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**Remembering our History, Honoring our Legacy: USEU Reconnects Salvadoran College Students with Their Culture and Parent's War Memories**

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*Bridging the gap between academia and the community*



# Remembering our History, Honoring our Legacy: USEU Reconnects Salvadoran College Students with Their Culture and Parent's War Memories

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## Abstract

*This research paper will link the theoretical concepts of collective memory, sites of memory, self-deception, generational memory and journalism's relationship to the preservation of memory. Through interviews with second generation Salvadoran students from the transnational organization, U.S.E.U. and the students' parents, I will explore how parents' memories about El Salvador during the Civil War have impacted the shaping of their children's cultural identity. I also hope to shine light on the ways cultural organizations such as U.S.E.U. and media outlets such as U.S.E.U.'s Spanish newsletter, Nueva Sintesis (New Synthesis,) can serve as sites of memory that encourage cultural preservation and expression. My contribution to knowledge lies in that although there is literature on the shaping of cultural identity issues of Salvadorans that immigrated during the war, not much has been written about their children and the development of their cultural identity in the United States.*

## Keywords

Collective memory; memoria historica; Nueva Sintesis; preservation; war memories

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## Introduction

Having been born to parents who escaped the violence of the Civil War in El Salvador has always been tied to my identity. Growing up I yearned to find other students who shared the same background because I thought it would help me understand more about what it meant to have such a sad history tied to who I was. Not knowing many Salvadorans my age, I made mental notes of subjects I wanted to explore. Was I Salvadoran or was I American? Why had El Salvador had a violent twelve year civil war? Had my family been personally affected by the violence? I didn't find people interested in exploring those very concepts until I was in college.

I joined *la Union Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios* (U.S.E.U.) in 2009. U.S.E.U. literally translates to Salvadoran Union of University Students but I usually short hand it to Salvadoran Student Union and will consistently refer to the organization as U.S.E.U. This research project was inspired by the stories I heard from different members at the first state-wide U.S.E.U. retreat I attended in UC Santa Barbara. As students shared about their views on their Salvadoran identity, I heard many students link their sentiments to their parents. One student from UC

Riverside said her mother had raised her to think she was American. She had endured poverty in El Salvador and after having escaped to Honduras and forced back into El Salvador, she had grown to resent her native country. She had transmitted those memories to her daughter making her question whether or not she felt proud to identify as Salvadoran.

Another student from UCLA, who was also at the retreat, told me her parents had raised her to honor her roots. She embraced her Salvadoran identity and said she had joined U.S.E.U. to have a place where she could connect with other Salvadoran students who spoke *caliche*, or Salvadoran slang.

Excited to create a space for Salvadoran students at the University of San Francisco (USF), where I was studying, I helped establish the first Jesuit chapter of U.S.E.U. which was already in about ten other public universities throughout California by that time.

Two years later, as a senior at USF, I took a Media, Memory and History class that provided me with the opportunity to explore the realization I had made during that first U.S.E.U. retreat—parent's memories of having fled El Salvador as war refugees impacts the way their children express their identity as second generation Salvadorans growing up in the United States. The questions that will frame this research are:

- How do parents' memories about their native country impact the way their children perceive their parent's native country and their culture?
- How do U.S.E.U. and Nueva Sintesis serve as sites of memory for second generation Salvadorans providing them a space to express their culture?

- Do parents and their children feel proud of being Salvadoran?

### **Methodology**

I conducted ten interviews during my research. I interviewed one male and one female student from U.S.E.U.'s chapter at the University of San Francisco. Each student has two Salvadoran parents that were also interviewed. I spoke to one student from the U.S.E.U. chapter at San Francisco State University because I wanted to make sure I had input from both of the chapters based in San Francisco. The student from San Francisco State is of mixed identity, meaning she has one parent that is Salvadoran and another that is Guatemalan. I also chose to interview her because I was interested in exploring how her mixed background impacted her Salvadoran identity. Both of her parents were also interviewed. I did not interview more students from the chapter at USF because hectic schedules both on the part of the sources and the researcher, who is a full time college student with many extra-curricular activities, interfered. The limited length of this paper would have also limited the depth of each narrative had more than three families been interviewed.. Only one student was interviewed from San Francisco State University because the chapter is currently struggling with membership and is currently comprised of only two active members. The other student had a Mexican father and a mother that was born in the United States, moved to El Salvador as an infant and moved to the United States again as a teenager which complicated the research.

