

## **“Already Having Forgotten:” Violence, Its Memory, and Political Identity in El Salvador**

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Abstract: El Salvador suffered from a brutal civil war from approximately 1980 until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. Civil war identities were formed by the incremental experience of violence, solidified by the post-conflict amnesty, and subsequently incorporated into a political landscape that persists today. While there is a pervasive sense that “the past is the past,” civil war identities continue to be salient determinants in political decision making for both voters and politicians. Through an examination of a series of interviews conducted by the author in 2013, supplemented by other primary and secondary sources, the argument is made that the polarization of current Salvadoran political identity is a result of past experiences of violence and the way past violence is collectively remembered.

## **Introduction**

Current Salvadoran political identity is influenced by a variety of multivalent forces: notions of what it means to be a Salvadoran are clouded by a pervasive sense of alienation from the political process, a general concern for safety in a rule-of-law vacuum, and the persistence of civil war identities. The prolonged salience of civil war loyalties post-conflict has led to a highly polarized national identity. Answering the question of what it means to be a Salvadoran is problematic because any notion of a cohesive identity is undermined by the persistence of polarizing civil war loyalties.

## **Argument**

The durability of civil war identities is related to several factors: the formative experiences of violence during the war, and the treatment of these experiences in post-war understandings, collective memorialization, and current politics. This paper shows that the polarization of current Salvadoran political identity is not only a carry-over of civil war identities, but a direct result of the way past violence is collectively remembered.

## **Method**

In the summer of 2013, I conducted formal and informal interviews with three Americans working in El Salvador and with Salvadorans from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Related to my research at the time, each interview or guided conversation was informed by the question: “what does it mean to be a Salvadoran?” Among the themes that emerged from these interviews was the persistence of civil war identities in terms of self-conception for individuals and groups, and in terms of structuring the current political landscape. These same interviews also pointed to further analysis of how civil war experiences have been remembered and what effect these experiences of violence have had on political identity. In the following analysis, the original

interviews are supplemented by the work of Gorkin et al. in *From Grandmother to Granddaughter: Salvadoran Women's Stories*, a collection of interviews conducted from 1996 to 1998.

In addition to the observation that civil war identities continue to frame current politics, several shared themes emerge from the interviews: first, violence had a polarizing effect on identity, evidenced by the fact that active participants in the violence were not ideologues before the war, but instead forced by their circumstances to pick a side; second, Salvadorans seemingly express a kind of resigned acceptance of the civil war's legacy, repeating dismissively that "the past is the past;" and third, there is evidence that the violence of the civil war is beginning to undergo a reconceptualization in order to incorporate this violent past into a coherent national narrative. In the following sections, I will address two main points about Salvadoran political identity: first, civil war identities were products of what Stathis Kalyvas calls "endogenous polarization" and their relationship to experiences of violence has led to their continued relevance for current Salvadoran politics; and second, the process of collective memorialization of these experiences of violence has a direct influence on future identity formation and what it means to be a part of El Salvador as a nation.

### **Civil War and the Formation of Political Identity**

According to Stathis Kalyvas's *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, "Civil war is defined as *armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the onset of hostilities*" (Kalyvas 2006, 5). Kalyvas lays out four logic puzzles that characterize the nature of civil war: the application of violence that seems to defy logic; the "enduring brutality" of the violence; the disconnect between macrohistorical and microhistorical accounts of identity formation; and, finally, the "disjunction between the

macrolevel causes of the war and the microlevel patterns of violence” (2). Kalyvas’s analysis of microlevel, individual accounts of civil war violence force us to question historical narratives that subsume individual experiences under an over-arching, easily generalized trajectory.

Kalyvas identifies three levels of analysis for engaging with civil wars: macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevel. “The first level focuses on interaction between (state and nonstate) political actors; the second level deals with the interaction between political actors and the populations they rule; and the third level concentrates on interactions within small groups and among individuals” (Kalyvas 2006, 10). Adhering to a process he calls “disaggregation,” Kalyvas resists the tendency to conflate the three levels, instead focusing on how each level experiences civil war differently. For example, macrolevel accounts of civil war “all assume unitary actors” (10). In other words, a macrolevel view assumes that “groups are monolithic and behave as such” (10). Such an assumption is problematic for the study of the dynamics of civil war because “posting coherent, identifiable political groups with clear preferences fails to match the vast complexity, fluidity, and ambiguity one encounters on the ground” (10). It is therefore important to highlight the microlevel choices of individuals in order to understand the nuanced history of a conflict.

### El Salvador, Cold War Battleground

In October of 1979, Salvadoran President General Carlos Humberto Romero was overthrown by a group of young military officers (Wood 2003, 26). After the coup, “as the country descended toward civil war, four guerilla organizations (later joined by the fifth) founded the FMLN in November 1980 to better coordinate their efforts” (27). Accounts of the Salvadoran civil war pin the right-wing elite against the communist FMLN, or Farabundo Martí

National Liberation Front.<sup>1</sup> The war's main revolutionary opposition group, grown out of a coalition of socialist, social democratic, and communist organizations, the FMLN did not predate the war in any organized form.

Though communist and socialist groups were highly mobilized before the coup, it seems discordant to note that the coup itself was not carried out by revolutionaries, but by opportunist members of the military. The disconnect lies with the broad-brush, or, to use Kalyvas's terminology, macrohistorical treatment of the conflict: El Salvador's civil war was and is understood as one of the last real Cold War conflicts. Because of the leftist rhetoric of the opposition, the Reagan administration considered the civil war "part of a broader struggle between communism and democracy" (Coutin 2005, 510). Consequently, the U.S. provided "over \$1 million a day to assist Salvadoran forces in their fight against guerilla insurgents" (510). In an attempt to avoid "another Nicaragua," U.S. officials funneled aid into an anti-guerilla military campaign long after records of its human rights abuses were corroborated (Armstrong 1982, 113).

