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Transformative Ties:
Gendered Violence, Forms of Recovery, and Shifting Subjectivities in Chile

Although a significant body of scholarship on trauma has emerged in medical anthropology, there has been little examination of how gendered expectations shape the aftermath of extreme human experience, forms of recovery, and subjectivity. Here, I show how domestic and other forms of violence have shaped Luz's suffering in the dictatorial (1973–90) and officially democratic (1990–present) eras in Chile. I then elucidate how Luz's engagement with Safe Space, an NGO connected to UN violence against women frameworks, and other globally connected women's groups, have allowed her to generate transformative ties with other women. These relationships provide support for Luz's self-defined project of transforming herself and society, largely in relationship to gendered expectations, so that her recovered sense of self will have more of a home in the world, outside the boundaries of narrowly defined gender roles. This analysis is based on ethnographic research in Santiago, Chile, over 19 months in 2000–04 and 2009, including participant-observation at two domestic violence centers and life history interviews with 18 women who sought help there.

Keywords: [domestic violence, gender, trauma, subjectivity, recovery]

Individual lives are defined by context, but they are also generative of new contexts.

—Veena Das, "The Act of Witnessing," 2000

Imagination is the only faculty that we have that lets us see beyond the horizon of convention.

—Laurence Kirmayer, "Failures of Imagination," 2007

I try not to look at it from the role of the victim . . . or of a poor woman . . . I don't accept that. . . . Imagine if you told someone, "I interviewed a woman who survived, lived 24 years with a man, and in the end what happened, poor woman." But no, it was one fact in my life. It's like I have isolated it and left it behind. Of course it marked my life. It has done a lot of harm. A

lot of things happened that shouldn't have. But, basically I have recovered who I am.

Here, they have marches against femicide, and you know what they do? Some women from the organizations, they go and paint themselves with fake bruises and put on bandages. I don't think that's the way to do it. Why don't they show histories of women who have overcome the life of violence, and who have brought their children up, and have been able to work, and have achieved a regular life, without the necessity of having an abusive man?

—Luz, 2009

Introductions

I first met Luz in 2003, through Safe Space, a women's rights NGO in Santiago, Chile, dedicated to working against domestic violence. Luz and I were both attending a fund-raiser for a group of young women to travel to the World Social Forum meeting in Brazil. The festive event included tarot card reading, yoga, and various workshops. It was held at the Women's Place, a grassroots organization where Luz worked and volunteered. Luz was around 45 years old at the time, with three children in their late teens and early twenties. She is economically lower-middle class, although she grew up in poverty, and since 2006 she has worked at a governmental organization dedicated to women's development. My friend at Safe Space introduced us because of the possibility that I might talk with Luz about her experiences of domestic violence, including her husband's attempted murder of her some months before, her experiences of help seeking, and her forms of recovery. Luz had also experienced violent ruptures in her social and family networks during the dictatorship era, which interested me.

When we met in 2009, seven years after she had almost died when her husband tried to kill her, Luz explained to me that she was now engaged in a process that she termed *sanación* [healing].[1] She described sanación as her central life project, characterized by her engagement in activities that contribute to her reclaiming of herself and the remaking of the meaning in her life. She feels that the various forms of gendered violence she experienced throughout her lifetime "poisoned" her own way of thinking and infected her interactions with other people. Here, I borrow from Das's phrase "poisonous knowledge," which signifies how extraordinary violence and disruption become folded into ordinary, everyday life (Das 2000). That violence, once lived, to some extent poisons experience and is always part of oneself and the social fabric. Luz explained to me that to heal, she has been engaged in an excavation of herself, to find the roots of the violence and to try to modify them. This reworking of what she perceives to have been a lifetime of gender-based violence and suffering is deeply intersubjective and embedded within the cultural, political economic, and social contexts she inhabits.

As a group, women in Chile, and across the globe, constitute a population specifically vulnerable to sexual assault, domestic violence, and other forms of violence by male intimates, and to the psychological distress and physical health problems that often accompany such abuse (Campbell 2001; Desjarlais et al. 1995; Finkler 1997; Murthy 2001).[2] In Santiago, the capital of Chile, where one-third of the population of the country's 16 million people reside, 50 percent of women

report having experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (SERNAM 2002). The women's rights movement has made domestic violence a major object of public policy intervention since the end of the dictatorial regime in 1990 (Larraín 1994).

Here, I examine how different forms of violence, as well as various interventions to confront violence and its effects, have shaped Luz's subjective experience of herself, and thereby her processes of and possibilities for recovery (cf. Whyte 2009).[3] The interventions that have proven to be most transformative for Luz are linked to global women's movements for women's equality and social justice. Her subjectivity is linked to kinships of affliction (Rapp 1999) and affinity on these scales. Gender socialization, expectations, practices, and ideologies are fundamental to subjectivity and are constantly in flux, negotiated, and contested (cf. Gutmann 2007; Hodgson 2001). This is central to understanding Luz's sanación.[4] Gendered expectations are socially produced, reproduced, and critiqued in Luz's interactions with family members, friends, and medical and judicial authorities. Recoveries—the forms they take, how they are defined by those who suffer, and what recovery means—are intersubjective. For Luz, this intersubjectivity is both local and global. I use the term *recovery* here carefully, to mean the processes in which people engage to transform some form or forms of damage they have suffered. Such transformations are processes, and the efforts to reconstitute meaning in the face of life-changing events are ongoing (Becker 1994; Luborsky 1994). For Luz, the transformation of gender roles is central to her sense of recovering herself, beyond the acceptable gender role position as a "victim" of domestic violence (cf. Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

