

Remembering Integration:
Salvadoran Refugee Resettlement in 1980s Manitoba

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Joint Master's Program
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Winnipeg, Manitoba

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ABSTRACT

The civil war in El Salvador displaced millions of people between 1979 and 1992. Throughout this time, Canada maintained some of the most liberal refugee admittance laws in North America, granting asylum to over 80% of Salvadoran applicants. As a result, over 37,000 Salvadorans arrived in Canada over the course of the 1980s—many qualifying as government-assisted refugees. By 1996, there were 755 people with Salvadoran ancestry living in the Prairie province of Manitoba. Using a selection of six oral history interviews conducted by the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba Project, this thesis explores what Salvadorans in Winnipeg remembered as the important circumstances of their initial integration with the retrospect of having lived over twenty-five years in Canada. It argues that Salvadorans actively used discussions of immigration challenges to prove that they had integrated into Canadian society by the time of their interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank all the interviewees who shared their stories with the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba Project, especially the six whose narratives I present in this thesis. Although we never met in person, I have been deeply moved by your stories. Hearing about how you came to know Winnipeg has changed how I see and experience the city I grew up in.

A special thanks as well to Alejandra Salcedo who conducted the majority of the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba interviews. Your incredibly skilled, empathetic, and professional interviews not only provided the foundation for my research, they also set a standard that I will aim to emulate in my future endeavours in oral history.

My thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Alexander Freund, who introduced me to the study of history and memory and got me involved with the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba Project. Thank you for your patience, feedback and encouragement. I am also very appreciative for the time and thoughtful comments provided by the members of my examining committee, Drs. Jorge Nállim, Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, and Fabiana Li. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the support of the staff and faculty of the History Departments at the Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba, especially Dr. Ryan Eyford and Sylvie Winslow who arranged for me to defend my thesis from abroad, and the funding bodies who supported my research, notably the Pollard Family Foundation, the University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship, and the Winnipeg Foundation.

Lastly, I am indebted to my family and friends who helped motivate me throughout this process. To Emma and Sam, in particular, thank you for taking time out of your very busy lives to help me sort out my ideas and clarify my writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening to Six Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba

The civil war in El Salvador displaced millions of people between 1979 and 1992. Throughout this time, Canada maintained some of the most liberal refugee admittance laws in North America, granting asylum to over 80% of Salvadoran applicants.¹ As a result, over 37,000 Salvadorans arrived in Canada over the course of the 1980s—many qualifying as government-assisted refugees.² Although most new arrivals landed in Canada's largest city centres, refugees settled across the country. By 1996, there were 755 people with Salvadoran ancestry living in the Prairie province of Manitoba.³ As members of a small and politically divided community, Salvadoran refugees encountered a distinct lack of ethnic community support when settling in the Prairies. This analysis will explore the circumstances of the Salvadoran refugees' initial integration in Winnipeg through a selection of oral history interviews.

Within the abundant Canadian historical scholarship focused on migrants, the history of refugees is often subordinate to that of immigrants.⁴ By not drawing distinctions between these two categories, historians overlook how experiences of state violence and forced displacement have affected newcomers.⁵ A recent monograph by Shauna Labman helps fill this gap by outlining the legal developments that have taken place in Canada's refugee

¹ Maria Cristina Garcia, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 11.

² Alan Simmons, "Latin American Migration to Canada: New Linkages in the Hemispheric Migration and Refugee Flow System," *International Journal* 48, no. 2 (1993): 295.

³ Before 1996, the percentage of Salvadorans was not specified. People with Salvadoran ancestry were classified under "other single origins" or "multiple origins." Statistics Canada, "1996 Census, Ethnic Origin and Population Group," last modified June 4, 2019, accessed October 16, 2023.

⁴ A historical survey of immigrants in Canada's prairie cities in 2009 by Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen found very little historical research on refugees. Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). This is a common theme in wider immigration literature. See, for example, Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder with Donna Gabaccia, *What is Migration History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

⁵ Findings from an unpublished literature review conducted for the project "Stories of Homeland, Violence, and Migration: Memories and Histories of Refugees in Manitoba, 1945-2010." Allison Penner, Alexander Freund, and Matthew Renaud, *The History of Refugees in Manitoba: A Comprehensive Literature Review* (Winnipeg: unpubl. mss., 2012).

resettlement programs over time, but her focus is on policy, not refugee experience.⁶ The stories of certain refugee groups have also been the focus of scholarly monographs,⁷ but researchers have not yet awarded this level of attention to the Salvadoran community.⁸

The goal of this study is to present how Salvadoran refugees experienced their arrival and settlement in Winnipeg. I have based my fundamental line of inquiry on first-hand narratives and ask what Salvadoran-Canadians remember about their initial integration. Through the process of describing key moments in the integration process—arriving in Canada, receiving government aid, building a social support system, and participating in Canadian society—I argue that Salvadorans actively used discussions of immigration challenges to prove that they had integrated by the time of their interviews. By establishing that they had successfully overcome hardships, Salvadoran-Canadians could demonstrate that they had adapted to their new home without abandoning their Salvadoran roots.

The thematic guide of this analysis are the experiences of six Salvadorans who found refuge in Winnipeg between 1982 and 1987. In using such a small sample size, this study does not aim to present a universal portrait of Salvadoran refugee integration. Instead, it introduces readers to six individuals with subjective goals, motivations and struggles. While an analytical lens is used to provide context for the interviews and the stories told within them, I have tried to stay as true to the narrators' tone and intention as possible. It is my hope that the interviewees' personalities shine through in the narrative. Despite arriving in Canada with the same legal status and receiving similar integration support services, refugees did not

⁶ Shauna Labman, *Crossing Law's Border: Canada's Refugee Resettlement Program* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

⁷ Examples of late twentieth century refugee groups that have received scholastic attention include Indochinese 'boat people': Morton Beiser, *Strangers at the Gate: the "Boat People's" First Ten Years in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Chilean exiles: Francis Peddie, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable: Chilean Exiles in Ontario and Quebec, 1973-2010* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014); and Ugandan Asians: Shezan Muhammedi, *Gifts from Amin: Ugandan Asian Refugees in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2022).

⁸ Maria Cristina Garcia's 2006 book *Seeking Refuge* examines the displacement of Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans to Canada, but does so through the lens of governmental reaction to requests for asylum, not refugee experience.

experience integration in a uniform manner. Each narrator exercised agency over their lives and had differing priorities at each step of the immigration process.

To better understand why Salvadorans were seeking asylum in Canada in the 1980s, let us first consider the socio-political events taking place in El Salvador at the time and the role Canada played as a country of resettlement.

The Salvadoran Civil War and the Refugee Crisis

In El Salvador, socio-economic inequalities between prosperous landowners and the impoverished majority date back to the colonial era. A small but powerful elite maintained control of the region's politics through the ownership of major agricultural exports: first cacao, then indigo and subsequently coffee.⁹ The situation reached a crisis point around the turn of the nineteenth century. Coffee profits soared and landowning oligarchs amassed immense wealth and political power while peasants faced land scarcity and a deterioration of working conditions.¹⁰ In 1932, the authoritarian regime in power brutally repressed a socialist rebellion of farmers and Indigenous people led by Agustín Farabundo Martí. Remembered as *La Matanza* (“the slaughter”), the armed forces murdered somewhere between ten thousand to forty thousand civilians.¹¹ Further peasant uprisings, *coups d'état*, military dictatorships, and electoral fraud followed in subsequent decades.¹² Violent suppression of dissidents went hand-in-hand with the continued protection of the landed elite as both the agrarian oligarchs and the government funded paramilitary death squads to control the population.

Supported by the Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, and the precepts of the Liberation Theology Movement—a Christian theological approach promoting social justice

⁹ Jordana Dym, *From Sovereign Villages to National States: City, State, and Federation in Central America, 1759-1839* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁰ From 1882 to 1900, coffee exports jumped from bringing in 59 percent of the country's income to bringing in 83 percent. Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, *Weak Foundations: The Economy of El Salvador in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 152.

¹¹ Jorge E. Cuéllar, “Elimination/Deracination: Colonial Terror, La Matanza, and the 1930s Race Laws in El Salvador,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2018): 39.

¹² Europa Publications, “El Salvador,” in *A Political Chronology of the Americas*, edited by Colette Milward and Annamarie Rowe (London: Routledge, 2001), 107–112.

and political liberation for oppressed peoples—the mobilization of peasants accelerated during the 1970s.¹³ The civil war began after a supposed progressive *coup* in October 1979 failed to bring about substantial reforms and the government employed increasingly violent measures to control the population. The year 1980 was particularly violent as the military purged itself of progressives and targeted the clergy for supporting reforms.¹⁴ As a result, various left-wing guerrilla groups came together to form the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) to oppose the authoritarian government.¹⁵ Continuing its long tradition of involvement in Latin American politics, the United States sent billions of dollars in military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government and trained the Salvadoran military in counterinsurgency warfare as part of their Cold War containment strategy.¹⁶ Over the course of the conflict, the American-supported Salvadoran military committed several particularly egregious acts of violence.¹⁷ After the election of the Christian Democrat Napoleon Duarte in 1984, human rights abuses in the country declined but did not cease.

Violence increased again when the FMLN launched an assault on San Salvador in its “final offensive” in 1989. The government retaliated with widespread repression. Notably,

¹³ Robert Chao Romero, “Liberation Theology in Practice: Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador,” in *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 163–173.

¹⁴ Most notably, the Archbishop Óscar Romero was assassinated on 24 March 1980, while celebrating Mass and four Catholic missionaries from the United States were raped and murdered on December 2, 1980.

¹⁵ The FMLN was made up of five political-military organizations: the Popular Forces of Liberation Farabundo Martí (FPL) founded in 1970, the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP) founded in 1972, the National Resistance (RN) founded in 1975, the Party of the Workers of Central America (PRTC) founded in 1976, and the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL) founded in 1980. Michael E. Allison and Alberto Martín Alvarez, “Unity and Disunity in the FMLN,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 54, no. 4 (2012): 89–118.

¹⁶ Greg Grandin, “Going Primitive: The Violence of the New Imperialism,” in *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 87–120; Adán Quan, “Through the Looking Glass: U.S. Aid to El Salvador and the Politics of National Identity,” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 2 (2005): 276–93.

¹⁷ In 1993, El Salvador’s Truth Commission attributed 85% of the acts of violence committed during the civil war to state agents and approximately 5% to the FMLN. Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador* (New York: United Nations, 1993), 43. The El Mozote massacre which took place on 11 December 1981, is recognized as one of the worst atrocities of the civil war. Salvadoran state forces massacred more than a thousand men, women and children in and around the rural hamlet of El Mozote. The massacre was denied by Salvadoran and US officials for decades. Rafael Alarcón Medina and Leigh Binford, “Revisiting the El Mozote Massacre: Memory and Politics in Postwar El Salvador,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 4 (2014): 513–533.

death squads murdered six Jesuits and their caretaker's wife and daughter, which attracted international condemnation and increased pressure for a cease-fire.¹⁸ United Nations-brokered peace talks resulted in the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords on 16 January 1992, which brought the war to an official end. The twelve years of conflict were devastating for the Salvadoran population. An estimated seventy thousand civilians were killed or disappeared,¹⁹ and around 1.3 million people were displaced from their homes.²⁰

Of those displaced, almost a million left El Salvador. Dispossessed and forced to leave on foot, asylum seekers crossed into neighbouring states. Since Guatemala and Nicaragua were undergoing their own internal conflicts in the 1980s, refugees mostly fled to Honduras, Costa Rica and Mexico. In these countries many struggled to have the legitimacy of their refugee status acknowledged.²¹ Further north, hardline anti-immigrant policies in the United States also drew the legal deservingness of Central American asylum seekers into question.²² For refugees undeterred by the large geographical distance, applying for asylum in Canada was one of the most reliable ways to have their refugee status ratified.

After World War II, Canada became a top refugee destination. It wasn't, however, until the passing of the *1976 Immigration Act* that 'refugee' became an admissible class for resettlement. Previously to this, the government could only pass special refugee admission

¹⁸ Diana Villiers Negroponce, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12, 72.

¹⁹ Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin defines the term disappeared as "those who were clandestinely abducted, their fate never disclosed nor their bodies recovered." Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 34; Amelia Hoover Green and Patrick Ball, "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980–1992)," *Demographic Research* 41 (2019): 781–814.

²⁰ Americas Watch Committee, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 107.

²¹ Each country's reaction to the refugee crisis differed. For detailed descriptions of how Honduras, Costa Rica and Mexico approached the refugee question, see: Fiona Terry, "The Nicaraguan and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras," in *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 83–113; Tanya Basok, *Keeping Heads above Water: Salvadorean Refugees in Costa Rica* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Garcia, "Designing a Refugee Policy: Mexico as Country of First Asylum," in *Seeking Refuge*, 42–69.

²² Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants' Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

schemes through ad hoc orders in council.²³ In 1983, the Canadian government granted Salvadorans a designated class status. This meant that Salvadoran asylum seekers no longer had to meet the UN Convention's refugee definition to qualify as refugees under Canadian law; they only had to demonstrate that they lived in "refugee like" conditions or were experiencing "war, political upheaval, or other negative circumstances in their homeland."²⁴

Canada's desire to maintain a favourable relationship with the United States had an important influence on its foreign policy in Central America. Unwilling to alienate its most important ally, the Canadian government never condemned American involvement in the Salvadoran civil war. However, it did use the ensuing refugee crisis to distinguish Canadian foreign policy from that of the United States and to curate a positive international image.²⁵ Not only did Canada grant asylum to a significantly larger percentage of Salvadorans than its southern neighbour, it also took official measures to admit Central Americans who were living in the United States illegally.²⁶ In the latter half of the 1980s, the number of refugee claims resulted in a significant processing backlog and the government introduced a number of controversial bills designed to streamline the refugee claims process.²⁷ Once the civil war in El Salvador ended, Salvadorans could no longer apply for asylum in Canada as a designated class.

Questions of Terminology

In the context of this analysis, I have chosen to refer to the Salvadoran interviewees as refugees. As there is significant debate in academic circles over the terminology used to

²³ Groups that received special refugee admission schemes included Eastern European displaced persons after WWII, Hungarians in 1956, Czechs and Slovaks in 1968, Ugandan Asians 1972, and Chileans in 1973. Gerald Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity Canadian Immigration Policy During the 1980s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 61.

²⁴ García, *Seeking Refuge*, 122-123.

²⁵ Jonathan Lemco, "Canadian Foreign Policy and Central America: Is There a Legitimate Role to Play?" in *Canada and the Crisis in Central America* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 11-32.

²⁶ Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity*, 74.

²⁷ Brahm Segal, "Restructuring Canada's Refugee Determination Process: A Look at Bills C-55 and C-84," *Cahiers de Droit* 29, no. 3 (1988): 733-759.

describe populations in motion,²⁸ this decision merits an explanation. The most important contemporary definition of a refugee comes from article 1A(2) of the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It defines a refugee as someone who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.²⁹

This definition is not unproblematic. Some argue that using the term refugee removes an individual's agency since it evokes the image of a helpless victim.³⁰ Others posit that the UN definition does not adequately consider how intricately economics are intertwined with violence. This is a particularly egregious exclusion in the Salvadoran context.³¹ Furthermore, by the time of their interviews, the Salvadorans featured in this study were either Canadian citizens or permanent residents and no longer thought of themselves as refugees. Why then do I feel that refugee is the best term to use?

My decision is motivated in part by the inadequacy of other terms. It would, for instance, be incorrect to label the Salvadorans analyzed in this study as exiles since this assumes that they all emigrated for political reasons. While this was true for some interviewees, others left because of generalized violence or difficult economic conditions.

Another option would be to use a unifying label like forced migrant. This, however, puts the focus on the Salvadorans' provenance, which seems out of place in a study of

²⁸ Semantics actively shape collective knowledge and beliefs and are therefore closely linked to ideology. See, for example, how language informs representations of migrants in the press: Kate Torkington and Filipa Perdigão Ribeiro, "What Are These People: Migrants, Immigrants, Refugees?": Migration-Related Terminology and Representations in Portuguese Digital Press Headlines," *Discourse, Context & Media* 27 (2019): 22–31.

²⁹ United Nations. *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954), 189 UNTS 137.

³⁰ Marita Eastmond and Francis Peddie use this argument to advocate for calling the Chileans they study exiles. Marita Eastmond, *The Dilemmas of Exile: Chilean Refugees in the USA* (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1997), 6; Peddie, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable*, 8.

³¹ Bridget Hayden, "What's in a Name? The Nature of the Individual in Refugee Studies," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no 4: 471–487.

integration. Moreover, the term migrant has become politicized through its use in a refugee/economic migrant binary which calls the deservingness of some asylum seekers into question.³² I do use the term migrant throughout this analysis, but I do so with the explicit goal of evoking movement, not to make any statement on the narrators' deservingness of protection.

The term immigrant also does not fully encompass the experiences of Salvadorans. While it does suggest a greater level of agency than refugee might, it ignores that Salvadorans in this study received economic and social assistance upon their arrival. Starting in 1976, the Canadian government evaluated immigrants through a points-based system that aimed to determine how well they would succeed in integrating into Canadian society.³³ This precluded immigrants admitted under the family and independent classes from receiving the same government assistance as those admitted as refugees.

In using the term refugee to describe the interviewees, I am therefore not calling on the UN refugee definition, but rather on the fact that many Salvadorans received the legal status of government-assisted refugee (GAR) upon arrival in Canada. Not all Salvadorans who came to Manitoba received this status, but the six presented in this thesis did. I feel that the term refugee is the most appropriate since this analysis presents the Salvadorans' initial arrival in Canada when they were still eligible to receive government support. My decision is reinforced by the interviewees themselves—all self-identified as refugees when speaking about their early integration experiences.

³² This topic has been widely discussed in the context of the recent refugee crisis in Europe, see for example: Eleanor Paynter, "Border Crises and Migrant Deservingness: How the Refugee/Economic Migrant Binary Racializes Asylum and Affects Migrants' Navigation of Reception," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2022): 293–306; Maya Goodfellow, "Interrogating the 'Economic Migrant' in British Political Discourse: Race, Class, the Economy and the Human," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 8 (2023): 1553–1575. The term economic migrant was also used extensively to describe Salvadorans fleeing to the United States in the 1980s.

³³ Arif Anwar, "Canadian Immigration Policy: Micro and Macro Issues with the Points Based Assessment System," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 46, no. 1 (2014): 170.

Literature Review

The foundational primary sources of this analysis are six oral history interviews with Salvadorans living in Winnipeg. These interviews were conducted by the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba (SVM) project between 2012 and 2014. The interviews were part of a larger project titled “Stories of Homeland, Violence, and Migration: Memories and Histories of Refugees in Manitoba, 1945–2010” led by Alexander Freund which also gathered oral histories from European postwar displaced persons and refugees from Afghanistan.³⁴ Members of the Salvadoran community in Manitoba initiated the SVM project with the help of researchers at the University of Winnipeg to document their history. After receiving training on oral history research, members of the Salvadoran community and university researchers conducted twenty-five life story interviews with Salvadoran-Canadians. As of writing, the interviews have been deposited at the University of Winnipeg’s Oral History Centre and are in the process of being made available to the public. Other primary sources such as newspaper articles from the *Winnipeg Free Press*, census data, and reports from governmental and nongovernmental settlement assistance agencies operating in Winnipeg in the 1980s supplement the information given in the interviews.

For secondary sources, the project largely draws on research from the fields of Canadian immigration history, oral history and memory studies. Since immigration has long played a central role in Canada’s past, there is unsurprisingly an abundance of literature on the subject.³⁵ Canada’s largest population centres, notably Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver,

³⁴ The interviews from this project have been used in a number of publications: Alexander Freund, “Transnationalizing Home in Winnipeg: Refugees’ Stories of the Places Between the ‘Here-and-There,’” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2015): 61–86; Alexander Freund, “Narrating Home: Oral Histories As Documents and Practices of Homing,” in *Handbook on Home and Migration* ed. Paolo Boccagni (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 529–542; Allison Penner, “On Multiculturalism’s Margins: Oral History and Afghan Former Refugees in Early Twenty-first Century Winnipeg,” Master’s thesis, University of Manitoba, 2019.

³⁵ See: Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-2006* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007); Franca Iacovetta, “Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestics: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship,” *Labour/Le Travail* 36 (1995): 217–252.

are the focus of the majority of research concerning Canadian newcomers. However, in 2009, Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen published a book about immigrants in prairie cities including Winnipeg. They argued that the demographic makeup, size and geographic location of Canada's prairie cities make them particularly good places to examine the immigrant phenomenon.³⁶ They base their research on the interconnected ideas of "ethnic webs" (in-group symbols and systems of meaning) and "boundary zones" (spaces that appear as a result of cross-cultural interactions with a host society) which I have used to guide the outline of my chapters. The third section of the book focuses on immigrants from the so-called Global South arriving in the prairies from the 1970s–1990s. Although there is a chapter dedicated to racism in Winnipeg, the experiences of Salvadoran newcomers to Manitoba are not the subject of focus for Loewen and Friesen.

As mentioned previously, there has been little written about Salvadorans in Manitoba, particularly in a historical context. For a master's thesis in 1999, Sarah Bowen conducted a quantitative study consisting of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to determine how Salvadoran women in Manitoba perceived health and illness.³⁷ While migration and settlement were unavoidable themes of her research, the goal of the study was to determine what Salvadorans needed from health services. Other research on Salvadoran-Canadians outside Manitoba has largely followed this line of inquiry by focusing on migrant health, most often mental wellbeing.³⁸ Most studies on refugee integration focus on stress, mental health, and social integration. While these studies use many of the same basic methodological principles as the ones I use in my analysis (interview analysis, focus on

³⁶ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 3.

³⁷ Sarah Bowen, "Resilience and Health: Salvadoran Refugee Women in Manitoba," Master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1999.

³⁸ Marta Young, "Moderators of Stress in Salvadoran Refugees: The Role of Social and Personal Resources," *The International migration review* 35, no. 3 (2001): 840–869; Denise Spitzer, *Engendering Migrant Health: Canadian Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

settlement experiences, investigation into trauma and family dynamics, etc.) they are quantitative studies rather than explorations of oral history.³⁹

Much of the recent work done on Salvadoran-Canadians has been—at least tangentially—related to the SVM project. In 2014, Danielle Dubois, who worked on the project as a research assistant, wrote a master’s thesis on the portrayal of Salvadoran refugees in Canadian newspapers which argued that press outlets consistently acted as gatekeepers for refugees into Canadian society, but also that the representations of refugees changed over the course of the war.⁴⁰ Alexander Freund, the lead researcher on the project, has published a number of articles based in part on the SVM interviews. His work on transnational conceptions of home and how oral history interviews present an active act of making home or ‘homing’ have informed my view of refugee integration.⁴¹

Historical literature on Salvadoran migrants is more abundant in American scholarship. Mike Anastario has looked at how the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States evokes memory practices through the sending of parcels and remittances.⁴² He explores how the diaspora has both collectively remembered and forgotten aspects of its migration. Legal anthropologist Susan Bibler Coutin’s work investigates how the Salvadoran diaspora imagines and relates to their home country. Building on Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” to describe the transnational nature of diaspora,⁴³ Coutin uses the idea of “re/membered” communities which privilege historical memory and take the ways in

³⁹ Karen Zwi et al., “Refugee Children and Their Health, Development and Well-being over the First Year of Settlement: A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 53, no. 9 (2017): 841–849; Judith Kulig, “Family Life Among El Salvadorans, Guatemalans And Nicaraguans: A Comparative Study,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 29, no. 3 (1998): 469–479; André Jacob, “Social Integration of Salvadoran Refugees,” *Social Work* 39, no. 3 (1994): 307–312.

⁴⁰ Danielle Dubois, “Representing Refugees: Canadian Newspapers’ Portrayals of Refugees of El Salvador’s Civil War, 1980 – 1992,” Master’s thesis, University of Manitoba, 2014.

⁴¹ Freund, “Transnationalizing Home in Winnipeg,” 61–86; Freund, “Narrating Home,” 529–542.

⁴² Mike Anastario, *Parcels: Memories of Salvadoran Migration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

which diasporas are constructed over time into account.⁴⁴ In her work with 1.5 generation Salvadoran migrants, in this case, individuals who were born in El Salvador but raised in the United States, Coutin emphasizes the differences between how the Salvadoran government and members of the diaspora depict El Salvador. She demonstrates that despite official efforts to market the country as transnational, migrants often have a complex relationship to their home country. She highlights that biographies (oral testimonies) are indispensable to El Salvador's national history because migrants use them as opportunities to fill in gaps in the official narrative, to point out injustices and to seek redress.⁴⁵

While scholarship from the United States has helped inform my analysis, I have found that individuals who migrated to Manitoba had a distinctly different immigration experience to those who went to the United States. To begin, much of the current American research on Salvadoran migrants analyzes recent flows of migrants that have arrived since the end of the civil war. Furthermore, foundational aspects of Salvadoran-American research are the impact of insufficient legal status, transnational family links, and circular migration.⁴⁶ These topics are much less relevant for Salvadorans in Canada, particularly those who arrived as government-assisted refugees in the 1980s.