A co-founder of U.S.E.U. and *Nueva Sintesis* was also interviewed. She is currently the Statewide Coordinator of U.S.E.U. and a senior at UCLA. She provided context to how both U.S.E.U. and its newsletter were created as spaces for cultural preservation and expression. I also looked at the *Nueva Sintesis* website's issues and looked specifically at the student contribution and this week in

history sections. I will be analyzing two student contribution pieces, one from the first issue and one from the most current issue analyzing the differences in how students' express their identity. I will also look at two examples that illustrate how *Nueva Sintesis* uses anniversaries to remember events about El Salvador's history.

Eight of the nine interviews were done over the phone. One parent asked for the questions to be emailed to him even though a brief phone conversation was held with him. The interview with the U.S.E.U. statewide coordinator was held over Google Chat due to phone and Skype complications between the source and the researcher.

## **Literature Review: Theoretical Concepts**

### **Collective Memory**

According to Maurice Halbwachs, our individual memories only make sense within a collective social context. He says that individuals often have different memories depending on their point of view but that even those memories are subject to change when we share them with other people. When speaking about history's relationship to memory, Halbwachs says that memory differs from history in that it is continuous. Our memories are always changing, while the past is often static and broken up into periods of time that have a clear beginning, middle and end. Another difference that exists between memory and history is that history consists of a spectator observing events that happened over a long period of time most likely not having lived through the entire era he or she is writing about.

I think Salvadoran students are adding to their collective memory through their participation in U.S.E.U. and through their use of *Nueva Sintesis* because both outlets seek to expand the student's

knowledge of Salvadoran history. The way we interpret events is always changing and the information added to describe past issues of El Salvador and current issues is something that also does not remain static. This highlights how the collective memory students have about El Salvador evolves as students learn more about the country's history. In *Nueva Sintesis*, students are also encouraged to submit works that reflect their Salvadoran identity. Since the way they define themselves is always changing, so does their writing in relationship to their identity.

### **Sites of Memory**

Author Pierre Nora is often cited for his work on sites of memory. He argues that sites of memory provide a space to remember things we do not want to forget. UNESCO world heritage sites for example seek to preserve history, monuments, places and events. Nora states that the purpose of these sites is to generate memories so that future generations do not forget historical and cultural events. I think that both USEU and its newsletter, *Nueva Sintesis* are sites of memory. They are an outlet to express cultural identity and definitely present topics that second generation Salvadoran students don't want to forget—historical topics about land reform, liberation theology, the Civil War, cultural traditions are all topics discussed at U.S.E.U. meetings and through the newsletter.

### **Self-Deception**

The idea of self-deception is a concept discussed by authors Roy Baumister and Stephen Hastings. They argue that we often edit our pasts to fit the description of our present. This is in part done to provide a more positive self-image. According to the authors, we leave out the negative memories we don't want to remember because they prompt negative emotions and we choose to highlight the positive. In my research, I discovered that many Salvadoran parents who fled El Salvador during the Civil War repress some of the memories they lived during those violent times. They often

referenced the country's green landscape and their school memories when I asked them about their memories about El Salvador. For some parents, I had to discuss my family's recollection of the war so that they would feel comfortable to speak about their war memories. In my interview of the students I found that some were more familiar than others with their families' memories of the war. What parents choose to tell and not tell their children, I speculate is linked to the way they remember living through the war as young twenty-year olds.

### **Journalists and the Media**

Researcher Barbie Zelizer argues that although it is not difficult to pinpoint ways in which journalists draw from the past to provide context for the present, there currently is not much investigation regarding how journalists impact the way a society remembers events. Zelizer argues that the journalistic form necessitates, invites and indulges memory. In all three instances journalists use past memories as a mnemonic form to address issues they may have either failed to cover in the past or that can only be reflected on after time has passed. In resurfacing past topics, Zelizer says journalists can also shift the way a story is perceived.

With regards to my research, Zelizer's argument supports that U.S.E.U.'s online newsletter, *Nueva Sintesis*, can be a medium to help second generation Salvadorans expand their knowledge of El Salvador by adding context to the memories their parent's may have shared with them.

### **Generational Memory**

Pierre Nora has also done research on how subjective memories can become part of a larger collective narrative in which memories can be connected to traumatic events that affected a

generation. Nora also makes the point that generations can be marked by anniversary celebrations and that being a part of a generation often instills a sense of belonging.

Second generation Salvadorans are currently near the age their parents were when they lived within the context of the Civil War. While their parents might repress some of the negative memories they have about the traumatic events, the “youth movement” Nora discusses in relationship to the 1968 generation in France, lives in the shadow of the previous generation. In this case, U.S.E.U. students are the children of parents who lived through the Salvadoran Civil War but the memories of the war have bled into the youth generation that founded U.S.E.U. and created *Nueva Sintesis* in part because of their interest to understand their violent history.

