# Esperanza Entre Dolor

# Hope Between Pain

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My Senior Project theme is based on my family and my culture background. I was born in El Salvador and brought here as a young child. Most of my family has immigrated to the United States. I am focusing on family members who lived through the war and their experience through it and the aftermath. I am focusing on my family now and what is important for us to maintain while being in the United States, which is our culture and our religion. This is important to me because family is the only thing I have and the reason I am here. I know the hardships they went through were not easy but it led them to this country and it led to me being here and for that I am thankful. This is important to my family because although sometimes it is hard to relive bad memories, it is important for them to never forget and most importantly for those around them to never forget. For them it is also important to pass on the values of hard work and prosperity, as well as the hope they have for their children and grandchildren. In this thesis, I will talk about how the war and its aftermath has impacted my family as well as myself. I will also focus on the process of creating my images. Why did I decide to focus on this certain topic? What have I learned from this subject?

In 1980, the small Central American country of El Salvador was caught in conflict caused by its own people. As the military and government could not find ways to get along, a 12-year-long civil war started, a war that left many hurt, homeless or dead. Soon after the war ended in 1992, some people started leaving and immigrating elsewhere. War was gone, but the country could not find ways to pick itself up. Poverty and violence overtook the country for years to come. Gang affiliates were deported from the United States in the early 1990s and 2000s. In returning to El Salvador, they continued their violence there but to greater extents. Conflicts between gangs was causing many problems and many young kids were being pressured and threatened into leaving whatever education they were getting to join a gang. These gangs started terrorizing the entire

country. Soon after, a large number of survivors and civilians started leaving El Salvador for a better life in the United States.

My family is one of the families that immigrated to the United States. They were highly impacted during the war. Both my parents were terrorized as kids by the atrocities they were witnessing. My mother lost her father who was a soldier in the military. After the war, her mother left the country to come work in the United States. My mother grew up without a father and for a long time without a mother as well. My parents' families found it hard to pick themselves up. They lived in poverty and often had very little to eat. My dad's father almost lost his life once when he was kidnapped. Violence and terror was very much still alive in the country. The poverty and violence prompted both of my parents to immigrate to the United States to try and prosper in a different country and to provide for the new family they were creating.

Although I did not live through the war, I somehow feel as if it is affecting me today in a different way. My parents left looking for a better future for my sister and I. They wanted a better opportunity at life and at a better education for us in a foreign country. I have not returned to El Salvador since I left and I do not remember much from since before then. I have not seen some family members in sixteen years. I only see my grandpa, my dads father, once every two or three years. It is very tough to be away from some of my family members and to not get a chance to see them often. However, at the same time, I feel happy to be in a country where I am getting a great education and where I can work and be independent. Everyday I think about what my parents went through and what they do to provide for their family. Their past and present is in a way impacting my own life now. I see their struggles and how hard they work. It hurts me to see them constantly break their backs, but it also motivates me to do everything they are giving me the chance to do. I

think about ways in which I might disappoint them, and ways in which I can work just as hard as they are to give back to them. All of this affects me day to day as I try my best to make them happy.

In this thesis photo project, I first decided to photograph my grandpa, a close family friend, and my mother. I chose them because they are three survivors with many stories to tell from their experience in the war. They represent hope and will. I also photographed my sisters. I wanted them in this project because they are very important to me and I can't imagine one day being separated from them. Working with my little sister was a little difficult because she tends to move around a lot. One of my main struggles during this project was photographing my mom. She is camera shy and it is hard for her to accept to have her photograph taken. I decided to compose every image differently so they wouldn't be consistent, but decided on same size frames due to the same amount of importance each image holds to me. My decision to work with black and white was based on the emotion I wanted to convey with certain photographs, and taking away color emphasized that emotion.

Recreating images of a war is very tough. You are never really sure of the effect it might have on others. I decided to have two photographs that demonstrate violence. I believe it is important to show these images because although the images are a fake reenactment, the violence was real. It existed and to date it still exists and many people are not even aware of this war and do not understand that this recurring violence is part of the reason so many immigrants are coming to the United States today.

I wanted to demonstrate religion through my images as well. Religion has always been fundamental in my culture. In my country during the war, Archbishop, and newly made Saint, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, always spoke up for the poor and oppressed. He wrote to the United States begging

them to stop the funding of weapons and training of the military so that they could stop killing so many innocent people. He was murdered for his activism. He has always been an important figure not just for my family alone, but for my entire country, whether the people are religious or not. His image is the only one I framed differently. It is printed on a different material paper. He was murdered some years ago and I did not want the photograph to have a contemporary look. His image is accompanied by a small piece of newspaper article from the year of his death in 1980, in El Salvador.