In this article, I have chosen to focus the analysis on Luz, with some reference to Mariana. This approach allows me to engage in a deep analysis of one woman's life-history narrative, as told to me in 2003–04 and 2009, and to examine how her engagement with Safe Space, global women's rights frameworks, and other women's groups have influenced her shifting subjectivity and her self-defined processes of "recovery" in a context of ongoing gender inequality. In this analysis of Luz's narrative, I depend on the reader to avoid a "failure of imagination" in dealing with the hard facts of her life (Kirmayer 2007).[5]

Methods and Research Contexts

I conducted ethnographic research in Santiago, Chile, during three months in 2000 and 2001, 15 months in 2002–03, and one month in 2009 (Parson 2005). My central concern has been to trace the relationships among shifting state formations, from dictatorship (1973–90) to official democracy (1990–present), and women's experiences of trauma, help seeking, processes of recovery, and the meanings of these processes, related to domestic violence. As Biehl and colleagues (2007:15) suggest, "through ethnographic study of subjectivity we attempt to explore what matters most in people's lives in the making and unmaking of meaning." I built collaborative research relationships, important for ethical research on domestic violence, with two centers for women who suffer such violence: Family Care, municipality run, and Safe Space, an NGO. In this article, I focus specifically on Safe Space, because Luz's help seeking and experiences of recovery were contextualized, in large part, by the women's rights frameworks she acquired and the social networks she forged

Table 1.   Experiences of Women Interviewed in This Project

Types of Violence Reported ($n = 18$)	
Physical Violence	15
Economic Violence	10
Psychological Violence	18
Sexual Violence	6
All Violence	3
Health Problems Reportedly Related to Domestic Violence ($n = 18$)	
Physical Health Problems	11
Depression	18
Anxiety	18
Court Case in Justice System	7

there. These two centers comprised my key ethnographic field sites, and I was able to achieve entry to interview women who had experienced domestic violence through these centers. The Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects approved the protocol. I read consent forms aloud to each participant in case reading comprehension was poor and emphasized that participants were free to leave at any time.

I conducted semistructured interviews with staff members from Family Care and Safe Space, to document the nature of their work and perspectives on the situations of the women with whom they work. I conducted a series of group interviews at Family Care with women who had experienced domestic violence and had participated in group therapy. I conducted participant-observation at Family Care, including attendance at staff meetings, public events, and group therapy sessions. I undertook the majority of my participant-observation activities related to Safe Space at public events, such as rallies, marches, and seminars. I did not observe any of the daily activities of the staff at Safe Space, given that they had ceased offering aid to women who suffered domestic violence shortly prior to the beginning of my study. These activities were pertinent to research interests and to gaining insight into some of the primary goals, theories, and practices of the organization. In addition, attending these events allowed me to form stronger relationships with key staff members, and to incorporate myself into the community both within the organization and related communities. These activities also enabled me to get to know several of the women whom I interviewed, and they provided us with common experiences.

Central to this project, I engaged in multiple, in-depth life history interviews with 18 women who suffered domestic violence and sought help at these centers, who were identified through collaboration with staff members at each center. The women I interviewed were approximately between the ages of 28 and 51 at the time of the interviews. One-half were aged 45 years and over. They all had children, and most were married to their abusers, even if they were not living with them at the time. Table 1 shows the types of intimate violence, the health problems (physical and mental), and the court cases the 18 women in this sample reported to me.

During the interviews, each woman narrated her general life history and the political, historical, and personal context(s) surrounding her experiences of domestic violence, illness, health, help seeking, and recovery. Their narratives include a wide array and great depth of information about their lives, domestic violence,

political involvement, mental and physical health, emotions, material circumstances, children, childhoods, and familial and other relationships. These women described physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence, including tactics of coercive control, which were often daily, naturalized, and normalized aspects of their routine experiences (cf. Stark 2007) and constitute everyday violence for these women (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992). Similary, Jenkins (1996:288) has observed that for Salvadoran refugees in the United States, who fled the chronic political violence or *la violencia* in El Salvador, "the circumstance of extremity [came] to be thought of simply as 'the way things are.'"

My patterns of interaction and interviewing differed depending on each woman's availability and particular desires for how the interview process would progress. I developed friendships with some of these women. With others the relationship remained more structured within the terms of researcher–interviewee, although I attempted to minimize barriers and to highlight the research process as a collaborative endeavor between myself and the women involved in it. I developed a friendship and maintain the strongest ongoing contact with Luz, who is the focus here, and Mariana. Both invited me to participate with them in various events related to women's rights activism, which gave me a more well-rounded understanding of the importance of this in their lives. Through Luz I became involved with some of the activities of the Women's Place (a women's organization). She also invited me to attend meetings of a grassroots women's rights organization, where I met others who were involved in forms of social activism. Luz invited me to go with the group to Villa Grimaldi, the former torture center, where we remembered those tortured and killed by the dictatorship, around the 30th anniversary of the 1973 coup, and especially the gendered torture tactics that women and men suffered. Luz and I frequently discussed topics related to women's rights and democracy in the post dictatorship era. My research relationship with Luz, as with Mariana, is marked by intersubjective engagement; the process changes us both. Scheper-Hughes (1992: 25) speaks of this process as both the transformation of the self and the other— a deeply intersubjective engagement, where both parties have something at stake. She sees it as an ethical imperative of ethnographic work, that "anthropological knowledge may be seen as something produced in human interaction, not merely 'extracted' from naïve informants who are unaware of the hidden agendas coming from the outsider" (Scheper-Hughes 1992:25).

I digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews and took note of important conversations and field experiences relevant to my research interests. I used Atlas-ti (ver. 5) qualitative data analysis software, based on grounded theory, to establish a coding process and map key themes in the interviews as they pertained to research questions, such as help seeking, health issues, and political situations and the meanings they held for the narrators. This allowed me to perceive patterns across women's experiences of domestic violence in social, political, economic, and cultural context (Bernard 1995; Pelto and Pelto 1978).

Gendered Ties That Bind

In juxtaposition to the term *aftermath,* commonly used for victims of extreme events, Gómez-Barris (2009), in her analysis of the ongoing effects of Chilean state violence

on the lives and memories of Chileans, proposes the term *afterlife* as a better way to understand those effects. She notes that, "the afterlife of political violence [is] the continuing and persistent symbolic and material effects of the original event of violence on people's daily lives, their social and psychic identities, and their ongoing wrestling with the past in the present" (Gómez-Barris 2009:6). Although she applies afterlife to the effects of state violence, this term aptly pertains to women who suffer domestic violence, as well. Luz took me through some of the processes of her remembering, in her afterlife, which for her is both the afterlife of state and domestic violence. Luz's remembering in her narrations of her life with me is an agentive act of remaking in the face of destructive physical, psychological, and, in Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) terms, the symbolic violence of gender inequality. This act of remembering and excavating the violence of the past and present is crucial to Luz's self-defined project of sanación.

In her family of origin Luz feels that she suffered immeasurably, and that this suffering was gendered. First, she suffered for having been born a female. She explained:

> My history has many marks of violence. One type of violence that I suffered was when I was in my mother's belly, and my mother wanted to have a son. She didn't want to have a daughter ... That is very difficult *(fuerte)* ... She had an unwanted pregnancy. For my father to accept it, she wanted to have a son, a man, because she already had a daughter ... And she waits the nine months, and I am born ... I think that was a very difficult moment ... That marks the history of a person. You realize, if you start to look, that there is a whole life [of suffering], that I think is the life of all women, in one way or another.

Luz feels that her birth, as a female, made her an unwanted child and led her mother to reject her. Soon after telling me this in our conversation, Luz said, "In this process of sanación, I have been discovering things that are sadder." She remembers having experienced sexual abuse as a child—another instance in which her intimate, family sphere, where the most primary affective ties are supposed to be forged—was the place where she underwent violence. Because she felt estranged from her mother, which she attributes to her mother's rejection of her for being female, she felt she had no one to tell. Another axis of her suffering, also related to her body and her sexuality, was her realization that she was lesbian, which she felt she had to keep secret. "There, too, is damage," she noted.

Luz's adolescent years were also marked heavily by her family's class-based activism during the Unidad Popular, in the years directly prior to the 1973 coup, and the gendered nature of those activities. Luz's early activity in the movement was through her father, who was part of the Communist Party and blacklisted by the government during the 1950s because of his involvement with organizing miners. The restaurant he owned in Santiago was a meeting point for left-wing activists, and Luz remembers that President Salvador Allende, who died in the 1973 coup, had been there once for a meeting. She remembers this time fondly. Her father's activism for class equality, however, did not translate into commensurate attitudes about gender equality. Luz told me that he did not want her to study to be an

electronic technician, which he said "was not for women," and then placed her in a school for girls where she would study gender-"appropriate" subjects.

In addition to her father's rigid gender ideologies, in her processes of *sanación* Luz has begun to name some aspects of her father's treatment of her mother as violence. "My father wasn't a man who hit, or anything like that, "Luz told me in 2009. She explained:

> There wasn't the issue of punishments [*castigos*], or anything. But yes, he, in his relationship with her, was abusive. Because he controlled the money. He thought she didn't know how to manage the money. I remember that he told her that she didn't understand. *He didn't let her develop herself as a person.* He always saw her as a disadvantaged person ... That's also abuse. [Luz 2009, emphasis added]

This aspect of Luz's narrative resonates directly with Mariana's, when she told me how the constant abuse "affects one's health because psychologically one sees that one is affected because one realizes that *she can't develop herself as a person.*" This squelching of personhood through everyday abuses and "routinized misery" (Kleinman et al. 1997: xiii) is a key aspect of both suffering and agency. The suffering aspect of these experiences is self-evident, but there is also agency in the struggle to maintain a sense of self in the face of the erasure of that self caused by intimate abuse. Luz's analysis here, looking back on her family life, allows her to critique the gendered expectations that she learned as a child—within a discourse that is similar to that of the feminist movement and Safe Space's frameworks, in particular, as I show in a moment. Safe Space and other women's organizations, which are globally oriented, have provided Luz a partial language to engage in this kind of critique of the culturally embedded gender roles that have produced her suffering.

Here, Luz's analysis is similar to what Das (2008: 283) points out, that "violence, far from being an interruption in the ordinary, is folded into the ordinary." In Luz's processes of *sanación*, she is engaged in identifying what has been seen as normal and everyday life for women but is actually abuse. She is bringing it out of invisibility, bringing it to language, and naming it as part of her experience of violence. She practices a form of agency in her critical reflections on and excavations of "the ordinary." In that process, she is naming and thereby reworking the symbolic violence of gender inequality, as Bourdieu and Wacquant call it (1992), that underlies much of social, political, and economic life (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Mariana, too, consistently reminds me that it is necessary to do the work of making domestic violence visible, of naming, to reorder individual lives and social lives.