#### **Additional Literature Used:**

##### **The Transnational Identity of Second Generation Salvadorans**

Dr. Hector Perla, the first Salvadoran American to earn his Ph.D. in Political Science is a strong ally of U.S.E.U. In his research for the NACLA Report on the Americas, he discusses the ways in which the Salvadoran American population has joined in their efforts of activism to provide resources for the Salvadoran community in the United States and in El Salvador. He emphasizes the transnationalism that is part of the Salvadoran American identity by highlighting the work of non-profit organizations like CISPES, SANA, SHARE and the California student organization U.S.E.U., which he has actively worked with. He argues Salvadorans in the United States are currently transitioning from a refugee state to a state of activism by the second generation’s pursuit of higher education in the United States.

### **The Second Generation Does not identify as American**

Author Alejandro Portes argues that the Civil Rights Movement in the United States created such an awareness of the racial discrimination faced by minorities that members of those communities often drop the hyphenation of American attached to their ethnic identities. For example, during that time instead of referring to themselves as Mexican American or Chinese American, adolescents began referring to themselves as Latino and Asian or tied their identity to their parent's country of origin by calling themselves Mexican or Chinese. Portes says this behavior was a defense mechanism against the previous discrimination of minorities who were not considered part of America's Anglo mainstream society. In my research, I will discuss why U.S.E.U. students say they prefer to identify as Salvadoran or Central American rather than as Salvadoran American.

### **Newspapers as a Site of Memory about War**

Author Choong Hee Han investigates how three newspapers from Japan, China and South Korea represented the Asia-Pacific War highlighting the differences in how each publication interpreted the events of the war. His research explores how war memories were portrayed and reconstructed through the different newspaper which he catalogs as sites of memory. I will further discuss how this research relates to my study on how *Nueva Sintesis* illustrates and reconstructs the knowledge U.S.E.U. students have about the war based on the left leaning perspective of the organization.

### **Context on El Salvador's Civil War**

El Salvador's Civil War was an internal conflict between the U.S. supported military government and the *Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional* (F.M.L.N.) guerilla (1980-1992). Although the causes for the war are debatable, many attribute the roots of the conflict to lack of land distribution which continues to be a problem in the country. The bust of the coffee industry during

the Great Depression which decreased wages for *campesinos* or agricultural peasants, the increase in leftist revolutions throughout the world during the sixties and the seventies and the Red Scare it caused for capitalist countries such as the United States, were also factors that contributed to the break out of the war. Additionally, during the 1960s, Catholic bishops held the Second Vatican Council in which they discussed the concept of liberation theology. This form of theology promoted the liberation of humankind from economic injustice by creating structures that allowed for better living conditions among impoverished populations. One of the most popular advocates of this ideology in El Salvador was Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero who was often referred to as being “the voice of the voiceless” for his defense of peasants and demand for a distribution of wealth.

Salvadorans participated in the movement by joining what were known as Christian Base Communities (CBCs) which consisted of priest-led groups that held bible study discussions raising awareness and taking initiative to tackle issues of socioeconomic injustice. According to Roy Boland, author of the book *Culture and Customs of El Salvador*, 60,000 CBCs existed in El Salvador by the early 1970s (64).

These groups were often targeted by the military as organizations with a communist agenda. Many members were killed along with anybody who challenged the status quo and advocated for a radical change to the economic structure of Salvadoran society. This was the case for Archbishop Romero who was assassinated while celebrating mass on March 24, 1980. Massacres also took place throughout the northern and eastern part of the country. The department of Santa Ana, which many of the parents interviewed were from, witnessed two large offensives. The 1981 offensive

which the F.M.L.N launched and called the “Last Offensive” became the *campesino* insurrection that sparked many more violent confrontations between the F.M.L.N and the military armed forces. The city of Santa Ana, the second largest in the country, also saw great violence during the offensive “*Hasta el Tope*,” which was the F.M.L.N.’s attempt to take over the major cities of El Salvador including its capital in San Salvador. Without a clear victory, the Civil War ended in 1992 with the signing of the peace accords in Chapultepec, Mexico. The deaths of the war totaled over 75,000 people according to the 1993 Truth Commission Report to the United Nations.

### **The S.F. Sanctuary Movement and Salvadorans**

According to Migration Information Source, the Carter Administration passed the Refugee Act in 1980 allowing for Salvadorans fleeing from the war to apply for political asylum. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services website specifies the difference between a refugee and an asylee is that refugees apply for permission to reside in the United States from outside of the country while an asylee applies for Temporary Protection Status (TPS) within the United States. Taking advantage of the newly passed act, thousands of refugees from politically unstable countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, immigrated to the United States. Receiving hostility from organizations such as Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and citizens opposed to the large influx of refugees, churches and synagogues began to offer their sites as “sanctuaries” for the newly arrived immigrants.