One of the artists that inspired my work was Susan Meiselas. Meiselas spent time photographing all the conflicts in Central America, including El Salvador. She said the violence and pain she had witnessed there had been worse than in any other Central American country. It is very hard and painful to look at, but it is also very important to notice that work. Her work has taught me, and as I hope it has taught others, of the pain a divided nation caused many innocent people. *El Salvador, work of Thirty Photographers*, is a book Meiselas worked on with American poet Carolyn Forche. In it, Forche states the economic role the United States played in the war through their economic aid as well as their military training. She writes, "In the violence of hunger, despair grew volatile: in blood hosed from the plaza after fixed elections, in the arms of those who carried the dead from the streets, in the mother whose children starved, in the father whose line work in the field was never enough." Another artist that inspired me through this project was Larry Towell. Towell was also photographing El Salvador during the last few years of the war. As some of his images are raw like Meisela's, many of them also represent the sweet, innocent and gentle side of the war which is the kids. They represent the future and the hope that could still survive after all these hardships. The images he took of these kids represent to me the light of the country that is still shining and

smiling because they are always filled with hope and laughter. His book, “El Salvador”, was filled with images as well as text with a little more context on the situation and state of the country, which helped me furthermore understand his images.

At the start of this senior thesis project, I was very lost and confused when it came to deciding what I was going to focus on. I wanted something that I highly cared for and something that represented me. I decided to frame it around my family and what has led us to immigrate and how important it is for us to keep hold of our culture and beliefs while being in a different country. Through this process, I have learned how passionate I am about my culture. I have gotten a little more knowledge on my country. I now know that my country was not always in turmoil and that at some point it was a happy and safe place for its people. My only hope is that one day it will be like that again and that people won't have to flee as much as they do today. I value my culture more now than I did before the start of this project due to everything I have learned from research as well as from my own family history.

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*Ana Jaco. Untitled. From series Esperanza Entre Dolor. Digital Archival Matte Print, 2018*

*Ana Jaco. Untitled. From series Esperanza Entre Dolor. Digital Print, 2018*

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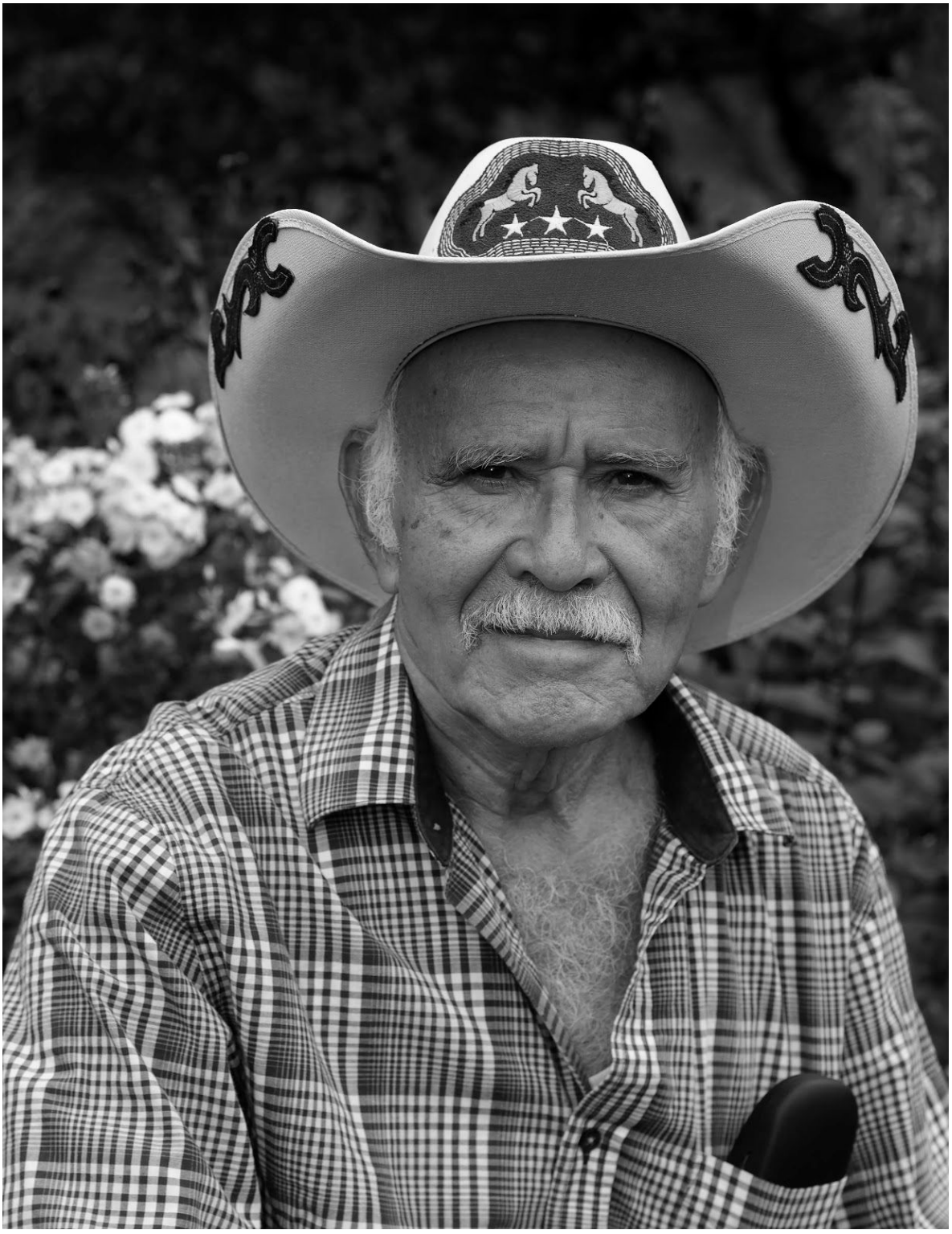

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