From Luz's perspective, the state has provided her neither protection from violence nor full citizenship, during and following the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973–90). Pinochet's authoritarian regime consciously intensified gendered ideologies based on women's roles as self-abnegating *(abnegada)* bearers of the responsibility for the reproduction of the nation through child rearing and being "good wives" (cf. Valdés 1987). Luz complained about how the state controlled even the most superficial symbols of femininity and masculinity. For example, women were to wear skirts only, and men could not have long hair. These roles were not new to the dictatorship, however. Women's inequality was written into the core of

the original Chilean Constitution of 1828 (Htun 2003). Gender inequalities have historically been institutionalized in the form of the state and its laws, with all of the power this implies (MacKinnon 1989). Only in recent years have the laws been changing in Chile; for example, in 1998, because of the work of the feminist movement, as well as the government's project to modernize legal structures, women were granted full adult citizenship (Htun 2003). In addition, the first Family Violence Law was instituted in 1994, and a revised version went into effect in 2005. Divorce was legalized in 2004, which in theory represents an improvement for women's ability to leave an abusive relationship without suffering complete economic devastation.

During the early and middle years of the dictatorship, Luz lived in a sector of Santiago close to La Victoria, specifically targeted by the dictatorial regime for its high population of leftist activism. She remembers that this time was filled with fear and insecurity; anyone could be an informant of the dictatorial regime (cf. Green 1999). She recalls this as "a very difficult period when you were incapacitated by everything and totally terrified ... [such an experience] changes your life." She described the ethos; she wanted me to feel it:

> There was a whole machinery of fear, because of the helicopters that were around all day, every night, over the *población*. ... They had a real influence over the población because you always saw soldiers with submachine guns, and they practiced day and night shooting. You always heard the sound of the bullets. Bullets, bullets, always. [Luz 2003]

She also endured violent ruptures in her social networks in the years following the *coup*. She told me: "I lost my circle of friends ... My *compañeros* [comrades or friends], well, almost all of them were exiled, others were disappeared, others prisoners." Much of her family fled Chile for Canada in the late 1970s, when they followed her older sister who was granted exile because she was pursued by the regime for her activism. Luz told me that this "had a great impact ... because it was very important for us the feeling of a big group, a big family." In 2009, Luz offered a gendered explanation for why she had been left behind. She explained that they took her brother, who was 19 years old, because "he was a man, and he represented a support for her [Luz's sister] and the family. And me, as a woman. I was 20. I couldn't go because I was an adult, but I didn't represent any possibility of generating income."

Luz explained that furthermore, during the dictatorship years, there were few possibilities for women to earn income in Chile, other than as domestic workers. She told me: "There was no work that was worth it ... I remember once I worked in a leather factory. And I was there one week. They fired me because ... it was complicated for them to have women. They couldn't have [women] because they had to have the conditions for women, women's bathrooms and everything" [Luz 2009]. At other times, Luz knitted and sold sheets and other small items, but she said she was not very interested in money. Her husband worked and paid the bills. She said, "when he made more money, he felt that he was worth more." A dominant form of masculinity requires that men perform as good providers. Luz expressed that when he enacted the role of provider, he felt more powerful within the home and

in society. It bears noting here that, unfortunately, I have not been able to provide a view into the subjectivity of Luz's abusive husband. Research on abusive men's subjectivity, in local and global context, is sorely lacking, and research that involves both partners in an abusive relationship presents a range of ethical problems to be resolved. In addition, Luz's husband died when he shot himself after attempting to murder Luz.

As for her embodiment of dominant female gender roles, Luz felt that "I ended up converting myself into his mother. . . . He was like another son for me." There is a common saying in Chile, that on marriage a woman becomes like her husband's mother. Women in a group interview at Family Care in 2003 as well as an upper-middle-class social acquaintance told me that this is popular wisdom. This aspect of Luz's relationship with her husband existed in juxtaposition to him being, as she told me, "a very *machista* man who was the boss of the situation, and he gave orders. He always told me, 'Look, I am the one who gives the orders. . . . I am the one who says if we are going to eat [at a certain hour] or not.'" Luz, however, portrayed herself as having, even in the face of violence, a strong rebellious streak: "I have a trajectory of rebellion against the system" [Luz 2003]. Although she suffered grave abuse, she stood up to her husband on many issues related to the raising of the children and running of the house. Luz's family history of activism appears to have contributed to her development of a critical perspective on gendered hierarchies. Left without her networks of friends and family, as a result of the dictatorship's violence, Luz married and gave birth to her own children, in part to fill this void, in combination with her project to fulfill the dominant gender roles of being a mother in order to repress her homosexuality. She told me, "I was fulfilling a role. I wasn't living."

In Luz's narrative, it is clear that she faced the violence of gendered expectations based on inequality at every turn. She described to me how her mother-in-law consistently intervened on behalf of her son's right to male dominance. As Hodgson (1995: 121) notes, it is often in the interest of women to uphold the patriarchal order of things. Luz told me:

> My mother-in-law came to visit us on Sundays, and she told me to serve him first. You have to serve him. . . . She told me that he deserved the best. He is the boss of the house *(dueño de casa)*, the man who brings in the money. And then, whenever I had an opinion, she told me, "Shut your mouth, don't talk," that I shouldn't talk or give an opinion. [Luz 2009]

Luz's mother-in-law upheld the dominant gender role of men as providers and as the authoritarian heads of households. Her mother-in-law's rigid upholding of gendered ideologies was not just directed at Luz. Luz remembers that "when my daughter started university, she asked her, 'But why are you going to study? You should get married.' And we're talking about the year 2000 . . . It's very cultural. It's very deep. *To change this you have to be in a constant fight*" [Luz 2009, emphasis added]. Luz points here to how, "To change this you have to be in a constant fight," a reference to her constant project to maintain her personhood and to create a new order based on gender equality within family and social systems.

