knowledge of local and national governance required for them to stay on their land was far greater than that required of an average U.S. citizen who sits fully housed.

This instance at La Esperanza was one of many that delegates witnessed along the two-week trip. Each community or organization had its own unique process, leaders, and tensions that we were there for far too short a time to detect. And yet, some trends, beyond the sticky plastic chairs and tiny tinto cups also arose. First, a relatively large number of people from community representatives, children, and others interested would attend. Processes of discussion were often slow and included all who wished to speak. If debates or disagreements arose, they were not avoided but discussed. As such, travelers witnessed attempts at more inclusive participatory democracy. U.S. travelers often referred to processes of “community” to reference the democratic processes they witnessed. For example, one Latine activist, Evan King, who had been living and working in Colombia for over two years at the time of our interview said that, though he’d initially been surprised about the impact of U.S. policies, what he’d learned went deeper than that:

“what I was surprised by more was how solidarity and community was being enacted in Colombia. How people and human relations were centered over profit. It felt freeing and liberating like it was always the way people should live, but they are unable to because they were hobbled by society, capitalism and social expectations.... I haven’t used the word solidarity before this time ... but came to understand what it really meant” (Evan King Interview with Author January 18, 2021).

He went on to note that being a part of a horizontal model in the organization he worked for and witnessing it in Colombia had changed what he thought was possible. Finally, he noted that living in Colombia:

“...showed me what an expanded moral consciousness looked like- including everyone and everything. Meeting with communities in Colombia highlights how shrunken our [folks in the US] moral consciousness is, to include just me. An expanded consciousness includes fellow humans, rivers, natures, and birds” (Evan King Interview with Author January 18, 2021).

What he had learned, then, was a mode of human sociability and relatability that prefaced inclusivity of people’s humanity and even nature over profit- a mode of multi-species accountability. Moreover, he noted that this level of connectivity was

built through horizontal relationships, processes akin to participatory democracy or comradeship. His perception was influenced by those he worked with in Colombia.

Another activist, Emily Rhyne, worked in Guatemala for two years, traveled on two delegations to Colombia, and now organizes in the Southern United States. She mentions an expanded sense of connectivity to others but is more focused on her own inclusion into this community, particularly people who are working toward building alternative futures: “I feel incredibly honored to be included in the community of these powerful people...being able to be in a community with people who are my real-life heroes...being able to feel in service, that my existence serves some sort of purpose” (Interview with Author February 19, 2021). Processes of connection and inclusivity were frequently mentioned throughout my interviews following the above trends. In highlighting how communal connectivity resonated with them, Evan and Emily were inherently indicating what they felt was lacking in the U.S.— broader community connection and participation in decision making and problem solving, or comradeship. They were inspired by witnessing democratic processes that were absent in extant U.S. politics and organizing tactics.

Delegations were also organized under new themes that mirrored a shift to imagining potential alternatives and highlighting local resistance. Though the delegations themselves still taught on the harms of U.S. policy, they also strove to interweave local actions combatting them. For example, in 2018 Alliance for Global justice coordinated a delegation in support of the first presidential election, and one in 2024 focused on “building solidarity with the working people of Colombia” (email communication). Witness for Peace hosted a 2020 (pre-Covid) delegation entitled “Confronting Climate Change and Building Peace: Environmental Justice in Colombia” and in 2024 recruited for a delegation highlighting “Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in Northern Cauca and their resistance against militarism and resource extraction” (e-mail communication). Colombians were reframed as more active agents of change and resistance and delegations emphasized learning from our neighbors in the South.

In Colombia, while trying to rebuild following the Peace Accords, activists and communities sought reparations through transitional justice mechanisms and legal recourse. However, communities also worked through more traditional autonomous practices that were particularly established in Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. U.S. activists’ distrust of the State mirrored some Colombian activists and communities who following the 1991 constitution were theoretically guaranteed access to more rights and political power, but found the willy nilly implementation, bureaucratic morass, and their inability to withstand illegal violent actors structured perfectly to continue to delimit access. Much resistance in Colombia was metabolized through “inclusion and the deepening expansion of colonial-capitalist relations” (Dest 2025, p. 7). U.S. activists echoed similar frustrations when choosing to eschew congressional advocacy for attempts to build more grassroots initiatives. After feeling frustrated with mechanisms of governmental recourse during the fight against Plan Colombia, my interlocutors were similarly galvanized by activists’ recognition that political struggle occurred beyond voting or the professionalized sphere of human rights, but through community forums, debate, discussion, protests, and autonomous actions.