Not only can it be argued that its classification as a Cold War struggle dramatically altered the civil war's trajectory, the imposition of a Cold War narrative onto the conflict also influenced post-war macrohistorical accounts of the violence. That is to say, we, and most Salvadorans, now understand the Salvadoran civil war to be an extension of the U.S. versus Soviet Union worldwide battle. This black and white understanding of the conflict's causes was difficult to maintain even while the fighting raged: though policy makers drew ideological lines between the two sides, El Salvador's war was not necessarily as clear-cut as communism versus

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<sup>1</sup> Farabundo Martí was a communist peasant organizer who died in La Matanza, or "The Killing." This massacre, in which government forces took the lives of anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians, was ordered by military president General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in 1932. Martí is remembered by the FMLN as a martyr.

democracy. In her account of El Salvador's political climate in 1982, entitled *Salvador*, Joan Didion explains, "It was certainly possible to describe some members of the opposition, as Deane Hinton had, as 'out-and-out Marxists,' but it was equally possible to describe other members of the opposition...as 'a broad-based coalition of moderate and center-left groups'" (Didion 1983). Didion claims that Deane Hinton, U.S. ambassador to El Salvador from 1981 to 1983, could not accurately describe the entire armed opposition as 'out-and-out Marxists' because of the FMLN's coalition nature. She goes on to call U.S. Cold War justifications into question:

It was possible to talk about Cuba and Nicaragua, and by extension the Soviet Union, and national security: no one could doubt that Cuba and Nicaragua had at previous points supported the armed opposition (in El Salvador)...but neither could anyone...be unequivocally convinced that American interests lay on one side or another of what Deane Hinton referred to as a civil war (Didion 1983).

Didion's trepidation in labeling the conflict using Cold War ideology reflects the knowledge that things were more complicated than they seemed, a realization that supports Kalyvas's argument against macrohistorical accounts of civil war.

#### Current Politics and the "Real FMLN"

While labeling the conflict using Cold War ideological boundaries ignored the nuanced reality of the civil war, this communist-anticommunist duality has persisted post-conflict as the major split in current Salvadoran politics. Carlos,<sup>2</sup> a graduate of a bilingual school in San Salvador, now a PhD candidate at Princeton University, describes Salvadoran politics as being stuck within a civil war framework:

In many ways, the political sphere (and I would argue the country's socioeconomic elite) have not moved past the civil war. We don't talk about it openly; that is, politicians don't

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<sup>2</sup> All interviewees' names have been changed unless otherwise noted.

cite the conflict as their birthright and philosophical standing ground, as Americans do the founding fathers. The conflict presents itself as a false party-binary nonetheless, there to hide the pettiness, selfishness, and ineptitude of politicians. I would say both parties need to move past the faux-communist threat (Carlos 2013).

Though the Salvadoran civil war is not explicitly part of current political discourse in the same way that American politicians call on the ideals of their Revolution, the identities solidified during the war's violence still define the boundaries of what is politically possible. According to Carlos, the lingering "faux-communist threat" is a meaningless carry-over from the civil war, an excuse for power-hungry politicians to demonize the opposition without debating any specific policies. There is a binary opposition between the former guerilla organization turned political party, the FMLN, and the right-wing elite-supported party, Arena, the National Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista), which perpetuates the ineptitude of Salvadoran politics as one party merely undoes its predecessor's reforms once power shifts.

One area of Salvadoran politics not marked by this back and forth used to be the presidency: after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, El Salvador saw four consecutive Arena presidents (some as a result of contested election results) (Wilkinson 1994). Mauricio Funes's victory in the 2009 presidential election was therefore ground-breaking for El Salvador because it represented the first peaceful transfer of power to the leftist FMLN. In some ways, this indicated that El Salvador as a democracy was maturing beyond the fear of a "faux communist threat," to use Carlos's phrase, solidifying the FMLN as a viable political party for those who still feared its guerilla background.

Yet, the political discussion surrounding the upcoming presidential election in February of 2014 indicates that the FMLN's association with the guerilla insurgency still defines its politics. The clearest indication of this lasting influence can be seen in the FMLN's choice of presidential candidate: Salvador Sánchez Cerén is a former guerilla commander serving the

current administration as Vice-President and Minister of Education.<sup>3</sup> Phil Dimon,<sup>4</sup> a Junior Political Officer at the American Embassy of El Salvador, explains, "...even though (current president) Funes himself is kind of moderate, he's not the real FMLN. Sánchez Cerén is the real [FMLN]" (Dimon 2013). As Dimon indicates, the FMLN is still defined by its direct association with certain acts of violence, even twenty years after the end of the war. Younger politicians like Funes, a journalist who interviewed the guerrillas during the conflict, are not considered the "real FMLN:" "Funes was the first FMLN candidate who didn't fight in the war. Sánchez Cerén fought in the war, is accused of war crimes. [If he became president], even though it would be the same party, it would be a major change" (Dimon 2013). Presumably, Dimon believes that Sánchez Cerén will live up to his designation as the "real FMLN" and finally take the country in a truly communist direction. Fear of a communist takeover, despite Funes's administration as proof to the contrary, is a legitimate fear for many Salvadorans who distrust the FMLN's background.

Not only does the FMLN's choice of candidate reflect the lasting effects of civil war identities, the reactions of FMLN loyalists to Sánchez Cerén as a candidate also point to how civil war identities determine current politics: many feel obligated to vote for the FMLN candidate, despite the fact that they doubt his ability to serve as president. Javier, a community

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<sup>3</sup> Current President Mauricio Funes is ineligible to run again because El Salvador's Constitution forbids consecutive terms. Former president Antonio "Tony" Saca, however, is running for a second term in this election under the new coalition party UNIDAD. There was some debate as to whether the Constitution forbade all second terms, or simply consecutive terms. Ultimately, he was allowed to campaign.