Ties That Bind: Gendered Interventions

These masculine and feminine gender roles that Luz learned in her family of origin and then experienced in her married life were upheld by medical and judicial professionals from whom Luz sought help for the domestic violence she experienced and its effects. Luz was active in seeking help for the general malaise she suffered, both during and following the official dictatorship era. She sought help from medical professionals and from the judicial system, and in both cases she felt she gained nothing. The medical professionals, in particular, contributed to her acceptance of the abuse. Luz described to me how the medications they prescribed for her helped her continue in the relationship. She told me: "I went to a lot of places, you see, to ask for help. I went to a lot of places, and they always talked to me about how I had to worry about my family, how important my family was for me, my children, that I had to be happier. But they didn't ask me why I wasn't happy."

Luz described the painful effects of the "treatments" they offered her: "They gave me pills to relax, other pills to sleep … It is terrible, this medication thing, because do you know that I feel that it was a way not to suffer, not to feel … [My husband] would leave on a Friday until Monday, and I had no problem [with it] because with my pills, I felt great." Han (2004) has also noted the phenomenon in Santiago of medicating distress produced by domestic violence, poverty, debt, and the shifting discursive landscape of the postdictatorship era. Luz also took pills for her various aches and pains, which her doctors attributed to stress, including headaches, upset stomach, irritable colon, backaches, and shoulder aches.

Although she had good health care through her husband's job, none of the various specialist doctors she went to see ever asked her what might have been causing such severe stress and stress reactions and generally individualized her problems and attributed them, as she expressed it, to "[my] character, my way of being … that I didn't trust, that I didn't give myself to relationships." In another instance, a doctor told her she was experiencing premenstrual syndrome, and another suggested that she go out and buy herself something pretty to feel better. Luz's distress here is clearly linked to gendered expectations, promoted by powerful professionals. Her interactions with health care providers who embodied the authoritative knowledge of biomedicine, and the power to define "truth" that often accompanies such knowledge, were key instances in which these gendered expectations of the self were made manifest and contributed to her entrapment (cf. Sargent and Bascope 1996).

Luz also sought help in the judicial system on three separate occasions before her husband shot her, each time with no result. Each time, the memories of the state violence of the dictatorship and what it had done to her networks made her fearful and hesitant. She, like some of the other women I interviewed, did not see safety in the police, but danger. It was in the years following the 1990 transition that Luz first went to the police. The response she received from the state in this instance was similar to the one from the health care practitioners, in that she felt that they implicitly upheld the gendered inequalities and assumptions that are fundamental to domestic violence against women. She described the police and judicial system officials as patriarchal and incompetent, and she questioned whether their incompetence was with the intent of dissuading women from coming forward,

denouncing domestic violence, and following through with the denouncement. She saw the state involvement in her relationship as a way to strip her abusive husband of his masculine power, through the ultimate authority of the state.

Luz described to me how she felt afraid, very embarrassed, and shameful when she first reported the abuse to the police. The police station felt very threatening and sinister to her, and the police seemed incompetent and uncaring. Nothing came of that complaint, except for embarrassment and shame. Luz denounced her problem to the police for the second time in the emergency room, after her husband had bloodied her eye. She narrated that experience: "I waited hours for them to attend to me, and they never saw me. The doctor never saw me . . . imagine . . . an emergency room that is full of people, where everyone could see me, where I had . . . to tell the policeman, standing there, not in a room or anything. . . . Then to wait for hours and not have anyone treat me. No one took care of my eye. I left. I never went back . . . "

The third time Luz interacted with the police was in 2001 when she requested a restraining order because she feared that her husband was going to try to kill her. She lodged the complaint at the Family Police Station, where she felt that they were very authoritarian and incompetent. She felt that she was very well informed about her rights and how to denounce domestic violence, yet she was only "able to do it halfway well," because of the incompetence of the judicial officials. One of the officials, she said, tried to talk her out of filing the complaint, but Luz persisted in filing the complaint and eventually received the temporary restraining order against her husband. However, the restraining order arrived in the mail at her house too late. By that time, Luz was in the hospital recuperating from a near-fatal gunshot wound that had been fired at her by her husband, who had then killed himself.

For Luz, as for many of the women I interviewed, the arms of the state, in the form of the judicial system, had failed to protect her (see Parson 2005). First, the officials of the state had treated Luz poorly, dissuading her from lodging her complaint. Then, as a result of time lags, what Lazarus-Black (2007) sees as a fundamental deterrent to follow through on women's complaints of domestic violence in the legal system in Trinidad, Luz was almost murdered by her husband. This was in 2002, eight years after the first Family Violence Law was implemented. The state's role in Luz's subjective experiences of domestic violence proved to have been life threatening. At that time, she was not enough of a citizen to be heard and her case dealt with in a timely manner. Perhaps this is why she told me, in 2003, as we rode to the memorial to victims of the dictatorship's torture, *Parque por la Paz,* Villa Grimaldi, with the grassroots women's group of which she was a part, "I don't believe in this democracy. No, I don't."