Forming coalitions and non-profit organizations such as CRECE, CARECEN (Central American Resource Center) and CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), religious organizations and refugees participated in marches and activist rallies to allow their stay in the

country. Dr. Perla, a Political Science Professor at the University of California Santa Cruz and close ally of U.S.E.U. wrote in an article titled “ Romero’s Resurrection: Transnational Salvadoran Organizing,” that the San Francisco Mission District was the home of the Central American solidarity movement. Having been involved in CBC’s in their country previous to their arrival to the United States, Salvadorans in particular were proactive in creating welcoming spaces for the refugees that arrived to the Bay Area. In this regard, it is particularly significant that the sources interviewed for this research are part of U.S.E.U.’s San Francisco chapters. Students’ interest in learning more about their history and getting involved in issues that pertain to the Salvadoran community in San Francisco demonstrate Dr. Perla’s thesis of how the Salvadoran transnational identity is something fueled by the work of non-profit and student organizations.

### **U.S.E.U. and Nueva Sintesis as Sites of Memory**

Co-founder of the Salvadoran Student Union, U.S.E.U., Jennifer Carcamo, said that the transnational organization was created before the three original founders entered college. Friends Ernie Zavaleta, Steven Osuna and Ivan Peña attended the Foro de Sao Paolo, a democratic youth conference that took place in 2005. There they met students from El Salvador who expressed their need to create a space for Salvadoran students to learn more about the country’s Civil War and how they could become more active in issues pertaining to their communities. The first U.S.E.U. chapter began in El Salvador at the public university, Universidad de El Salvador (UES).

When the three students returned to their home in California, they enrolled into California State University Los Angeles (CSULA), University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and University

of California Santa Barbara. The first three chapters were founded at those universities between 2007 and 2008. Eight other chapters were created quickly after that through established connections at other universities. Two chapters at USC and CSUF are currently in the process of getting formed demonstrating the desire of second generation Salvadorans to have a space to explore their identity.

Why is such a space necessary? You might think there are other Latino student organizations on a college campus that would provide a gathering space for students who share ethnic origins in Latin America. While this is true, I argue this thinking poses a risk in homogenizing the different realities lived in Latin American countries. Immigrants may sometimes share reasons for having left their country. Perhaps they sought greater economic opportunities or they wanted to reunite with family members who had immigrated to the United States. Yet, in the case of Salvadorans who fled their country during a violent civil war, it cannot be ignored that one of the main factors for their immigration was the need for security due to their country's political instability. Although it would be incredibly enriching to learn more about the history of different Latin American countries in Latino student organizations, that space is not always provided.

In his work, "Between Memory and History," Pierre Nora speaks about the creation of "les lieux de memoire" or sites of memory that allow for the evolution of memories that can sometimes be dormant and reawakened by the creation of historical documents or monuments that seek to organize and preserve those memories ( 10). Creating such a space provides a material and visible representation of those internal and evolving memories we wish to archive and not forget.

Yet U.S.E.U. students do not seek to exclusively look at their history. Instead, Carcaro said, U.S.E.U. seeks to “shed light on our current reality, and how it's related to our history and not just in El Salvador, but throughout Latin America.” More research would be necessary to evaluate the degree to which each chapter relates events from Latin America to the history of El Salvador and the current issues of the Salvadoran community, but that goal is definitely apparent in U.S.E.U.'s online statewide newsletter. The compiling of such information demonstrates the way in which both U.S.E.U. and *Nueva Sintesis* promote Halbwachs' concept of collective memory because both seek to expand students' understanding of the social context associated with both historic and current events pertaining to El Salvador and Latin America.

Although both the organization and newsletter complement each other in its goal of expanding collective memory, Carcaro said the idea to create the newsletter that would later be called *Nueva Sintesis*, began before the idea of creating a statewide student organization. As the first editor of the newsletter, Carcaro explained that *Nueva Sintesis* is divided into three news sections that include domestic news (issues impacting the Salvadoran and Latino community in the United States), news about El Salvador and International news about Latin America and other parts of the world. The *Nueva Sintesis* team, which currently consists of six members from the different chapters, draws most of their information from alternative news sources such as Telesur, BBC, La Prensa Grafica and Al Jazeera among others. All of the content is in Spanish because it highlights how language is also a part of the sites of memory established by U.S.E.U. and *Nueva Sintesis*. The memories of parents are usually in the dominant language of El Salvador, which is Spanish. Carcaro said it makes sense U.S.E.U. would preserve its history and express its cultural identity in the language of the country's whose history they seek to preserve.