<sup>4</sup> Real name



leader from the Bajo Lempa region of Usulután, El Salvador,<sup>5</sup> and wounded veteran of the guerilla, explains:

The FMLN has had an imbalance, because the candidate, who we love because he is a fellow guerrilla who has struggled who knows how many years behind us and everything, is not the ideal a candidate...many will vote for him, out of obligation or because we cannot betray each other and we have to give our vote (for the FMLN), being former militants and all (Javier 2013).<sup>i</sup>

Javier recognizes that FMLN supporters are conflicted: as former guerillas or sympathizers, they identify with the party and the candidate, but Sánchez Cerén has not proven to be an effective politician. As Minister of Education, a position he took on as Funes's Vice-President, he promised many reforms to Salvadoran teachers, but was unable to deliver. Manuel, a local high school teacher and community leader also in the Bajo Lempa, expresses disappointment:

Sánchez Cerén was Minister of Education, and he said he would work hard, because the area under the Ministry of Education is in a bad way. And he committed himself to the teachers that he would work for them, and he did not. And now he's going for president and he failed to keep his promise? He, from my point of view, as a candidate, is screwed. He does not work. (Manuel 2013).<sup>ii</sup>

There is very little in terms of concrete success that Sánchez Cerén can point to during his time as Vice-President as proof of his effectiveness as a leader. Therefore, Manuel is similarly conflicted as to whether or not the FMLN should get his vote in 2014: "Sánchez Cerén for me, he is not a good candidate. So that's why, there's that doubt about whether to vote for the FMLN or not" (Manuel 2013).<sup>iii</sup>

Despite Dimon's assertion that an FMLN victory next year would signal a "major change," there is little to indicate that radically different policies would result from another FMLN victory. This is mainly because of El Salvador's close relationship with the United States,

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<sup>5</sup> The Bajo Lempa region is widely considered to be an FMLN stronghold. The majority of its residents are former refugees or members of the guerilla displaced from their homes as a result of the conflict. As a condition of the Peace Accords, they were awarded land in Lempa River watershed of Usulután.

evidenced by the nation's use of the American dollar and the fact that "nearly a quarter of El Salvador's population now works in the U.S." (Economic Weekly 2009). Truly communist reforms would also threaten programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact, an important source of aid recently renewed in September of 2013. The MCC is an independent U.S. foreign aid agency founded by Congress in 2004 that negotiates aid compacts with developing nations worldwide (Millennium Challenge Corporation 2013).

Roddy Hughes,<sup>6</sup> director of Voices on the Border, a U.S.-based non-profit that has worked with refugees of the civil war since the 1980's, expresses considerable disappointment in Funes's administration for not being "red" enough to implement policies more in line with his party's communist roots. Comparing Funes to his predecessor, Arena president Tony Saca, Hughes declares, "Funes hasn't done anything differently. Maybe with some of the social policies, there's a difference. But [in terms of] implementing progressive policies, not so much" (Hughes 2013). For others, Funes' more moderate approach to politics signals a step in the right direction, towards a maturing and less polarized political scene.

While it is clear from Funes's time in office that at least a portion of the FMLN does not want to make El Salvador into the next Cuba, the strong party association with civil war identities makes it hard to dissuade those wary of the FMLN from the fear that another leftist president will turn El Salvador into "a communist regime" (Javier 2013).<sup>iv</sup>. The fact that this fear never came to anything during Funes's time in office is proof once more of the "false party-binary" and "faux-communist threat" that Carlos identified: the civil war identities that continue to define and determine political decision-making in El Salvador are in many ways simply the

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<sup>6</sup> Real name

residue of a macrohistorical Cold War narrative and have little to do with real policies. These limiting identities continue to influence political decision making for voters and politicians alike in large part because they were solidified by experiences of violence during the war.

#### “Endogenous Polarization”

Stathis Kalyvas in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* highlights the power of violence to guide and determine identity formation as part of the logic behind its use in civil war. Arguing that there is a “method” to the seeming “madness” of civil war, as his title suggests, Kalyvas posits violence as a useful tool in civil war because it functions as the impetus for changing or adopting political identities. In a restricted choice environment, loyalties are determined by the necessity of survival in the face of actual violence, or the threat of potential violence. Therefore, part of the continued salience of civil war identities for current Salvadoran politics is attributable to the influence of experiences of violence.

In what Kalyvas calls the “polarization thesis,” civil war violence is explained as having its roots in “prewar cleavages” (Kalyvas 2006, 77). In other words, the parties that make up the warring factions of any civil war are conceived of as rival groups before violence breaks out. In El Salvador’s case, most accounts of the civil war look back almost fifty years to explain the conflict’s beginnings.

The roots of the civil war in El Salvador lie in the country’s long-standing patterns of economic, political and social exclusion...In 1932, approximately 17,000 indigenous people were killed by state forces in the aftermath of a failed uprising organized by the fledgling Communist Party, an event that seared elite memories and solidified elite opposition to political reform (Wood 2003, 21).

This massacre, in which government forces took the lives of anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians, was ordered by military president Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and became known as La Matanza, or “The Killing” (Armstrong 1982, 9). For most historians it

marks the onset of tensions between communist or populist groups and the consequently anticommunist elite.

Kalyvas takes issue with the polarization thesis's assumption that rival groups pre-date (in El Salvador's case, by fifty years) the onset of civil war violence. To support this challenge, he notes the disconnect between macrohistorical and microhistorical accounts of civil war:

...almost every macrohistorical account of civil war points to the importance of preexisting popular allegiances for the war's outcome, yet almost every microhistorical account points to a host of endogenous mechanisms, whereby allegiances and identities tend to result from the war or are radically transformed by it (Kalyvas 2006, 3).

Microlevel experiences of identity formation track the political identification of individuals, rather than large groups. Patterns that emerge from studying these microlevel tendencies indicate that polarization is "endogenous to the conflict," a product of "initial predispositions and preferences that flow directly from prewar politics" but nonetheless "shift with the dynamics of the conflict" (Kalyvas 2006, 78). Crediting endogenous polarization posits identity formation as a non-linear process influenced by a variety of factors, especially violence. Attempts to consolidate and generalize civil war identities into categories along class lines, ethnic identities, or prewar political commitments are therefore at least partially misguided because they ignore the altering experience of violence.