Mobility, memory and migration have also been the subject of historical analysis outside the Salvadoran community. A recent book resulting from research conducted by the "Bodies Across Borders: Oral and Visual Memory in Europe and Beyond" Project, focuses on migrant groups in Italy and the Netherlands.⁴⁷ It touches on several themes including

⁴⁴ Susan Bibler Coutin, "Originary Destinations: Re/membered Communities And Salvadoran Diasporas," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 39, no. 1/2 (2010): 51.

⁴⁵ Susan Bibler Coutin, "Re/membering the Nation: Gaps and Reckoning within Biographical Accounts of Salvadoran Émigrés," *Anthropological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 809–834.

⁴⁶ See for example, Cecilia Menjivar, "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States," *The American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (2006): 999–1037; Leisy Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014); Adrian Bailey and Joshua Hane, "Population in Motion: Salvadorean Refugees and Circulation Migration," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14, no. 2 (1995): 171–200.

⁴⁷ Luisa Passerini, Gabriele Proglia, and Milica Trakilović, eds, *The Mobility of Memory: Migrations and Diasporas Across European Borders* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

language subjectivity (for example, the differences in connotations between the terms migrant, immigrant, or refugee), cultural difference in education and the shaping of cultural memory. There have also been a number of projects focused on how communities remember large-scale violence resulting from displacement by war, genocide, or other human rights violations. A collection edited by Steven High, Edward Little, and Thi Ry Duong explores how experiences of mass violence influence oral histories.⁴⁸ Besides presenting the importance of speaking about and representing trauma, this collection also exposes many of the difficulties that historians face when dealing with sensitive and personal material. Based on his experiences with the Montreal Life Stories project, High has published additional work focusing on the methodology of “community-university collaboration and project-based research” dealing with violence and displacement.⁴⁹ Shared authority and collaboration are central themes of the book. Despite focusing on numerous different migrant groups, the voices of the Latin American diaspora are largely absent from these projects. My research did, however, draw inspiration from these works since the violence of the Salvadoran civil war was comparable to the other groups featured.

Oral Testimony as Historical Source

Memories cannot be accessed directly from an individual’s mind. As a result, recollections are necessarily shaped by linguistic imperfections inherent in narration, societal pressures, trauma, and personal circumstances. This does not, however, mean that oral testimonies should be discounted due to their inaccuracies. Alessandro Portelli, one of the pioneers of historical memory studies, argued that memory’s unreliability was its strength. He suggested that the discrepancies within memories allow historians to “recognize the interests

⁴⁸ Steven High, Edward Little, and Thi Ry Duong. *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them.”⁵⁰ Following this line of thinking, this project will treat oral testimonies as the complex primary sources that they are, acknowledging that each story contains insights into the narrators’ past and present.

One of the unique characteristics of oral history is its aptitude for sharing the stories of ‘ordinary people’ and providing them with a platform to tell their stories. By using interviews as sources, historians can describe deeply personal events with emphatic appeal. It was therefore important to me not to try and share the stories of too many narrators. Instead, I chose to focus on a smaller number of interviewees and tell their stories in greater detail. To narrow down the scope of the analysis, I only included interviews conducted by a single interviewer—Alejandra Salcedo, a Salvadoran journalist who arrived in Winnipeg at the time the SVM project was taking place.⁵¹ I chose to focus on her interviews since it provided a point of consistency across the sources, but also because it ensured that a Salvadoran interviewer had conducted all the interviews in Spanish. While some researchers have argued that interviewees may be more inclined to share personal or culturally sensitive information while speaking in a non-native tongue,⁵² people express themselves most clearly in the language they speak best, which for most Salvadorans in Manitoba was Spanish. Using Alejandra’s interviews had the benefit of reducing language barriers and ensuring that a certain level of assumed shared knowledge took place across the interviews. This was particularly important to me as a researcher since I am not Salvadoran myself. Although I do speak Spanish and based my analysis on the Spanish audio recordings of the interviews, I do not share a cultural paradigm with the interviewees and had to be aware of this discrepancy throughout my analysis.

⁵⁰ Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning In Oral History* (Buffalo, NY: Suny Press, 1991), 2.

⁵¹ There is one exception to this. One session of Roberto’s interview was conducted by Laura Castillo, a Salvadoran student who worked as a research assistant for the SVM project.

⁵² Susan Burton, “Issues in Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Japanese Women in England,” in *The Oral History Reader* 3rd Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016), 243–253.

Interviewee requests for anonymity and geographic and temporal delimitations also informed which interviews I chose to include. Since my goal was to share in depth accounts of Salvadoran experiences, interviews with major privacy restrictions were not practicable for my use. I also chose to only include narrators who had settled in Winnipeg—not in other cities in Manitoba—and who had arrived in Canada as adult government-assisted refugees in the 1980s. Delimiting my sample in this way allowed me to present the stories of individuals who all had the same legal status and received the same government support upon arrival. This selection process left me with the six interviewees that I will present here. The interviews cover each narrator's life story and vary in length, ranging from two to six interview sessions and 2.5–11 hours of audio per interviewee.

Although my research focus is on the Salvadorans' initial integration, having access to life story interviews was valuable. Alejandra structured all of her interviews the same way. In the first session, she asked the interviewees to tell their life story. Generally prompted by a single question—"I would like to ask you to tell me something about your life"—she would then allow the interviewees to lead the direction of the discussion. In subsequent sessions, she asked follow-up questions which allowed interviewees to expand their account. This approach put the narrators in charge of the interview direction and encouraged the telling of stories that the interviewees found important—rather than ones privileged by the interviewer, society or the historical discipline.⁵³ The interviews therefore covered events that ranged from the narrators' childhoods to the moment of the interview. In being familiar with interviewees' full life stories, I could take each narrator's past actions in El Salvador and their future pursuits in Canada into account while analyzing their immigration experience.

Admittedly, secondary analysis has been the topic of much debate. Opponents argue that subsequent researchers will never be able to fully understand data sets constructed by

⁵³ Freund, "Transnationalizing Home in Winnipeg," 68–69.

others, and draw attention to ethical questions of using testimonies for alternative purposes than the original intent the participants consented to.⁵⁴ Proponents, however, not only contend that researchers can reuse data with integrity and ethical consideration, but that they should reuse it since the benefits include opening innovative avenues of thought and increasing potential output. Joanna Bornat points out that there is no way for any researcher to know every aspect of the context in which data or documents were produced.⁵⁵ All researchers must take a source's social and historical context into account. On the question of ethics, she argues that data can be re-analyzed as long as the testimonies have been deposited in an archive under public ownership and "full and open acknowledgement of the varied and different contexts for interpretation are included."⁵⁶ This is particularly practicable in the historical discipline since most oral history projects, such as the SVM project, privilege comprehensive archiving practices in which researchers collect metadata, audio files, transcripts, translations and field notes for interview projects. Paul Thompson further posits that the most valuable qualitative data sets for future reanalysis are those in which "the interviews are free-flowing but follow a life story form," which the SVM interviews are.⁵⁷ The most important concern for any researcher using oral testimonies is to treat the sources with respect even when the accuracy or appropriateness of an account is called into question.

I began my analysis by listening to the interviews. As Portelli has underlined: "Oral sources are *oral* sources" and should therefore be appreciated as such.⁵⁸ Much meaning and emotion can be lost through transcription. Since I had previously worked as a translator for the SVM project, some interviews were already familiar to me. I listened through the

⁵⁴ Joanna Bornat, "Crossing Boundaries with Secondary Analysis: Implications for Archived Oral History Data," paper given at the ESRC National Council for Research Methods Network for Methodological Innovation, University of Essex, Essex, 19 September 2008.

⁵⁵ Joanna Bornat, "A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose," *Oral History (Colchester)* 31, no. 1 (2003): 50.

⁵⁶ Bornat, "A Second Take," 52.

⁵⁷ Paul Thompson, "Re-Using Qualitative Research Data: a Personal Account," *Forum, Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 3 (2000): 13.

⁵⁸ Author's emphasis. Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader* 3rd Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 48–58 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 49.

interviews multiple times listening not only for content, but also for the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, how interviewees structured their narrative, and above all for auditive clues of emotion.⁵⁹ It was only once I started writing that I switched to using the written English translations of the refugees' words. When using citations from the interviews, I have often chosen to include Alejandra's questions. Each interview was a joint product created by the combined efforts of the interviewee and the interviewer and I wanted to acknowledge the context within which the interviewees were sharing their stories.

As a final note on the oral histories, I would like to address how I am referring to the interviewees. Before an interview took place, the interviewer gave participants a description of the SVM project after which they signed a questionnaire and consent forms (provided in both English and Spanish) in which they could mark if they 1) agreed to be interviewed or not, 2) agreed to have the interview recorded or not, 3) agreed to have their name used or not, 4) agreed to have their interview and questionnaire deposited in various archives or not, and 5) determined in what year their interview would be accessible. Although all the narrators discussed in this study agreed to have their interviews be open access to the public—with one exception of an interviewee who requested that her name be kept private—I have chosen to refer to interviewees solely by their first names.

Anonymizing interviewees who have consented to be named is an ethical dilemma in the practice of oral history. It is generally preferred to name interviewees as documentation of an oral history's credibility.⁶⁰ Imposing anonymity can be seen as silencing marginalized groups.⁶¹ What ultimately pushed me to make this decision was the confluence of the

⁵⁹ A group of German oral historians working with a secondary analysis of an interview have clearly demonstrated how privileging the auditory aspect of an interview can influence analysis. Andrea Althaus, Linde Apel, Lina Nikou, and Janine Schemmer, "Ein Interview, zwei Gesprächspartner, drei Fragehorizonte, vier Mithörerinnen: Deutungsmöglichkeiten einer archivierten Audioaufnahme," *Forum Zeitgeschichte* 29, Juni (2022): 81–117.

⁶⁰ Mary Larson, "Steering Clear of the Rocks: A Look at the Current State of Oral History Ethics in the Digital Age," *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013): 38.

⁶¹ Sheena Rolph, "Ethical Dilemmas: Oral History Work with People with Learning Disabilities," in "Memory, Trauma, and Ethics," special issue, *Oral History* 26, 2 (Autumn 1998): 66.

sensitive nature of the topics discussed in the interviews and the small size of Winnipeg's Salvadoran population. While the interviewees themselves consented to being named, the people they talked about did not. In a community of fewer than three thousand people, it would be easy to identify who interviewees were referring to even if I had removed the names of individuals uninvolved with the SVM project. This is a particularly pressing concern in the digital era. I wanted to ensure that my research would not leave a digital trail that tracked back to interviewees. Following the approach of other oral historians in similar situations,⁶² I decided to only use interviewees' first names which respected their choice to be named, while protecting their associates and their online privacy.

Since I was using first names for the interviewees, I decided to also refer to Alejandra Salcedo by her first name. Although I do not share any sensitive details about her life, I felt that using a surname for my interviewer while using first names for my interviewees portrayed an unequal power dynamic that was not present during the interviews. While I acknowledge that a certain level of authority is inherent in the interviewer position,⁶³ Alejandra was well known to most of her interviewees and maintained a friendly relationship with them. Furthermore, the interviewees often referred to Alejandra by her first name during their interviews, so it seemed logical to use a consistent name for her throughout the analysis.

Thesis Outline

This analysis has three chapters with an introduction and conclusion. Chapter one introduces readers to the six interviewees. Through an examination of their departure from El Salvador and arrival in Winnipeg, it explains each individual's motivations for leaving their home, their migration route and their early memories of arriving in a new country. The focus

⁶² Mia Martin Hobbs, "(Un)Naming: Ethics, Agency, and Anonymity in Oral Histories with Veteran-Narrators," *The Oral History Review* 48, no. 1 (2021): 59–82.

⁶³ For more detailed discussions of the power dynamics in oral histories, see: Sanchia deSouza and Jyothsna Latha Belliappa, "The Positionality of Narrators and Interviewers: Methodological Comments on Oral History with Anglo-Indian Schoolteachers in Bangalore, India," in *Beyond Women's Words*, eds. Stacey Zembrzycki, Katrina Srigley and Franca Iacovetta (London: Routledge, 2018), 38–47; Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 137–153.

is therefore on active transition and change, rather than on integration and settlement. Chapter one has three subsections which provide 1) details of each interviewee's circumstances of departure, 2) a description of the federal aid extended to newly arrived refugees, and 3) a reflection on Salvadorans' reaction to cold weather.

The following two chapters focus more directly on strategies of integration. Chapter two describes the Salvadorans efforts at building a community in Canada. I argue that it was the maintenance of social networks—made up of old connections which extended back to El Salvador and new ones formed after migrating—which allowed narrators to feel at home in Winnipeg. Chapter two gives readers a greater understanding of each narrator's priorities and describes what social circles they gravitated towards. The three subsections provide an overview of 1) how interviewees preserved ties with El Salvador from abroad, 2) how Salvadorans created support systems in Winnipeg, and 3) how relationships within refugees' homes and families changed after migration.

Chapter three covers the refugees' early interactions with Canadians. It discusses the challenges interviewees faced in integrating into a new culture and what strategies they used to adapt to their new surroundings. This chapter allows readers to get to know the narrators' public personas. The three subsections explore refugees' experiences with 1) learning English, 2) finding employment, and 3) interacting with Canadians.

I conclude by looking at the interviews in their wider context. I argue that the six interviewees participated in the SVM project not only to share their life stories, but also to demonstrate that they had led a successful integration in Winnipeg. This highlights that the interviews themselves were part of the Salvadorans' integration process and the legacy that they wanted to share with future generations.

“Before we left, my husband was backing out, saying he didn’t want to leave. He had a good job, we had a house, a car, but our lives were not safe and I was ready to come alone with my children, if necessary. I wanted to leave El Salvador at all costs. I was happy that we were coming to Canada.”

—Lorena, 2013¹

“I have never wanted to move elsewhere [other than Winnipeg]. I don’t know why; it seems I’m a masochist, bearing this cold weather!”

—Ricardo, 2013²

CHAPTER ONE

A Time of Transition: Leaving El Salvador, Arriving in Winnipeg

In deciding to leave their country of origin and relocate to a country of asylum, refugees took a step into the unknown. The time surrounding their emigration and settlement was therefore often turbulent. The first chapter of this thesis will describe the conditions of Salvadorans’ initial arrival in Canada from their preparations before leaving El Salvador to their first months in Winnipeg. In doing so, it also introduces the six interviewees, first describing their lives in El Salvador then going on to present their situation after relocation. Already from these early moments, the interviewees’ experiences were not uniform—every individual had their own motivations for coming to Winnipeg and their own expectations of what a new life in Canada would be like. Understanding the circumstances of this period of transition is vital for all subsequent analyses of the refugees’ integration in later sections.

The narrators themselves placed a significant emphasis on this transition time. Even when providing a condensed biography—as many interviewees did at the start of their first interview session—they presented the process of coming to Canada as a critical juncture in their life stories. Immigration constituted the transition between their past and their present. Chapter one begins by outlining the situations refugees found themselves in in El Salvador; it describes their reasons for emigrating, their pre-departure preparation, and their route to

¹ Lorena, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, June 10, 2013, translated by Monica Ruiz, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 23.

² Ricardo, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, February 2, 2013, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 3.

Canada. The second section describes the financial and material support Salvadorans received as government-assisted refugees. The final section reviews refugees' first impressions of one of Winnipeg's more challenging characteristics: the weather. These sections demonstrate that the context of the refugees' migration and their first impressions of Winnipeg had a lasting impact on their integration.

1 - Circumstances of Departure

The circumstances surrounding Salvadorans' departure from El Salvador affected their initial perceptions of Winnipeg and their ability to adapt to a new environment. Studies with refugees of various origins have linked high levels of stress before or after migration to difficulties with cultural adaptation and social integration.³ In the Salvadoran context, political exiles often delayed their integration out of a desire to return to El Salvador.⁴ To better understand each interviewee's situation upon arrival in Canada, the following section will review how closely connected the interviewees were to the conflict in El Salvador, what level of pre-departure preparation they had before emigrating, and what trajectory they travelled on their way to Winnipeg.

The Legacy of Conflict

All six interviewees came to Canada as refugees. All were therefore able to prove to Canadian immigration officials that they had a well-founded fear of being persecuted in El Salvador. The level of persecution they faced, however, varied greatly. By creating a designated humanitarian immigration class for Salvadorans during the civil war, the Canadian government acknowledged that the situation in El Salvador was so volatile that most

³ Julie Drolet et al., "The Alberta Syrian Refugee Project: Understanding Trauma and Resilience in Refugee Resettlement," in *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada*, eds. Margaret Walton-Roberts, Luisa Veronis, and Leah K. Hamilton (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 65–84; Marija Bogic et al. "Factors Associated with Mental Disorders in Long-Settled War Refugees: Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia in Germany, Italy and the UK," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 200, no. 3 (2012): 216–223; Matthis Schick et al. "Challenging Future, Challenging Past: The Relationship of Social Integration and Psychological Impairment in Traumatized Refugees," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 7, no. 1 (2016): 28057–28066.

⁴ Jacob, "Social Integration of Salvadoran Refugees," 311.

Salvadorans had a justifiable refugee claim. The six interviewees had a variety of reasons for emigrating. Some left El Salvador because they were being actively persecuted for their participation in popular movements, some were threatened or intimidated despite being ostensibly apolitical, and others left to better their economic prospects. Many interviewees were motivated by a combination of these factors. However, the violence of the war deeply affected all interviewees, even those who remember their main emigration incentive being education or employment. Every interviewee shared recollections of how commonplace violence had become in El Salvador in the 1980s: they recalled being stopped and searched at gunpoint, being threatened, witnessing violence, and losing friends or family members in the conflict. Two interviewees, Roberto and Laura, were actively pursued by Salvadoran authorities and had been the victims of state-sanctioned violence before leaving El Salvador. After suffering long-term and especially severe persecution, they faced additional challenges on their path to integration.

Roberto became involved with the leftist popular movement of El Salvador in the late 1960s at age fifteen. His work with labour unions made him a target of the national police who captured and tortured him three times, in 1972, 1977 and 1980. He eventually fled El Salvador in 1981 and, after a brief stay in Mexico, relocated to Winnipeg in 1983 as a government-assisted refugee. When telling his life story, Roberto described his attitude after coming to Canada as “stupid” and “rebellious.” For the first eight years that he lived in Winnipeg, he claimed to have made little to no effort to integrate into Canadian society. Roberto became depressed and had issues with alcohol addiction. When interviewed in 2012, he described his behaviour as a legacy of the war.

During my first years in Canada, I was rebellious. “No, this is not my country. I am not Canadian, I am Salvadoran. I am just passing through here.” I did not want to learn English. I was completely traumatized: “English is from the United States and they are responsible for everything that happened to me.” I was in a horrible, critical state. [...] It

was a very difficult time because I dreamt of having a home and did not know what a home was.⁵

Highly aware of the role the United States played as a sponsor and ally of the Salvadoran government, Roberto was critical of anything that reminded him of the country. In his interviews, he described his aversion to American culture covering everything from an ideological opposition to capitalism to the English language. It wasn't until Roberto had returned to El Salvador after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 that he found closure and made a new start in Canada.

After the peace treaties, I said to myself, "The odyssey is over; I am going back." [...] I went to El Salvador in '92. My family was very happy that I had come back. But it was a remarkable experience; in spite of my rebelliousness, I did not want to live in El Salvador, I had grown accustomed to life in Canada. [...] I mention this because it was a transformation for me. I said, "I have wasted eight years." I didn't study English, I didn't make the best out of my time because I was rebellious. What a disgrace. Well, when I came back after the peace treaties I arrived with a different idea: I am going to embrace Canada as my second country.⁶

As will be further detailed in subsequent chapters, Roberto continued to dedicate his attention and resources to supporting the Salvadoran population throughout the civil war. Assuming that his stay in Winnipeg would be temporary, he did not work to build a life outside El Salvador. Ultimately, Roberto's process of integration was slower than other interviewees' who had been less involved in the conflict. By his own account, Roberto did not truly begin to make active attempts to integrate until he had found some closure in his home country, nearly a decade after having moved to Winnipeg.

Laura also had close connections to popular movements from a young age. Most of her brothers and the father of her eldest son joined clandestine rural organizations in the early 1970s. Laura's family kept her in the dark about their actions and the mounting danger that their organization garnered until she was eighteen years old. It was around that time that the Salvadoran army began actively targeting Laura's family and all five of her brothers, her

⁵ Roberto, interview by Laura Castillo, April 12, 2012, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 11–12.

⁶ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 13–14.

child's father, and many of her cousins were disappeared. After fleeing their home, the remaining family sought refuge under the jurisdiction of Monseñor Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador. Laura then joined a left-wing religious organization herself. In 1980, the National Guard kidnapped and tortured Laura and her sister. The guards only released the two women after Monseñor Romero appealed for their lives. The archbishop's involvement, however, garnered the interest of the national media, and Laura was no longer able to continue to do clandestine work after repeatedly appearing on television and in newspapers. Because of the increasing threats she was facing, Laura and her husband decided to emigrate. While Laura did not experience the same delay in integration as Roberto, she nonetheless recalls that her pre-migration experiences influenced how she related to other refugees.

I had a lot of disagreements when I arrived, because of my way of thinking. [...] I had come out of a different kind of suffering. I lost people. I lost my brothers. I lost my cousins. I lost a lot of family. Coming here, other people missed the mansions that they'd lost because they got taken away [laughs]. To me, a house isn't worth the same as a human being; it doesn't have true value.⁷

When refugees left El Salvador, they had very little control over where they were going or when they would be leaving. Departures were often rushed or unplanned. Coming from such a tumultuous position, the amount and quality of preparation each interviewee received before arriving in Canada also coloured their initial perceptions of their new home.

Pre-arrival Knowledge and Preparation

After having their refugee status acknowledged by the Canadian government, most interviewees received some level of pre-departure orientation by immigration services abroad. The goal of these pre-departure workshops was to give refugees realistic expectations of what they would encounter upon their arrival in Canada. Interviewees recalled immigration officers showing them Winnipeg on a map, giving them basic descriptions of the city's demographic makeup and climate, and outlining their immigrant status as refugees.

⁷ Laura, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, May 9, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 16–17.

Many, however, felt that the workshops insufficiently prepared them for life in Canada. Inevitably, an individual's level of pre-arrival preparation contributed to their initial arrival experiences. Interviewees' perception of Winnipeg depended to some degree on how they imagined the city would be. In working with Soviet German Immigrants, Hans Werner has found that imagined trajectories of future lives influence subsequent paths of integration.⁸ Interviewees who had more information about the resettlement process and their destination country and city therefore arrived with more realistic preconceptions which, in turn, facilitated their integration.

Many of the interviewees' departures took place while they were navigating particularly stressful situations. These circumstances left very little time for them to prepare themselves for a life-changing move. Almost thirty years after arriving in Canada, Lorena still remembered exactly how little time her family had to prepare themselves to permanently leave El Salvador. "We never thought that we'd be leaving so quickly. I remember that on December 31, 1985, we received a telegram saying that we were to leave January 10, 1986. In other words, it was two weeks later. We were in shock. We didn't have the time to sell the house or to get rid of our things. We barely had time to think."⁹

At the time, Lorena was living in San Salvador with her husband and two young children, pregnant with her third. The family applied for refugee status after they began receiving threats due to her husband's work with the Department of Urbanism and Architecture of El Salvador. The unexpectedly quick approval of their refugee claim resulted in Lorena knowing almost nothing about Winnipeg before migrating. Her husband did attend a few pre-departure workshops, but Lorena could rarely join him since she stayed home to look after their children.

⁸ Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007).

⁹ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 22.

Really, when we left, they didn't give us a lot of information, because I remember that when we went the first time when they told us we had been accepted and that there would be an examination process and everything, they never told us how long it would take. They also never asked us where we wanted to go, they just said: "You are going to Winnipeg." We didn't even know where Winnipeg was. I remember we got home and we started to look at a map, right, to see where Winnipeg was. But they didn't give us a lot of information.¹⁰

Others who had attended pre-departure workshops didn't necessarily feel that they accurately represented life in Winnipeg. Ricardo, who applied for refugee status after being repeatedly harassed by members of the National Guard, had a few months to prepare for his departure but did not describe the additional information he received as particularly advantageous. In hindsight, Ricardo believed that the immigration officers he spoke with were not familiar with Winnipeg. In an attempt to prepare Ricardo for the extreme temperature difference he was about to face, they either intentionally exaggerated the toll that winter took on Winnipeggers' lives or provided him with false information out of ignorance.

They told me in El Salvador that I was coming to a cold place, an extremely cold place. Even the immigration officer told me that life here in the Winnipeg cold was very difficult. I thought it would be worse. Those people didn't know anything about it. He even told me that people here only work for six months of the year because they spend the other six months locked up due to the cold. But it's not like that in reality. Those people speak without knowledge, without experience.¹¹

While Ricardo was likely relieved to discover the falsehood of this piece of misinformation, having false conceptions of his new home would have complicated both his departure and integration.