Supporting the research of Ph.D. candidate Choong Hee Han, *Nueva Sintesis* allows for the reconstruction of history by providing different perspectives on history. Although the organization leans politically to the left, the diversity in the sources it draws its information from helps students expand their view on historical events of the war in comparison to the subjective memories of their parents. For example, a parent who was attacked by the guerilla, the military or both simultaneously may not be as objective in relating the events of the Civil War yet *Nueva Sintesis's* attempt to provide different perspectives gives students more room to draw their own conclusions.

Students are also allowed to share their insights through *Nueva Sintesis's* student contribution section through which students can express their feelings regarding their cultural identity in either English or Spanish. Contributions usually consist of poems, essays, songs or research students have explored in their classes or are particularly interested in investigating. All content is related to El Salvador and all chapters participate on a weekly rotating basis.

In the first student contribution of the initial August 9, 2009 issue, for example, political science UCLA student Ernie Zavaleta contrasted two events that had drawn attention to Central America at the time—Mauricio Funes, had just become the first F.M.L.N. candidate to be sworn in to the presidency while democratically elected Honduran President Manuel Zelaya had just been ousted by a military coup. Zavaleta's contribution, written in Spanish, illustrated the importance of having political structures that ensure people keep their elected officers accountable for projects that encourage their flourishing and do not leave room for unconstitutional behavior.

In the most recent student contribution on the November 15 2011 issue, the writer, who chose to remain anonymous, wrote a poem about the sadness the month of November brings to them because it is the month their grandfather, which they never met, died in the Salvadoran Civil War. The contributor who also shared in Spanish wrote: “Le pregunto a mi padre, ¿Cómo era mi abuelo? Y no sabe contestarme. Se le llenan los ojos de agua y veo el dolor que causa el recuerdo de su padre en su corazón.” This translates to: “I ask my father. How was my grandfather? And he doesn’t know how to respond. His eyes get watery and I can see the pain his father’s memory causes in his heart.”

Two more cultural sections are included in *Nueva Sintesis*. One pertains to language while the other pays homage to anniversary events where readers are presented with happenings that took place this week in history. The language section, *Palabra de la Semana*, provides a word of the week in *caliche*, Nahuatl derived Salvadoran slang, so that more members become familiar with colloquial ways of speaking in El Salvador and don’t forget the indigenous influences in Salvadoran Spanish. For example, the last word in *caliche* was *broza*, which refers to a group of friends or acquaintances. The *Esta Semana en la Historia* section, highlights important events in Salvadoran and Latin American history. For example, in the last past two issues, the Nueva Sintesis team highlighted the commemoration of the Jesuit martyrs who were killed on November 16, 1989 and the International Day of the Woman celebrated on November 25 in commemoration to a female massacre that took place in the Dominican Republic. Such remembrances highlight Pierre Nora’s research on how anniversary events can help a generation feel like they belong or understand the history of a particular time period. Students, for example, can feel more

knowledgeable about their cultural history if they can remember particular events solely because they get repeated every year.

The stories presented in Nueva Sintesis also highlight Barbie Zelizer's argument about how journalism can be an effective tool for memory studies because the newsletter's stories necessitate, invite and indulge memory. For example, explaining the facts behind historical events necessitates memory as it commemorates an anniversary. A short paragraph describing student activism today can invite memories of Salvadoran youth that organized during the war. Stories can also indulge memory by highlighting the long struggle of Salvadorans to achieve land rights and equality. Doing this might shift the perspective of second generation Salvadorans by helping them understand that El Salvador's violence did not begin with the Civil War. The causes are rooted deeply in our past.

### **Parent's Memories of El Salvador's Civil War Influence their Children**

The two students interviewed from the U.S.E.U. chapter at the University of San Francisco (USF) were Hector Martinez and Diana Vaquerano. Breena Nuñez was interviewed from the U.S.E.U. chapter at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Both parents of each student were also interviewed.

### **Hector Martinez**

Hector is currently a freshman Business Administration student and is 18 years old. His parents are Hilda Martinez, from the department of Sonsonate and his father is Jose Antonio Martinez,

originally from the department of Santa Ana. His parents had been married for eight years before they left El Salvador in 1989. Both parents were about 29 years old when they left and brought Hector's older brother, David, who was seven at the time, to the United States. Hector's parents did not have legal problems entering the United States because Mr. Martinez' mother had filed residency papers on her son's behalf. He received his green card one month after having arrived to San Francisco, where his mother lived. Hector was born about ten years after his parents established themselves in their new country. Both parents are currently 52 years old.

When asked what his parents had told him about El Salvador, Hector referred to stories his parents had told him about relatives he had not had the opportunity to meet. In many of the cases, the relatives had simply died of old age. His mother and father said they had been fortunate to not lose any family members during the war but neither of the parents said they really like to recall their memories about the war let alone share them with Hector.

