

more with the rich anthropological literature on rural Mexico and Mayan communities of the Yucatan peninsula, even as the descriptions of relations between conservation workers and communities are eye-opening.

Still, Martínez-Reyes makes a far stronger argument than many other writers about the degree to which conservation relations are continuous with colonial relations. While other writers have described relations between conservation workers and organisations as “colonialist” because of the fundamental inequalities on which they are based, Martínez-Reyes argues for a continuity of the colonial relations from the arrival of the Spanish in Yucatan to the present. On one hand, there has been a constant pressure to appropriate “natural resources” and land on which the Maya depend for subsistence for the generation of wealth. On the other hand, there have been Maya resistance, defence of autonomy (especially in the area where Martínez-Reyes worked), and defence of lands and forest that are the Maya world.

Students of conservation as a political and cultural project in Latin America and elsewhere, anthropologists interested in the contemporary Maya, scholars of Indigenous and rural peoples of Mexico and beyond, people working in conservation and the “nature industry,” and upper-level undergraduate or graduate students in courses on environmental anthropology, Indigenous studies or environmental history of Latin America will find this book particularly rewarding. The material can be appreciated at the levels of ethnographic description and theoretical development, and should be read in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, as well as in the seats of power of the nature industry.

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**Sliwinski, Alicia**, *A House of One’s Own: The Moral Economy of Post-Disaster Aid in El Salvador*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018, 264 pages.

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*A House of One’s Own*, by Alicia Sliwinski, is an ethnographic analysis of the cultural intricacies of postdisaster aid understood and experienced as the morality of gift giving and

receiving in the context of two earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. This rich account draws on fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2002 in the small town of Lamaria (fictitious name), about 40 kilometres west of the Salvadorian<sup>1</sup> capital in the department of Sonsonate. Ethnographically, the book is informed by the lived experiences of key cultural consultants who received and gave humanitarian aid following a magnitude 7.9 earthquake on 13 January 2001 and a magnitude 6.6 earthquake on 13 February 2013 in Lamaria. What results is a theoretically sophisticated discussion of humanitarian action that explores the moral economy of postdisaster aid in El Salvador by focusing on the political economy of international aid and calamity management. Although the earthquakes occurred a number of years ago, the book remains urgent because the humanitarian encounters described are not dissimilar to those that have happened since or that may yet happen again.

What did different gestures of aid mean to the individuals involved in these humanitarian transactions? How did people engage in humanitarian activities and moralities, either as providers or as receivers of aid? The book shows how three different modalities of aid interacted to entail gestures and relationships between donors and receivers: (1) immediate local responses, (2) food aid and (3) a participatory housing reconstruction project. Each modality is a “humanitarian configuration,” a concept that stresses a special arrangement of resources, values and roles. Each configuration took place at different moments, even as each was connected to and interrelated with the others. These fields of action were part of a wider totality of postdisaster humanitarian response, where each configuration included some people and excluded others and where each foregrounded a distinctive logic of giving and receiving. These distinctive configurations informed the relationships that engendered expectations of reciprocity and return, whether or not they were either present or absent, or accepted, negotiated or downright contested.

Sliwinski frames the localised humanitarian undertakings in Lamaria in terms of the anthropological category of the gift. According to the author, the gift is not an abstract category with which to make sense of humanitarian conduct in the face of disaster, but instead a lived dimension fraught with contradictions, even more so when different actors perform humanitarian roles. The gift, for example, is relevant to the rhetoric of community participation, since participation is the preferred methodology in the community for housing reconstruction projects financed by foreign donors. The richness of the book comes from telling the story of the people whose lives are at its centre and charting the social transformations caused by the disaster. Sliwinski successfully shows how the earthquake and its aftermath changed the lives of individuals who went from landless disaster victims to new homeowners. Paradoxically, disaster was a source of new opportunities and benefits.

Sliwinski demonstrates that beyond pragmatics, belief is central to the moral construction of gift giving and receiving in the face of disaster. A critique of Salvadorian NGOs and how and why strangers manifest their generosity when calamity strikes are important issues discussed in this book. Sliwinski incorporates the critique of the “politics of pity,” a politics that is triggered when singular images of distant suffering or destroyed neighbourhoods prompt concerned citizens to donate

from the safety of their homes. As don Rodolfo, one of her cultural consultants, claims, “[D]istant donors’ humanitarian giving does not amount to real solidarity.” While the politics of reality as authenticity is addressed in the book, don Rodolfo, a key participant in the study, understands “reality” as meaning politically informed and sustained expressions of support for the community.