Transformative Ties

In contrast to the ways in which her family, health care, and judicial systems upheld dominant gender role expectations based on women's inequality, Luz's interactions with the globally connected women's rights–based domestic violence organization Safe Space, her activities with other women's rights–based organizations, and a global movement of "Women's Spirituality Circles" allowed her to engage in her

processes of sanación, as she termed it in 2009. I refer to the relationships Luz has formed over the years through these groups as transformative ties.[6]

Luz first began to identify the role of gender inequality in her experiences of violence through her participation at Safe Space, which began in 2000. For her this was a turning point. A friend from a women's organization to which Luz belonged made an appointment for her at Safe Space. At first, Luz did not want to go because of the negative experiences she had had with therapeutic professionals in the past, but she felt obliged because of her friend's effort. Safe Space is a nonprofit NGO founded in 1984 to promote women's full development and social participation. It grew out of the feminist and antidictatorship movements of that time, which were linked in the successful effort to defeat the dictatorship in the late 1980s, under the slogan "Democracy in the Home and in the Country." This movement involved women who had remained in Chile during the dictatorship, but also women who had been exiled in Europe and North America, had interacted with feminists there, and had brought some of the frameworks around domestic violence and women's rights home (Chuchryk 1989). Safe Space has engaged in activism to promote women's rights in a variety of spheres and at many different levels. They draw heavily from and contribute to United Nations frameworks around violence against women. One of their members attended a women's global leadership conference in the United States. Others have been involved in shadow reports on the implementation of CEDAW (the UN Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women) and in research on domestic violence. During the 1990s they advocated for women's rights through promoting women's full citizenship and participation in the postdictatorship context. To this end, they focused on educating women in a variety of realms about their rights and how to exercise them through outreach programs, including workshops, community education programs, and playing important leadership roles in community activism around women's rights.

From 1996 to 2001 Safe Space developed and maintained a strong focus on domestic violence and became widely known for work with women survivors. During this time their programs included providing services and support for women survivors of domestic violence, workshops, and community education programs. Safe Space worked to "de-psychologize" the problems women face in relation to violence and to improve women's quality of life through a focus on women realizing their rights. They served predominantly lower-middle- and lower-class populations. Safe Space's Gender and Domestic Violence Program had several interconnected components: direct therapy, violence prevention education, diffusion of information, networking, and generation of knowledge. Their work continues to be based in a gender inequality perspective on the issue of domestic violence against women, and a multidisciplinary approach integrating the psychological, social, and judicial *(psicosociojurídico)* aspects of women's healing. In their work with women survivors of domestic violence, their goal has been to enable women to take charge of their lives and to stop the abuse to which they are subject. They have provided women the tools and support to engage in positive relationships and self-care and to build their identities, and they educate women about their rights in the postdictatorship context, when democracy and civil society are being restored.

Luz told me in 2003 that at Safe Space she began to learn language that allowed her to begin to name the various forms of violence she suffered and to understand

the violence in broader terms. In 2009, she still maintained that Safe Space had offered her crucial resources for developing herself. She attended group therapy sessions where she engaged in forming transformative ties that allowed her to see beyond gender role expectations based in women's inequality:

> I felt terribly bad, to hear the other women in the group talking and to hear the same atrocities that were happening to me and the same discomforts. But ... I felt different. I always had a sensation that I was different. Because they cried and fussed, and I said, "I don't have any reason to cry. I don't have any reason to feel pain ... It was the life I chose." Do you understand? I was very firm in that. I chose this, ... and they cried, and they told me, "Hey, but it can't be ... that you, how you are!" It was a questioning among us because I questioned them, and they questioned me, and things started to emerge. I started to talk about things, the fights, the problems [*dramas*] that I had. [Luz 2009]

The effects of these intersubjective engagements with other women who had suffered domestic violence and professionals attuned to the problem at Safe Space were very different from those she had experienced in her prior help seeking in medical settings years before. Luz described some of the positive outcomes of those therapeutic sessions, based in an ideology of women's equality and citizenship rights:

> It was very important because I was able to realize that it wasn't necessary that I have such a bad time. ... I started to realize all of those things, that moreover ... because of my condition [i.e., her homosexuality], I suffered those things and arrived at the conclusion that it was a self-punishment or a form of ... sacrificing myself ... for what I felt or how I was. I sacrificed myself by dealing with my husband because he maintained my status as a woman with children, a husband, with a house. ... For me this started to become clear. I started to realize. I did everything as a process, although the therapy was for violence, I started to do personal work there, to understand, and it was accompanied by this women's citizenship workshop. It was ... everything together [the personal therapy and introspection, group therapy and group reflection on domestic violence, and the citizenship workshop]. [Luz 2003]

She became friends with and still kept in touch with four other women from the group therapy who provided support for one another. Because of the activities in which she engaged through Safe Space, Luz explained: "I started to think that I ... had the right to do with my life [what I wanted] ... to change my life, to do other things," and she decided to make radical changes in her life. She stopped taking her pills, started going out for fun and to seminars, and began taking better care of herself. She was elected director of the Women's Place.

For the most part, Luz's now-deceased husband had ceased physically abusing her in the early 1990s, but he continued belittling her psychologically, telling her that she was "stupid, ridiculous ... confused ... weird," which for her was magnified by her own sense of herself as strange because of her repressed homosexuality. Toward

the end of the relationship, after she had sought help at Safe Space and began to make changes in her life, she described a "terrible violence" where normally he did not beat her nor verbally abuse her, but instead threw away and misused her most precious possessions. He threw away paintings she had painted and her collection of books (which she dug out of the dumpster with the feeling of being watched by all the neighbors), and he used her favorite pajamas to wash his car. In January 2002, Luz went to the World Social Forum in Brazil, where she had a romantic interlude with a woman she is friends with in Santiago. She described this experience as liberating and with much joy. She feels that her daring to take this trip and engage in a romantic relationship with a woman was directly related to her experiences at Safe Space. It was soon after that when Luz decided to file for a restraining order against her husband, which arrived at her house only after he had attempted to kill her.