One of the interviewees was, however, significantly better informed about Winnipeg than the others. Already in the early 1980s, Cristina had a personal connection to Canada; her brother was briefly married to a woman whose mother lived in Quebec. After hearing her sister-in-law tell stories about Canada, she became interested in immigrating there. Cristina couldn't find the means to leave El Salvador immediately, but she and her family stayed

¹⁰ Lorena, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, March 5, 2014, translation by Sophie Sickert, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 2.

¹¹ Ricardo, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, March 1, 2013, translated by Sophie Sickert, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 7.

informed about opportunities to migrate to Canada even after the couple had divorced. As the war worsened, some of Cristina's family members, notably her sister and brother, were granted asylum in Canada. Since her siblings had settled in Winnipeg, Cristina also requested to go there when she applied for asylum in 1987.

I was asked where I wanted to go; they allowed me to choose where I wanted to be. I said Winnipeg and they asked me, "Winnipeg, why Winnipeg?" Obviously the person interviewing me knew where Winnipeg was; I didn't know where it was or how it was, but my siblings were here, so I said I had two siblings who lived in Winnipeg, and there were no issues: Winnipeg it was.¹²

Cristina's explicit desire to migrate to Winnipeg—a medium-sized, isolated and relatively obscure city, with cold winter temperatures—presumably provided her with some control over her destination. As the official's surprised reaction indicated, it was likely rare for refugees to directly request to be sent to Winnipeg. Already having family living in a specific Canadian city may also have given Cristina some say in her assignment. The UNHCR had long urged asylum countries to "apply liberal criteria" in identifying and admitting family members to be reunified after migration.¹³ As refugee advocates hoped, having family already living in her destination city made Cristina's migration process smoother. She knew more about the city before her departure and could rely on her siblings' support during her initial arrival. She recalled, "Obviously I was happy about coming when I came [laughs]. [...] My two siblings already lived here and were waiting for me at the airport. I received a really warm welcome and reception everywhere. They introduced me to their friends, who are still friends of mine today. The first days were good because everything was new."¹⁴

¹² Cristina (pseudonym), interview by Alejandra Salcedo, January 8, 2013, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 26.

¹³ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, *Family Reunification No. 24 (XXXII) - 1981*, 21 October 1981, No. 24 (XXXII). The "principle of unity of the family" had been a central tenet of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, see section IV, Recommendation B.

¹⁴ Cristina (pseudonym), interview by Alejandra Salcedo, March 24, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 13.

For the individuals who arrived in Winnipeg directly from El Salvador, personal connections and pre-departure orientation workshops were the only ways they could conceptualize the toll of migration. Many had never travelled outside El Salvador and had their first experiences with culture shock and the troubles of relocation in Winnipeg. Other refugees left El Salvador before they had secured asylum in Canada. Many faced arduous journeys through neighbouring countries in an attempt to find a country that would grant them refuge.

Getting to Winnipeg Through Mexico and the United States

When an individual's migration to Canada took them through other countries, they arrived with past experiences, both positive and negative, that shaped what they expected from their final resettlement country. Even if the time interviewees spent in these intermediate communities was short, it could have an immense impact on their lives. Freund has argued that refugees make home at multiple points along their migration journey and that immigrant conceptions of home include more than the country of origin and the country of settlement.¹⁵ Having experiences at making home outside El Salvador inevitably impacted refugees' perceptions of Winnipeg. Despite not necessarily knowing more about Canada, these individuals had previously encountered state bureaucracies mediating refugee affairs, endeavoured to find employment in a foreign country, and attempted some level of integration outside El Salvador.

During the civil war, many Salvadorans spent time in Central American countries neighbouring El Salvador, in Mexico, or in the United States before coming to Canada. Salvadorans who were forcibly displaced from their homes often had to cross large distances on foot in an attempt to find asylum. Once they had crossed a national border, refugees faced discrimination and the threat of repatriation at multiple points along their journey. For

¹⁵ Freund, "Transnationalizing Home in Winnipeg, 61–86.

example, Mexico granted few asylum visas despite being the country which hosted the largest number of UNHCR-recognized Central American refugees.¹⁶ As a result, most Salvadorans in Mexico did not receive resettlement support or have any legal recourse. The United States implemented even stricter policies, granting legal asylum to only 2.6% of Salvadoran applicants and implementing a rigorous crackdown on “illegal aliens” in 1986.¹⁷

When refugees arrived in Winnipeg after already having lived outside El Salvador, they necessarily compared their resettlement experiences. For the individuals interviewed for this project, this had a positive effect on their early integration and initial perception of Winnipeg. Gilberto and Laura spent the longest amount of time in asylum countries other than Canada. Their cases illustrate two distinct ways in which previous migration experiences influenced refugees’ perception of their final migration destination.

When Gilberto left El Salvador in 1981, he had been studying engineering in San Salvador, first at the University of El Salvador then at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University. Throughout large parts of the 1970s and 1980s, Salvadoran universities were sites of ideological and physical conflict. The campus of the University of El Salvador was the site of frequent protests and the student body was subject to recurrent violence.¹⁸ In an attempt to find an institution at which he could finish his engineering degree, Gilberto made his way to Mexico. He spent almost nine months there, unable to afford university tuition or find consistent employment, before illegally crossing into the United States where he spent another few months. During this time he was constantly on the move, first looking to further his education and later once that proved unobtainable, looking for work. In the United States, Gilberto was on high alert fearing that he would be deported. He was therefore keen to receive official refugee status in Canada.

¹⁶ García, “Designing a Refugee Policy: Mexico as Country of First Asylum,” in *Seeking Refuge*, 44–84.

¹⁷ García, “Refugees or Economic Migrants? The Debate Over Accountability in the United States,” in *Seeking Refuge*, 85–118.

¹⁸ Nancy Rios, “Three Decades of Struggle: the University of El Salvador, 1960–1990,” PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1992.

In his first interview, Gilberto was asked about his initial impression of Winnipeg. After having lived in several large dynamic cities like San Salvador and Dallas, Gilberto was not particularly impressed with Winnipeg's ambience. His initial answer to the question therefore had nothing to do with the city itself. He answered: "The only thing I liked was that at least I was legal here."¹⁹ Having had the experience of being constantly on edge because of his undocumented status, Gilberto was willing to overlook the shortcomings of his new home for the security that being a legal refugee afforded him. Having had a challenging previous migration experience made Winnipeg seem better in comparison.

Previous experiences also informed Gilberto's impression of Canadians. While living in Texas, he remembered only socializing with other Latinos and being frustrated by the dominance of Mexican culture within that community. While less severe than the segregation experienced by black Americans, Hispanic isolation was prevalent across the United States in the 1980s.²⁰ Living in Texas, a state with a population that was over 20% Hispanic (the vast majority of whom had Mexican ancestry), Gilberto's social circle was almost exclusively Latino.²¹ One of Gilberto's first positive memories of Winnipeg therefore centred around interethnic mingling. Shortly after arriving, Gilberto went to a local nightclub and was impressed at the lack of discrimination, so much so that the memory stayed with him for the next thirty years.

What I liked was that there was a mix of all kinds of people. There were Asian people, white people, black people, all kinds, and I never saw any kind of discrimination. I saw everyone getting along; it was something I really liked compared to the type of relationships I had in Dallas, Texas. [...] Perhaps it was because of the language barrier or maybe because of our race, but the thing is that the whole time I was in Dallas, Texas

¹⁹ Gilberto, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, July 24, 2013, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 13.

²⁰ Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, "Trends in the Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians: 1970-1980," *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 6 (1987): 802-25.

²¹ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Population Division Working Paper No. 56 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), 76; Sharon Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas and Nora Albert, "The Hispanic Population: 2010," 2010 Census Briefs (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

I never went anywhere where there was a big mix of people like I experienced when I arrived here.²²

If he had not had a contrary experience in the United States, Gilberto would likely not have found this event to be as important. As it was, this moment ingratiated Gilberto towards Winnipeg at a time when the city was still relatively unknown to him and positively reinforced his decision to leave the United States.

Laura had been displaced from her home early on during the war in 1977 and had worked for a number of refugee camps in El Salvador before emigrating in 1983. After escaping El Salvador, Laura and her family settled in a farming village in Mexico with the help of church connections. The family spent four and a half years living there before coming to Canada. Mexican authorities recognized Laura as a political refugee and provided her with a legal status while she lived in Mexico. The local community her family moved to was welcoming and she quickly developed friendships and made home in Mexico. A friend encouraged Laura to pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a nurse, and for a while, it seemed as though Laura and her family would settle in Mexico permanently. However, once Laura began applying for practicum positions to complete her nursing degree, she encountered barriers.

I started applying to work everywhere, but no one gave me work. I went to the Ministry of Labour because they told me to go there and explain my circumstances. The person I talked to there said, “You are not Mexican; you cannot work in Mexico. You’re only here as a refugee, you could kill the patients.” I got so angry that that very second I told my husband, who was with me, “Let’s get out of here. I no longer wish to live in Mexico, let’s go.”²³

Despite her refugee status, Laura was restricted from participating in Mexican society. After dedicating herself so completely to her nursing studies, she found the lack of trust she experienced at the Ministry of Labour deeply insulting. While the majority of her experiences in Mexico were positive, being refused work because of her nationality convinced Laura to

²² Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 13–14.

²³ Laura, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, April 4, 2013, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 25.

migrate again. In her interviews, she continued to reflect on the Mexican people she met positively, but stood by her decision to leave. Upon arriving in Canada, Laura seemed to benefit from having experience settling in a new country. She had realistic resettlement expectations and knew how to overcome settlement obstacles. Living in temporary housing also troubled her less than it did other refugees who did not have previous displacement experiences. She appreciated Canada's higher standard of living, and above all, that her refugee status no longer prevented her from working in the healthcare sector.

Gilberto and Laura's migration experiences in other asylum countries acted as first-hand resettlement workshops. They were not any better prepared for the cold and they did not speak more English than the other interviewees, but they did already know that they were capable of living in a foreign country.

2 - Government Aid

All government-assisted refugees received aid from the federal government upon their arrival in Canada. In the 1980s, the Department of Manpower and Immigration provided services for refugees through the Immigration Adjustment Assistance Program (IAAP).²⁴ Aid included pickup from the airport or port of entry, temporary lodgings and assistance in finding permanent accommodations, basic household goods, integration services, and an immigration loan that covered transportation to Canada and additional settlement costs.²⁵ Refugees received this support for up to one year, or until they could support themselves, whichever came first. Afterwards, the government expected refugees to begin repaying their loans in monthly instalments. While refugees did not officially enter Canada through the

²⁴ The Department of Manpower and Immigration was the branch of the Canadian government responsible for matters dealing with immigration to Canada, refugees, and Canadian citizenship between 1966 and 1994. The branch was renamed Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada in 1994. John Powell, "Department of Manpower and Immigration," in *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration* 2nd edition (New York: Facts on File, 2016). The IAAP was renamed to Immigration Resettlement Assistance Program in 1998.

²⁵ The support refugees received in the 1980s, resembled the support refugees today: Government of Canada, "Financial help – Refugees," Immigration and Citizenship, last modified February 21, 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-within-canada/financial.html>

points system, the 1976 *Immigration Act* encouraged immigration officials to keep resettlement in mind when granting refugee status.²⁶ Immigration services therefore assumed that a year of assistance would allow all government-assisted refugees to become successfully established in Canada. The following section will provide an overview of Salvadoran refugees' experiences with government support in Winnipeg, covering their memories of the hotel they stayed at temporarily after arrival, their regard for government services (arrangement of housing, household goods and clothing), and their perceptions of welfare. The section concludes with the description of a deportation scare, in which the immigration officials called the validity of one of the interviewees' refugee claims into question.

The Balmoral Hotel

Most interviewees described similar scenes upon arrival in Canada. On the way to Winnipeg, Central American refugees often transited through Toronto. Immigration officials assisted newcomers on their route in Canada, ensuring that they reached their final destination. Although each interviewee's narrative varied slightly depending on when and with whom they were travelling, the experience was relatively uniform. Gilberto described his arrival as follows:

I arrived in Canada on September 9, 1982. I remember that I left Dallas, Texas on September 8, 1982. At the Dallas airport I met another Salvadoran [...] We travelled together on the same plane and arrived in Toronto where immigration officials were waiting for us. Given that it was already late and there were no more flights to Winnipeg on that same day, they sent us to a hotel near the airport and the following morning, they sent us to Winnipeg. At the Winnipeg airport, another immigration official was waiting for us; his last name was Scott, I don't remember his first name. It was Scott who took us downtown and brought us to the immigration and employment offices which were then on Edmonton Street near the International Centre.²⁷ [...] We filled out some papers and then they brought us to the Balmoral Hotel.²⁸

²⁶ Michael Molloy, Peter Duschinsky, Kurt Jensen, and Robert Shalka, "The Immigration Act, 1976: New Provisions for Refugees," in *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese refugees, 1975-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 63.

²⁷ The Immigrant Centre carried out the IAAP in Winnipeg.

²⁸ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 3.

What was not detailed in Gilberto's narrative was that the Department of Manpower and Immigration endeavoured to welcome refugees in their native language—Spanish in the case of Salvadorans. After a brief introduction to the city, IAAP staff drove refugees to their apartment, if one had already been rented ahead for them, or more likely to a hotel for temporary housing. In Winnipeg during the majority of the 1980s, the hotel in question was the Balmoral Motor Hotel near Winnipeg's downtown. Refugees stayed at the hotel until the Department of Manpower found them suitable private accommodations. Some Salvadorans left the hotel after a few days, while others lived there for up to a month. On paper, the location of this hotel seemed desirable. It was within a 20-minute walk to the largest healthcare facility in Manitoba, a large urban park, several department stores, a grocery store, the immigration and employment offices, and cultural institutions such as museums and concert venues. It was also close to public transit routes, including a free downtown shuttle service established in 1986 called DASH.²⁹ As refugees quickly learned upon their arrival at the Balmoral Hotel, however, Winnipeg's inner city had high levels of poverty and crime.

Both the spatial and ethnic character of poverty in Winnipeg had preceded World War II but became particularly apparent in the 1950s and 1960s as suburbanization and deindustrialization led to a hollowing out of the inner city.³⁰ The neighbourhoods in the inner-city became characterized by low rates of home ownership and educational attainment, and high rates of poverty, unemployment and government support.³¹ The affordability of downtown housing drew migrants—both immigrants arriving from abroad and Indigenous people moving to the city from reserves—to the area.³² Located slightly north-west of

²⁹ "Winnipeg's Public Transit History," *Manitoba Transit Heritage Association*, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.mtha.ca/transit-history.html>

³⁰ Jim Silver and Owen Toews, "Combating Poverty in Winnipeg's Inner City, 1960s-1990s: Thirty Years of Hard-Earned Lessons," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 18, no. 1 (2009): 98–122.

³¹ Brian Lorch, "Spatial Polarization of Income in a Slow-Growth City," in *The Divided Prairie City: Income Inequality Among Winnipeg's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2010*, eds. Jino Distasio and Andrew Kaufman (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 2015), 33.

³² Mary Jane Norris, Stewart Clatworthy, and Evelyn Peters, "The Urbanization of Aboriginal Populations in Canada: A Half Century in Review," in *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural*

Winnipeg's downtown centre in the neighbourhood of West Alexander, the Balmoral Hotel was unquestionably situated in an impoverished part of town.

As mentioned previously, the incoming Salvadorans knew very little about Winnipeg before their arrival. Although they received a brief introduction to the city from a Department of Manpower and Immigration worker on their drive to the hotel, they did not know about the dynamics between Winnipeg's different neighbourhoods. It is difficult to find an authentic description of refugees' initial reactions to the hotel and the surrounding area. In their interviews in the early 2010s, the Salvadorans describe different impressions. Ricardo, for example, felt that the neighbourhood was safe, but he presented this memory in direct contrast to what he had learned about the area since.

Something that I found quite curious, and that to this day I still think about, is that for three weeks I never saw a police car near the hotel. I came to the conclusion that it was a very good neighbourhood. That is until later. At this point I have come to realize that it's not a very good area. On one side of the building—that is to say, of the hotel—there is a building that I saw on television about two days ago and they described it as the 'building of death' or something like that, the police are there all the time. The police say that they are there two, three, four times a week or a day, something like that.³³

Although Ricardo did not remember being aware of it at the time, there were still high crime rates in the area around the Balmoral Hotel during the 1980s. The *Winnipeg Free Press* reported several assaults, robberies, and stabbings which had taken place on or around the hotel premises while he was living at the Balmoral.³⁴ In fact, when Ricardo arrived in Winnipeg on 10 September 1985, the beer vendor behind the hotel had recently been robbed and vandalized.³⁵

Innovation, eds. Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 29–45.

³³ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 2.

³⁴ See for example: "Police Took 25 Minutes on Assault Call: Cabbie," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Aug. 25, 1978; Bob Cox, "Alcoholic Gets 18 Months for Robbing Cabbie," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Oct. 23, 1986; "Charge Laid Under New Knife Law," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Dec. 13, 1988; Paul Wiecek, "Man Smashed Over the Head with Bar Stool Five Times: Vicious Attack Shocked Police," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Dec. 1, 1991.

³⁵ "Judge Wants Stiffer Jail Terms for Robbers," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Sept. 8, 1985.

A number of factors could explain why Ricardo felt so comfortable in the inner city when he first arrived. For one, he described living in a “happy poverty” for most of his childhood in El Salvador and would likely not have held prejudices against a visibly impoverished area.³⁶ Furthermore, he could communicate with the hotel staff through his English-speaking roommate. Ricardo arrived in Winnipeg alone—his wife and stepson joined him 14 months later—and stayed at the hotel in a room with another refugee who had arrived at the same time. His roommate had been a journalism student in El Salvador and spoke French, German, and English in addition to Spanish. When Ricardo was asked about his experiences at the Balmoral, his first thought was of his roommate, although they had not kept in touch since. “I can’t complain because the service was good. Perhaps I had no major difficulty because my roommate spoke English. Well, he spoke four languages, so he was in charge of asking for or requesting anything. But I don’t really think we had any problems.”³⁷ Being able to ask locals for directions, recommendations, or explanations about Canadian culture helped Ricardo orient himself in the downtown area.

Finally, Ricardo also had first-hand experiences which made him feel that the area was well-regulated. One that stuck out to him was the province’s involvement in alcohol sales. In the 1980s, Manitobans could only purchase alcohol from government stores, select private beer vendors or by the glass at licensed beer parlours.³⁸ This arrangement was unfamiliar to Ricardo, who initially assumed that he would be able to buy alcohol from a convenience store. When he found out that he could only buy beer at specific locations he found the arrangement to be favourable despite the potential inconvenience.

I remember that when I came, as a newcomer, the same week that I arrived when I was still living in the hotel, I went to go buy some beer. There was a 7-Eleven, and I went to look for beer at the 7-Eleven and they told me that they don’t sell that kind of stuff. This was without knowing that there was a beer store right under where I was living. So

³⁶ Ricardo, interview, February 2, 2013, 3.

³⁷ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 4.

³⁸ Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003); Bartley Kives, “A Brief History of Booze in Manitoba,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Jan. 19, 2013.

I realized that in the United States, for example in the case of California, you can find beer, cigarettes, anything in any store, but here you can't. But that doesn't bother me. As I said, we are now touching on political issues, in that system there is no education or healthcare for the people. In other words, there is a lot of debauchery, and young people have access to it.³⁹

On the other end of the spectrum, Lorena remembered having an immediately negative reaction to the hotel and surrounding neighbourhood. During her drive from the airport, Lorena was impressed by her first glimpses of the city, but she was distinctly unimpressed by her temporary lodgings: "They took us to a horrible hotel, now that I think about it. I saw such beautiful houses, and then it was like, "Oh my God, where are we?" [...] A horrible hotel, awful—I can say that [laughs]."⁴⁰ In retrospect, Lorena was aware that the challenges she was facing amounted to more than distaste for her lodgings.

When we arrived in Canada in 1986, I got very depressed at the hotel. I was depressed for a few weeks, because I realized then the huge changes that I was putting myself through. I had arrived in a country where I didn't speak the language. I was seven months pregnant with a child that we hadn't planned on. I was living in a hotel after having lived in a house and the only thing I could see outside the window was white. It was snowing all day and we couldn't go anywhere. I had no contact with anyone except my husband and my three children. All of us in a hotel room for a whole month.⁴¹

At the time of her arrival, Lorena was pregnant and was responsible for caring for two children who were both under the age of five. She was prone to bouts of morning sickness and spent most of the month at the hotel feeling unwell. While her husband left the hotel to take English classes and learn about the city, Lorena and her children stayed in their room. Due to her lack of English skills, the winter weather, and her concerns about neighbourhood safety, Lorena kept her children indoors which proved to be quite a challenge for the energetic youngsters.

Obviously it was a pretty big shock after being in my country, in my house, then coming to a room in a hotel, pregnant, with two young children whose only desire was to run and jump, and they couldn't. Well, I couldn't do much because it was in the

³⁹ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 12.

⁴⁰ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 23.

⁴¹ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 24–25.

middle of winter. I couldn't go out with them and being in the hotel for 24 hours a day for a month was quite hard.⁴²

There were other refugees staying at the Balmoral Hotel while Lorena was there, but they mostly originated from Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe.⁴³ Language barriers prevented these groups from mingling. Without a common tongue, refugees couldn't commiserate with each other or share information they had learned about Winnipeg. While there was one other Salvadoran family staying at the hotel at the same time as Lorena, she still felt very isolated. In telling her life story, staying at the Balmoral Hotel stuck out as one of the most arduous steps in her migration journey. She reflected, "They couldn't find us an apartment with three or four bedrooms so we stayed there for a month; our stay at the hotel felt awfully long. I became very depressed, I cried a lot. [...] There was no way to call my parents, after having been so close to my family—my mother-in-law used to live near us, so did my parents, cousins, friends—Here we had nobody."⁴⁴

The food at the hotel was another issue for many Salvadorans. The hotel served three meals a day at a buffet on the main floor. Interviewees recalled eating sausages and scrambled eggs for breakfast and a variety of meats and vegetables for lunch and dinner. Potatoes with gravy were a staple, as well as green beans, boiled corn and salad. This fare would have been typical for someone used to a North American diet,⁴⁵ but it proved to be challenging for the Salvadorans who were accustomed to red or pinto beans, corn or rice flour tortillas, and savoury meats. Some interviewees mentioned that the food was visually appealing, but that the taste was so different than they expected that it was challenging to eat. Interviewees remembered skipping meals when they couldn't find anything they thought was

⁴² Cristina (pseudonym), interview by Alejandra Salcedo, March 29, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 2.

⁴³ Government of Canada Publications, *Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980* (Ottawa: Employment and Immigration Canada, 1982); Vinh Huynh, "From Vietnam to 'Gianh Dao' in Canada: A Sojourner's Reflections," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 24 (2006): 93–98; Magdalena Blackmore, "Reinventing the Polish Community: Manitoba After the 1980s," *The Polish Review* 62, no. 1 (2017): 81–92.

⁴⁴ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 25.

⁴⁵ Hersch Jacobs, "Structural Elements in Canadian Cuisine," *Cuisine: The Journal of Canadian Food Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2009). <https://id-erudit-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/iderudit/039510ar>

appetizing. For Laura and Ricardo, it was the sweetness of North American food that made it unappealing.

We didn't know what to order. The food looked delicious because it was served like a buffet. It was right there, we could see it, it looked delicious, but most of the food was sweet. We weren't used to eating sweet food, we always had savoury food, and the sweet stuff was like, "Wow, the beans look so tasty, but they're too sweet." We ended up going without food the first night; we didn't eat.⁴⁶

The first bad experience, let's say, was the food. It was food that we were not used to and it's possible that I drank more juice than I ate food. There was really very little food that we liked. Well, but there came the time that we had to come around to it because we had no choice. [...] I was not used to mashed potatoes or sweet meat. I remember that when we saw ribs being served there, I said, "Wow, we're going to eat something good," but it ended up being sweet and I couldn't eat it. I don't like sweet food.⁴⁷

Roberto and Lorena didn't remember anything positive about the food; not even its looks. More than not liking the taste of the meals, they both recalled getting sick from what they ate. Roberto remembered, "I was expecting tortillas, other things, and it was a horrible situation; such a change, the food. I got sick and I got hives all over my body. Perhaps due to that entire situation, it was not pleasant at all to arrive here."⁴⁸ In reflection, Lorena linked the morning sickness caused by her pregnancy with her dislike for the hotel food. "What really affected me was the food at the hotel because I'd never tried that food before. I was pregnant, I was always sick, vomiting. The food we got was horrible."⁴⁹

All the refugees who were housed at the Balmoral experienced some level of culture shock during their stay. It was there that the refugees first interacted with Canadians, that they first attempted to communicate in English, and that they first tried typical Canadian foods. While the interviewees appreciated having somewhere to stay immediately after arriving, they felt confined at the hotel and overwhelmed by the unfamiliar environment. Ultimately, the refugees' time at the hotel was a transitory period. Once they left the Balmoral and began

⁴⁶ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 2.