For example, according to Carlos Cabarrú's 1983 study of Salvadoran peasants, class relations were a "poor predictor of allegiances compared to factors such as kin, conjuncture (who gets to organize peasants first), and micropolitics (the ability of organizations to manage intercommunity conflicts)" (Kalyvas 2006, 81). The macrolevel understanding of the conflict pitted the lower classes, mobilized by communist groups, against the military-backed, right-wing elite who favored the status quo to protect their land interests. Nevertheless, Cabarrú's study indicates that class was not a reliable determinant of political affiliation during the civil war.

Class did not automatically determine political loyalties, but instead became part of an environment of choice influenced by micropolitics, family relationships, locale, daily experiences of violence, and the threat of violence.

Moreover, many Salvadorans were not committed ideologues before their circumstances forced them to “pick a side.” Instead, experiences of violence or threats of violence were the motivating factor behind deciding political loyalties during the war. For example, Niña Julia, a young mother by the onset of the war, notes how violence forced her to move: “Over in Zacamil was a bad place to be. That’s why we moved out of there” (Gorkin 2000, 210). Similarly, Lupe, like many others, is a living example of how conjuncture determined political identity (Kalyvas 2006, 81). Forced to move because of a family dispute, Lupe’s, and her family’s, political identity was determined largely by their new choice of locale: “When we went to San Vicente, you see, it was in the late ‘70s. We didn’t know it when we went there, but San Vicente was one of the places where the guerillas were just getting started... a little while after we got there, things began to happen. The FMLN started organizing people” (Gorkin 2000, 129). She goes on to express concern for her safety having unwittingly moved into a guerilla stronghold, where the covert activities of the insurgents were raising the suspicions of the Salvadoran military in the area: “I knew we had to get out of San Vicente... But we had no place to go... So we took off north and went first to one place near the Honduras border... We had no choice. We had to flee El Salvador to save ourselves” (Gorkin 2000, 130). Ultimately, the threat of violence forced Lupe and her family to leave El Salvador for the refugee camps of Honduras.

With the start of the armed conflict in about 1980, thousands of displaced Salvadorans were forced to escape over the border into Honduras. Once established, the refugee camps became a sort of recruiting pool for the growing guerilla army, where insurgents could convince

refugees to join the cause. According to a report by Doctors Without Borders, an organization which worked extensively with Salvadoran refugees, the guerillas “regarded the camps as both an ideological showcase and a rear base for their armed struggle, and thus obliged the refugee population to be entirely devoted to the cause (Medecins 2004). María, Lupe’s granddaughter, joined the guerilla army at age 13. She remembers, echoing her grandmother’s language:

We just didn’t have any place to go...The only safe place to go was this refugee center further up in Honduras...What happened is that people from the FMLN came to the camp. Yes, guerillas. They came just like they were refugees. They’d stay awhile, and when they were there they had these meetings. The guerillas told us about what was happening in El Salvador, why we had to organize and fight for a better life (Gorkin 2000, 102).

Maria, and others who went on to serve in various capacities in the guerilla army, developed their understanding of the insurgents’ ideology after the war was well underway, a clear example of Kalyvas’s theory of endogenous polarization. Far from a committed revolutionary until circumstance and increasing threat of violence forced her into Honduras, Maria was in fact a child before her involvement in the insurgency. She was not alone: roughly 20 percent of the guerilla armed forces were child soldiers, and a portion of the military was also made up of recruits younger than 18 (Portillo 2000, 14).

In addition to conjuncture, as Maria’s example indicates, “the ability of political actors to provide protection for their supporters” was also an important determining factor for identity formation (Kalyvas 2006, 81). For example, “When asked why he joined, a Salvadoran insurgent answered that he ‘had no choice...It was a matter of survival. Those were the days when *not* to go meant getting killed’” (157). Kalyvas explains: “indiscriminate violence allows insurgents to solve collective action problems by turning the protection of the civilian population into a selective incentive” (157). In this way, the manipulation of violence allowed the insurgency to gain recruits. And further on, “In El Salvador, Cabarrús (1983:195) argued, the power of the

revolutionary organization was its ability to provide security for its members,” or sympathizers, as the case may have been (157). While common sense might dictate that remaining neutral would secure your safety, to “not go” or not pick a side was instead an imminent danger.

### **Violence and Post-Conflict Identity: “Already Having Forgotten”**

After more than a decade of stalemated warfare the eastern hill country, largely exacerbated by foreign military aid from the United States, peace negotiations moderated by the United Nations began in 1990. In January of 1992, the two sides signed the Chapultepec Peace Accords in Mexico. According to Ana Cristina de Sol,<sup>7</sup> who served as El Salvador’s ambassador to France, Belgium, Portugal, the EU, and UNESCO from 1989 to 1993, and later as ambassador to the United States from 1993 to 1997, “Peace was achieved because the Salvadoran people decided they were tired of war” (de Sol 2013).<sup>v</sup> Though a ceasefire was achieved and the beginnings of regularly functioning democracy were instated, post-conflict El Salvador was, and is, faced with the problem of how to engage with its recent history.

Moving forward, how El Salvador chooses to remember its violent past will have political import and further consequences for identity formation. Benedict Anderson’s work *Imagined Communities* argues that how violence is remembered collectively shapes group identity. What is incorporated into the narrative that defines a nation is a political project undertaken by the state. In other words, history is written with a particular agenda in mind. The agenda of nationalism, that of forming a common bond when “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them,” is not served by writing a history of violence between classes, ethnic groups etc. (Anderson 1991, 6). Therefore, a project

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<sup>7</sup> Real name

of simplification and domestication is applied to the collective project of remembering historical violence.