*“Fue duro cuando estuvimos alla nosotros. Ni acordarse uno de esas cosas quiere,”* Mrs. Martinez said over the phone, “It was hard when we were there. You don't even want to remember those things.” Telling her about the war memories my family had shared with me helped her feel more comfortable. She said the violence wasn't excessive when she lived in Sonsonate (perhaps in comparison to other departments like Santa Ana, Chalatenango and Morazan which were the sites of many massacres) but she did see airplanes and soldiers on a constant basis. She explained one particular memory in detail. She said she was getting off of the bus with her sister when she told her that they had to run really quickly. Glancing at the sight her sister was trying to hide, Mrs. Martinez said she saw about eight dead bodies blindfolded lying on the floor. She reiterated in

Spanish, “*La verdad es dificil. No es para estar contando.*” That roughly translates to “The truth is difficult to acknowledge. It is not something to be shared.”

The first memories Mr. Martinez shared about El Salvador were regarding the natural beauty of the country. He said he could never forget the land of his birth. When asked if he had any memories about the war, he said he recalled the offensive of 1980, which actually took place in 1981 and was launched by the F.M.L.N. He said he often does not like to remember such events because he knows many people died in Santa Ana during that time. Yet he continued on to say he remembered people leaving their homes out of fear of being killed when the guerillas or military would enter their village. Mr. Martinez said bullets would rain over his home and that he and his neighbors would often throw themselves on the floor to take cover. He quickly shifted to discussing what he considers beautiful in his native country. He spoke about the recreation areas the country has to offer although he clarified that he had not visited many of them.

Mr. Martinez said he faced many economic difficulties growing up in El Salvador. In line with the reality of that time period and that some children still face, Mr. Martinez said he began working at a banana plantation with his father when he was 12 years old. Both his wife and son described him as a serious person. He agrees and attributes his personality to the way he was raised. Most of the memories he shares with his sons Hector and David are regarding his tough childhood and not about the Civil War.

Hector, however has built his own memories about El Salvador. He visited the country when he was seven years old for two weeks. He said he had heard about the gang issue taking place in the

country but that he was not afraid. He was excited to see the place where his parents had grown up, meet relatives he hadn't known previous to the trip and visit El Salvador's natural landscapes in both Santa Ana and Sonsonate. Although that was the only time he visited the country, the experience impacted him greatly and sparked his interest to learn more about his culture.

### **Diana Vaquerano**

Diana is a sophomore Exercise and Sport Science major and is currently 19 years old. Her parents are Ana Marina Ramirez Vaquerano and Jose Vaquerano. They met in San Francisco doing solidarity work for Salvadoran refugees during the 1980s. Mrs. Vaquerano was 25 years old when she left El Salvador in 1986. She is originally from the city of Santa Tecla in the department of La Libertad. Mr. Vaquerano left El Salvador when he was 31 years old in 1980. He is originally from the department of San Vicente. Mrs. Vaquerano said she arrived to the United States as an undocumented immigrant. She said she did not qualify for the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) offered to many Salvadoran refugees because she did not arrive by the deadline to submit the required documents. She said the TPS amnesty law that would offer residency to incoming refugees ended before 1981. Her husband qualified and filed papers on her behalf so that she could also obtain her residency. The couple met through the religious non-profit organization, CRECE, which offered Salvadoran refugees job training and legal orientation. After having volunteered at CRECE for a number of years, Mr. and Mrs. Vaquerano helped found the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) in San Francisco. The organization currently continues to provide legal assistance and family programs to immigrants from Central America.

Although both parents participated in marches promoting the Sanctuary movement and refugee services in San Francisco, they are not both as equally open to discussing their memories about the Salvadoran Civil War. Diana says she remembers her mother telling her about how before the war she was able to hang out with her school friends and walk through the streets freely. During the war, a curfew known as *toque de queda* was put in place that limited her mother's freedom.

Diana's mother also told her about being a college student studying psychology at the University of El Salvador (UES). Due to the constant strikes and protests held by the students opposed to the military's presence on campus, it was difficult for students to complete their exams. Mrs.

Vaquerano said that although she tried moving to the Jesuit University of Central America (UCA) she still was not able to finish her degree. The lack of security motivated her to immigrate to the United States.

When asked about the memories her father has shared with her, Diana said he doesn't like to speak about the war with her. She knows the military occupied San Vicente and that her father moved to the capital in San Salvador to escape the violence. She said some of his family members had disappeared in San Vicente but that he reunited with some of them when he reached the capital and when he came to the United States.