⁴⁷ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 2-3.

⁴⁸ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 11.

⁴⁹ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 23.

living alone, they experienced their first opportunities to establish themselves in Winnipeg on their terms.

One Year of Government Aid

Each province in Canada was responsible for organizing support for the refugees resettled in their jurisdiction. In Winnipeg, the IAAP worked through the International Centre to provide incoming refugees with resettlement services. Operating since 1969, the Centre ran language classes, employment counselling, nutrition and cooking courses, and put on cultural events celebrating immigrants' cultures.⁵⁰ In 1986, the *Winnipeg Free Press* published an article with interviews with IAAP staff and refugees outlining the program's operations in Manitoba.

At the IAAP office, the group's supervisor, Jim Crawford, explains that his staff provides three areas of service for refugees: reception, settlement and placement. "Our first job is to meet them at the airport, with a translator, and put them up at the Balmoral (Hotel) until we can get permanent accommodation for them." After that, the refugees receive an issue of clothing, get a minimally furnished apartment and, if they don't speak English, begin language training. The refugees receive a monthly allowance to pay for food, a bus pass, rent and incidental expenses. While they take training programs, counsellors try to find a work placement that will allow the refugees to be self-supporting.⁵¹

Salvadoran interviewees seconded this description of the IAAP's areas of service. All narrators mentioned the monthly stipend, English classes (which will be discussed in the third chapter of this analysis), receiving basic clothing and furniture, and employment services. What the article overlooked was how aware refugees were that the aid was limited, both in quantity and in duration. When reflecting on the government services he had received, Gilberto framed his recollection around financial constraints.

They had a budget for us. Generally, the low-cost apartments were near downtown and it was suggested that we could share so that we'd meet the budget. Given that we didn't have much information and in order to be close to each other, we accepted whatever

⁵⁰ Immigrant Centre Manitoba, "History of the Immigrant Centre Manitoba Inc.," accessed July 21, 2022, <https://www.icmanitoba.com/about-us/history/>. The International Centre changed its name to Immigrant Centre in 2009.

⁵¹ Kelly Teahen, "Refugees Marvel at Supermarkets, Endure Weather," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Jan. 13, 1986.

they offered us. I remember that part of the government aid included boots, inexpensive winter boots—inexpensive—green coats for the winter, simple beds—also inexpensive—, a small table, one or two chairs and some plates; the basic things that were needed to start off. I think there were blankets too and they gave us a monthly stipend to live on which was the bare minimum. The obligation or contract that was made or the obligation that they had towards us—the refugees—was to provide us with sufficient aid for a maximum of one year. That included a living allowance and an English program so that we could learn the basics. They also called and tried to help us find work as soon as possible. Given that we were unemployed; it was costly for them. If, at the end of the year of government aid, we couldn't find a job, the following year we were then put on welfare.⁵²

While Gilberto did mention a clear preference for the aid he received in Canada over trying to make do as an undocumented migrant in Mexico and the United States, he presented the government aid less generously than the program advertised itself. His apartment, clothes and furniture were “low-cost” and “inexpensive,” the monthly stipend he received covered only the “bare minimum,” and being on welfare was presented to him as “costly” for the government. The underlying message of Gilberto's narrative was that budget constrained refugees' lives. Despite government support, money was at the forefront of newcomers' thoughts.

Refugees also worried that they would end up on welfare after their year of support was over. Many of the interviewees mentioned that either they or their partners were strongly averse to receiving social assistance beyond what they received as refugees. Married Salvadoran men specifically seemed to take pride in providing for their families and dismissed the idea of accepting anything construed as charity. From the narrative that arose in the interviews, refugees often felt that the Department of Manpower pushed them to become self-sufficient before they themselves felt ready for it. Once refugees were deemed to be self-sufficient, they stopped receiving support payments, even if they had been in Canada for less than a year.

⁵² Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 6–7.

In discussing her family's transition away from government assistance, Laura treated the issue delicately. She never criticized her husband's decision to start working as soon as possible, but she also detailed how difficult it was for their family to make ends meet without government support so shortly after arriving in Winnipeg.

We took six months of English and then my husband started to work, because they told him, "You are going to study for six months and then you have to start working." The people at Immigration—it was called Manpower back then—offered him work on a farm and my husband said, "I don't want to depend on anyone, I have self-respect." He said, "I am not used to being provided for and I am going to do whatever it takes to start working. It doesn't matter what." My husband started to work, earning four seventy-five an hour on a farm in East St. Paul. [...] I wanted to keep studying while he was working, but they weren't paying him enough money for that, so I started working for a cleaning company.⁵³

Over the course of the six interview sessions that Laura did for the SVM project, she retold this story of leaving government aid three times, always in slightly different ways. Precise details like the length of time her family had been in Winnipeg before her husband started to work were sometimes inconsistent, but the general tone of her narrative remained unchanged: her husband began working only a few months after coming to Canada, his first job did not pay enough for a family of five to live off of, and it was her husband, not Laura, who steadfastly refused to receive additional support. In later retellings, Laura elaborated the narrative. She noted that neither she nor her husband spoke much English by the time they entered the workforce, that her husband's sense of pride influenced his reaction to social assistance, and that without governmental support supplementing the family's income, she stopped taking English classes sooner than she would have liked. In her fifth interview, she illustrated her husband's view on welfare very plainly. "My husband told me, 'I will never go to welfare. I don't want to and we're not going to.'"⁵⁴

Lorena shared a similar story regarding her now ex-husband's negative reaction to receiving clothing donations from the church congregation she had joined. While Lorena was

⁵³ Laura, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, April 25, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 6.

⁵⁴ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 3–4.

pleased not to have to pay for clothing, it embarrassed her husband to wear something second-hand. She suggested that his prejudice originated in El Salvador.

LORENA: That's why the churches were very important because at that time everything we wore were clothes that people gave us, donations. They were always bringing things to the church.

ALEJANDRA: Did that bother you?

LORENA: Me personally no, but it bothered my ex-husband. He hated that people were giving us used clothes. Hm, I think those are prejudices that we brought from our country. I don't see anything wrong with it, but I think it's a prejudice we have. I didn't see it as if people felt sorry for us, but my ex-husband saw it that way.⁵⁵

Laura and Lorena's husbands both balked at the prospect of needing "charity." In El Salvador, both men had careers that supported their wives and children. Salvadoran culture assumed that it was a father's responsibility to support his children financially.⁵⁶ When refugee men migrated to Canada, they often maintained this notion and were reluctant to receive additional government aid. Rather than go on social assistance, most families chose to become dual-income households even if that had not been their practice in El Salvador.

The IAAP also provided refugees with basic necessities such as beds, tableware, cutlery and clothing. To stay within budget, they purchased these items at low prices. This allowed refugees to move out immediately once they had found an apartment. Interviewees expressed mixed views on this process. For instance, Laura had positive memories of the way immigration services assisted refugees in finding appropriate clothing.

LAURA: Everything [the government gave us] was new. We went to the store to buy things, and we picked everything out.

ALEJANDRA: And how was that? Tell me a little bit about that Manpower store.

LAURA: It was in the—it was a store that was just downtown. I already don't remember [laughs] what the street's called, but there was a shop where everything was new. [...] We picked out the clothes: pants, shirts, jackets, all that. And they would tell you, "You'll be given everything"—I mean they didn't let you take the whole pile, but rather, "You have the right to as much as you like, take as much as you like"—I mean

⁵⁵ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 9.

⁵⁶ Judith Gibbons and Sandra Luna, "For Men Life Is Hard, for Women Life Is Harder: Gender Roles in Central America," in *Psychology of Gender Through the Lens of Culture: Theories and Applications*, eds. Saba Safdar and Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 307–325.

as many clothes as you want, that was it. It seemed like a good program to me. I think they gave us the help that we needed.⁵⁷

In contrast, Lorena's description of the allocation of goods brought to light several issues with how the government had outsourced the process. Prompted by various questions by the interviewer, she gave the most detailed description of the system out of all the interviewees.

We realized that perhaps the government invested a certain amount of money, but the retailers, the stores gave us the worst, the worst. Eh, I remember when we came they brought us to the basement of a store, here on Main Street [...] and I remember that the store was very nice and everything, but they took us to the basement. It was on the bottom floor where they had a lot of clothes and things but they were out of style, jackets like that, eh, maybe what the customer no longer wanted. They must have charged a large amount of money to the government and they gave us the ugliest things. That is to say, there wasn't much choice.⁵⁸

A central theme of Lorena's narrative was how demoralized she felt having to wear clothing she didn't like. She did not take issue with receiving clothing through social assistance, but she objected to the lack of control she had over what she received. At a time when she was living in a hotel, away from the personal possessions she had cultivated for herself and her family in El Salvador, wearing unappealing clothing was alienating. Despite laughing about the situation in her interview, her emotional reaction indicates how much Lorena suffered in losing the agency regarding her appearance.

LORENA: No, you didn't say: "I don't want it." They just told you: "Ta, ta, ta, take it, take it, take it, measure it, it's your size." Full stop. They didn't even ask if you liked it or anything, nothing. [...] That's why we were all in uniform.

ALEJANDRA: Everyone knew that you were from Manpower? [Laughs]

LORENA: Yes, we were Manpower [laughs]. All in the same jackets.

ALEJANDRA: Were they the same colour?

LORENA: The same colour, maybe the colour was a little different but it had the same pattern [laughs]. Yes, personally—I don't know if I can say this—I hated those clothes. In my house you will not see anything that reminds me of them. [...] Ah I hated those jackets. When I see those super ugly orange jackets and the horrible men's boots that all women wore. You know what I thought? I felt like I was in a concentration camp, that's what I felt, and in my house I gave away [laughs] and threw away all those things.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Laura, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, May 16, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 11–12.

⁵⁸ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 7.

⁵⁹ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 8.

Lorena's comments illustrated that the clothing refugees received needed to be more than just suitable for Winnipeg's cold climate to be truly beneficial. She felt that it would have been helpful for the government to be more flexible in the items they allocated to refugees. As the number of Central American refugees in the city grew, Lorena recalled that earlier refugees such as herself encouraged newcomers to communicate their need for self-determination more clearly to immigration officials. She believed that this allowed refugees who arrived in the 1990s to have more control over the items they received.

Another key aspect of government aid included assistance in finding permanent accommodation. Most interviewees found their first apartments through immigration services. Despite the financial burden that living on their own engendered, the interviewees were glad to leave the Balmoral Hotel. With more freedom to regulate their day-to-day activities, refugees could develop routines and establish relationships outside their immediate family. For instance, Lorena's first happy memories of Winnipeg were of her first apartment.

When we moved to the apartment, that was where we could get more established because I had more freedom to take the kids out to the park, to go to interviews, to medical appointments and to begin to develop my role as a mother. It was also very helpful to see that more people were arriving at our time and to make a circle of friends because we were on our own here in this country. So we made friends with the people who lived in the same building as us, we got together, we visited each other, we set up playdates for the children, and then brought them to the park together. And that's how we started to grow. But yes, it was a great relief to have moved, especially from a hotel to an apartment.⁶⁰

Since the government stipend refugees received was limited, the Manpower offices tried to find inexpensive accommodations for the newcomers so that they would still have enough money left over to pay for groceries and other expenses. The most affordable apartments in the city were downtown. None of the refugees stayed in these apartments long; most remember finding other accommodations after one to two years. Some areas that the refugees lived in had high crime rates and interviewees remembered encountering dangerous

⁶⁰ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 2.

situations while living there. Ricardo, for example, witnessed a fight which resulted in a murder outside his first apartment.⁶¹ When his wife and stepson arrived in Winnipeg, the family moved to a different area.

After leaving the Balmoral Hotel, government assistance continued to shape refugees' lives. The Department of Manpower arranged their apartment lease, their furniture, their clothing and their first jobs. Interviewees' perceptions of these services were largely positive, but the pressure to become self-sufficient and fears of requiring long-term social assistance still troubled many. Navigating government assistance was a unifying experience, but not everyone assessed the success of the program the same way. The next section will detail one account where an interviewee's interactions with Canadian government services deviated substantially from the others.

Concerns About Refugee Status

As noted above, Cristina's initial arrival differed from that of the other interviewees. Since she had family living in Winnipeg her initial welcome was more personal: her siblings were the ones to meet her at the airport, she moved into her sister's apartment instead of living at the Balmoral Hotel, and she received a more individualized introduction to the city. While Cristina's familial connections helped her avoid stressful situations that other Salvadorans were required to navigate—isolation, unfamiliar food, short-term lodgings—she nonetheless dealt with challenges of a different sort. Within days of her arrival, Cristina faced potential deportation and found out that she was pregnant. Ultimately, this second finding saved her from the first.

Key to understanding the events that took place in Winnipeg is a description of Cristina's life back in El Salvador. As mentioned previously, Cristina had personal connections to Canada before the civil war had begun and she had wanted to move long

⁶¹ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 2–3.

before she had the opportunity to do so. She was in a relationship with her boyfriend of ten years and had advocated for the couple to emigrate together. He, however, did not want to emigrate and they both remained in El Salvador throughout most of the 1980s as the civil war raged on. After a long engagement, Cristina's boyfriend decided that he was not ready to marry. Cristina remembered that this was the final push she needed to leave the country. Despite never being targeted directly, she had lived her entire young adult life surrounded by conflict and she longed to move somewhere where she would feel safe.

Our relationship was so beautiful: we never fought, we were always together, we enjoyed everything [...] but I said, "If I stay in El Salvador, I am going to turn into a mistress and not a wife." I was going to turn 26, and a 26 year old woman in El Salvador, at the time—not today, but at that time—her life was pretty committed; if you didn't stay with the man you loved and marry him, it was very difficult for you to have a safe and stable home. [...] We didn't have any issues but that's not what I wanted for my life.⁶²

Cristina went to the immigration office and applied to come to Canada two days after the wedding's cancellation. She applied alone, underlying how volatile daily life had become in El Salvador: "In my case, being a young, very beautiful woman—[...] a girl like that faced danger everywhere, no matter where."⁶³ In her interview, she recalled that her boyfriend did not realize how serious she was about leaving until she had booked her medical exam. He then asked her again to marry him, which she conceded to after much deliberation.

The couple's decision to marry added several complications to Cristina's upcoming emigration. Most notably, her immigration papers no longer accurately described her marital status. Unclear of how this would affect her application, Cristina reached out to her siblings who were already living in Canada.

When I found out I was getting married I told my siblings that I was not going to say anything, because I already had a date to come to Canada; but my sister told me I had to talk to the Canadian embassy, because the Canadian government is very proper and I was going to have problems if I didn't tell them about my marriage. She told me to go and ask what my options were, so I went to their offices and told the secretary what was happening. She said, "You have two choices: one is to get married and wait for your

⁶² Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 21–22.

⁶³ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 21.

husband's documents to be sorted out and then leave together, but that way they won't let you go, because the Canadian government will tell you that you do not need to leave; that your life is not in danger and they'll cancel everything. The other option is to get married, write a letter, make copies of all the documents and send everything to the Canadian embassy before you leave. In the letter you need to explain that you got married, but this must be done before you leave; it has to be dated before you land. And when you get to Canada, if possible, from the plane go to Immigration," [laughs] "and explain everything so they can see it from another angle."⁶⁴

The danger Cristina faced was that immigration officers would assume that she had gotten married to secure a visa for her husband. When telling this story in 2013, Cristina laughed about the situation she found herself in. Her tone of voice, however, showed that she was now aware of how precarious her position was. As the number of refugees Canada admitted rose in the 1980s, both public opinion and governmental agencies became concerned about "bogus refugees."⁶⁵ Since "welfare fraud" was grounds for deportation, Cristina faced possible expulsion to El Salvador if immigration officials determined that she had violated Canadian law.

Once Cristina arrived in Winnipeg, she found out with dismay that the Department of Manpower did not have jurisdiction over immigration disputes. The best the Department could do was to schedule an appointment with the appropriate office—fifteen days after her arrival. While waiting for the opportunity to explain her situation, Cristina was dealing with another life-changing matter.

I should have had my period when I came to Canada, but I didn't have it. A week went by and I went to see the doctor. I barely spoke English. Through gestures and drawings the doctor told me that it hadn't been enough time to know if I was pregnant, because the past few days had been very stressful and that could explain my missed period. She told me to wait another week, if I still hadn't had my period after that, she was going to order a blood test. I had my blood test and it came back positive; I was pregnant.⁶⁶

Now knowing that she was pregnant, Cristina was more determined not to return to El Salvador where she worried for her future child's safety. Taking the advice that she had

⁶⁴ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 24.

⁶⁵ Anna Pratt, "Risky Refugees," in *Securing Borders: Detention and Deportation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 109–138.

⁶⁶ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 24.

received at the Canadian embassy in San Salvador, she prepared to explain her situation, but ultimately, the immigration officer found her tale incredible. To believe the story Cristina was telling her, she needed concrete proof that Cristina's marriage was not fraudulent. Due to her recently identified pregnancy, Cristina could provide the proof she needed.

I had an appointment with Immigration. When I got there I told them I hadn't broken Canadian law. They thought or assumed that I had gotten married in order to get [her husband] a visa to come to Canada, which is fraud. I understood more or less; I was not able to speak much English, but I understood what was being said. The lady told Alfredo, the man who accompanied me, that I was likely going to be deported because I had violated Canadian laws. I understood that conversation and I asked Alfredo if my understanding was correct, that they were going to advise my deportation; because if that was the case, I was going to go to the Swedish or Australian embassy because they were not going to send me back to my country where my child and I would be killed. And he said, "Your child? But you don't have any children?" "I'm pregnant," I told him, and he asked, "Do you have anything to confirm that?" "Yes, I went to the doctor a few days ago and she wrote me a letter." I showed him the letter and he handed it to the Immigration officer who read it and said, "This changes the story entirely; your marriage is legitimate." She said, "I will advise that your husband be brought here as soon as possible so he'll be here for your child's birth." Because the pregnancy coincided with our wedding date, they corroborated that my marriage was legitimate so they recommended bringing [her husband] here. He came to Canada nine months later and [her daughter] had been born eighteen days before. That is how we both came to Canada.⁶⁷

The situation was extremely stressful for Cristina, but ultimately she had achieved what she wanted in coming to Canada: she had a stable life and raised her family away from violence. Once the government affirmed the legitimacy of her and her husband's refugee status, Cristina focused on settling in Winnipeg. Although the government had provided her with an apartment, she chose to continue living with her sister throughout her pregnancy so that she would have additional support. She still received the same stipend as the other refugees, and after settling the complication regarding the legality of her marriage, her path again closely resembled that of the others.

The federal government played an important role in all the interviewees' integration. With financial support refugees could orient themselves in the city, focus on learning English

⁶⁷ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 24.

and begin building a community in their new home. While the process by which the government provided settlement support was by no means flawless—few refugees remembered the Balmoral Hotel fondly, most felt pressured to start working as soon as possible, and one interviewee was almost deported—it did allow individuals and families who would otherwise have been unable to afford a move to Canada to leave dangerous situations in their homeland. Government aid did not, however, diminish the impact of other hardships inherent to life in Winnipeg. Being given a hardy winter jacket, for example, did not necessarily prepare Salvadorans for Winnipeg weather.

3 - Moving From a Tropical to a Continental Climate

One of the most drastic changes that the refugees experienced with their move to Canada was the difference in climate. El Salvador has a tropical climate, which results in temperatures remaining consistent across pronounced wet and dry seasons. Temperatures vary primarily with elevation, with annual averages ranging from hot in the lowlands (25°C to 29°C) to moderate in mountain areas (12°C to 23°C).⁶⁸ As a result, few refugees had experienced sub-zero temperatures before their migration to Canada. Winnipeg has a continental climate with wide temperature contrasts between winter and summer. Average summer temperatures lie around mid-20°C, with highs reaching the high 30°C, while winters are significantly colder. January, generally the coldest month of the year, has a daily average temperature of -16.4°C and temperatures often dip below -30°C.⁶⁹ Sub-zero temperatures are the norm for at least five months of the year. Between 1981 and 2010, Winnipeg averaged 127.8 days a year with snow on the ground.⁷⁰ Even with warnings from immigration officials

⁶⁸ Mary Helms, “Geography,” in *El Salvador: A Country Study*, ed. Richard A. Haggerty (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 49–53.

⁶⁹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Winnipeg Richardson International A, Manitoba,” *Canadian Climate Normals 1981–2010*, last modified November 7, 2023, https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_normals; “Winnipeg - Lowest Temperature for Each Year,” Current Results Weather and Science facts, accessed July 13, 2023, [Winnipeg MB Lowest Temperature Each Year - Current Results](#).

⁷⁰ Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Winnipeg Richardson International A, Manitoba.”

that climate would prove to be a challenge, refugees did not have the life experiences to fully comprehend what weather in Winnipeg was like.

Any discussion of immigrants and climate in Canada must acknowledge that Canada has a long history of using claims of “climatic unsuitability” to justify racist and discriminatory immigration systems. Until 1962, the Canadian government explicitly discouraged or prevented the immigration of people of colour because it claimed that their “fixed biological characteristics and traits” made them unable to assimilate to the Canadian climate.⁷¹ These policies were no longer in place when Salvadoran refugees were looking to enter Canada in the 1980s, but their legacy—combined with the popular belief that immigrants from warm countries struggle with cold temperatures—may have informed how the interviewees discussed the weather.

Climate proved to be a universally engaging topic in the SVM interviews. If the interviewees didn’t bring up the subject themselves, the interviewer always asked them follow-up questions about it. Even without having a questionnaire to guide her, Alejandra felt that each narrator would have stories to tell about Winnipeg’s weather. Her instinct proved correct. From first snow stories to anecdotes of their coldest, most trying, or most amusing winter experiences, interviewees were happy to participate in the Canadian predilection for discussing the weather. Discussions on climate were illuminating since they allowed interviewees to reflect on a recurring challenge, one that they still faced yearly at the time of their interviews. They could therefore reflect on how their attitude towards the cold had changed since their initial move.

Memories of the First Winter

One of the most shocking ways for newcomers to encounter a continental climate was to migrate during the winter. The SMV stories indicated that the weather each refugee

⁷¹ Nalinie Mooten, *Racism, Discrimination and Migrant Workers in Canada: Evidence from the Literature* (Ottawa: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021), 50.

experienced on arrival informed their initial impression of the city. Lorena and Roberto had the most jarring transitions arriving in January and February respectively. Arriving in March, at the tail end of winter, Cristina also arrived to cold temperatures and snow but didn't need to confront the length of Winnipeg's winter immediately. Ricardo, Gilberto and Laura all arrived in September and had a short period of time to settle in before the first snow.

Roberto

Roberto actively worried that the weather in Winnipeg would kill him. After being targeted for years for his work with labour unions, he arrived in Canada with a suspicious and distrustful mindset, particularly towards organizations or countries with strong capitalistic ties, like the United Nations and Canada. As a result, he worried that his refugee status may be a scam.

When I arrived in Canada on February 22nd 1983, I didn't even know where Winnipeg was, because I had very little information. I arrived when it was horribly cold, and when I got off the plane I saw something, which I thought there were clouds but it was snow, and I said to myself, "Why have I been so stupid? They brought me here to my death; that is why they accepted me, so that I will die here." I was traumatized, in shock.⁷²

Once he had arrived at the Balmoral Hotel, Roberto's impression did not change. Within days he had fallen ill which further confirmed his fears that he was being punished. In his first interview, Roberto related his sickness to the unfamiliar food he was eating at the hotel, in his second interview, he linked it to the cold weather. Whatever the true cause of his condition, feeling unwell and living in a hotel did not alleviate Roberto's misgivings about his new home.

I got sick because of the cold; I started itching everywhere; my body turned red with dryness. I had a fever; I was sick for four days, not wanting to eat. That was a very harsh experience because I fell into a deep depression; I started cursing the moment I decided to come to Canada. I started blaming the United Nations. I thought that they had taken me here because there was a plan to kill me, because I didn't think I was going to resist this weather. I thought it was a punishment, that I was sent here to be punished, that I was not going to cope with the cold. [...] Sometimes I didn't dare to

⁷² Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 11.

venture outside because of the cold, because I was afraid of freezing to death. It was very rough.⁷³

Refugees migrating to Manitoba received two allocations of winter clothing—one in Toronto, the other in Winnipeg. The director of the IAAP in Winnipeg described the extra issue of clothing as a necessity since the refugees would “freeze in the jackets they get when they land in Toronto.”⁷⁴ Roberto did not recall receiving government-provided clothing at the airport—either there had been a delay in getting the winter clothing to him, or the weather was so extreme that having a jacket and boots did little to help. Instead, he remembered being wholly unprepared for the weather: “I was not ready, I didn’t have any winter clothes. It was a nightmare, arriving with the weather how it was; it was like a fridge and I wasn’t dressed properly.”⁷⁵

Ricardo

Ricardo remembered that his wife, who arrived in December, also had quite a difficult time adjusting to the weather. She initially seemed to find the idea of living somewhere with so much snow absurd. Although her husband had already been living in Winnipeg for fifteen months by the time she arrived, she found it difficult to believe that their family would be able to endure the cold.