To illustrate this point, Anderson calls our attention to the grammar structure in Ernest Renan's definition of what it means to be French in *Que 'est-ce qu'une nation?* (What is a nation?). Renan claims that the essence of nation is that its members have certain things in common, for example, forgetting two prominent and violent events in French history: St. Bartholomew's Day massacre and the Massacre of the Italians at Aigues-Morte. Upon analyzing Renan's language, Anderson is "...struck by the peremptory syntax of *doit avoir oublie*...- 'obliged to have forgotten'" (Anderson 1991, 200). This grammatical structure is telling because no context is given for the tragedies Renan references: "In effect, Renan's readers were being told to 'have already forgotten' what Renan's own words assumed they naturally remembered!" (200). In other words, Renan's definition of what it means to be French requires embracing a certain cognitive dissonance: to simultaneously "remember/forget" past national tragedies. In this way, Renan's definition "suggests that 'already having forgotten' ancient tragedies is a prime contemporary civic duty" (200).

This process of "remembering/forgetting," Anderson argues, is operationalized in civic education, characterized by

...a systematic historiographical campaign, deployed by the state mainly through the state's school system, to 'remind' every young Frenchwoman and Frenchman of a series of antique slaughters which are now inscribed as 'family history.' Having to 'already have forgotten' tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be 'reminded' turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies (Anderson 1991, 201).

The young French must be reminded of ancient tragedies because they have also been taught to forget them. Ultimately, Anderson argues that this seemingly contradictory process serves the



important function of “constructing” a “national genealogy,” or in other words, defining the French nation.

Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community...both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1991, 6). Nations are constructed abstractions, conceived from the collective imaginations of individuals who all “consider themselves to be a nation, or behave as if they have formed one” (6). The identity of the French nation is built on telling a cohesive version of French history, one not marred by massacres or “unbrotherly” violence. Interestingly, Renan neglects to use the word massacre at all in referencing St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre and the Massacre of the Italians at Aigues-Morte, further reflecting the domestication of violence in its remembrance in order to create a cohesive national identity. This paradoxical education for members of a nation is not unique to the French; Anderson goes on to reveal this tension in American history. Similarly deployed through education, Anderson notes:

A vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers’ rather than between--as they briefly were--two sovereign nation-states. (We can be sure, however, that if the Confederacy had succeeded in maintaining its independence, this ‘civil war’ would have been replaced in memory by something quite unbrotherly.) (201).

Anderson argues that conceptualizing the “hostilities of 1861-65” as a “civil” war between “brothers” served/serves the purposes of creating a national identity. Here Anderson evokes the phrase “reassurance of fratricide:” brothers killing brothers is more easily incorporated into a national historical narrative than a disruptive, divisive war (199). Therefore, classifying the violence as a civil war, both during and after the conflict, has political import.

Like state education, constructing a memorial to commemorate a national tragedy has political import because it begins the process of writing official, state-sanctioned history. Tony

Judt, echoing Anderson's call for simultaneously remembering and forgetting past violence, expresses concern about the sometimes counterproductive effects of collective memorialization.

In erecting formal reminders or replicas of something we ought to remember, we risk further forgetfulness: By making symbols or remnants stand for the whole, we ease ourselves into an illusion. In James Young's words, 'Once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember... Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience' (Judt 2008, 198).

Again, the relationship between remembering and forgetting is explored: a memorial, as its name indicates, serves to help us remember an important event. And yet, now that we have publicly commemorated said event, we can begin to forget it. Anderson's call to "'already have forgotten' tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be 'reminded'" is played out exactly: by cursory remembrance, we are allowed to forget. This in turn contributes to the state's project of constructing a national identity by endorsing "collective inattention to recent history," a phrase reminiscent of Anderson's "already having forgotten" (257).

"What happened, happened"

If "'already having forgotten' ancient tragedies is a prime contemporary civic duty," then what is the protocol for recent tragedies? Instead of contending with centuries-old historical violence, several generations of Salvadorans still remember a conflict less than twenty-five years old. Thus, contemporary Salvadoran politics and the "systematic historiographical campaign" of public education are only beginning to contend with how the civil war will be remembered. According to Anderson, this process will begin to teach members of the Salvadoran nation how they need to "already have forgotten" past violence.

In some ways, it seems as though this process has already succeeded: there is a widespread sense that Salvadorans have "gotten over" the war, or are inclined to act as if "the past is the past." This is especially apparent to non-Salvadorans. Phil Dimon notes that not only

has the legacy of U.S. involvement in Salvadoran affairs not affected his work at the American Embassy, but also that Salvadoran society as a whole no longer ascribes much importance to the history of the civil war. “It’s just a topic of conversation that doesn’t come up. Which is pretty amazing considering that we played a major role in the war and the war ended only 20 years ago...Salvadorans in general and Salvadorans in government have just moved beyond it...it’s kind of like a “the past is the past” thing” (Dimon 2013). Javier expresses a similar resignation in the face of the war’s memory. “Well, what happened, happened. We shouldn’t stop remembering it, but in the things of the future...there are many positive things...” (Javier 2013).<sup>vi</sup> Though resigned to the reality of the war, he seems hopeful for the future. Despite the sense that Salvadorans suppress the memory of the violence, clearly the civil war is not forgotten because identities formed by the experience of this violence continue to frame current politics and limit what is politically possible.

Dimon’s error in declaring that Salvadorans have “moved beyond” the conflict lies in his conflation of macrolevel and microlevel understandings of the war’s legacy. To recall Kalyvas’s definitions, the macrolevel is “the realm of elites, ideologies, and grand politics,” whereas the microlevel refers to “intracommunity dynamics and individual behavior” (Kalyvas 2006, 10). Because of the state’s consistent inability to address the civil war in a publicly meaningful way, with a few exceptions, it is fairly easy to assume that all Salvadorans have overcome the trauma of a 12-year civil war. And yet, to make this assumption ignores individual formative experiences of violence and the dynamics of family histories that retain the memories of these experiences.

### State-Sanctioned Memory, Or Lack Thereof

Arguably, another reason it seems to outsiders as though Salvadorans have “moved beyond” the violence of their recent past is because it is so recent. Painful memories of family members who went missing never to be heard from again are not stories easily told to strange American interviewers. Reactions to the project I conducted in the summer of 2008 were telling in this regard. When I told Salvadorans that I was researching Salvadoran political identity, most often their response was raised eyebrows. Many did not view Salvadoran politics as a topic worthy of study, or, because the memory of the civil war is so fresh, they wondered why anyone would investigate something so unpleasant.