Her father said he was too busy to speak over the phone and preferred to have the questions sent to him via email even though he was called on two different occasions. His responses were brief.

When asked what his memories about El Salvador were, he responded that he had been a migrant throughout El Salvador and listed the different cities he had lived in. When he was asked about his memories about the war specifically he responded that the war affected people very much since it

limited their liberties and power was concentrated among the military. In this regard, Mr. Vaquerano did not go into detail about his personal memories. The brevity of his responses may have been attributed to a hectic work schedule or it may symbolize the repression of negative memories. Lastly, when asked what he tells his daughter, Diana, about El Salvador he responded that he tells her about the beaches, the rivers, the people and the history of the country although from her responses it does not seem he gives her detailed information about his memories of the Civil War.

### **Breena Nuñez**

Breena is a Visual Communication Design senior and is 22 years old. Her mother, Mayra Angelica Miller, was born in Guatemala and her father Manuel Atilio Nuñez was born in the department of Santa Ana in El Salvador. They met in San Francisco when Breena's mother invited Breena's father to a Christian service. After having two children, Breena and her older brother, Breena's parents divorced. Breena was about ten years old in the fifth grade when this happened. Her has since remarried with a man of Caucasian descent.

Mrs. Miller left Guatemala with her mother in 1972 to join Mrs. Miller's father who had already been living in the United States for five years. Breena's mother was about 12 years old when she left Guatemala. She filed for residency papers through her father. Mr. Nuñez left El Salvador in the late 1970s when he was about 18 years old. He said he studied until the sixth grade and did not continue his education because he saw the need to help his family with finances. After having completed a three year apprenticeship at a mechanic shop, he found himself at a loss for a job. Frustrated, he fell into alcoholism and his mother kicked him out of the house. Mr. Nuñez left his

house with nothing but fifty cents in his pocket and hitchhiked his way to Mexico. After having lived there for about a year, he moved to San Francisco with his older sister. He obtained his residency when he married Breena's mother. Mrs. Miller is currently 51 years old and Mr. Nuñez is 52.

Acknowledging her dual identity, Breena said that her perception of El Salvador was a combination of her father's positive memories and her mother's negative interpretation of the country due to the violent war coverage she saw on T.V. Breena said her father would often speak to her about his hometown helping her understand the economic difficulties he faced living there yet reminiscing on the simplicity of life and carefree spirit he felt living there. Because Mr. Nuñez was in Mexico when the Civil War began in 1980, he does not have personal memories attached to the violence that took place in his native country. His knowledge of the war was based off the oral accounts he heard from Salvadoran refugees coming to San Francisco during the 1980s and the news coverage he saw on T.V. Mr. Nuñez remembers seeing a lot of T.V. content that highlighted the military's victories over the guerillas which he said made sense since the United States was financing the government led military.

Growing up, mainly with her mother, Breena said her mother depicted El Salvador as a dangerous place. She had also tuned into the news about the country during the war and had blacklisted the country as a possible destination for her daughter. Instead Breena, visited Guatemala as a child. Breena said she internalized her mother's view on El Salvador and thought she would be considered a dangerous person if she said she was from there. Due to her father's absence, she also

felt discouraged from wanting to ask questions about an identity that at the time stirred negative memories about Breena's father for her mom.

Yet when Breena was 16 years old, she visited El Salvador with several of her cousins. Although her mother's concerns made Breena anxious, she said she felt like she had to make the trip. "They said I might get kidnapped. They said I might not come back to the United States but something told me that this was part of who I was. I was able to see another half that I didn't know about myself."

## **Summarized Findings**

### **Parent's Memories and Their Children's Cultural Identity**

Parents memories influence the way their children's perceive their parent's native country and the way they view their cultural identity. Diana, who has received a lot of information about what the war was like from her mother, has grown up understanding the importance her history has to who she is. In fact, Diana has a tattoo of the outline of El Salvador on the top of one of her feet to show just how proud she is of her roots. It seems like the lack information about the war from her father has not diluted how proud she feels to be Salvadoran.

The same can be said about Hector and Breena. Although Hector's parents do not often speak to him about the violent memories they have of El Salvador during the Civil War, Hector is often seen around the USF campus wearing Salvadoran jerseys and sweatshirts. He said, "My brother would call me *gringo* and I would say no I'm from El Salvador. I was always proud of being Salvadoran. I was raised to be proud about where I come from." As for Breena, she said she

identifies as Central American because she feels it encompasses her Guatemalan and Salvadoran identity. Although growing up she says she identified more as Guatemalan, she is now more interested in exploring her Salvadoran identity. She is currently working on a design project that seeks to illustrate the diminishing size of mangroves in El Salvador. She has also connected with her father's sister and asked her more about what it was like to live in Santa Ana during the Civil War. It seems that in her case the absence of information has motivated her to want to learn more and reconnect with a component of her identity she sometimes repressed.