[His wife] arrived on the 14th of December 1986. On the 7th of November, a few weeks earlier, Winnipeg had been hit by a blizzard. And this blizzard was not like the last ones we’ve had, no. All activities stopped, everything. [...] When my wife left the airport she felt bad when she saw all the snow that was still on the ground. Well, the snow reached [hand gesture]. When she left the airport and saw how much snow there was, it was a disappointment. She wanted to go home right then and there. She said that she was scared, that she was shocked, that it was going to be very cold. In short, she was thinking a lot of things.⁷⁶

⁷³ Roberto, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, December 13, 2012, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 10–11.

⁷⁴ Kelly Teahen, “Refugees Marvel at Supermarkets, Endure Weather,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Jan. 13, 1986.

⁷⁵ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 10.

⁷⁶ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 7–9.

An early snowstorm had indeed hit Winnipeg on the 7th and 8th of November, 1986. It was one of the largest snowstorms in Winnipeg's history. News reports from the following days described how the city was "nearly paralyzed for 36 hours" by more than 35 cm of snow. While snow clearing crews would have long dealt with the disruptions caused by the storm by the time of Ricardo's wife's arrival, there would have still been a lot of snow on the ground when she landed, particularly from the point of view of someone who had never seen snow before in their lives.

Ricardo presented his reaction to the weather in stark contrast to his wife's. Over the course of his interviews, Ricardo often mentioned that he had never found winter in Winnipeg to be particularly challenging: "Well, truthfully, the weather wasn't a problem for me. I don't mean to say that I didn't suffer, obviously, but I prefer a cold climate to a hot one."⁷⁷ If Ricardo's wife's only preparation for the weather had come from her husband, it is no wonder that she felt unprepared for the cold. Several of Ricardo's anecdotes highlighted how well, and how quickly, he had been able to adapt to Winnipeg's cold conditions. In one of his stories, where he described how he and a friend had walked for almost 45 minutes in -30°C weather, Ricardo again endeavoured to illustrate how differently he reacted to the climate compared to other newcomers.

Right after I had arrived here, just as winter was starting in 1985—I think that it was November or December—a friend of mine was at the hotel. He had just arrived. [...] I told him that if he wanted, we could go to a place where they gave away clothes and that we could get some winter clothes there. "And how will we get there?" he asked. "Oh, we'll walk," I said. I remember that the temperature was around minus thirty and we had to walk from the Balmoral Hotel to St. Boniface. This guy was infuriated with me because, [laughs] he couldn't imagine how cold it was. And the truth is that since he wasn't used to the conditions, the guy got upset with me. He was angry because, at least in the moment, he couldn't imagine where I was taking him. But as I said, I like to walk.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 6–7.

⁷⁸ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 7–8.

Ricardo told this story almost as a joke. He acknowledged that the weather in Winnipeg was very cold, but he simply never described it as a problem for himself. Being well-suited to cold weather was clearly a point of pride for Ricardo.

Lorena

For Lorena, the main difficulty that the cold weather presented was that it dissuaded her from leaving the hotel, making her feel trapped and isolated. Her memories of the weather upon her arrival present an interesting case for the study of history and memory since they contain several small contradictions. Here it is again vital to underline that misremembering is not a weakness in oral sources. As Alessandro Portelli has noted, memory is an “active process of creation of meaning.”⁷⁹ By analyzing discrepancies between memory and history records much can be learned about an individual’s perception of events.

In two of her interviews, Lorena clearly stated that a serious blizzard hit Winnipeg in January 1986. The way she remembered it, she and her family arrived in Winnipeg during this storm.

LORENA: We got to Toronto and slept there for one night. The next day we got picked up at the Winnipeg airport. There was a blizzard. I remember they had given us some clothing in Toronto, but we were still cold because the clothing was not adequate for the Winnipeg climate.

ALEJANDRA: Wait—was the blizzard in Toronto or Winnipeg?

LORENA: Here in Winnipeg, in January, 1986. The blizzard is well-known. Several streets were closed for days, there were no schools, and there were no buses. It was a quite large blizzard.⁸⁰

Historical climate data, however, shows that Winnipeg never experienced a blizzard in January 1986.⁸¹ The weather was mild when compared to other years and the city received minimal snowfall. In fact, Lorena’s arrival coincided with a period of five days where daily highs reached above 0°C, an uncommonly warm temperature for January. While the rest of

⁷⁹ Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 54.

⁸⁰ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 23.

⁸¹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Winnipeg Richardson Int'l A Manitoba: Daily Data Report for January 1986,” Past weather and climate: Historical Data, last modified November 7, 2023, https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_data/daily.

the winter season did have typical winter lows, the snow depth was shallower than average, and after a storm in November 1985 for which Lorena was not yet in Canada, there was not another snowstorm in Winnipeg that winter.⁸²

In a later interview, Lorena made more references to the supposed extreme weather during her first winter in Winnipeg. She shared another memory which she recalled having taken place during a blizzard. Following her remembered timeline, this second story would have occurred shortly after her family had moved out of the Balmoral Hotel, either in February or March of 1986. In retelling her narrative, Lorena faltered slightly once she realized that the “well-known” storm she was remembering couldn’t have taken place both at the time of her arrival and months later once she had moved into an apartment. To explain these situations as she remembered them, Lorena concluded that her first winter must have been particularly intense and that there had been multiple storms that year.

When we arrived on January 10th, 1986 there was a—It was one of the most intense winters. There were snow storms and a number of blizzards and I remember when we had just moved to the apartment one of our kids, I don’t remember if it was my daughter or my son, got sick. There were no buses because a terrible storm had struck and the city was paralyzed. That was the only time in ’86 that there was a day without buses. The snow was up to our knees and we had to walk from the apartment to the Winnipeg Clinic here. We lived on Hargrave, but we had to walk a long way to be able to take the child. Both of us went. I remember that we walked and climbed in the snow.⁸³

Since weather data shows that neither of these storms took place, the question arises: why do Lorena’s memories and the data not match up? It is possible that, having never been exposed to sub-zero temperatures or snow before, Lorena was overcome by the snowy scene she encountered upon leaving the Winnipeg airport and she therefore misremembered an average winter day as a blizzard. A number of details in Lorena’s account, however, suggest that she was only misremembering the timing of the storm rather than exaggerating its severity. As mentioned previously in Ricardo’s account, Winnipeg was hit by a massive

⁸² David O’Brien, “Early Winter Storm Bogs Down City,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 19, 1985.

⁸³ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 3.

snowstorm in November 1986. This storm took place eleven months after Lorena's arrival, starting off her second winter in Winnipeg. Her descriptions match this blizzard well: heavy snowfall obstructed city streets, halted transit and taxi services, and necessitated a weeklong, multi-million dollar cleanup.⁸⁴ Travellers arriving in Winnipeg by plane were stranded at the airport for the duration of the storm due to road closures.⁸⁵ As Lorena aptly described, the city was "paralyzed" for almost two days.

If Lorena had misremembered the timing of the storm, then in her first story, she was using a later event she had lived through to embellish the description of her initial arrival. It is key to keep in mind that as individuals recall a moment in their past, they are actively creating meaning for the event in the present. In his work on memory and the Holocaust, historian Mark Roseman found that discrepancies in survivor testimonies were often related to moments of trauma. When some of his interviewees described past events that they felt uneasy or ashamed about in the present, they altered certain details to impose control over the memory.⁸⁶ This process could be deliberate or subconscious. For Lorena, arriving in Winnipeg was primarily unpleasant. She recognized that she became "depressed" after leaving El Salvador and that she spent her first few months in Winnipeg—months that coincided with her first winter—staying indoors. By amplifying the severity of the weather, Lorena could further justify her reclusive behaviour and initial negative reaction to a city she grew to think of as home.

Lorena's second story about bringing her sick child to see a doctor during a storm, however, could very well have taken place during the November 1986 storm. The only discrepancy was therefore that she moved the event forward by eight or nine months. It is, of course, possible that Lorena misremembered small details after twenty-five years, but she

⁸⁴ David Roberts and Shane Minkin, "Colossal Dig-Out Gets Under Way," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 9, 1986; Jane Armstrong, "South Put on Hold," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 9, 1986.

⁸⁵ John Douglas, "Airport Officials Criticized," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 10, 1986.

⁸⁶ Mark Roseman, "Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony," in *The Oral History Reader* 3rd Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 320–333.

seemed certain about the timing in her interview. It is likely that she felt so confident about the date because she had told the story before. As time passes and individuals retell stories, they tend to create a narrative that is coherent and engaging.⁸⁷ While the general facts of the story may not change, the way in which it is told does, and individuals may pad out their narrative to make it more dramatic. For Lorena, this meant placing the story during her early days in Winnipeg when she would have been the least accustomed to snow or cold weather. What the discrepancies in both stories ultimately indicate, is that the first snow storms she lived through made a lasting impression on Lorena.

Laura

Laura and her family experienced a winter season in its entirety during their first year in Canada. The winter in 1987 started slowly and the first snow didn't fall until December 11th. Unlike the previous year, there were no major winter weather events.⁸⁸ While this might have helped the family's initial adjustment, the rest of the season brought on more extreme temperatures.

The first winter—well I don't think it was too much of a shock because we were already adjusting to everything else: needing a good house, the food, having everything we needed to live after everything that had happened to us: El Salvador, Mexico—So it didn't really shock us the first year. It was basically later [laughs] that the winter became more of a reality for us. By living through that first winter, we learned. We had this friend who would pick us up in winter. She taught us how to dress well for the weather and everything. “Bundle up and let's go,” she would say. We went to the *Festival du Voyageur*, the French one. She took us to other places, all over, and my children had fun in the snow. They were amazed by the snow. It didn't affect them the first year, and I don't think it affected them at all in their childhoods. They were happy to play in the snow, to go tobogganing, we would take them to parks—I mean, we kept them entertained all winter. Personally I felt the cold because I'm less athletic. My husband didn't; they would play on the ice; they would play a lot, my husband with my children. He would play lots of sports with them. I felt it more than they did, but I think the first year it wasn't that bad. They were amazed, in wonder at seeing the snow, so the

⁸⁷ Fred Allison, “Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives Over Time,” in *The Oral History Reader 3rd ed.*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 334–342.

⁸⁸ Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Winnipeg Richardson Int'l A Manitoba: Daily Data Report for December 1987,” Past weather and climate: Historical Data, last modified November 7, 2023, https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_data/daily.

cold didn't affect them. That was another thing that I was seeing for the first time. I've definitely seen more over the years [laughs].⁸⁹

Despite admitting that the cold affected her more than the rest of her family, Laura painted a favourable portrait of winter weather. She spent more time describing the friend who introduced her family to winter activities and her children's wonder at seeing snow for the first time than she did detailing the difficulties of adapting to a foreign climate. Later in the same interview, Laura shared an anecdote of one of the struggles she had during her first winter. Rather than presenting the story as a hardship, she found the humour in the situation and described how taking the bus in the cold was ultimately what pushed her and her husband to learn to drive.

I remember that the first winter I worked [...] the evening shift. When I left work at one in the morning, waiting at the bus stop in minus thirty was horrible. There was a blizzard one day and the bus passed by without seeing me, because of the blizzard—it didn't see me and it left without me. I had to walk all the way to Henderson, which is—it's not that far, but in a blizzard it's super far—It was about four blocks from my work to Henderson; four or five blocks. I had to walk those five blocks to wait for another bus—it was past midnight already—waiting for the bus there at the stop. I got home from that around one in the morning [laughs]. It was terrible, so cold, and we didn't have a car; neither one of us could drive. And I remember that morning I said [to her husband]—[laughs] as a joke—“You have to learn how to drive or I'm going to hire a chauffeur” [laughs]. And I remember that that same week he said, “Then I've got to buy a car. If I'm going to learn to drive we have to buy a car.” And well, at that point [...] we had some small savings already. We bought a car that same week and started learning. He got his beginner's licence and started practising. My husband learned to drive in such a short amount of time! I think my joke scared him, [laughs] but he did learn quickly. I didn't want to, I let two or three years go by, but when he was working and the kids had to ride the bus in the cold, walk in the cold to catch the bus, I said, “We can't let that happen. I'm right here, I can take them to school. My husband can pick them up. Why don't I learn how to drive?” Since we already had a car. So that's how I learned, out of necessity. The cold made me learn how to drive.⁹⁰

In this story, Laura related two integration milestones to winter. The first was buying a car and the second was learning to drive. Winnipeg was, and largely remains, a car-centred city and it was difficult to get around without a car, particularly in the wintertime. In auto-oriented communities, having access to vehicle transportation has been demonstrated to

⁸⁹ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 8–9.

⁹⁰ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 9–10.

be important for integration.⁹¹ Learning to drive was also a particularly important milestone for Laura as a woman. Few Salvadoran women knew how to drive before coming to Canada. Several interviewees presented having the independence to move around the city on their own terms as immensely empowering. Lorena for example noted, “Many women, we come here and we learn how to drive a car. Over in El Salvador we don’t drive. That also gave us independence, we didn’t need a man to take us to the supermarket, right?”⁹² Laura thereby presented the weather as a motivator to leave her comfort zone and to integrate into Canadian society.

Perceptions of Winter After Twenty-Five Years

By the time of their interviews, all the interviewees had accumulated extensive experience with cold winters. What was notably absent from their accounts was any pointed discontent with the weather. Some, as described above, mentioned difficulties adjusting to the temperature difference or shared anecdotes about challenging circumstances, but these were usually told in a jovial tone and were followed up with assurances that they had learned how to live with the cold. In fact, all the interviewees were markedly positive in their assessments of winter.

This theme of positivity may have emerged from the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. Having moved to Canada much more recently than the interviewees, Alejandra was still in shock about the weather at the time she was conducting the interviews.⁹³ On the interviewer’s end, this influenced how she phrased and asked her questions—she presented winter as an obstacle that the Salvadorans had to overcome. On the interviewees’ end, they were aware that they were speaking with someone who was undergoing the same challenge that they had

⁹¹ Kristin Lovejoy and Susan Handy, “A Case for Measuring Individuals’ Access to Private-Vehicle Travel As a Matter of Degrees: Lessons from Focus Groups with Mexican Immigrants in California,” *Transportation* 35, no. 5 (2008): 601–12.

⁹² Lorena, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, July 18, 2013, translation by Sophie Sickert, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 19.

⁹³ Private discussion between Alejandra and author, October 27, 2022.

faced twenty-five years earlier, which influenced how they answered. All oral history interviews are ultimately collaborations between the interviewer and the interviewee. Portelli describes that in this process, “the interviewees are always, though perhaps unobtrusively, studying the interviewers who ‘study’ them.”⁹⁴

This dynamic may help explain why the interviewees seemed to minimize the impact of the weather—either to show off how well they had been able to adjust or to encourage Alejandra that she would also find the cold more manageable with time. Ricardo, for example, joked that he adjusted to winter weather easily because of his natural disposition to live in cold climates.⁹⁵ Both Lorena and Cristina claimed that the weather had never been much of a shock for them despite never having experienced anything similar before moving to Canada.⁹⁶ Laura also confidently explained that she had been able to adapt to the conditions: “We have adjusted to dressing well and keeping the cold out as much as possible in winter. We might still grumble about it; maybe we haven’t gotten used to it, but we’ve accepted it as a part of life.”⁹⁷

Cristina took a mixed approach. She acknowledged that there were parts of winter that she found challenging, but underlined that these did not prevent her from living comfortably in Winnipeg. Her account follows a model often used by Canadian-born Winnipeggers: complaining about winter, but ultimately preferring the cold to the mosquito-filled summer.

To be honest, the weather never [laughs] bothered me that much. I mean, it had an impact! But, [laughs] I don’t spend months complaining about it, or feeling depressed and everything. I know that winter is going to come again, and again, and again. Nobody, no human force can prevent it; it will come. It gets me at the end of the season. If winter were three months long, like it is in January, I don’t think I would complain. But winter lasts six months [laughs] and at the end of those months, yes, I get tired of it. That’s when it hits me. It hits me when the snow is already gone, but suddenly we get another big snowfall and everything is white again. I don’t want to see white

⁹⁴ Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 55.

⁹⁵ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 7.

⁹⁶ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 3–4; Cristina, interview, March 29, 2013, 42.

⁹⁷ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 9.

anymore! [Laughs] It hits me in March, in April. The rest of it is fine. Summer might actually get to me more with the mosquitos than winter with the cold.⁹⁸

A second reason for the narrators' positive view of the cold may stem from a perception that enjoying winter and snow is an inherent part of Canadian culture. Salvadorans described braving cold weather as a universal experience for anyone who lived in Winnipeg, regardless of their heritage. Ricardo joked that "one becomes a masochist here because you have to endure this cold. That is the truth not only for me, but for everyone, all of us who live here."⁹⁹ Through this quip, he demonstrated that the weather provides a shared ordeal for those born and raised in Winnipeg, as well as newcomers. By grumbling about or appreciating the weather, Salvadorans could relate to other Winnipeggers. The narrators may have felt that they could reinforce their affinity towards a Canadian lifestyle by describing winter positively.

Lorena made the most explicit connection between feeling Canadian and winter activities. When she was asked to describe Canadian culture, she immediately turned to winter and the positive experiences she and her family had participating in outdoor activities.

ALEJANDRA: What is Canadian culture? What is it like?

LORENA: Everything, even the weather, that is—I feel that my children, for example, that we have to integrate. I integrated my children in all the winter sports. Winter is beautiful, it is nice to go out. Have you ever been tobogganing?

ALEJANDRA: No.

LORENA: You have to experience it, it's super fun. It's something that all Canadians do here and the children enjoy it. It's part of the culture. Going skiing, going to a cabin for a weekend during the winter, it's wonderful. [...] We joined all the activities here in Canada for each season. Going camping, going fishing, that is—You know, I get emotional when I hear the Canadian anthem and sometimes it makes me feel a little sad if I'm with other Latin people because I say: "Is it me? They're going to think I'm crazy or something, right?" But no, hearing the Canadian anthem gets me.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Author's translation from Spanish original. Cristina (pseudonym), interview by Alejandra Salcedo, March 29, 2013, Spanish transcript by Alejandra Salcedo, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 42–43.

⁹⁹ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 19.

For Lorena, going outside in the wintertime and enjoying winter activities were key points in her family's integration process. It was these activities that made her feel Canadian and she encouraged Alejandra to take part in winter events when she could.

Talking about the weather was anything but mundane for Salvadoran refugees. It was a practical way to demonstrate how well they had integrated into Canadian culture. The interviewees showed that cold weather had become part of their identity, part of the way they presented themselves to others. While experiencing a cold winter for the first time had been traumatic for several narrators, all learned how to comfortably manage their new environment by the time of their interviews. Since talking, complaining, and bragging about the cold is something of a favourite hobby in Manitoba, the very act of engaging in extensive weather talk demonstrated that Salvadorans had picked up a typical Canadian custom.¹⁰¹

Conclusion: Reflecting on First Impressions

The move between living in El Salvador and Canada was the greatest transition in the interviewees' life stories. It was a time of compromise when refugees were expected to adapt to constantly evolving conditions. When interviewees arrived in Canada, they brought their past lived experiences with them. Habits and assumptions picked up throughout the civil war in El Salvador and their travels to Canada informed their perception of their new surroundings. As refugees settled into life in Canada, they reevaluated and reimagined these old conceptions to better suit their new circumstances. For their first months in Winnipeg, the support Salvadorans received as government-assisted refugees largely constrained their lives. Their lived reality was drastically different from what they knew from their homeland; they lived in different types of accommodations, wore different clothing and had to acclimatize to different weather. Interviewees, however, succeeded in adapting to their new environment

¹⁰¹ Marlo Campbell, "Are Winnipeggers Changing Their Tune? Lack of Snow, Return of the Jets Give Folks Less to Complain About," *The Herald (The Free Press Community Review)*, January 11, 2012; Bartley Kives, "Legends of the Snowfall: Busting a Few Myths About Winnipeg's Winter," *CBC News*, January 07, 2017.

and eventually began to think of Winnipeg as home. The following chapter will explore how refugees built social networks and communities, an important aspect in the refugees' process of feeling comfortable in a new city.

The three of us [the first three Salvadoran refugees in Winnipeg] shared an apartment on Sargent and while we were there, other Salvadorans began to arrive. Those who arrived would visit us at the apartment on Sargent; it was a gathering point for all newcomers. We got to know each other.

—Gilberto, 2013¹

Church was the centre for us. [...] We were involved in the church from the start, so from the beginning of our time in Canada we were always linked to the “Latino community” you could say, with the Salvadorans and the Latinos [who attended church].

—Laura, 2013²

CHAPTER TWO

Relationships and Community: Making Home

While refugees dealt with the initial shock of being in a foreign country, they also had to begin rebuilding their lives. Recently arrived Salvadorans developed social connections and support systems which allowed them to make sense of their new surroundings, preserve the memory of their homeland, and manage the stress inherent to resettlement. This chapter examines what this process of creating community looked like from the inside, focusing on the relationships that Salvadoran newcomers built for themselves in Winnipeg. In this way, the focus of the chapter draws on Loewen and Friesen’s concept of “ethnic webs” which they describe as the “inner workings of ethnic community adjustment” or the “networks composed of familial, religious, inter-ethnic, and transnational links that shape newcomer strategies of integration.”³ This concept differs from that of diaspora in that it is not limited to relationships between members of the same ethnic community. To emphasize the non-ethnically homogenous aspect of community in the Salvadoran context, this analysis will use the terms social web or social network to refer to the relationships refugees cultivated after migrating. Approaching the shared memories from this immigrant-centred point of view demonstrates that the social connections interviewees made during their first years in Canada

¹ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 6.

² Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 14.

³ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 4.

had an enormous impact on their integration process and influenced how they evaluated that experience twenty-five years later.

The interviewees' social network encompassed more than ethnic community organizations or clubs—although these could play a vital role in the integration process. Social connections extended back to the home country and culture that a migrant had left behind and included relationships between individuals of different ethnic origins who were drawn together due to other similarities. It was by building connections in these varied communities that refugees began to feel at home in Winnipeg. The first section of this chapter focuses on the intangible or emotional link refugees created between Canada and El Salvador; the second looks at communities and organizations in Winnipeg that were important to the interviewees; the third narrows the scope to the relationships within the family unit. The networks that newcomers created were complex and individual. Many of the connections that the interviewees recalled making were the result of happenstance or the efforts of a single person. As a result, each interviewee's experience was highly personal.

1 - Living in Canada, Thinking of El Salvador

No matter a refugee's circumstances of departure, being physically distant from familiar places and people required a major adjustment. Migration forced Salvadorans to contemplate their conceptions of home and to reflect on how these conceptions changed over time. From his research with the SVM interviews and other oral histories of refugees in Winnipeg, Freund has suggested that "home is made in everyday life, in creating and maintaining the self and family within a community that each individual and family slowly builds over time."⁴ His work demonstrates not only that social relationships and emotional support play a vital role in making a place feel like home, but also that refugees often have a transnational notion of home. Therefore, while building social networks in Winnipeg,

⁴ Freund, "Transnationalizing Home in Winnipeg," 66.

refugees did not stop thinking of El Salvador, or the other stops along their migration route, as home. Immediately after their arrival, immigrants generally felt out of place in Canada and were melancholic in their reminiscences about El Salvador. Sometimes memories would aggravate their sense of loss and loneliness, other times they would provide comfort. The longing for the familiar was, however, powerful and could manifest on a personal emotional level or could lead to direct transnational action.

It is also worth noting that in the postwar period, the Salvadoran government went to great lengths to foster nostalgia and patriotism in Salvadorans living abroad. With over 7 million Salvadorans living outside the country as refugees—many of whom remained actively invested in Salvadoran politics—the state was cognizant that the Salvadoran diaspora could have an impact on national governance.⁵ As a result, officials began marketing El Salvador as “a society without borders.”⁶ Salvadoran émigrés became increasingly important as migrant remittances began making up increasingly large portions of El Salvador’s GDP. By the end of the 1990s, remittances came to constitute the single largest source of income for the Salvadoran economy.⁷ To preserve this monetary influx, the Salvadoran state found ways to promote the seemingly contradictory idea of transnational nationalism. Salvadoran political rhetoric began promoting El Salvador as “an object of nostalgia and devotion,” stressing the connections Salvadorans living abroad had to their home country.⁸

While the implementation of this policy took place shortly after the period this analysis is focused on, its influence should nonetheless be considered here. When using oral testimonies recorded with a significant time delay from the events discussed, it is vital to consider how occurrences in the intervening years may have influenced how interviewees remembered the past. Even if interviewees did not speak to the fact that Salvadoran state

⁵ Americas Watch Committee, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror*, 107-116.

⁶ Beth Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 57.

⁷ Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 51.