Other non-Salvadoran voices have attributed this relative silence about the war not to emotional resignation, but to a kind of unresolved, buried, collective social trauma. Erik Chong, director of Furman University’s study-abroad programs in Latin America, describes El Salvador’s relationship to its past this way: “Though the fighting officially ceased more than 20 years ago, ‘El Salvador as an entire nation is still deeply traumatized by this war... The whole nation has PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], and violence seeps in and pervades society as a result’ (O’Neill 2013, 12). While Chong’s assertion is an over-simplified generalization, he raises an interesting point about the lack of public, collective, and state-sponsored recognition of the conflict. In fact, El Salvador’s attempts to collectively acknowledge the monumental human loss as a result of the civil war have been spotty.

One example of the state’s inability, or unwillingness, to wrestle with the creation of civil war memory can be seen in public education, and more specifically in Salvadoran university entrance exams. The Learning and Skills Test for Graduates of Secondary Education (Prueba de Aptitudes para Egresados de Educación Media), or PAES, is a standardized, state-administered

apptitude test necessary for acceptance at the university level in El Salvador. It covers four basic areas: Mathematics, Language and Literature, Social Science, and Natural Science. In the Social Science portion on Salvadoran history, the relevant information about the civil war that students are responsible for does not include the history leading up to the conflict, but instead the results of the Peace Accords, including provisions to limit and define the new role of the military, reform the judicial system, and establish a Truth Commission (Escuela Americana). Furthermore, the results of the Truth Commission's research are not incorporated into the PAES's treatment of civil war history.

According to the Truth Commission's final report *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador*, the Peace Accords that ended the war were explicit in defining the Commission's purpose and ultimate goals: "The Commission shall have the task of investigating serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth" (UN 1993). Nevertheless, the government did not officially recognize the results of the Truth Commission. Instead, on March 20, 1993, the same year that the Truth Commission's report was published, El Salvador forgave its war criminals in The General Amnesty Law for the Consolidation of Peace (La Ley de Amnistía General Para La Consolidación de La Paz). This action could be viewed as a direct negation of Article 5 of the Peace Accords, which declared of war crimes: "acts of this nature, regardless of the sector to which their perpetrators belong, must be the object of exemplary action by the law" (UN 1993). Not only were war criminals not subject to "exemplary action by the law," they never will be: "the amnesty law has been invoked to preclude the possibility of any further investigation" (Méndez 2006, 126).

The argument behind the sweeping Amnesty Law was that “peace was best served by forgiving and forgetting,” allowing society to transition from stalemated civil war to legitimate democratic process (Aguilera 2012, 3). The consequences of such a position meant that human rights abuses went un-prosecuted and Salvadoran society failed to purge itself of its most insidious elements. The PAES’s narrow view of national history and the Amnesty law’s blatant denial of the consequences of war crimes committed during the war are both examples of the state’s unwillingness to address the civil war, promoting instead “collective inattention to recent history” (Judt 2008, 257). Both represent attempts to deny the reality of past violence and “keep silent about the cataclysmic civil war” (DeLugan 2012, 108).

Extending Anderson’s argument about remembering/forgetting past violence, one can see how there is great power in the state’s creation of memory in the process of defining what it means to be a nation. In an article entitled “The Future of Memory,” Richard Ned Lebow argues that memory not only serves to help us remember the past, but also to help us shape the future: “memory works forward as well in the sense that our individual behavior and governmental policies are based on memories of worked or failed in the past” (Lebow 2008, 39). Consequently, the power to shape memory formation is extremely valuable because it dictates how the future will be formed as well.

“The ability to influence these (past) memories and, thus, their putative behavioral and policy implications, is one means of achieving influence in the present over the future...we do have imagined memories of the future. We routinely build scenarios with good or bad outcomes based on the lessons we think we have learned from the past...Future memories of this kind are just as important for building and sustaining identities as memories of the past” (39).

Lebow plays with the relationship between past, present, and future: “future memories” are formed from the forward projection of memories of the past, and painting a certain version of the future, based on the past, allows you to control the present.

## Violence in the Collective Memory

If controlling the formation of memory, both past and future, is so important for “achieving influence in the present,” then why has the Salvadoran state adopted a stance of virtual silence on matters associated with the civil war? When the silence is broken, any attempts to form a national genealogy have been marked “by a pervasive sense of impunity, justified as ‘letting bygones be bygones,’ to which former insurgents also contribute” (Méndez 2006, 126). Attempts to deal with other past national tragedies have made clear the “contradiction between the state’s general postwar support of national history, and...its policy to keep silent” (DeLugan 2012, 108). For example, the collective treatment of La Matanza, the massacre of peasants and indigenous people by government forces in 1932, offers evidence of this contradiction.

As a consequence of the Great Depression, the coffee market in El Salvador collapsed. With a disproportionate section of the Salvadoran economy devoted to tenant farmer coffee plantations, the results were catastrophic. Political unrest followed as “a military coup replaced the labor government of Salvadoran President Araujo with the military dictator General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez” in December of 1931 (Destiny’s Children). Shortly after, in January of 1932, “thousands of destitute indigenous peasants participated in a rebellion led by Agustín Farabundo Martí and supported by the Salvadoran Communist Party” (Destiny’s Children). The government response to the uprising was brutal, taking the lives of anywhere between 10,000 and 30,000 civilians, the majority of whom hailed from the Pipil tribe. As a result of this state repression, indigenous identity was virtually stamped out:

During “La Matanza” anyone wearing indigenous dress or anyone simply thought to be associated with the rebellion was shot... For El Salvador’s indigenous population, the effects of the massacre went far beyond the immediate death toll. As it became increasingly dangerous to be identified as indio (Indian), traditional dress, language and customs largely disappeared (Destiny’s Children).

Government sources refused to acknowledge the death toll, and La Matanza was both buried in the fog of the past, while at the same time remaining a strong warning against popular protest and the rhetoric of communism.