Though activists did not necessarily word their inspiration in these terms, they highlighted the influence of Latin American movements. For example, when I asked about how to learn how to act in solidarity, Jerry, mentioned the importance of having “role models of action” for how to build change and noted that such role models he noted are found in the solidarity “community” with activists across the Americas (E-mail communication with author 2020). Others, like the activist previously mentioned above, noted the models of community processes and communal action they witnessed in places across Latin America, from communal organizing against extractive projects in Honduras to the role of *encuentros* in Colombia.

Similarly, while reflecting on his own work as an activist scholar, Anthony Dest noted “Meeting Francia [Marquez] and other members of PCN [Proceso de Comunidades Negras] offered me the opportunity to apply myself more purposefully, particularly as my own political commitments became clearer and I grew more critical of WOLA’s approach to Human Rights Advocacy....I remember being struck by how the concept of autonomy was at the core of so many of our conversations” (2025, ix).

For these activists who had been in the struggle for years, their personal interactions with Colombians were foundational to their own understanding of solidarity. These interactions illustrated modes of socialization and struggle beyond allyship and communicative capitalism and sparked in some U.S. activists the desire to be in comradeship. They also illustrated the importance of delegations and accompaniment in training activists beyond practices of communicative capitalism.

Ongoing references to the importance of connections and community reflect a broader dissatisfaction with neoliberal informed organizing techniques and desires to move beyond allyship. Notably, not one of my interviewees said that solidarity was “calling a congressperson or signing a petition”. Nor did they see solidarity as being a member, worker, or volunteer of a specific organization. Rather, U.S. activists denoted relational connections and processes of engagement between activists in the U.S. and Latin America and among activists in the US as more akin to solidarity than State-based advocacy actions. Evan, for example, argues, “Solidarity sees the potential that is restricted by outside forces. It has a political analysis and strives for horizontality.” (Evan King Interview with Author January 18, 2021). Evan discursively indexes an idea of solidarity closer to comradeship—a political relationship that is not limited by the dominant socio-economic structure but that works (through horizontality or accountability) to challenge system limits.

Emily pushes this analysis one step further: “Solidarity is about reimagining” (Emily Rhyne, Interview with Author February 19, 2021). Here, she unknowingly echoes Dean’s theorization that the problem stifling the left is not democracy, but an inability to think beyond the limitations of communicative democracy. For Emily then, reimagining what the world could look like without structures of violence and the types of efforts needed to create this was foundational for solidarity or, similar to Evan, a relationship that is not limited by historical conditions, but that pushes against them.

Indeed in 2024, after hosting Daira Quiñones, prominent Afro-Colombian activist or “guía”, guide as she prefers to be called, we engaged in yet another conversation about imagining. After enjoying a relaxed lunch with Daira and her band at the house of Gail Phares, Daira called Emily, Gail, and I went into a room together to discuss the

current state of solidarity organizing and Witness for Peace, the primary organization through which we had become connected to Daira. After years of internal tensions, the organization had recently decided to close its Colombia program. The conversation circulated around the fact that “something has to be done”. Emily noted that the local chapter of Witness Peace Southeast would continue to exist and be rebuilt. Gail mentioned the difficulties in gaining public momentum and a “hook” through the complexities of neoliberalism. I mostly listened and wondered— what could be done? We didn’t make any decisions but agreed to continue discussing the issue.

Our conversation highlighted the double bind of communicative capitalism: “finance- and consumption-driven entertainment culture produce the setting of democratic governance today. Changing the system—organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism—seems to entail strengthening the system. How else can one get a message across? Doesn’t it require.... increasing awareness?” (Dean 2019a, b, p. 24). We needed to create and advocate for more democratic international interactions with Colombia, encouraged by our Colombian comrade Daira to figure out how to do so—but we weren’t sure how to reach people locally in the U.S. or even through what practices our transnational relationships with Colombians might take shape. Indeed, my interlocutors frequently mentioned the importance of raising awareness as a first step to building a movement. But, even if we were to find a “hook”, would it not just be feeding back into the communicative abyss, overflowing with miniscule antagonisms but lacking a unified cultural whole? At issue, then was as Emily noted, reimagining. Unspoken but known, was the need to think beyond this current system. But here, the conversation paused. We could not reimagine in just one afternoon, or as just four people.