⁸ Bibler Coutin, “Originary Destinations,” 54-57.

rhetoric had shifted to court émigrés, this does not mean that the government's endeavours did not have an influence. This is not to say that refugees did not have a strong desire to preserve ties to El Salvador before the implementation of policy changes. As the following sections will show, El Salvador was constantly at the forefront of refugees' minds throughout their first years in Winnipeg.

Missing Familiarity and Belonging

The desire for the familiar was particularly poignant in the early days of the interviewees' immigration. At this time, the notion of home—both as a place and as a feeling of belonging—still evoked memories of El Salvador.⁹ Before interviewees had the chance to create new networks of support and actively engage in building a home in Canada,¹⁰ thoughts of El Salvador elicited a strong sense of loss. Indeed, a sense of loss—of family, friends, communities, property, routine—permeated many of the interviews. Often, the yearning for people and places left behind was implicit. Other times, interviewees could still describe the moments in which they had missed El Salvador the most.

Lorena provided one such example. In her first interview, Lorena spent more than ten minutes detailing the events surrounding the birth of her third child which took place three months after she arrived in Winnipeg. Although the experience was in many ways traumatic, Lorena described the events in an animated fashion, often making herself and Alejandra laugh. Throughout the interview, the two women quickly began employing what Kristina Minister refers to as a female sociocommunication subculture. The conversation felt intimate and collaborative. Alejandra allowed Lorena to control the direction of the interview and would complete Lorena's sentences or interject with verbal cues to show that she was

⁹ In her work with the Barbadian diaspora, Mary Chamberlain described home as both a place and a feeling of belonging, and noted that it could be remembered or imagined. Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2004), 70.

¹⁰ Paolo Boccagni has advocated for describing this process through the verb "homing" to underline that making home is an ongoing process that individuals actively engage in. Paolo Boccagni, "Homing: A Category for Research on Space Appropriation and 'home-Oriented' Mobilities," *Mobilities* 17, no. 4 (2022): 585–601.

following the narrative and that she was emotionally involved with what she was hearing. While simultaneous talking may be discouraged in oral interviews for audio clarity, Minister argues that researchers obtain better, more complete accounts if they employ an oral history method in which they speak with interviewees the way they would like to intuitively.¹¹ The comfortable flow of the interview between Alejandra and Lorena, particularly during emotionally charged moments like the description of Lorena's delivery, makes a strong case in favour of this approach.

It seems likely that Lorena had recounted the story of her youngest son's birth several times before. Her account was coherent and followed a clear narrative structure. She also took time to continuously justify her actions and reflect on her emotional state at the time. It is through these reflections that she revealed how often she was thinking of El Salvador while going through a traumatic event in Winnipeg. In comparing interviews given many years apart, Fred Allison has found that interviewees tend to recount often repeated stories in this structured manner.¹² Narrators like Lorena can add significance, drama and justifications to their tales at a later date. This enhanced coherence does not necessarily indicate that the memory is less accurate, rather it gives listeners a fuller understanding of how the speaker has made sense of the event that they lived through. In Lorena's case, this meant beginning her narrative a week before her delivery, with a false alarm.

When it was time to give birth to my son, the government had told me that I could not use an ambulance—well, I could use an ambulance, but only once. I was supposed to go to the hospital only when I knew without a doubt that I was going to have my baby. One week before my son was born, I began to have contractions. I told Rosa María [a neighbour and friend], who was also pregnant, and we called the ambulance. My husband was in school at the time. Rosa María left the children with her husband and she came with me in the ambulance. I was crying. They took me to the hospital. When I got there, two hours later my pain went away and they sent me home.¹³

¹¹ Kristina Minister, "A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 27–41.

¹² Allison, "Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight," 334–342.

¹³ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 27.

Like most recently arrived refugees, Lorena and her family did not own a car for the first years they lived in Winnipeg. They relied on public transit, acquaintances with vehicles, and taxis to get around the city. If the government had agreed to cover the cost of a single ambulance ride, this would have been the easiest and most affordable way for Lorena to reach a hospital while in labour. After one false alarm, Lorena was reluctant to call another ambulance when her contractions began again a week later. As a result, her trip to the hospital was distinctly uncomfortable. When describing the events to Alejandra, Lorena was, however, able to see the humour in her situation.

My contractions began in the morning, but with the experience I had had the week before I told Rosa María, “I’m not feeling well, but I don’t know if it’s time to give birth... I don’t know what to do.” So she said, “Let’s take the bus.” We walked to Broadway to wait for the 29 bus—Sherbrook—to go to the Health Sciences Centre, to the Women’s Hospital. But when we were waiting for the bus, I felt my pain get worse and worse. When I got on the bus, I was almost screaming in pain, that’s how bad it was. [...] The bus driver didn’t make any stops until I got to the hospital, to the Health Sciences Centre [laughs], because I was shrieking in pain with Rosa María. [...] I was in so much pain that the driver said: “I won’t stop at any bus stop!” He took me straight to the hospital.¹⁴

When describing the subsequent events, Lorena became sombre. She explained that when she arrived at the hospital, the doctors determined that her baby was breech and that she had to have a C-section. Her friend could not join her for the surgery and Lorena found herself alone in the hospital. She described the fear, confusion, and isolation that she felt having birthing complications in a country where she didn’t speak the language or have familial support. The worry she felt for her child in that moment still made her cry twenty-seven years later.

It was a very difficult time for me because I was alone in a room, and only saw the doctors talking, and sticking tubes in me. I didn’t understand anything they said, and the person who was going to interpret wasn’t there yet because everything happened really fast. It was an awful experience for me because I cried and cried and told them “I don’t understand what is happening.” I thought there was something wrong with my baby [voice breaks]; I was crying and telling them, “Someone explain to me what is going on.” I only heard them talking to each other and they were getting ready to take

¹⁴ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 27.

me to surgery, but I didn't understand anything. [...] I remember one nurse grabbed my hand and said, "*Operación, operación.*" She made me more nervous because I thought, "Why are they operating?"¹⁵

Luckily, the interpreter arrived at the hospital before Lorena's surgery began. They explained what was happening and reassured Lorena that both she and her baby would be alright. The C-section was a success and Lorena's son was born without further complications. It was after presenting the full narrative that Lorena took time to reflect on the memory and how she had felt in the moment. Despite the major obstacles presented by the language barrier she was facing, it was the fact that Lorena was so detached from her support system in El Salvador that caused her the most distress. She remembered that in the moment she was comparing the birth of her first two children in El Salvador to her experience in Canada; feeling strongly that the latter was more difficult. She pointed out that she was missing both the material support that she would have had in El Salvador and the emotional support she would have received from her family.

At that moment I felt disappointed in myself—it wasn't that I was rejecting the child I was about to have, but we weren't expecting it with the same excitement as one does their first child because I didn't have time to prepare anything for my baby. I did everything for the first one in El Salvador, his clothes—everything that was needed. It was the same with my baby girl. But for the third one, we hadn't brought anything from El Salvador. We had only been here for three months. I had nothing because the government had told me that they weren't going to provide things for the baby such as clothes or a crib until the baby was born and they knew the baby's gender. I thought about all that as they took me into surgery. I felt awful that I had nothing prepared for my baby, I had nothing.¹⁶

At times like those I've always longed for my parents to be there; or any other relative. I often cried a lot in those moments because I missed my mom, my dad and my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law was always very involved in our lives and in the births of my other two children because she worked as a nurse where they were born. I missed that warmth. I felt alone. [...] My husband didn't meet his son until the day after he was born. It was very sad for both of us because we had nobody with whom to leave the children, we could not bring them to the hospital.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 27–28.

¹⁶ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 28.

¹⁷ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 29.

Through these passages, Lorena portrayed a deep melancholy for having left behind her life in El Salvador which intensified her feelings of loneliness and pain. Part of what made her experience so harrowing was the fact that Lorena's baby was breech. This could have also happened in El Salvador, but Lorena remembered all the various aspects of the ordeal—arriving at the hospital by bus, the breech birth, not understanding English, the emergency C-section, being alone—as a whole. Her desire for familiarity in a difficult situation likely made Lorena recall her previous deliveries in El Salvador in an unrealistically positive light.

Gastronomical Nostalgia

Salvadorans' longing for home also manifested through their diet. While much of the interview discussions on food pertained to the refugees' experiences at the Balmoral Hotel discussed in the previous chapter, some interviewees also described what they ate after leaving the hotel. In their own kitchens, refugees tended to cook predominantly Salvadoran food. For many immigrants, recreating familiarity through daily food practices was an important step in feeling at home in a new country.¹⁸ For instance, Ricardo demonstrated his attachment to Salvadoran gastronomy when he was asked about his diet in Canada. He proudly related that in 2013, he still ate almost exclusively Salvadoran food.

If I tell you what I ate yesterday, the day before yesterday and today, you won't believe me. But I had *ejotes con huevo*—that is not Canadian food—*pipianes con crema*, *chilaquiles*, and *pupusas*. That's what we've eaten in the last three days, in addition to rice and beans. [...] We only have Canadian breakfasts on Saturdays, which is bacon [laughs].¹⁹

Food is often used to create or develop national identity and to delineate class and ethnic distinctions.²⁰ When immigrants are prevented from accessing traditional foods

¹⁸ Sarah Huang, "Food from Home and Food from Here: Disassembling Locality in Local Food Systems with Refugees and Immigrants in Anchorage, Alaska," in *The Immigrant-Food Nexus: Borders, Labor, and Identity in North America*, eds. Julian Agyeman and Sydney Giacalone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 99–114.

¹⁹ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 15.

²⁰ Mark Smith, "Tasting," in *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 75–91.

through their relocation, they are therefore being prevented from accessing a piece of their identity. As a result, immigrants often place an increased worth on dishes that remind them of home. In a study on Arabic and South Asian immigrant women, Vallianatos and Raine found that not having access to traditional foods caused immigrants to feel psychologically anxious and socially isolated.²¹ Conversely, having access to desired foods could help reinforce an immigrant's sense of self as it did for Ricardo in 2013.

While longing for familiar food is common across immigrant groups, Sharon Stowers argues that Salvadoran emigrants who experienced food scarcity before and during the civil war have a particularly strong craving for traditional foods. She suggests that Salvadorans abroad use gastronomic nostalgia as “a vehicle for reconciling relationships to their homeland, individual and collective histories, especially of scarcity, and dreams for their life in America.”²² This could explain why the interviewees had such a difficult time adjusting to Canadian tastes at the Balmoral and why they made such an effort to recreate Salvadoran meals abroad.

In the 1980s, mainstream grocery stores in Canada did not carry the same items that refugees recognized from El Salvador. If a store in the city had imported Latin American foodstuffs, newcomers would spread the news around as treasured knowledge. As time passed, more traditional Salvadoran products found their way onto Canadian grocery shelves and Salvadorans had an easier time finding the ingredients they needed to make basic dishes.

When we got here, the products that we could get were quite scarce, like the flour to make tortillas wasn't sold everywhere. It was difficult to find chayote, for example. There were a few places that had it, yes, but nowadays all stores carry it.²³

²¹ Helen Vallianatos and Kim Raine, “Consuming Food and Constructing Identities Among Arabic and South Asian Immigrant Women,” in *Sisters or Strangers?: Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Marlene Epp (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 463–464.

²² Stowers, Sharon, “Gastronomic Nostalgia: Salvadoran Immigrants' Cravings for Their Ideal Meal.” *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 51, no. 5 (2012): 382.

²³ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 15.

We made the dishes with the ingredients that we could find, but it was not so difficult because we always found Maseca,²⁴ which is our main ingredient for tortillas, right? We always managed to make some dishes, not all, but the traditional ones like tamales and pupusas could be made.²⁵

Rather than having trouble finding ingredients, it was getting to and from the grocery store that was, as Ricardo described it, a “nightmare” for recently arrived refugees without cars.²⁶ Once refugees had made their way to the grocery store—usually by bus—they encountered greater problems than not finding Maseca. Studies on the cultural dimensions of food insecurity among immigrants and refugees have identified common issues that newcomers face while shopping in Canadian grocery stores. Most significant to the Salvadorans in Winnipeg in the 1980s was the increased availability of less fresh, more processed foods and the high cost of ethnic and organic food.²⁷ Since Salvadorans placed such a high cultural value on eating a traditional diet, they would often prioritize food above other purchases. A common point across the interviews was the pride that the interviewees took in Salvadoran food which many asserted was healthier than Canadian food. Lorena, for example, noted:

Although we came from a poor country, I think that the food in our country is more balanced and better than here, right? When it comes to the four food groups, greens or vegetables. We were always aware that the children’s diet was very healthy and good. I think that food is what we invested in the most, even though it was limited, the budget was enough. We made it be enough. It was enough to support the family.²⁸

Stowers also underlines that a Salvadoran kitchen is generally a woman’s space. She refers to the loving and labour-intensive way in which Salvadoran women approach food preparation as “food grooming” since it plays a vital role in the fabrication of their family’s identity.²⁹ It is therefore interesting to note that both Laura and Lorena claimed to have only

²⁴ Maseca flour is a popular brand of cornflour.

²⁵ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 22.

²⁶ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 15.

²⁷ Tina Moffat, Charlene Mohammed and K. Bruce Newbold, “Cultural Dimensions of Food Insecurity Among Immigrants and Refugees,” *Human Organization* 76, no. 1 (2017): 15–27.

²⁸ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 9.

²⁹ Stowers, “Gastronomic Nostalgia,” 384–387.

learned how to cook traditional Salvadoran dishes once they had moved to Canada. Since both had ostensibly been cooking to feed their families for years, it seems to have been the lack of Salvadoran food and culture in their surroundings in Winnipeg that drove them to incorporate more traditional foods into their diet. To learn how to make specific Salvadoran dishes, the women turned to other newcomers. Learning how to cook traditional foods from fellow Salvadorans was not only a way to share recipes, but it also provided an avenue for refugees to spend time together and reminisce about El Salvador.

ALEJANDRA: Could you already cook [traditional Salvadoran food] before you left El Salvador?

LAURA: Not really. Well, we could cook beans, rice, chicken—that was normal there. But cooking here I make pupusas—I learned that here in Canada. And tamales—that is, I made them in El Salvador, but my mom’s way, so I’ve learned to do them another way here. I’ve learned to make a lot of things here, even though it’s Salvadoran food.³⁰

For the adult refugees who remembered living in El Salvador, eating traditional Salvadoran food helped sate the melancholy of having left their homeland. Traditional Salvadoran family meals also helped teach children who were too young to remember El Salvador or those who were born in Canada about their family’s culture and history. Refugees felt connected to El Salvador from abroad by eating Salvadoran food at home and going to the trouble of learning traditional recipes from other Salvadoran emigrants. Focusing money and energy on food was therefore a key point in the Salvadoran refugees’ social web.

Remittances

Thoughts of home also lead to direct transnational actions by refugees. One of the most common ways migrants could connect to the people and places they had left behind was by sending them money or goods, also known as remittances. Since the 1990s, remittances to Latin America have been the subject of extensive scholarship.³¹ This analysis, however, is not

³⁰ Laura, interview, May 16, 2013, 13–14.

³¹ Most of the literature on this subject focuses on economics and development. See, Pablo Fajnzylber and J. Humberto Lopez, *Remittances and Development: Lessons from Latin America* (Washington, D.C: World Bank, 2008); Vincent Fromentin, “Remittances and Financial Development in Latin America and the Caribbean Countries: A Dynamic Approach,” *Review of Development Economics* 22, no. 2 (2018): 808–826. Other publications have also focused exclusively on El Salvador. For example: Luis René Cáceres, “Remesas y

concerned with the larger societal implications of remittance, but rather with why refugees sent money to El Salvador and how this act influenced their sense of community and self during their initial years in Winnipeg.

In her work with Caribbean migrants, Jenny Burman has found that émigrés found remittances to be “inextricable from a sense of responsibility, attachment, guilt, and reparation.”³² Salvadorans in Winnipeg seconded this view. Interviewees described sending money to relatives in El Salvador as a “responsibility,” an “obligation” and a “sacrifice.”³³ While these depictions may evoke negative connotations, none of the interviewees presented them as such. While discussing the topic interviewees’ tones remained conversational. They approached the subject as though it was self-evident that they had sent money home when they were able. Alejandra also seemed to operate under this same assumption. In her interview with Lorena, the interviewer assumed that families would have sent remittances from Canada. Rather than asking if her interviewee had sent money home or not, she broached the topic by asking, “When you came, was it difficult for you to send money to help your relatives?”³⁴

El Salvador has a long history of migrant workers and money transfers. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Salvadoran peasants who were forced off their lands by large landowners buying up properties for the cultivation of coffee for export took part in seasonal labour migrations, mostly to Honduras, where they worked abroad for part of the year then returned to El Salvador.³⁵ Later, as U.S. capital became increasingly important for the Salvadoran economy in the twentieth century, Salvadorans began migrating to the United

Macroeconomía en El Salvador,” *Comercio Exterior* 56, no. 7 (2006): 592–607; Luis René Cáceres and Nery Saca Nolvía, *What Do Remittances Do? Analyzing the Private Remittance Transmission Mechanism in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C: International Monetary Fund, Statistics Dept., 2006).

³² Jenny Burman, *Transnational Yearnings: Tourism, Migration, and the Diasporic City* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 90.

³³ Laura, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, April 18, 2013, translated by Ezra Enns, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 4; Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 26; Cristina, interview, March 29, 2013, 32.

³⁴ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 26.

³⁵ Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 33-34.

States to work on shipping lines.³⁶ Despite leaving the country, these migrants kept close ties to El Salvador. Emigrants' motivation to remit has also been more widely connected to unspoken conventions of responsibility. Common motivators include altruism, self-interest (particularly if migrants plan to return to their home country), and implicit feelings of obligation towards family.³⁷

Most interviewees indicated that they still felt obliged to send money to their families in the 2010s, but that their remittances had decreased or changed over time. Lorena, for example, noted that she sent more remittances to her parents in the first years of living in Winnipeg. As time went on, she found that the goods she was sending were less necessary: "We sent more things just after we had arrived. Or we brought things when we went to El Salvador, because we knew about the need that there was. [...] Now you can get everything in El Salvador."³⁸ Cristina also indicated that she sent more money shortly after her arrival. As time went on, she changed her remittance practices because she felt that her sister was mispending the money she sent.

I sent her so much money—I still send money to my mother, because she's my responsibility until the day she dies, but I don't send money to my sister anymore. I did, until I said that was enough, she has to be responsible. When my children were little I didn't even have money to buy them two litres of milk, I was digging in the sofas to see if I had the money that I needed in order to buy it, and I never called to ask for a dime. I managed as I could with what I had, so she should manage by herself too; I do not have to keep on sending her money.³⁹

These discussions indicated that refugees were sending money back to El Salvador while they were still receiving government aid. As an example of this, Laura remembered sending money home while she was still living at the Balmoral Hotel: "They gave us twenty dollars extra to go to a laundromat, because we were in the hotel that month. So the twenty

³⁶ Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 10-11.

³⁷ Andrés Solimano, "Remittances by Emigrants: Issues and Evidence," *CEPAL Macroeconomía del Desarrollo* 26, (Santiago: UN Economic Development Division, 2003), 12-13.

³⁸ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 26.

³⁹ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 32.

dollars that they gave my sister and me, we said, ‘Let’s put it together and send it.’”⁴⁰ This was clearly not the way that the Canadian government had planned for the refugees to use their monthly support stipend. While administrators were aware that refugees were sending some of their money out of the country, they didn’t have any recourse to prevent them from doing so. In a *Winnipeg Free Press* article from 1986, a counsellor for the IAAP noted that “Central Americans from El Salvador and Nicaragua often run short of money. [...] We suspect they send some of their support money home, but we can’t prove anything.”⁴¹ In the 1980s, Salvadorans generally sent remittances by informal means that were untraceable. Ultimately, the way refugees decided to spend their money was up to them. The actions of Salvadorans in Manitoba indicate that maintaining stable connections with their transnational social network was more important than saving money to use for themselves.

Another way refugees could maintain a connection with El Salvador was to become involved in a solidarity organization. These organizations and committees hosted fundraisers and informed the Canadian public about the situation in El Salvador to rally their financial support. Shortly after arriving in Winnipeg, Roberto became involved with such an organization. Drawing on his experience as a union leader, Roberto turned his focus to helping create social change in El Salvador from abroad. This process differed from remittances on both sides of the transaction. In El Salvador, an entire community—rather than a single family—benefitted from fund-raising events. Organizers in Winnipeg rallied support for specific goals: providing medical supplies to refugee camps, supplying relief after natural disasters, or bringing Salvadoran public speakers to Winnipeg to provide first-hand accounts of human rights violations.⁴² In Canada, organizers focused on convincing

⁴⁰ Laura, interview, April 18, 2013, 22.

⁴¹ Kelly Teahen, “Refugees Marvel at Supermarkets, Endure Weather,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), Jan. 13, 1986.

⁴² Doreen Marten, “Carrying On the Struggle: Immigrants Continue Fighting for Changes in Their Homelands,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), September 12, 1987; Paul Wiecek, “Salvadorans Show Support,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), November 27, 1989; James Crampton, “Voice of the Revolution,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), September 9, 1990.

non-Salvadorans to donate money to their cause. Roberto explained this approach simply: “The ones who gave us solidarity were the Canadian people. They were the ones with the money.”⁴³

Sending money and goods to El Salvador allowed refugees to maintain a tangible and emotional link to their home country. In his analysis of Salvadoran courier operations, Mike Anastario argues that sending parcels (money and goods) is integral to diasporic remembering. When émigrés send parcels to El Salvador, he contends that they are participating in distinct memory practices that “inform, preserve, emote, please, and project—practices that can also be thought of as *not forgetting*.”⁴⁴ Anastario’s interpretation underlines that refugees were also benefiting themselves by sending remittances. Their actions allowed them to maintain a connection to their homeland that could evolve to suit their changing needs in a new country.

Family Reunification

Some refugees felt that sending money across borders was not enough to help their extended families live good lives. As a result, they took steps to bring their family members to Canada. While the refugees themselves focused on how reunification would improve their emotional wellbeing, refugee agencies also supported family reunification from economic and practical points of view. The UNHCR, for example, highly recommended that States create avenues to prevent family unit breakdown. The Commission found that family reunification was in the best interests of both refugees and the State providing them with asylum since refugees in family units had a better chance of successfully integrating.⁴⁵

Shortly after she had begun her immigration process, Laura’s parents and sisters decided to join her in Canada. Reuniting the family, however, proved more difficult than she

⁴³ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 25.

⁴⁴ Anastario, *Parcels*, 8.

⁴⁵ United Nations, “UNHCR Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme Standing Committee, 15th Meeting ‘Family Protection Issues,’” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 11, no. 3 (1999): 587.

had hoped. At the time of Laura's application, her family was living in Mexico as political refugees. Since they all had connections to left-wing religious organizations and had legitimate fears of persecution in El Salvador, the entire family qualified as refugees under the UNHCR definition. Laura and her parents were the first to apply for asylum in Canada and her two sisters and their families followed suit soon after. While some application procedures were expeditious and orderly—namely Laura's and her one sister's—it took longer for her eldest sister's documents to be processed and her parents remained in Mexico due to her mother's health issues. Once Laura had settled in Winnipeg, she lost contact with her family back in Mexico. Despite sending numerous letters, and occasionally money, she stopped receiving replies. Worried that something had happened to them, Laura went to an embassy in Winnipeg to try and re-establish contact.

I went and told them what was happening, and I gave them the information of the people who were in Mexico, who were all ready to leave but weren't coming. With my struggling English I told them what was going on and they said, "They don't want to come anymore, their visa expired and they didn't come to renew it. That tells us that they no longer want to come here," and I said, "That's not true, not true because I'm waiting for them here. I've lost contact with them. I don't know what's going on." So then they started the immigration process all over again. They sent a notification there about what was happening. I sent a friend I knew in Mexico City to my dad. I sent him there and told him, "Please go and find them and tell them that they should make an appearance at the Canadian embassy because I don't know what's going on."⁴⁶

Distressed by the idea that her family was cutting ties with her, Laura sent her sister an angry letter imploring her to allow their parents to leave Mexico. After spending only a short time in Canada, she was certain that the home they were building in Winnipeg would be more suitable for her aging parents.

I sent a letter as well, like an angry one, and they laugh at it now. I said to them, "If you want to stay there and die of hunger in Mexico, then stay. Die of hunger there, but send my mom and dad here. Put them on the plane and send them to me, because they have no business being in Mexico. Life there is too difficult. But if you want to starve there," I wrote in the letter, "then you go right ahead and do that."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Laura, interview, April 18, 2013, 21.

⁴⁷ Laura, interview, April 18, 2013, 21–22.

Unbeknownst to Laura, local Mexican mail carriers were at fault for the communication fallout. Having realized that the letters often contained money, the carriers began detaining Laura's mail to steal the cash. It wasn't until Laura enlisted the help of a local priest that the issue was solved and the letters—without the money—were delivered to her family. With communication restored, Laura helped her family reapply through the refugee program and eventually settle in Winnipeg. This misunderstanding caused Laura emotional turmoil during the first difficult months of her relocation; she had been cut off from a foundational part of her social web. Twenty-six years later, however, with all false impressions cleared, the story had become a single dark point in a happy story that she could laugh about.