In fact, the collective memory of La Matanza is so distorted that a contemporary of this tragedy, albeit a child at the time, remembers the perpetrator of the massacre as “a great leader.” Niña Julia, a middle-class grandmother and former housekeeper, grew up very poor. She remembers the limited supplies at her country school were provided by military president Maximiliano Hernández Martínez: “We had these things thanks to General Martínez, the one who put down the Communists. You can look it up-I think it was in the early ‘30s. A great leader, I admire him. Because of him we had our things at school. He was the one who arranged it” (Gorkin 2000, 192). While it is true the peasant uprising was organized and influenced by the fledgling Salvadoran Communist Party, the massacre took the lives of innocent men, women, and children, not only upstart communists. Niña Julia’s view of La Matanza seems like anti-communist propaganda, but, as outlined before, the massacre is considered the onset of communism-anticommunist, populist-elite tensions. Incorporated this way into Salvadoran history, the massacre ceases to be genocide, subsumed instead under Anderson’s “reassurance of fratricide.”

This disconnect between the violent reality of La Matanza and the subsequent understanding of its history is deepened in the state’s recent attempts to reclaim its indigenous history in order to forge a unique national narrative. One area in which this disconnect reoccurs is education. Related to preparation for the PAES, students in their final year at Escuela Americana (American School), a bilingual private school in the capital city, take a course entitled Salvadoran Studies. Dave Gentry, an American who teaches English literature at the 11<sup>th</sup>



grade level at Escuela Americana, expresses frustration with Salvadoran Studies' focus on indigenous culture: students dress up in native costume and present about the Pipil culture to the class, seemingly ignoring how La Matanza targeted similar expressions of indigenous belonging (Gentry 2013).

In addition to the ways in which education reflects this problem, Gentry notes that tourism is also marked by a certain selective memory and cognitive dissonance. Arguing that El Salvador, in some ways, lacks a cohesive national culture, he points out the dissonance in remembering La Matanza alongside a celebration of indigenous identity:

This culture I think wants for a cultural identity because there was a genocide, (the indigenous way of life) was stamped out, and you weren't supposed to speak the native language. Simultaneously, the tourism bureau loves now parading around the traditional costumes and all this other stuff. Like, "Come, look at our culture." Well, dammit you were killed for this. You were wiped out en masse by the thousands for expressing this. And now suddenly it's going to be a money maker for the country so, ta-da, it's on a coaster? You can't help but be conflicted about the cultural identity of the place (Gentry 2013).

This is hardly a unique blend of cognitive dissonance for nations with a history of genocide, as Anderson notes with his treatment of French and American history. But Gentry makes an important point about the state's selectivity in writing a national narrative: the version of a violent past that is remembered and taught to young Salvadorans directly serves the project of nation forming by claiming indigeneity post-genocide as a source of unique identity.

While the state's treatment of La Matanza provides an important example of Anderson's "reassurance of fratricide," its treatment of the civil war has yet to be marked even by such cognitive dissonance. Instead, the state's default response to civil war memory has been silence. One explanation for this institutionalized impunity lies in the reality formed by the Amnesty Law: the majority of Salvadoran politicians, including 2014 presidential-hopeful Sánchez Cerén, are implicated as criminals in the war's violence. Therefore, as figures in the public realm, their

recourse is not to forget by cursory remembrance in a way that Anderson would predict, but to not even acknowledge the civil war's legacy for fear of trapping themselves in hypocrisy.

If the above explanation is true, Funes's administration is even more noteworthy: on many occasions, Funes, and other government officials during his time in office, have apologized on behalf of those who committed crimes during the war. In a recent ethnography of El Salvador entitled *Reimagining National Belonging: Post-Civil War El Salvador in a Global Context*, Robin Maria DeLugan cites many examples of Funes's interaction with civil war history and the formation of national identity, including the creation of a Secretariat of Culture and a Secretariat of Social Inclusion, and public apologies to "all victims of crimes committed by security forces, army, and paramilitary organizations" (DeLugan 2012, 127). On one such occasion, in 2011, the government apologized for the El Mozote massacre in which virtually an entire town was killed by an American-trained Salvadoran military battalion (BBC). Human rights abuses like El Mozote were commonplace during the war, and they reveal a lot about the questionable relationship between the American and Salvadoran militaries, implicating American advisors in the murders of hundreds of civilians. Acknowledging such tragedies seems commonsensical from an empathetic point of view, but disastrous politically for the potential repercussions in American-Salvadoran interstate relations. In this way, we can begin to understand another reason why Salvadoran politicians, in addition to their association with certain acts of violence, might be loath to engage the civil war legacy in a public forum.

DeLugan attributes Funes's openness about the war to the FMLN's progressive nature as a party. She even goes as far as to "speculate whether the Funes administration will attempt to repeal the 1993 amnesty law" (DeLugan 2012, 127). (Such a reality did not come to pass during his time in office, most likely because such action would have jeopardized as many members of

Funes's own party as the opposition.) While the majority of Salvadoran politicians are unable to acknowledge the civil war's memory because of their own involvement in the conflict, Funes is the first president without direct ties to the perpetration civil war violence. Arguably, such distance, and not solely his status as a political progressive, is what allowed him to engage more constructively with the nation's violent past.

#### Civil Society: An Alternative Discourse

While the state may be loath to engage with the civil war's legacy, civil society has been the source of a powerful dialogue surrounding memory and identity formation post-civil war. One example of this initiative is the construction of a memorial to honor those who lost their lives in the war. The only national monument constructed to remember the war's consequences, the Monument to Truth and Memory stands in a public park in the capital city: "A wall of black granite 85 meters long immortalizes the names of over 25,000 girls, boys, women and men, innocent victims of conflict" (UN 1993). The construction of a national memorial was recommended by the UN-appointed Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, but initially it did not garner support from the Salvadoran government. Instead, the effort "was promoted by the Pro-Monument for the Civilian Victims of Human Rights Abuses Committee, which included a dozen Salvadoran NGOs" (SHARE El Salvador). Though the Truth Commission's report was published in 1993, the first phase of the monument was not erected until December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003, after years of pressure from the Committee and committed civilians (SHARE El Salvador).