In addition to exploring individuals’ beliefs and practices related to the morality of gift giving, the book turns to the ways that local groups and individuals occupying different positions, in a changing humanitarian landscape, made sense of their own roles within the moral frameworks of different humanitarian configurations. It also traces peoples’ and institutions’ involvement in different configurations of humanitarian aid, ranging from emergency to reconstruction. This ethnography effectively illustrates that gift giving and receiving do not come without paradoxes, contradictions and frustrations. The moral representations of humanitarianism varied, as did the ways ideas were circulated, crystallised and reified in a postdisaster setting. Indeed, the moral frameworks of gift giving and receiving were not monolithic systems: they were neither rigid grids nor static performatives. Instead, the gift, community and participation formed a conceptual apparatus that defined a series of humanitarian gestures and that oriented the moral narratives that framed them. According to Sliwinski, although the Lamaria crisis was not a “complex emergency,”<sup>2</sup> the aftermath of the earthquakes does allow an exploration of the point of convergence of the moral economy of disaster management and existential human suffering in the face of calamity. In this context, natural disasters are not devoid of politics or human-made catalysing forces. The fallacious category of disaster as solely a natural event is thus properly discussed in this book.

The book is organised into six chapters. The Introduction explains how Salvadorian risks were compounded over time through the production of vulnerability.

Chapter 2 introduces the location of Lamaria, the ethnographic setting, the impact of the earthquakes, the forms of assistance and local humanitarian response structure, and the dynamics of nonofficial forms of aid to argue that gifting gestures mobilised pre-existing social networks and brought about the discussion of the humanitarian configuration of food aid.

Chapter 3 discusses reconstruction in Lamaria to address questions related to local and international understandings of community participation. Salvadorians preferred participatory methodologies for postdisaster housing projects, while the literature is concerned with the multidisciplinary critique of community participation as it applies to development and humanitarian endeavours. Local expectations for reconstruction created tensions in the receiving groups targeted, especially in dealing with property rights and building methodologies. The main protagonists representing the German Red Cross in La Hermandad, a permanent housing reconstruction project, are introduced. The chapter discusses how decisions were made, beneficiaries selected, projects assembled, and projections of better futures enacted through reconstruction.

Chapter 4 accounts for the daily lives of the 50 families living in La Hermandad. While more descriptive than analytical, the chapter offers a well-informed feeling for place. It illustrates how people interact, it shows how microgroups of people

develop, and it outlines the social dynamics between individuals as a central activity. Given their central importance in the reconstruction process, gender relations and house construction become the focus. A phenomenological appreciation of the physical labour of house reconstruction enriches the critiques of community participation in reconstruction, an area omitted by most social science research on postdisaster reconstruction.

Chapter 5 analyses participatory work in La Hermandad. Here gender comes to the fore, as it was a central facet of the human relationships. What were the conflicts arising around work activities? What were the “physical” and “social” tensions of reconstruction? Reconstruction projects are anchored in a participatory execution methodology and in narratives based on giving and nonmonetary exchange. This chapter outlines the fundamental components of the moral economy of reconstruction to show how they oscillated between giftlike gestures and regimented efficiency-driven concerns.

The Conclusion turns to the challenges of everyday life in La Hermandad by interrelating it with the conceptual system that makes up the economy of aid in this postdisaster humanitarian configuration. It ends on Sliwinski’s last day in the field and her enduring relationship with some families.

This excellent account of a postdisaster site renews our appreciation of the seminal categories of anthropology to understand the multifaceted dimensions of the costs and hopes of aid. It offers important lessons of the political economy of morality and international aid in the global South, and it offers a new analysis of the gift in the context of disaster. Unfortunately, the author falls short of addressing the complex and asymmetrical relationships between donors in the global North and receivers in the global South. It is precisely this asymmetry that lies at the heart of the political economy of international aid programs. Furthermore, there is no reference to *false charity*, a concept that seriously problematises the true intentions of international humanitarian aid.

The number of this book’s virtues, however, greatly surpasses these two shortcomings. The book is suitable for scholars of anthropology, sociology, political sciences, economics, international development, urban planning, history, cultural studies and international relations as well as moral philosophers. This book is both a great secondary source for research and reference and an excellent textbook to be studied in classrooms across these disciplines. It provides a renewed appreciation of gifting matters in humanitarian contexts, as gifting matters continue to give meaning to the everyday moral economy of humanitarianism.

## Notes

- 1 One unfortunate weakness of this otherwise exemplary ethnography is its use of the US spelling “Salvadoran,” disliked by Salvadorians. The correct English spelling is either *Salvadorian* or *Salvadorean*, as the Oxford English dictionary shows it, but never *Salvadoran*.
- 2 A complex emergency is generally defined as a combination of natural and human-made causes where violence and warfare, massive population displacements, and famine or epidemics create a difficult political and security environment.