My sister still has that [angry] letter and tells me, “I like that letter because you were so sincere and honest. All the other letters were about what it was like here, that it's nice, that you don't regret it, that you're doing well here.” [...] If I hadn't gone to Immigration, they wouldn't have been able to come now, they wouldn't have made the trip. So, God is good, as my sister says now, “He made you a leader of the family [laughs] so that you could do whatever you had to do.” Because we were the first to leave El Salvador, then little by little everyone left and came to Mexico with us, and then same with coming here, and here we are.⁴⁸

Laura's experience illustrated how important social connections were to refugees, even when they were not reciprocated. Despite not receiving word from her family for months, Laura's longing to reunite with them changed the way that she went about resettlement in Canada. The idea that her parents and sister's family would soon be joining her in Winnipeg influenced how she went about building her new life in the city. When analyzing the family budget, she was not only thinking of her husband and children, she was also thinking about how much she could afford to send her parents. When becoming involved in community organizations and a local Spanish-language church (discussed in a later section of this chapter), she was not only making connections for herself, she was also making connections that would benefit the rest of her family once they joined her in Winnipeg. Consequently,

⁴⁸ Laura, interview, April 18, 2013, 22–23.

reuniting with the objects of her transnational longing fundamentally changed Laura's immigration experience.

Salvadorans had to create viable communities in Winnipeg to integrate into Canadian society. The SVM interviews indicate that this did not mean breaking off connection with El Salvador. On the contrary, when Salvadoran immigrants developed their identities in Winnipeg, they infused their new sense of self with memories of El Salvador and continued efforts to connect with their home country.

2 - Winnipeg Based Communities

Maintaining contact with El Salvador from afar was not enough to fulfill the refugees' social needs. To feel at home in Winnipeg, Salvadorans also needed local connections. Due to language barriers, almost all the significant initial relationships that refugees built were with other Spanish speakers. This limited the number of social connections interviewees could viably make. In seeking out Spanish language communities, refugees forged their first relationships through groups and institutions they were already familiar with. For the refugees interviewed for this project this included cultural groups, be they of Salvadoran or wider Latin American tradition, and churches. By integrating into familiar organizations in an unfamiliar place, refugees began putting down roots in Winnipeg.

(Dis)unity in the Salvadoran Community

The first Salvadoran refugees arrived in Winnipeg in 1982. Over the next decade, the size of the Salvadoran community grew steadily. Winnipeg was, however, not a top destination for refugees from El Salvador. By 1996, the first year that the Canadian census identified how many people of Salvadoran ethnic origin were living in the country, 755 people in Winnipeg recorded their origin as Salvadoran.⁴⁹ While not negligible, this number

⁴⁹ Before 1996, the percentage of Salvadorans was not specified. People with Salvadoran ancestry were classified under "other single origins" or "multiple origins". Statistics Canada, "1996 Census, Ethnic Origin and Population Group."

was small when compared to the number of Salvadorans who were living in larger resettlement centres like Montreal (7,380) and Toronto (5,035).⁵⁰ In a community with fewer than a thousand members, it could be assumed that Salvadorans maintained particularly close relations. This was, however, not necessarily the case. A comparison of the accounts of refugees who arrived at different times throughout the 1980s indicates that relationships within the Salvadoran community changed over time. Those who arrived in the first half of the 1980s, notably Gilberto and Roberto, remembered the Salvadoran community upon their arrival to be close-knit. For them, fellow Salvadorans had an immense impact on their integration experience. This was no longer the case for those who arrived in the late 1980s. Those who migrated later were more likely to build social networks within the wider Spanish-speaking community, rather than focusing on the Salvadoran community specifically. Once prompted by Alejandra, interviewees admitted that they felt that the Salvadoran community in Winnipeg lacked unity, both during their arrival and at the time of their interviews.

One potential reason for this change was a shift in refugee demographics. Throughout the 1980s, refugees increasingly began arriving in family units rather than as single adults (most of the first refugees were single men). Both Gilberto and Roberto recalled that Salvadorans who arrived with their families were less likely to join the bachelors for their activities. Another potential dividing factor was differing political affiliations and mistrust. The violence of the civil war in El Salvador had a huge impact on civilians.⁵¹ Even when a refugee claimed to be non-political, they had personal connections to violence and loss which made them wary of certain of their countrymen. In 1993, El Salvador's Truth Commission attributed 85% of the acts of violence during the civil war to state agents and approximately

⁵⁰ Statistics Canada, "1996 Census, Ethnic Origin and Population Group."

⁵¹ Estimates put the number of civilian killings and disappearances during the conflict at over 70,000, about 1–2% of El Salvador's prewar population. Hoover Green and Ball, "Civilian Killings and Disappearances During Civil War in El Salvador (1980–1992), 781–814.

5% to the FMLN, but highlighted that the “warped psychology engendered by the conflict led to a convulsion of violence” in which a mentality of “he who is not for me is against me” permeated both sides.⁵²

The complex realities of the civil war also resulted in disunity within the FMLN. The FMLN was a coalition of five disparate political-military organizations and went through alternating periods of unity and disunity throughout the war.⁵³ It was only in 2005, once the war had ended, that the organization became a programmatically coherent party. Refugees who had supported different branches of the FMLN may therefore have had significant ideological disputes and differing visions for the future of El Salvador.

Experiences with violence and betrayal followed Salvadorans as they migrated to Canada. Discussions on the matter still seemed to be uncomfortable in the 2010s. Most interviewees were hesitant when questioned on the topic of community disunity. Laura, for example, was reluctant to make any decisive statements on the matter: “I don’t know how to explain it, but I do feel like there isn’t unity. [...] I wouldn’t know how to explain it, but yes I feel like there’s quite a lot of—it could be political problems, it could be problems—I don’t know.”⁵⁴ In her next interview, Laura was more forthcoming about the animosity she experienced within the Salvadoran community in the early days of her resettlement. “I had enemies here [laughs] in Winnipeg [laughs]. Political enemies. [...] I’ve mostly tried to avoid the Salvadoran enemies. I know who they are, but I haven’t confronted them. [...] We were enemies; gossiping. Every meeting was like that, every encounter, and I did sometimes try to avoid it—those were the first years here in Canada.”⁵⁵

Having migrated in 1982, Gilberto was one of the first three Salvadoran government-assisted refugees to arrive in Winnipeg. He was therefore in a unique position to

⁵² Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope*, 13, 43.

⁵³ Allison and Alvarez, “Unity and Disunity in the FMLN,” 89–118.

⁵⁴ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 16.

⁵⁵ Laura, interview, May 16, 2013, 32–33.

describe how relationships between Salvadorans developed before the community lost much of its cohesion. The first three Salvadoran refugees all landed in Winnipeg on the same day, September 9, 1982. After being picked up from the airport, the three men went to the Balmoral Hotel. Gilberto recalled that the comradery between the three started on the first day they met. He described how one man arrived at the hotel “dressed as a soldier” with a bottle of liquor that he shared with the other two to celebrate arriving in Canada.⁵⁶ He told the anecdote cheerfully, making both himself and Alejandra laugh.

After a short stay at the Balmoral, the three men moved into a downtown apartment together. As other refugees arrived in Winnipeg, their apartment became a meeting point for the small, but growing, Salvadoran community. Since most refugees initially lived in the same downtown neighbourhood, newcomers could easily gather at each other’s homes.

The three of us shared an apartment on Sargent and while we were there, other Salvadorans began to arrive. Those who arrived would visit us at the apartment on Sargent; it was a gathering point for all newcomers. We got to know each other, especially those of us who were single. If they came with a family, they would move to different areas [laughs]. However, that’s where the meetings, parties and everything would take place as people arrived.⁵⁷

Gilberto had little to say about ensuing divisions within the Salvadoran community. Roberto, in contrast, was more open to describing how he remembered relationships evolving as new arrivals made their way to Winnipeg. Like Gilberto, Roberto described feeling a deep solidarity with the first Salvadoran arrivals. Since he initially had no intention of permanently moving away from El Salvador, the local Salvadoran community provided occasions for him and others to reminisce about their home country and make plans for El Salvador’s future. For Roberto, the community was so vital not because it allowed recently arrived Salvadorans to share solutions to practical issues that may have aided members’ integration (e.g., tips on where to go grocery shopping or how to manage the cold weather), but rather because it allowed him to discuss experiences and beliefs in a space where others could relate to him.

⁵⁶ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 5.

⁵⁷ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 6.

When I got here there were only four Salvadorans in Winnipeg. [...] We could all relate to each other. It was the only year that we all got along, that we took care of each other, that we cried together. [...] When the new year came, we were all crying, remembering our country. [...] At that time we all thought we were going to go back to El Salvador, that we would be leaving.⁵⁸

As more people began arriving from El Salvador, the community became less uniform and Roberto no longer felt solidarity with the group at large. When asked about meeting other Salvadorans in a later interview, Roberto explained that he actively distanced himself from individuals who disagreed with his political ideology. “It was a complex situation for me, because it was another stage, not like now. I just wanted to be with my people, the people who had the same ideals as me, and I was not interested in hanging out with anybody else. I didn’t have a social life with people who didn’t share my ideals.”⁵⁹

Roberto also remembered tensions arising between political and apolitical refugees. While the first group wanted to return to El Salvador when it was safe to do so, the second took steps to put down roots in Manitoba. While Roberto was sympathetic towards this point of view in retrospect, these different philosophies made organizing the community behind a single objective difficult throughout the 1980s.

[In the first years] it was a uniform group because we all had the same idea due to political issues. However, war not only affected people on a political level. When a war takes place in a country, especially like the war in El Salvador, it doesn’t only affect the left or the right, it blows away a whole country. Therefore a lot of people were sick of both groups; when they came to this country they wanted to distance themselves from that and build a life separated from all of that. I think that is one of the reasons why I am not able to place any guilt on anybody or to judge people.⁶⁰

The close ties the community had maintained with El Salvador also created potential for conflict in Winnipeg. Serious divisions within the FMLN came to light during the later war years and disagreements resulted in repeated fracturing after the war had ended.⁶¹ After the signing of the peace treaty in 1992, the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance

⁵⁸ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 13.

⁵⁹ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 19.

⁶⁰ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 25.

⁶¹ Allison and Alvarez, “Unity and Disunity in the FMLN,” 89–118.

(ARENA) remained in power, and the FMLN transformed from an umbrella group of five leftist guerrilla organizations to an official political party. Although the armed conflict had ended, significant political disagreements and changes continued. Roberto felt that many of the issues experienced in Canada originated from these conflicts in El Salvador.

There were internal changes in El Salvador, which affected the situation here. I was very close to people who were not in good standing in El Salvador and I was demoted from all of my responsibility here. More than likely they were not able to subdue us; they just told us that we were no longer authorized to keep on working, because we weren't following any particular line from El Salvador. All the things we did here were known in El Salvador, even if it wasn't political work, but there were changes in El Salvador and I was told that I [...] had to leave that work.⁶²

In short, many refugees found that making connections with fellow Salvadorans necessitated caution due to political differences. Salvadorans did build lasting relationships with their compatriots based on individual compatibility, but it was rare for the community to plan events together as a whole in the latter half of the 1980s. Instead, Salvadoran newcomers joined the wider circle of Latin American Manitobans.

Building Connections with Spanish Speakers

The first Salvadoran refugees to arrive in Winnipeg received a warm welcome from a group of previously settled Latin Americans: the Chileans. Within days of having arrived at the Balmoral Hotel, members of the Chilean community reached out to Gilberto and his two fellows and offered to help the newcomers familiarize themselves with the city. The first wave of Chileans had settled in Winnipeg after the instalment of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in 1973, a decade before the arrival of the first Salvadorans. Because of the Chilean government's systemic expulsion of its political opponents, many of the Chilean exiles were "young, well-educated and adaptable," traits which allowed them to quickly prosper in Canada.⁶³ Drawing on past experiences with organization in their home country,

⁶² Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 23.

⁶³ Peddie, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable*, 3. Peddie takes this quote from Minister Robert Andras, who announced the Special Movement Chile in the House of Commons. House of Commons Debate, 29th parliament, 1st sess., vol. 8 (November 30, 1973), p. 8297.

Chileans set up solidarity organizations and by the 1980s, were eager to help resettle refugees arriving from other Spanish-speaking nations.⁶⁴ They offered the newcomers advice, material supplies, and opportunities to interact with other Spanish speakers.

The Chilean community gave us clothes and household things that we needed. For example, if we needed a chair or basic furniture, they helped us out. The Chileans took us to a lot of places, for example, to stores and they gave us advice. They would tell us what stores to go to when we wanted to buy something. Some of them would come to the apartment where we lived on Sargent and would cook for us; they wanted to show us their traditional dishes.⁶⁵

The importance of this intercommunity relationship diminished over time. As detailed in the previous chapter, most interviewees remembered receiving basic clothing and household goods from government services which were more comprehensive by the late 1980s. Out of the six narrators discussed here, only the three earliest arrivals mentioned that Chileans assisted Salvadorans upon their arrival in Winnipeg. Ricardo, who arrived in 1985, had only heard stories about the close relationship that had taken place in earlier years: “The Chilean community here took care of [the first Salvadorans]. They went, as they say, above and beyond. They believed that they were the political leaders [laughs]. [...] But later, at least when I came, no, we were like the others.” Despite the deprecating tone that Ricardo took while talking about the Chileans’ position as political leaders, he still acknowledged the importance of their contributions. Salvadorans who never experienced the Chileans’ generosity themselves, still knew that the Chilean community was the first to welcome Salvadorans in Winnipeg. The community passed tales of their actions down through stories.

Gilberto finished his reminiscence of his time spent with the Chilean community by recounting a memory of attending a Chilean Independence Day party. Less than ten days after the first group of Salvadorans had arrived in Winnipeg, they were invited to join a *Fiestas Patrias* celebration on September 18. Gilberto’s account showcased how openly Chileans welcomed the new arrivals to join their existing community structure.

⁶⁴ Peddie, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable*, 73-97.

⁶⁵ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 7.

GILBERTO: On that day, it was only José, Eugenio and I who were at the Chilean event. Up until now, I don't know if it was a joke or not—in any case, what happened didn't bother me. The people there made us three Salvadorans dance cueca.

ALEJANDRA: Dance what?

GILBERTO: Cueca, it's the traditional dance of Chile. They taught it to us. Three young women asked the three of us to dance and made us dance cueca to celebrate their Independence Day.

ALEJANDRA: It didn't bother you?

GILBERTO: No, it didn't bother us! We had fun.⁶⁶

As Gilberto explained, cueca is the national dance of Chile. For the Chilean diaspora, the dance played a vital role in constructing and maintaining a Chilean identity abroad.⁶⁷ Generally accompanied by guitar, accordion and percussion, cueca is a mixed partner dance in which the dancing pair imitates a cock courting a hen. The dancers circle each other, twirling handkerchiefs as they dance.⁶⁸ Although cueca follows a basic fixed structure, there is still room for improvisation which allows new dancers, like the three Salvadoran men, to participate after limited exposure. Thirty-one years after living through this experience, Gilberto still remembered the event fondly. In his interview, he didn't mention maintaining contact with the Chileans who adopted him and his fellow Salvadorans during their first days in Winnipeg, but their actions certainly facilitated his integration. As a result of being welcomed into the Chilean community, the first Salvadorans in Winnipeg quickly built their social webs based on structures the Chileans had already developed.

In the late 1980s, when support from the Chilean community was less prevalent, refugees no longer had a ready-made support network to draw from. Newcomers could, however, meet others when they were accessing settlement services, generally at the International Centre in downtown Winnipeg. While the programs the Centre offered were valuable in their own right, it was the connections that refugees were able to build through

⁶⁶ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 7–8.

⁶⁷ Jan Sverre Knudsen, "Dancing Cueca 'With Your Coat on': The Role of Traditional Chilean Dance in an Immigrant Community," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, no. 2 (2001): 61–83.

⁶⁸ For a more detailed description of *cueca* see Katia Chornik, "Cueca," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Popular Music*, ed. George Torres (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 127–128; Samuel Claro Valdés, Carmen Peña Fuenzalida, and María Isabel Quevedo Cifuentes, *Chilena o Cueca Tradicional* (Santiago: Ediciones UC, 1994).

the Centre which remained particularly memorable. Lorena, for example, spun the first thread of her social web from a contact there.

As described in the previous section, during her first weeks in Winnipeg, Lorena was lonely and anxious. Pregnant and isolated at the Balmoral Hotel she had become depressed. However, things began looking up when her husband introduced her to a woman that he had met at the International Centre. Lorena did not clarify if the woman was also a refugee from El Salvador, but her new acquaintance was certainly from a Spanish-speaking country and she had arrived in Winnipeg within the last year. When telling Alejandra about this friendship, Lorena became emotional, her tone becoming tender and sentimental. This first friendship was, and continued to be, very important to her. The same woman, Rosa María, was also the one who accompanied Lorena during the birth of her son in Winnipeg. While the general topic of Lorena's initial arrival led to heightened emotions throughout the interview, Lorena only began to cry when she described the act of kindness that her friend made during their first meeting: she brought Lorena a home-cooked meal to the hotel.

It was a tough time until my husband met someone at the International Centre, Rosa María, we're very good friends. She was pregnant and was as far along as I was. One night she came to visit us at the hotel and she brought me fried beans and plantains for supper. [Long pause] She was the first friend I had in Canada [crying]. I finally felt as though someone could understand what was happening to me because she was also pregnant. She was married and had two daughters. She told us that she'd help us find an apartment and in a matter of a week she had found us a place, it was right across from hers. I get emotional when I think about it because I felt so alone, I felt lost in this country. [...] Rosa María helped me, she taught me how to get to the supermarket. She was the one who took us to the supermarket for the first time. She showed me the bus routes and my children played with her children. I would look after her children while she went to appointments and she looked after mine. Our husbands also became close friends. We were going through the same things, but they had already been living here for a year. She found me a gynecologist who spoke Spanish and also a pediatrician since I didn't speak English.⁶⁹

Rosa María, as an individual, filled the role for Lorena that the Chilean community had filled for Salvadorans in the early 1980s. First and foremost, she provided emotional support

⁶⁹ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 25–26.

by relating to the situation Lorena was in. Roberto had found solace in speaking with others who had also been organized in the Salvadoran conflict, but this connection would have provided Lorena little comfort since she was not particularly political. What made her friendship with Rosa María so well suited was that they were both mothers, pregnant with their third child in a foreign country. Rosa María made her feel less alone. Her first friend also passed on practical know-how which other migrants had learned from the Chilean community. She showed her how and where to go grocery shopping, helped her find an apartment, and ensured that she felt comfortable with the medical professionals she was seeing for her pregnancy.

Connecting with other Spanish speakers already living in Winnipeg was a key step in every interviewee's integration process. Since Salvadorans didn't have a particularly large or unified ethnic community in the city, most refugees made connections through pre-existing networks, like that of the Chilean Canadians, or built friendships around unifying commonalities beyond ethnicity, like motherhood and language. Religion, a further unifying commonality, was so significant to interviewees that it merits its own section.

Finding Community Through Faith

Alongside charitable organizations, labour groups and universities, churches played an important role in pressuring Canadian policymakers to allow increased Central American immigration throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Harnessing the moral authority they possessed as faith organizations, churches from a variety of denominations lobbied the Canadian government to honour its humanitarian commitments, participated in transnational sanctuary work, and privately sponsored hundreds of refugees across the country.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The vast majority, 81,6%, of Salvadoran refugees still arrived in Canada as government-assisted refugees. Statistics Canada, *Longitudinal Immigration Database* in Feng Hou, Garnett Picot and Yan Zhang, *Labour Market Outcomes Among Refugees to Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2019), 15. When churches sponsored a refugee, they took on the responsibility of providing them with the support they would have otherwise received from the government. This included looking after the refugee's reception, lodging, basic care, and settlement assistance for a year. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Undertaking/Application to Sponsor Form (IMM 5373)," Section G: OBLIGATIONS, 4.

In the 1980s, St. Ignatius Church, a Jesuit parish in the south-central part of the city, became a meeting place for the Spanish-speaking community of Winnipeg. In 1979, the church had created a refugee committee to help integrate Indochinese refugees but, by the mid-1980s, the focus of the Committee had shifted to Central Americans. At this time the ethnic and racial composition of the Catholic Church across Canada was shifting. Catholic immigrants from non-European countries began joining local congregations with the support of the Church which encouraged local bishops to cater to these populations.⁷¹ In 1987, after Father Foliot, St. Ignatius' pastor, spent a sabbatical in Nicaragua, the church began offering a Spanish language mass, which led in turn to the formation of a Spanish community within the parish.⁷²

Laura and her family were some of the first Spanish-speaking newcomers to take advantage of this offer at St. Ignatius Church. Religion played an important role in Laura's life and she found great solace in joining a religious congregation in Winnipeg.⁷³

[Coming to Canada] was really hard at first, really shocking, exasperating to an extent, but at the same time our faith made us—well, we looked for a church; we had stopped going. We looked for a church to go to and we started going to church. That helped us a lot. Our faith, the desire to better ourselves, the desire to provide for the kids, those things made it not so tough, and made sure the initial shock of arriving didn't last too long.⁷⁴

As was the case for Laura, becoming active in a religious community helped settle some immigrants both spiritually and emotionally.⁷⁵ Being part of a congregation oriented towards a specific linguistic and cultural community provided further support. Through the church, Laura made connections quickly. Since she had a strained relationship with some

⁷¹ Mark McGowan, "Roman Catholics (Anglophone and Allophone)," in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 75.

⁷² Richard Lebrun, "St. Ignatius Parish, 1983-2008," in *Who We Were, Who We Are: St. Ignatius Centennial Book*, 39.

⁷³ Laura had been heavily involved in Catholic parishes in El Salvador. The very first topics that Laura spoke on in her interviews were that she had a happy childhood, that her parents were people of faith, and that the family went to church almost daily. Her father in particular was very devout and had been a teacher of catechumens.

⁷⁴ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 4.

⁷⁵ Phillip Connor, *Immigrant Faith: Patterns of Immigrant Religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 71.

fellow Salvadorans due to political differences, it was advantageous for her that the church ministered to the wider Hispanic community. Not only did this allow her to avoid potential conflicts, but it also introduced her to a larger community within which to make connections. When Laura joined the congregation in 1987, the bulk of the Spanish-speaking parishioners at St. Ignatius was of Chilean origin, however, more Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan families joined soon after.

At the beginning when I had just started going, we were only a few families. There weren't many of us recently arrived families. Later it started growing and growing and growing. Thanks to God we had a place to be. Father Foliot and the other priests who came after him were very welcoming to our Hispanic community. Over time the community grew, and I think that was the best part: being able to preserve and see our Hispanic community grow in the church. Our culture, the food—all of that helped us to hold on to it.⁷⁶

Besides mass, the Hispanic congregation at St. Ignatius organized many events at the church in Spanish. They hosted celebrations (e.g., for Mother's Day and Father's Day), commemorative events for the deaths of Monseñor Romero and the Jesuits killed in El Salvador, and fundraisers among others. Over time the Spanish-speaking congregation grew to over a hundred families and by 2006, they separated from St. Ignatius and established an independent, Spanish-language Catholic church called Iglesia Nuestra Señora de la Asunción.⁷⁷ Being able to attend church in her native tongue was immensely important to Laura. Even at the time of her interview when she was fully proficient in English, she felt that church services were more meaningful in Spanish. "Having a mass in Spanish has helped me a lot for my own wellbeing. [...] Spanish is really important to me because it's where I understand everything one hundred percent, like the feeling of things. Spanish has more of that way of being, of being able to express so much more."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 15.

⁷⁷ Brenda Suderman, "Their Own Place: Local Spanish-Speaking Catholics Celebrate New Church," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), October 22, 2006.

⁷⁸ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 6.

While St. Ignatius did gather the largest group of Latinos of any church in Winnipeg, it was not the only place Salvadorans went to worship. Some interviewees only attended church sporadically in Canada, and others maintained religious beliefs without actively participating in a religious organization. Lorena, however, underwent a transition made by only a minority of immigrants in the West;⁷⁹ she converted religious denominations after a year of living in Canada.

When Lorena arrived in Winnipeg in 1986—more than a year and a half before Laura—St. Ignatius Church did not yet offer a Spanish-language mass. While she was living at the Balmoral, members of the Mission Baptist Church came to the hotel to invite refugees to attend a service at their church. After two weeks of living in Winnipeg, Lorena agreed to join them. She went to Sunday services with her children and began participating in a bible study group focused on language exchange—English-speaking members of the congregation who wanted to learn Spanish came together with recent arrivals from Central America in a space where each party could learn from the other. This arrangement also appealed to other refugees. Lorena remembers “maybe fifteen families from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua” who became involved with the Mission Baptist Church.⁸⁰

Through the church, Lorena found a sense of community that she had missed since leaving El Salvador. From the beginning, members of the congregation would invite Lorena and her family to their homes for lunch on Sundays, and while she was recovering in hospital after the birth of her youngest son, someone from the church was constantly there to keep her company. The openness and generosity of the community made a lasting impression on Lorena. A little while after she had given birth to her son, while she was still feeling lonely and melancholy about being away from her family in El Salvador, the congregation threw her

⁷⁹ Connor, *Immigrant Faith*, 62.