The Museum of the Image and the Word (Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen), or MUPI, located in the capital city and part of the Committee that lobbied for the creation of the Monument to Truth and Memory, represents another civic initiative to deal with the history of the civil war. Its stated vision is "to be a leading citizen initiative in El Salvador dedicated to the

creation and preservation of historical memory” (MUPI). To this end, the MUPI initiated a campaign in 1996 to begin to collect materials. Entitled “Against the Chaos of Forgetting” (“Contra el caos de la desmemoria”), the initiative “permanently invited the public to donate or lend objects or documents of cultural, historical, or artistic significance” to the museum (MUPI). DeLugan’s analysis of identity and memory formation in El Salvador lauds MUPI for its extensive collection of unique pieces of Salvadoran history, and for its honesty in dealing with the nation’s checkered past (MUPI). She also analyzes the word choice of the collection campaign: more than just the process of forgetting, the word *desmemoria* implies a falsity in memory, a dis-memory, highlighting the museum’s desire to preserve the, sometimes uncomfortable, truth.

The only museum exclusively devoted to the war is decidedly from the insurgents’ perspective. The Museum of the Salvadoran Revolution (Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña) is located in Perquín, Morazán, a former guerilla stronghold and site of the famous Radio Venceremos. “We will Overcome” Radio was a primitive underground radio network that the opposition used to coordinate counter-military efforts, communicate insurgent propaganda, and criticize the government. According to the travel website and guidebook publisher Lonely Planet, highlights of the museum include “the collection of anti-war posters from throughout the world, the stark color photos of life inside guerrilla camps, the incredible assortment of Soviet weapons and some histories of those who died in action” (Lonely Planet).

DeLugan notes the vital role that memorials like the Monument to Truth and Memory, and museums like MUPI and The Museum of the Salvadoran Revolution, play in the process of identity formation:

museums and monuments...are among the important public sites that represent nation and can reveal contest over national inclusion and exclusion. In addition, they are

locations where national memories dwell, are conjured, and reconjured. By connecting to the historical references announced through monuments and displayed in museums, citizens can be incorporated into a constructed past that is constitutive of the collectivity (DeLugan 2012, 108).

Additionally, DeLugan also cite Anderson's work, "Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006) recognized museums, along with the census and maps, as primary tools that helped to define eighteenth and nineteenth-century nation-states" (108). In El Salvador, civil society has taken up the initiative to create a national narrative based on remembering past violence. DeLugan's understanding of museums differs from Judt's fear that commemoration will allow us to forget: instead, museums and monuments, DeLugan and Anderson argue, allow us to construct an identity by being reminded of our shared connectivity.

### **Conclusion**

Salvadoran political identity is highly polarized due to the persistence of civil war identities. Formed from the process of "endogenous polarization," civil war loyalties were solidified for the majority of Salvadorans by the altering experiences of violence and the manipulation of the threat of violence during the conflict. Post-conflict El Salvador saw a sweeping Amnesty Law forgive its war criminals, as the warring factions merged seamlessly into political parties. In this way, the civil war continues to limit what is politically possible.

Moving forward, El Salvador will be faced with the problem of how to incorporate a divisive 12-year conflict into a coherent national narrative. State responses to this problem have been marked either by silence or by an attempt to acknowledge certain pro-nationalist versions of past violence. The Funes administration is an outlier in this process, publicly apologizing for civil war crimes and making direct attempts to define and preserve national identity.

Furthermore, civil society has in many ways picked up the government's slack in the process of

identity formation, lobbying for the creation of monuments to honor the war's victims, and creating public museums dedicated to the war's history.

In addition to the civil war's legacy, another aspect of Salvadoran identity that affects its fragmentation is the disproportionate number of Salvadorans that do not live in El Salvador: nearly a quarter of all Salvadorans worldwide live in the United States, and many others live elsewhere abroad, having left the small nation as a result of the war's violence, or in search of better economic opportunities post-conflict. This transnational component, newly able to vote more easily in domestic elections, presents an added challenge to the already difficult project of defining what it means to be a Salvadoran.

Ultimately, it is hard not to be hopeful about El Salvador's potential to heal. For a democracy to function so well that the widely feared and distrusted opposition party is able to dispel such fears and win the presidential election is major indication of the nation's growth since the civil war. While the upcoming presidential elections provide for an interesting analysis of the country's relationship to its past, their results won't decide how the war will be remembered one way or the other. To suggest such would be to forget Kalyvas warning against conflating micro and macrolevel politics. Individual Salvadorans will be responsible for creating and healing their collective past, and this process has already begun.

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<sup>i</sup> El FMLN ha tenido un desequilibrio, porque el candidato, lo queremos mucho porque es un compañero guerrillero que ha luchado a saber por cuantos años detrás de nosotros y todo, pero no es el idóneo para ser candidato...muchos le van a pedir, por obligación o porque no podemos traicionar y tenemos que dar el voto, los militantes y todo eso.

<sup>ii</sup> Sánchez Cerén fue ministro de educación, y él dijo que iba a trabajar mucho, porque el ámbito del ministerio de educación está mal. Y él cometió a los maestros que iba a trabajar por los docentes y no lo hizo. Y ahora va por presidente ¿y no cumplió? Él, desde mi punto de vista, como candidato está quemado. No funciona.

<sup>iii</sup> Sánchez Cerén para mí, él no es un buen candidato. Por eso que, esa duda que votar por el FMLN o no.

<sup>iv</sup> ...como hay bastante polarización entre...partidos aquí cuando la gente, alguna gente, se dio cuenta de que el FMLN tenía una chance para poder ganar la presidencia, pensaron que el país...iba a ser comunista.

<sup>v</sup> La paz se logró porque el pueblo salvadoreño decidió que estaba cansado de la guerra.

<sup>vi</sup> ...lo que pasó, pasó, pues. No hay que dejarlo de recordar, pero en las cosas del futuro...hay muchas cosas positivas.