US activists’ discussions and reflections on their interactions with Colombians show their desire to relearn and re-engage democratic processes and deeper political relations of comradeship to which they may have had limited exposure in the U.S. political culture of neoliberalism and diminished democracy. Moreover, it illustrates their drive to experiment with new forms of struggle. While they continued to face ongoing limitations, as discussed in the next section, my interlocutors were still engaging in the slow practices crucial for emerging from communicative capitalism—reimagining, transnational knowledge sharing, and experimentation with alternatives.

Nevertheless, comradeship is not built through desire alone but through sustained practice. My interlocutors faced a variety of struggles translating their desire for comradeship into practice. The limited number of involved activists combined with the obstacles in framing campaigns against neoliberalism limited U.S. activists’ ability to build a true movement centering comradeship, as I will discuss in the next section.

Democratic desires within neoliberal limitations: struggling to emerge from neoliberal constraints

What does solidarity-comradeship- against these systems and for La Esperanza look like? While activists learned from and were inspired by those in Colombia, not all the tactics transferred over into the geographically dispersed realities of transnational solidarity organizing. A deeper web of accountability, action, and community is eas-

ier to foster in person. Plan Colombia provided activists with a more concretized target—even if some appeals fell into the communicative capitalist abyss. Moving beyond advocacy surrounding Plan Colombia required that activists have a similarly concrete political project they were constructing together. Comradeship requires a joint recognition of a political goal or truth that can then be embodied and created through practice (Dean 2019a, b). Without the immediacy of a targeted policy, U.S. activists had to widen their framing and justification for activism. As discussed in the following section, the murky intangibility of a transnational political project intensified by distance and engrained practices of allyship limited broader community building and militancy.

In his historical account of US Latin American solidarity, Striffler (2019) described current-day tactics as reactive, fragmented, and incohesive. However, internally activists are grappling with how to move beyond reactive and exclusive tactics to re-embrace more democratic practices to eschew allyship for comradeship. This section discusses why, despite their *desires* and attempts to build comradeship, from the outside U.S. activists' tactics can still look like and fall into the trap of allyship. While compelled to build an impactful anti-imperial social movement, U.S. activists still struggle with small overall numbers and a lack of communal connection, individualistic reactive actions, and the unintentional exclusion of activists in Latin America. These issues are a symptom of an overarching problem—a frequent inability to name US empire or capitalism as the root cause of harm and the lack of a coherent alternative political project activists are building towards.

The small number of ongoing engaged U.S. activists delimits their capacity to on-board or support the development of new activists. As such, there is not an “easy” or low-lift entryway to ease new people’s transition to activism. This is further compounded by the transnational nature of solidarity work. Following delegations and online events, often those who attended did not return home to a hub of local activism or engaged individuals with whom they could develop personal connections and learn how to effectively advocate for change. For example, in online and in-person events, organizers often gave time and space to various community crafting exercises. At the 2021 SOA Watch vigil-conducted virtually due to COVID- presenters read poetry, offered breathing exercises, and played music. These activities had an affective impact generating some collective effervescence and motivation. However, following the end of the zoom, it was difficult to maintain the interpersonal connections between attendees or find additional way to get involved. At many online (and even in-person) events after introducing people to new information and perhaps suggesting a petition to sign, organizers would hand off the responsibility for continued political engagement to those who participated. A collective experience then became an individual’s responsibility to carry forward. Moreover, the available options for engagement – signing a petition, calling congresspeople, hosting another event etc—lent themselves to an activism of allyship that was not reliant ongoing connections with Colombians and often generated more sound bites to echo around the over-news sphere of communicative capitalism.

A few activists I interviewed explicitly noted this reality when I asked if they felt a part of a U.S. solidarity “community”. Kathy, an activist involved for about a decade, replied, “I have to actively seek out opportunities to be involved, and at times it can

be quite difficult” (Interview with Author 2021). The rich interpersonal connections and web of support that everyone desires and references is not present for everyone. The lack of accountability for activists in the U.S. and Colombia can delimit the creation of discipline needed to create a broader social movement. Sometimes, people need to be told what to do or presented with a direct ask (Dean 2019a, b; McAlevey 2016). However, the normalization of allyship presupposes and often demands that individuals figure out how to act independently.