Many years later, in 2009, her transformational work, her sanación, entailed conversing in free form with a close-knit group of friends. Luz's friendship circle of women, what she describes as her form of spirituality, is inspired by the women's circle global movement, based on U.S. psychiatrist Jean Bolen's ideas in her book *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World: The Essential Guide to Women's Circles* (Bolen 1999). Luz gave me a printed copy of this book, which had been translated into Spanish by a Venezuelan woman and disseminated through the Internet, another way in which globalization is inseparable from Luz's experiences of sanación. In her circle of women, she told me, "with these women friends I have, when we get together, there we take care of one another *(contenernos),* and some things can come out." In a way, this group serves, as Safe Space groups did in the past, simultaneously as a kind of kinship of affliction (Rapp 1999) and a kinship of affinity, which replaces for Luz her ruptured bonds with her family of origin and her friends, who did not support her in her quest to find a different way to live her life, beyond constraining gender roles, marriage, motherhood, and heterosexuality.

In claiming a new identity for herself, outside of her identity as a mother and wife subservient to others' needs, Luz had risked her life and her social networks. She was able to do so because she engaged with new networks of women, those at Safe Space, and other women's organizations. These groups linked her into global women's rights frameworks and social activism of various kinds. Her sanación is clearly linked then to local organizations, both formal and informal, and to frameworks originating elsewhere and disseminated through the tools of globalization.

A fundamental aspect of Luz's sanación, growing out of these local and global transformative ties, is her identification of the victim role as the fundamental gendered role against which she constructs her identity. Although she has suffered, she is not a victim; this is fundamental to her self-concept. She explained why her life project of claiming an identity beyond gender constraints is so important for her: "In this country it is very strong, the model of the Virgin, the Virgin Mary . . . It's very strong. It's very idealized. The Catholic Church has taken charge of installing in us the image of purity, of victimization, of suffering, of abnegation" [Luz 2009]. Luz believes that Chilean women have this role of suffering and self-sacrifice so deeply integrated into their sense of themselves and the world that they say of suffering domestic violence, "That's life," and then continue on. The very basis of living, as a woman, is suffering so that others may have a better life. The basis of a woman's

personhood, then, is her denial of herself. Ironically, to count as a social being, and to avoid the threat of social abandonment (Biehl 2005), women must in a sense deny themselves—deny the development of themselves. This is a kind of death of the self, as it encourages women to negate themselves, to deny their full personhood, to legitimately claim social personhood.

Indeed, in many of the interviews I did and the conversations I had during my research, the victim role was described as a fundamental aspect of gendered identity for women. The idea that women actually enjoy suffering is prevalent, as shown in a news magazine article about "masochistic depression" (Egert 2002). Based on this, I have come to see the victim role as a nonthreatening, submissive, and socially acceptable way for women to express the dissatisfaction and suffering produced by inequalities, because it is consonant with common ideas about women's acceptable roles and does not therefore call into question the status quo of gender inequality.[7] Indeed, professionals working in the field of domestic violence have suggested that the state's responses to domestic violence, including the recently instituted safe houses *(casas de acogida)*, reinforce the existing patriarchal order, which works against women's escape from domestic violence and their self-definition of and engagement in recovery processes (SERNAM et al. 2007).

When Luz decided that she could no longer play the gendered womanly roles based on suffering, victimization, and abnegation, her interior emotional world was in turmoil: *"It was like thinking that I wasn't so good"* [Luz 2009]. This sense that by breaking with these gendered roles, to take care of herself, she was somehow bad was upheld, she felt, by people in her social networks. She told me, "Many people told me, 'You went too far [*te pasaste*]. No woman would have done that. You broke the mold. You put yourself first, and you went to the other extreme.' [This was] very troublesome and very threatening for other women."

Luz, in telling me her story, reclaimed again a subjectivity that is outside of the victim role, which she sees as a gendered and debilitated role. She emphasized this to me as she constructed her narrative and, thereby, her sense of herself. The process of telling her story has been for Luz a part of her process of self-realization and transformation. Indeed, Lamb (2001:28) notes that "the telling of stories is one of the practices by which people reflect, exercise agency, contest interpretations of things, make meanings, feel sorrow and hope, and live their lives" (cited in Brettell 2003:24; cf. Maynes et al. 2008). Luz told me:

> I try not to look at it from the role of the victim . . . or of a poor woman . . . I don't accept that. . . . Imagine if you told someone, "I interviewed a woman who survived, lived 24 years with a man, and in the end what happened, poor woman." But no, it was one fact in of my life. It's like I have isolated it and left it behind. Of course it marked my life. It has done a lot of harm. A lot of things happened that shouldn't have. But, basically I have recovered who I am. [Luz 2009]

Here, Luz refuses the gendered victim role, in favor of constructing her identity, herself, and her life around her idea of being a strong woman, a woman who was able to get out of a violent relationship and who is doing well on her own.