As Pierre Nora states in his work "Generations," U.S.E.U. makes up the generation of children whose parents survived the Salvadoran Civil War. The fact that the traumatic event of the war is tied to their cultural identity regardless of how many memories their parents share about the internal conflict is what I believe draws students to U.S.E.U. Students desire to understand their cultural identity and doing that requires becoming aware of their history whether it be through media such as *Nueva Sintesis* or participation in student organizations such as U.S.E.U.

### **U.S.E.U. and Nueva Sintesis as Sites of Memory**

A recent member to U.S.E.U., having joined Spring 2011, Breana said she was motivated to become a part of the organization because meeting other Guatemalan, Salvadoran and students of mixed descent made her feel a part of a community. She no longer feels she is alone in her desire to explore the different facets of her cultural identity. Breana said she referred to *Nueva Sintesis* as a resource to learn more about current issues taking place in El Salvador. She said she is also happy she can find *caliche* and information in the student contribution section. She would like to

expand her *caliche* vocabulary and feels inspired by the number of U.S.E.U. students pursuing higher education.

Hector said he likes to be a part of U.S.E.U. because he likes that it dedicates special attention to Salvadoran culture. He is a member of the Latin American Student Organization (L.A.S.O.) at USF but feels it is important to have a space for Salvadoran students because it shows the growing presence of Salvadorans in higher education. According to Hector, the fact that U.S.E.U. is a statewide organization shows the increasing impact of the Salvadoran community.

Currently the Director of Community Service in the chapter at USF, he said he aspires to become president. He looks at political news in *Nueva Sintesis* with the hopes of teaching Salvadoran history and current events to future members of U.S.E.U.

Diana said her family moved to Boston when she was 10 years old. She had few Salvadoran friends growing up and living in a place where the majority of Latinos have roots in the Carribean, Diana said she felt the extra need to represent her Central American roots. Moving to San Francisco in pursuit of her college degree, Diana said she liked that U.S.E.U. provided both a social and academic space where students could embrace and learn more about their culture. She said she reads *Nueva Sintesis* to inform herself of what is happening in El Salvador.

### **Proud of Being Salvadoran**

All parents with the exception of Breena's mother who is from Guatemala, said they felt proud of being from El Salvador and that they supported their children identifying as Salvadoran. When asked whether students identified as Salvadoran American, all three said they didn't. In fact, the

term American was a term they all rejected. This could be because as author Alejandro Portes suggests, the students may equate the identity of American with a conception of whiteness they do not consider they fit into. In an era where many Latino students associate their cultural identity with their parent's country of origin, it becomes easier to understand why U.S.E.U. members prefer to call themselves Salvadorans rather than Americans or Salvadoran Americans for that matter.

Diana said that her close connection to her culture, makes her speak about her identity in terms of her parents' native country rather than referring to herself as an American. Hector said that although he was born in the United States and his brother was born in El Salvador, he identifies as Salvadoran and not American. He says that the fact that he speaks Spanish and his knowledge that his parents were born in El Salvador is sufficient to make him feel proud about anything that has to do with Salvadoran culture. Breana said she feels picked on when her step father tells her she should call herself American because she was born in the United States. She says she identifies with anything that has to do with Guatemala and El Salvador because the history of those two places is what she feels defines her cultural identity.

Such responses make us consider Portes' argument that students might equate the label of American with a notion of whiteness or ethnic discrimination they do not identify with. In the end, it seems travel experience, parent's testimonies, virtual sites of memory and involvement in student organizations can all contribute to the shaping of cultural identity.

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**Interviews: Students (November-December 2011)**

Martinez, Hector. 18 years old. Business Administration freshman at the University of San Francisco (USF), Interview was completed via phone

Vaquerano, Diana. 19 years old. Exercise and Sports Science sophomore at the University of San Francisco (USF), Interview was completed via phone

Nuñez, Breena. 22 years old, Visual Communication Design Senior at San Francisco State University (SFSU), Interview was completed via phone

Carcamo, Jennifer. 21 years old, Political Science Senior at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Interview was completed via Google chat

**Interviews: Parents (November-December 2011)**

Martinez, Jose Antonio. 52 years old, Interview was done via phone

Martinez, Hilda. 52 years old, Interview was done via phone

Vaquerano, Ana Maria Ramirez. 51 years old, Interview was done via phone

Vaquerano, Jose. 50 years old, Interview was done via email

Nuñez, Manuel Atilio. 52 years old, Interview was done via phone

Miller, Mayra Angelica. 51 years old, Interview was done via phone