Spatiality also further complicates the ability to develop community accountability and discipline within transnational solidarity activism. As activists are located across the Americas, there is no collective physical space where people can meet, continue conversations, and connect after zoom calls. It is much more difficult to foster a community and democratic connection with people who rarely, if ever, meet in person.

Exclusion is also a common frustration of Latin American activists. For example, the coordination of petition writing, event planning, or dissemination of educational information takes place between U.S. activists. There is a greater focus on processes of collaboration among those within the U.S. (particularly those working within non-profit organizations) and not those across borders. Failures in communication between U.S. and Latin American activists can create discrepancies between calls for action issued by activists in Latin America and the practices of activists in the U.S. (Gill 2009). In 2013 while meeting with community members from a small ocean side community of San Jose in Buenaventura a community member inflamed by broken promises gave an angry monologue highlighting this weakness of solidarity. At one point he said: “What are you going to do? People keep coming here and saying that they will help, but they don’t. What are you going to do?” (2013). His community was being threatened with displacement due to large corporation condo constructions that wanted their land to support their tourist industry. What could we do? We weren’t sure. What did we do? We wrote a report, op-eds, and called congresspeople in the U.S.. A year later the corporation displaced the community.

I am not sure if any of our writing or efforts made it back to this man’s ears. I doubt it. He perhaps had an overinflated presumption of our power and we had a diminished perception-delimiting ourselves to one off publications rather than organized action. Our solidarity focused more on who we were communicating to in our own Northern U.S. circles, rather than a robust connectivity with comrades in Colombia—it fell plainly into the trap of communicative capitalism. Deepening our connections with those who we say we are in solidarity with might not have changed the outcome, but perhaps it could have tempered the extinguishing of hope, led to more incremental collaborations, and created long-term engagement. Indeed, when recounting solidarity activism in Haiti, Mark Schuller noted that one of his interlocutors said that “... while we tell our international comrades everything we do, we still aren’t very well informed about what they do and what happens in Washington” (2023, 602).

At the same time, on every solidarity delegation I attended when a U.S. traveler asked either community members or activists (which happened on all eight trips) what they could do to be “in solidarity”, the response was commonly “get your own country in line”, as shown in my opening vignette. U.S. activists’ references to and desire for Latin American models of inclusive communal processes or participatory

democracy, reflected calls for a new and more effective models of organizing in their own lives and broader shifts in U.S. activist culture as well.

For those who did begin to engage in consistent ongoing struggle, many did so through organizations or campaigns that focused on local U.S. issues, such as immigration. While activism surrounding U.S. immigration often mentions the “roots of migration” with nods to U.S. imperialism, the general thrust of campaigns still focus on national U.S. policies rather than foreign affairs. It was rare to find campaigns or organizations that focus on advocating for both national and international shifts, making links between U.S. imperialism abroad and its localized manifestations. Nevertheless, activists turn to focus inward on U.S. policies, did heed Colombian comrades’ calls to “get your own country in line” and were examples of them trying to overcome actions of allyship for engaging in long-term movement struggle. For example, Isaac, who was raised in a working-class immigrant household in California directly contested the idea that “solidarity is just educating others” (Interview with Author March 8, 2021). Instead, he provided a more nuanced answer to my question noting that “solidarity depends on where you are, but education isn’t enough because people don’t care. Sometimes it is putting your body on the line, voting, or even finances”. In his own activist trajectory, he has been involved in organized blockades against ICE officials trying to arrest and deport immigrants.

Similarly, when I asked another interlocutor, who had been an active accompanier in Colombia over the past decade, how he was currently framing solidarity with Colombia, he responded with a focus on influencing U.S. politics.

“Over here it’s a 24/7 task to contend with the current assault on immigrants, communities, and the rule of law. On a daily basis, including today, we’ll receive a dozen or more reports of the migra having taken working class people - besides nationality and ethnicity, the onslaught has a distinct class component - and try to connect those taken and their families with attorneys and material support. Nearly always I’m one of those answering our hotline. *Though I keep an eye on events in Colombia, in the current context the best we can do, I think, is to try to limit the damage done by the U.S. regime, because that’s a full-time task.*” (emphasis added, E-mail communication 2025).