Conclusions and Implications

As Geertz noted (2000:17), paraphrasing Weber, human beings live "suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun" and continually spin. Luz conceptualizes her healing activities in concert with other women engaged in the same work of remaking meaning for themselves and society, both local and global. From her perspective, these spheres are bound together. Through these efforts, Luz creates new meaning and recreates gendered roles and expectations for herself; her subjectivity is shifting in relationship to these shifting meanings (cf. Merry 2006a). In a way, it seems that Luz wishes to live beyond gender, that is, to inhabit a subjectivity that is not encased and determined by gendered expectations, but that is structured by forms of self-development that are unhinged from these—and therefore are in process, and up for interpretation.

Luz's generation of new affective ties with other women—women in the various groups to which she belongs, and now especially in her women's spirituality circle—allows for her transformation of herself. In this way, Luz engages in what Das has described as the swallowing of "poisonous knowledge." Das (2008: 294) "considers the manner in which women engage in repair of relationships through the ordinary, everyday acts of caring [and] thinks of healing through the metaphor of women digesting 'poisonous' knowledge so that they learn to reinhabit the world by dwelling again within internal landscapes devastated by violence." As Das has suggested, Luz has figured out a way, through her transformative ties, to "reinhabit the world," but in a new way. As part of Luz's reworking of poisonous knowledge, she works toward social change, so that her society, both local and global, might one day resemble more of herself and, therefore, enable her to reinhabit the world more fully on her own terms.

For Luz, what she calls "sanación," her form of recovery, occurs outside the gaze of the state (cf. Das and Poole 2004). Although women need different tools to engage in their own processes of recovery from domestic violence, this fact has remained largely illegible to the state. Luz's recovery and experiences can be conceptualized as emerging from the tension between agency and structure, wherein she has been able to create new possibilities for a regendered or even a nongendered sense of herself. Luz creates changes within herself and within the world, so that her recovered sense of self, of subjectivity, will have a home in the world. This notion of healing through changing the world runs counter to the neoliberal move toward psychotherapy as a form of self-governance (Merry 2006b). It is a form of remaking and reordering—growing out of the poisonous soil of intimate violence. Luz's journey is replete with agentive acts, geared toward propelling herself into the future, to create a meaningful, fulfilled life, not by forgetting, but by reshaping the meaning of the violence and engaging in transformative acts with other women.

Her healing entails not so much weapons of the weak (Scott 1985) and is not a way to speak truth to power; it is, instead, a way to claim what is hers—her body and herself—the most fundamental sites of gendered domination by the state and by abusive men in intimate relationships. It is about transforming herself and social orders, in a way that is creative of new orders, not merely in opposition to historically entrenched social hierarchies. Although Luz feels she has endured a lifetime of gendered abuse, which does not constitute a time-delimited disruptive

event, Becker's observation still holds true, that: "Restoring order to life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself" (Becker 1997: 4).

Luz conceptualizes her engagement in this transformation work as being for herself, but also for the world. This work gives meaning to her life and is creative of new social orders. The arc of Luz's narrative also brings into focus the ways in which the various forms of violence she has experienced are always there in her memory and permeate her life's projects. Whether hovering in the background or dominating the foreground of her life, they are always there. The marks are indelible, and the poisonous knowledge, although it can be transformed, still moves her subjective experience.

This analysis points to the importance of ethnographic and longitudinal engagements to understand the gendered contexts of distress, suffering, and possibilities for recovery (cf. Guarnaccia et al. 2003). More specifically, this research suggests that it is crucial to examine not only individual women's processes of recovery from domestic violence but also to examine those processes in terms of their interactions with various contexts. For Luz, her interactions with Safe Space and its gender and citizenship-oriented program, were crucial to her recovery. The anthropological analysis of her subjectivity highlights that recoveries are contextual, and that judicial interventions do not necessarily contribute to women's recoveries from domestic violence. This analysis also brings to light the need for similar research on men who are perpetrators of domestic violence, their interior lives, and how they feel themselves positioned in relation to the world.

Notes

1. I use the Spanish term for healing, *sanación,* throughout, to remind the reader that this is Luz's term and not a construct that I am overlaying on her experience.
2. Herman (1992) posits that domestic violence is comparable to political torture, although intimate abuse is often more chronic.
3. João Biehl, in his analysis of Catarina's life in *Vita*, notes that "subjectivity is neither reducible to a person's sense of herself nor necessarily a confrontation with the powers that be. ... Always social, subjectivity encompasses all the identifications that can be formed by, discovered in, or attributed to a person" (2005:137).
4. Moore (1994:141–142) notes that, "If subjectivity is seen as singular, fixed, and coherent, it becomes very difficult to explain how it is that individuals constitute their sense of

self—their self-representations as subjects—through several, often mutually contradictory subject positions, rather than through one singular subject position ... individuals come to take up gendered subject positions through engagements with multiple discourses on gender" (Merry 2006a:184).

5. Kirmayer (2007) developed this idea in his work on the clinical psychiatric encounter with asylum seekers in Canada. The failure of imagination in that setting entails: (1) failure of refugee's own imagination, and (2) failure of the clinical imagination to understand the refugee's situation, which is related in part to the willingness of the clinician to enter into imaginative spaces of terror.

6. Petryna (2002) found the importance of social ties of various sorts for victims of the Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine being able to access support, and ultimately biological citizenship, in the newly formed government.

7. In a similar vein, Fassin and Rechtman (2009) have noted that the language of trauma and the ways this paradigm has been appropriated in modernist projects is to elide the *sources* of suffering in favor of a focus on a cataloging of symptoms through psychiatric nosologies, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In a similar fashion, the language of women "victims" of domestic violence in Chile can be seen as a cultural form of avoiding an often uncomfortable focus on the inequalities that produce and reproduce domestic violence against women and that contribute to normalizing that violence.

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