These types of actions inherently require more intensive group training and communication to prepare for and execute (even if reacting to an urgent situation). His example illustrates a more organized (less atomized) and physical solidarity that engenders accountability and that is possible when living or working with those you are doing solidarity with. However, distance, time, and language barriers can delimit such physical possibilities for other contexts.

The multitude of layered relationships that U.S. activists need to maintain is complicated both by limited time, urgency, and the normalization of internalized neoliberal rationality that can emphasize individual action and limit activists’ practice with democratic processes. However, many activists in my study were not unaware of these issues, possessed a desire to move past them and were frequently engaging in conversations with one another about how to make changes.

This does not begin to answer a myriad of complicating questions that impact transnational solidarity, but it does indicate that below the visible reactive, individualized and sometimes exclusive actions of U.S.-Latin American solidarity, there are deeper efforts and desires to build democratic processes to overcome these weaknesses.

Conclusion

It has been nine years since Maria pushed our delegation of activists in Colombia to consider how Trump was elected and what we were going to do about it. During those nine years mass global protests against neoliberalism took place in 2019, COVID-19 struck and caused societal reflections on communal responsibilities, and Trump was elected to office once more. Latin America has come in and out of focus as immigration debates rise and fall and Palestinian liberation has taken central stage. Rather than paint U.S. Latin American solidarity activists as beholden to history, an oversimplified monolith of neoliberalism, or the drying up of democratic practices, I hope to illustrate instead how activists are working to emerge from the morass of a neoliberal era. In many ways, my interlocutors exemplify this, struggling against and within themselves to birth and normalize new tactics and grow capacities for self-governance. Attempts could lie fallow or be fully embraced. These tensions illustrate solidarity as a process, as conflict, and as a mode of relearning and perhaps remaking democracy.

Even though my interlocutors were still hamstrung by the tensions inherent in transnational organizing, their struggles to build beyond allyship should not be cast off as a failure. Rather, seen as "...knowledge- in-struggle [Whose] survival and development is always contested and in process of formation" (Barker and Cox 2002, 11). This knowledge is critical as we continue to weather and resist the current administration.

In 2020 when speaking with a decades-long activist he emphasized how power had been laid bare in the United States following COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement. "Well, with what's happening right now, there is more room for people to become more radicalized.Power relations are being exposed in ways that they haven't been before" (Interview with author 2020). He found the shift encouraging for building a larger anti-imperial State-side movement. For my interlocutors, a focus on immigration advocacy and ICE watch is not the only way they have continued to work "get their own country in line". Others, engage in other state-side organizations, such as Democratic Socialists of America, continue direct congressional advocacy, and focus on local neighborhood community building through art, theatre, and supporting networks of mutual aid. Their own passion and political consciousness has compelled them to continue to seek out opportunities to confront U.S. imperialism at home and abroad. However, for those who are just finding their political awareness, without an already established structure of ongoing actions to plug into, anchored in a unified transnational political project, people struggle to find ways to act on their newfound political consciousness.

Yet, with ICE raids intensifying in the US and rising tensions with foreign leaders across Latin America, the co-construction of the U.S. empire at home and abroad is

exceptionally clear. These moments of political unrest offer social movements increasing opportunities to advance ideas and practices of democracy and take only a proportionally small part of the population, 3.5%, to initiate significant change (Chenoweth & Stephan 2012, della porta 2020). The affective pull residents across the U.S. are feeling as they are inundated with constant footage of ICE violence, the Gaza genocide, and whatever absurd hourly new story abounds offers a fruitful juncture for U.S. activists to organize enraged onlookers into militant comrades committed to a daily practice of action. The budding ICE self-defense networks and the reemergence of the Black Panther Party reflect this potential. Reflecting on the swift mobilization in Minneapolis following ICE agent Jonathan Ross's murder of Renee Good, Harsha Walia via instagram argued that the pre-built localized infrastructure, in-person organizing, and the central focus of the neighborhood and responsibility for one's neighbor in Minneapolis culture has allowed for such a successful turn-out. In many ways she referenced what my interlocutors desired and admired from their experiences in Colombia—communal infrastructure reliant on basic participatory democracy and a culture of accountability and care. Perhaps the Minneapolis response is indicative of these desires more broadly across the U.S., and more importantly, the potential of them being fulfilled.

Funding This study was partially funded by grants from the Tinker Foundation and Vanderbilt Department of Anthropology's Professional Development and Summer Research grants.

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