⁸⁰ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 26.

a baby shower. Through these acts of kindness, members of the church community quickly became the foundation of Lorena's social web.

The church held a huge baby shower for me even though I didn't know any of them. It was a community of about 500 people and all the women met in the church basement and brought me clothes and things for my son. It was a beautiful gesture. [...] It was a few weeks after I had the baby. They took me to the church and all the women were there. They had prepared food and brought gifts for the baby, beautiful, lovely clothes. It was really great, because these people—They are still part of my children's lives. My children had many aunts, uncles and grandparents in the church because they took us in.⁸¹

Despite the deep social and emotional connections Lorena had made with members of the congregation, she was initially hesitant to join the church. In El Salvador Lorena had been a practising Catholic and therefore had to change denominations to become a full member of a Baptist congregation. She did not convert immediately, but after one year of living in Canada, when she and her husband at the time were going to be married in the church, Lorena decided to convert. Despite feeling that it was the right choice for her, she still struggled with her decision. "The time when I converted was a pretty difficult one for me. My husband wasn't religious, well, he says he's Catholic, you know? I was having an internal struggle. I felt that I was betraying my family's values. I worried about what my mom and dad would say."⁸² In her second interview, Lorena clarified that she decided to convert for several reasons: the Canadians in the congregation had made such an effort to be welcoming to Central American refugees, other Latino families had also become members at the church, and finally she was attracted to the evangelical doctrine.

I hadn't thought of changing religions. I had always been Catholic. I went to Catholic schools and all my family was Catholic, but when I came here, the families that spoke Spanish weren't Hispanic, they were Canadians who spoke Spanish. They had been going to the hotel for months where they knew that immigrants were being brought and they invited them to church, to join their bible study with the purpose of learning English by learning about the bible. Several Latino families who had come from Guatemala, El Salvador and Chile gathered. There were already a number of families. Since we came alone, we had no friends, no family, that was the circle that we were involved with first, right? I changed religions because I really did feel the need to do so

⁸¹ Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 29–30.

⁸² Lorena, interview, June 10, 2013, 30.

and I had always been attracted to learning more about the evangelical church. I liked it. In El Salvador I had gone a few times and I liked the prayers, I liked the way they studied the bible, I identified a lot with the church.⁸³

Ultimately, it was the fact that Lorena had made connections with people within the Baptist church that persuaded her to convert. The social network that she had established during her first year in Canada was so solidly attached to the church that it likely would have been detrimental to her integration to have cut herself off from the congregation. The services Lorena attended were not in Spanish like the ones at St. Ignatius Church, but she nonetheless found a space where she could communicate with others in her mother tongue. As a result, Lorena's social network was not dependent on ethnicity, but it was still a viable community which helped her rebuild her identity in a strange city.

This section reviewed the main groups with whom the interviewees made connections in Winnipeg. Salvadorans followed similar tendencies as other immigrant groups: they built relationships with individuals with whom they had something in common. Shared culture, language, life stage, values, and faith provided common points of affinity. What was, however, less typical about Salvadoran refugees was their reticence to use their ethnic community as the foundation of their social web. Political conflicts, trauma and resentment prevented Salvadorans from feeling unified. Even after living twenty years in Winnipeg most of the interviewees were reluctant to discuss intercommunity relationships. Narrators did, however, voice their hopes for greater Salvadoran unity in the future. Many interviewees identified the SVM project itself as a means to bring the community together, and more importantly to create something that future generations of Salvadorans in Winnipeg could look back on to understand how their community had evolved.

⁸³ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 2.

3 - Relationships Within the Home

Having relationships with individuals and communities outside the household was a vital part of all the interviewees' integration process, but for the refugees who arrived in Canada with their families (meaning all interviewees, save Gilberto), it was the members within their household with whom they interacted with the most. Immediate family members therefore constituted the central point of Salvadorans' social webs. Upon moving to Canada, all interviewees underwent massive changes in their family lives. These changes included the births of new children for Lorena, Cristina and Ricardo, a reconceptualization of gender roles, and shifts in personal relationships. As with most transition periods in life, hardships brought some families closer together, while it drove others apart.

The immigrant family often became a hybridized social unit where cultural precepts from the homeland were mixed with values from the host country.⁸⁴ In their discussion of marriage and family, the SVM interviewees demonstrated this mix of customs. Despite attempts to maintain cultural heritage within the home, family dynamics were highly susceptible to change. The last section of this chapter will explore these evolutions within the family. First, it will describe how interviewees were affected by their spouse's reaction to displacement, before discussing how perceptions of gender roles and parenting changed in Winnipeg. The end of the section strongly features women's narratives as they engaged in a wider-ranging analysis of these developments than did the men.

Migration and Marriage

On an individual level, every refugee faced various challenges upon arriving in Winnipeg. Some of these challenges were universal to all refugees—learning English, finding employment, securing accommodations—while others were personal. Whatever the nature of the challenges, refugees who migrated as a couple necessarily shared, or were at least

⁸⁴ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 122.

connected to, the burdens their spouses faced. Even if only one half of a couple struggled to adjust to life in Canada, this could profoundly impact both partners' integration. As a result, several interviewees noted that their relationship with their spouse changed after migration.

Of the six individuals presented in this analysis, two of the five married interviewees went through a divorce after migrating. Latin American refugee groups have been found to experience higher levels of marriage breakdown in Canada than in their home countries.⁸⁵ Francis Peddie, however, argues that migration challenges alone do not explain this finding. He points to the increases in divorce rates across Canada following the Divorce Acts of 1968 and 1985 to demonstrate that wider societal changes act upon newcomers and that the rates of migrant divorce are not more acute than those of the wider Canadian population.⁸⁶ Most of the interviewees, both those who remained married and those who eventually separated, did nevertheless remember the period after their arrival to have strained their relationship with their spouse in some ways.

Individual relationships had a large impact on how refugees managed integration as a couple. In Ricardo's case, he didn't know his wife particularly well before migrating—he had married her only ten days before leaving for Canada. In his interviews, Ricardo was upfront about the fact that he didn't marry for love. "I decided to get married because I didn't want to come here without a wife. I didn't know how easy or how difficult it would be to find a wife here. Because I was a bachelor, divorced, I could have done whatever I wanted, but I wanted a Salvadoran wife."⁸⁷ Since Ricardo had submitted his asylum application as a bachelor, it took fourteen months for his new wife and twelve-year-old stepson to have their paperwork processed and join him in Winnipeg. His wife had not initially wanted to come to Canada and Ricardo remembered her finding the transition challenging.

⁸⁵ Statistics Canada, "1996 Census, Ethnic Origin and Population Group," last modified June 4, 2019, accessed October 16, 2023; Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, "Marriages and Divorces," *Our World in Data*, July 25, 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>.

⁸⁶ Peddie, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable*, 111.

⁸⁷ Ricardo, interview, February 2, 2013, 20–21.

When [his wife] arrived our lives were very difficult. She had never left the country, she had never even left her city, she had never left her home, she had never had to let go of her parents. She thought of her parents every day and she cried for them. She didn't want to go to school and she avoided meeting people so she wouldn't have to speak because she wasn't able to. In the end it was a very difficult period. I never expected a reaction like that from her.⁸⁸

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ricardo's wife arrived in Winnipeg in a snowstorm which likely did not help her feel welcome. Within a year of being reunited, Ricardo and his wife had a son which added further stress to the family life. As time went on, the situation seemed to improve, but Ricardo often noted in his interviews that living with someone struggling to integrate was difficult.

Roberto also felt disconnected from his wife when they arrived in Winnipeg. Although they had been married for several years, Roberto felt that they had never had a "proper marriage" due to his involvement in the war. "Our marriage was already finished in El Salvador. We never had a marriage—I never lived with her. She is the mother of my children but I didn't have that experience; we didn't live like a couple, the war didn't allow me to."⁸⁹ Roberto recalled that both he and his wife struggled with depression upon arrival and that they were both reluctant to integrate or adapt to life in Canada. Neither of them felt motivated to make Winnipeg their home. Roberto recalled, "The whole family suffered, but the one who suffered the most was my wife, my children's mother. It was a horrible situation because she was never able to adapt; she never tried to adapt and she constantly complained about that situation and blamed me for all of her misfortunes. It was a tremendous conflict."⁹⁰

Roberto credited his continued involvement with the war effort with ending his marriage. Shortly after arriving in Winnipeg, he was approached by *La Solidaridad*, an organization focused on improving the situation in El Salvador from Canada. Despite never regretting the work he did for his community through this organization, he believed that it

⁸⁸ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 9.

⁸⁹ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 12.

⁹⁰ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 12.

was this work that was the last straw for his wife: “She always condemned me for being devoted to the revolution, for not being dedicated to my children.”⁹¹ After five years of living in Canada, Roberto and his wife divorced. For Roberto, who was still recovering mentally from the effects of his participation in the war and who did not yet feel at all integrated into Canadian society, this added another considerable hurdle to his recovery.

Divorce was not a decision refugees made lightly. Roberto took great care to justify his decision to separate during his interview. “As a partner, as a conscious person, as a fighter, I had to make the decision—as tough as it was—to give her her freedom. That’s how I decided, with an aching soul, to separate. I didn’t want to; I didn’t do it out of dignity, I did it because I couldn’t give her and didn’t give her happiness, all of our love was dead.”⁹² While the challenges inherent in migration exacerbated conflicts within Roberto’s home, they were not the cause of his divorce. It was therefore personal circumstances and the legal availability of divorce, not struggles with relocation, that were the main motivators for separation for the Salvadorans in this analysis.

There have been no extensive studies done on the impact of relocation on Salvadoran refugee marriage in Canada to extend these claims beyond the six interviewees. Much of the recent research done on Salvadoran families has focused on the strains of maintaining ties transnationally.⁹³ This is due in part to the strong American bias that permeates research on Salvadoran migrants. In the majority of cases, Salvadoran refugees arriving in Canada in the 1980s migrated with their families. It is therefore logical that their experience mirrored that of Chilean exiles in Canada in the 1970s more closely than those of Salvadoran asylum seekers in the United States since Chileans also often migrated with their families.

⁹¹ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 23–24.

⁹² Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 13.

⁹³ See Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*; Jennifer Van Hook and Jennifer E. Glick, “Spanning Borders, Cultures, and Generations: A Decade of Research on Immigrant Families,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82, no. 1 (2020): 224–243; Cecilia Menjivar and Leisy Abrego, *Immigrant Families* (Malden: Polity, 2016).

Changing Gender Roles

Underlying beliefs and assumptions about gender roles were present in many of the interviews. While having a sample size of only six individuals prevents this analysis from making assertions about the greater Salvadoran community in Winnipeg, the difference in the way men and women interviewed reflected on marriage—and adjacently gender roles in a marriage—is worth noting. When asked about their past and present relationships, the men interviewed focused on their personal situations. The women also described their personal histories, but additionally commented on power dynamics within their marriages and how these evolved as they migrated from one cultural milieu to another. Their discussions thereby surpassed the individual level and touched on societal norms which they felt affected all Latino migrant marriages.

When noting this disparity, it is also important to consider the interview context. A wide range of research has shown that an interviewer's relation to an interviewee has a marked influence on what the interviewee will disclose and in what manner they will disclose it.⁹⁴ In the case of this analysis, the interviewer was a Salvadoran woman. Several cues throughout the interviews indicate that there was a level of solidarity and implicit understanding taking place between Alejandra and the women she interviewed. As will be further shown throughout this section, this tacit affinity was particularly marked during the discussion of gender and gender roles. Since the women could assume that—as a woman herself—Alejandra could relate to their experiences and was sympathetic towards their position, they were more likely to speak candidly on often taboo subjects such as gender inequality and domestic abuse. Conversely, the men interviewed may have become more reserved in their discussion on the same topics. If the interviewer had been a Salvadoran man,

⁹⁴ Notable examples: Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History As Genre," in *Narrative & Genre*, eds. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 23–45; Geoffrey Cubitt, "Memory and the Individual," in *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 66–117; Charlotte Linde, "The Creation of Coherence in Life Stories: Overview," in *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–19.

the men may also have had more to say on how Canadian culture affected their relationship with their wives and the dynamics in their families. With the information available in Alejandra's interviews, however, most of the following sections will focus on women's accounts.

Since conceptions of gender roles and feminism have shifted significantly between the 1980s and the 2010s, it is also worth noting that the women were presenting their narratives with conceptions and vocabulary prevalent in 2012–2014. As Alessandro Portelli has noted, memory is an “active process of creation of meanings,” implying that interviewees use the understanding that they possessed at the time of an interview to inform the way they remember and describe their past.⁹⁵

Cristina and Lorena were the most vocal on the topic of family life and women's rights. They each spent a significant amount of time discussing their experiences with, and perceptions of, gender roles in their interviews. They were wary of the traditional Salvadoran divisions of gender which place women in the home caring for children and men outside the home working, largely because in their experiences this dynamic was highly susceptible to abuse. When reflecting on the marriages they observed in El Salvador, the two women noted that men's entitlement and machismo and women's lack of support and autonomy to leave abusive situations were prevalent issues. Machismo here refers to exaggerated masculinity, which in the Central American context includes the “core practices” of “hard drinking, excessive gambling, womanizing, and wife-beating.”⁹⁶ Cristina and Lorena likely were the most vocal on this subject because they both had personal histories with abuse. In Cristina's case, the abuser was her stepfather and in Lorena's, it was her ex-husband.

At various times throughout her interviews, Cristina displayed open contempt for her stepfather. She described him as “a case of textbook machismo” who expected his wife to do

⁹⁵ Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 54.

⁹⁶ Roger Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 39.

his bidding in all things.⁹⁷ Throughout her childhood, Cristina watched as he mistreated her mother, often as a result of excessive drinking, and later discovered that he had sexually abused her younger sister. Growing up in this environment gave Cristina a clear model of what she wanted to avoid in her marriage. “I always hated that, the violence and the servitude that I saw. I hated it. [...] I wasn’t going to have a home like that, where the man was sexist and I did everything.”⁹⁸ When she reflected on the early years of her marriage, however, she found that although her husband always treated her well, there was less of a power balance in their relationship than she would have liked.

The years of university [her second year in Winnipeg] were very hard because like a good Latino family [laughs], I just did everything. My husband didn’t help me with anything. He just went to work and came home to sit down and watch television. I tended to the kids, gave them baths, made the food, did the shopping, paid the bills, absolutely everything.⁹⁹

Cristina’s narrative indicated that she had spent much time reflecting on this subject and had already developed a certain vocabulary to discuss her situation. When employing the archetype of the “good Latino family” Cristina laughed, not angrily or self-deprecatingly, but as though she was sharing a joke with Alejandra that they were both in on. She was certain that Alejandra would be familiar with the stereotypes she was evoking and that she would understand how ubiquitous they were. Cristina noted that her relationship with her husband had gradually become more equal over time.

Over the years, I have realized that the reason [my marriage] was always peaceful, and that it was good and everything, was because I always did everything. I always gave in to everything, so obviously [her husband] didn’t have any reason to get mad. [...] The only thing I might regret about that is that I didn’t realize what was happening sooner. I don’t want my children to see me as a slave to the home. I want them to see us as a team.¹⁰⁰

In her first interview, Cristina also reflected on the reasons why she had a significantly more respectful marriage than her mother and stepfather. She ultimately determined that it

⁹⁷ Cristina, interview, January 8, 2013, 4.

⁹⁸ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 37–38.

⁹⁹ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 36.

came down to who she and her husband were as people, but acknowledged that living in Canada made achieving a more balanced partnership easier. She linked machismo, which she credited with being the source of the abuse she observed growing up, with Latin American culture. Living in a different cultural milieu therefore allowed her and her husband to develop their partnership on their own terms.

So today I do feel accomplished; in spite of what has happened, of what I've seen, of what I lived. It's because of all that that I am me. That is why I feel accomplished, and if I would have stayed in El Salvador I believe I would feel the same way, no matter where. I feel that it was easier in Winnipeg, because in my marriage I didn't have that rotten influence of machismo that exists in El Salvador. [Laughs] My husband was able to grow up in another environment, and we both grew together and fought together, and we both suffered together and have gotten over that. But it is not the geographical circumstances that give you that; it is what you make with your life and how you take advantage of opportunities.

Lorena also viewed her personal experience with domestic abuse through a distinctly cultural lens. Like Cristina, she felt that Salvadoran culture tolerated, or even encouraged, machismo which often resulted in abuse, especially at the time when she was living in El Salvador. Using her personal case to illustrate the hardships that she observed many newcomer couples go through, Lorena described how the different cultural norms in Canada allowed women living in abusive situations to assert and protect themselves vis-à-vis their partners.

In a lot of newcomer couples the man abused the woman physically, emotionally, psychologically. In our country that is very common, and there were no restrictions. Now things are changing, but before it was like that. I realized that when a woman comes here there's like a light bulb moment. She opens her eyes, "This can't be, there has to be an end." And that's when the man gets upset. He doesn't like that. He'd say: "Ah, you've already become Canadian, now you're going with the laws here." But no, it's not that. It's that there had to be a change. I was an abused woman for many years in El Salvador and all I did was cry and keep quiet because I didn't know what else to do. But when I came here I saw that it didn't have to be like that.¹⁰¹

Concerns about Central American women's 'canadanization' were common at the time. Judith Kulig conducted interviews with Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Guatemalans living in

¹⁰¹ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 18–19.

Alberta in the 1990s and discovered that the most heated discussions concerned the perception that women “drastically changed after their arrival in Canada.”¹⁰² Lorena readily acquiesced that this was the case for her. She described her light bulb moment: “There was a moment in which I said, ‘That man is never going to touch me again,’ and he never did.”¹⁰³ She, like Cristina, acknowledged that the less patriarchal society in Canada made exerting her rights easier. Notably, neither woman perceived their actions as anti-Salvadoran or excessively Canadian. As Lorena said, being in a new cultural milieu allowed the women to decide for themselves that “there had to be a change.”

Lorena noted that it was more difficult for her ex-husband to adapt to life in Canada than it had been for her. Again, she echoed the discussions that had taken place in Kulig’s interviews. Kulig found that Salvadorans, more than other Central Americans, felt that “women and children in Canada have too many freedoms and too much protection.”¹⁰⁴ This was seen as encroaching on the man’s role as the provider and decision maker in the home. Lorena described conversations she had had with her ex-husband where they agreed that women had more explicit protection in Canada.

LORENA: It was more difficult for him than for me to integrate into this community.

ALEJANDRA: Why do you think that was?

LORENA: Well, there are more changes when you come here. Because women are well protected here, there are many opportunities. And as a man—I don’t know. I think they felt that—Latino men, I think that they felt isolated sometimes, right? I don’t know, maybe machismo makes them feel that way. [...] He always said that I felt, like, more secure because the government supported me. And yes, I think that that’s how it is, that is true.¹⁰⁵

To a lesser extent than the other women, Laura also reflected on how her relationship with her husband evolved in Canada. While she acknowledged that she had always been the one responsible for many of the tasks in the home traditionally assigned to women, she recalled always having a good, balanced relationship with her husband. She never detailed

¹⁰² Kulig, “Family Life Among El Salvadorans, Guatemalans And Nicaraguans,” 475.

¹⁰³ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Kulig, “Family Life Among El Salvadorans, Guatemalans And Nicaraguans,” 477.

¹⁰⁵ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 18.

what their relationship looked like in the years after they arrived in Winnipeg, but Laura did mention that as they spent more time living in Canada, her husband lowered his expectations of what he assumed she would do in the home. This indicates both that the cultural influences noted by Cristina and Lorena also impacted Laura and her family, and that Laura did the vast majority of childcare and domestic work upon her arrival in Winnipeg, although, like the other two women, she was also working full time.

He likes for the house to be clean and everything, and if I'm at home, I have to do it. I know that I have to do it, or that I should do it, right? It's part of—but now it doesn't make him mad when it's not the way he wants to find it, where before it did—now it doesn't. [...] If the food isn't completely ready, he has learned to be tolerant. I mean those are things that get learned gradually.¹⁰⁶

The women's testimonies showed how much change could take place *within* a migrant's social web. The women responded to the outside forces they encountered and altered or refined their existing cultural paradigms in ways that suited them best in their new home. They did not, however, simply leave behind Salvadoran conventions to adopt Canadian ways of thinking. While some interviewees, particularly Cristina, were active proponents of women's rights, their lived experiences and personal realities influenced their priorities. Studies on immigrant women's activism in Ontario and British Columbia from the 1960s to the 1980s have found that immigrant women's activism was distinct from that of "mainstream" Canadian feminists. Little et al. concluded that while both groups critiqued patriarchal oppression, immigrant women were more "sensitive to issues of family and motherhood than other feminists."¹⁰⁷ Immigrants advocated for policies that supported them both as economic providers and as mothers and wives, while white Canadian feminists at the time focused primarily on women's position outside the home.

Having Salvadoran men's perspective on changing gender roles in Canada would provide a valuable addition to this analysis. While their silence on the topic within a life story

¹⁰⁶ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Little, Lynne Sorrel Marks, Marin Beck, Emma Paszat, and Liza Tom, "Family Matters: Immigrant Women's Activism in Ontario and British Columbia, 1960s–1980s." *Atlantis* 41, no. 1 (2020): 110.

interview is an interesting finding on its own, it would be fitting to conduct other interviews with direct questions on the subject. Several works cited throughout this section have suggested that immigrant men's dislocation from familiar patriarchal systems caused significant levels of distress, but that ultimately most families transitioned towards greater gender equality.¹⁰⁸ Having men's remembrances and reflections on this topic would compliment and nuance the recollections provided by the women interviewees.

Passing On New Values

Like their parents, refugee children were also quickly exposed to new cultural values and expectations linked to gender roles. These notions were presented to them both outside the home or in the home if their parents had also adopted Canadian ideals. Often, however, children would adapt to new norms more quickly than their parents. This could potentially lead to conflicts between family members or even to the involvement of law enforcement. Since Salvadoran women were the ones responsible for the cultural maintenance of their families, children's conceptions of gender roles could in part be traced to their mothers.¹⁰⁹

The pressure for women to act as socializers for their families came both from within the Salvadoran community and from without. Little et al. found that in the 1980s, the Canadian state still assumed that a husband was the economic provider in a household and therefore less involved in child-rearing. By making multiculturalism an official state policy in 1971, the government then pressured immigrant women to be the preservers of the culturally distinct family.¹¹⁰ As described in the previous section, some Salvadoran women were, however, open to passing on liberal views of gender roles from early on in their integration process. Loewen and Friesen also found that most immigrants in prairie cities applied the

¹⁰⁸ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 127–133; Peddie, Young, *Well-Educated, and Adaptable*, 112–113; Kulig, "Family Life Among El Salvadorans, Guatemalans And Nicaraguans," 470–477.

¹⁰⁹ Kulig, "Family Life Among El Salvadorans, Guatemalans And Nicaraguans," 472.

¹¹⁰ Little et al. "Family Matters," 110.

concept of cultural maintenance more rigorously to secondary relations (“social clubs, churches, and mutual aid societies”) than they did in the home.¹¹¹

As described above, Cristina saw no place in her home for machismo. She took great care to separate Salvadoran culture from sexist values. She taught her children to speak Spanish and to be proud of their Salvadoran heritage, while actively encouraging them to dismiss traditional Salvadoran gender roles. She told Alejandra that she had been particularly decisive in this with her daughter. “I made it clear to them: *Hija*, you aren’t going to be anyone’s servant. Your mom is the last slave in our generations because I got used to your dad like that. It’s really hard for me, it’s part of my culture, but not you. You’ll be studying.”¹¹² She did, however, also note that this outlook had caused tension with some older family members.

Just recently my mother-in-law nearly fought with my husband because she was asking how it was possible that I hadn’t taught [her daughter] how to cook. What was she going to do when she got married? I said, “She’s not going to get married so she can cook for her husband. Her husband will be her companion, not her boss or master. She isn’t anyone’s servant.”¹¹³

Cristina looked back on her children’s upbringing positively. She was very glad that what she saw as a cycle of abuse had ended with her children’s generation. As a final comment on the subject, Cristina joked that there was no question that her daughter would not end up as a servant to the home when she grew up: “I can say with confidence that it has worked for my daughter, because my daughter even gets her dad to work [laughs].”¹¹⁴

Lorena never mentioned being as direct with her children about women’s rights as Cristina was, but she still remembered that her children’s perception of acceptable behaviour changed after they arrived in Canada. While Lorena felt empowered by living in Winnipeg and did eventually separate from her husband, she suffered domestic abuse throughout her

¹¹¹ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 133–134.

¹¹² Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 37.

¹¹³ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 37.

¹¹⁴ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 37.

initial integration. During this time, she recalled that her ex-husband drank often and that the abuse that had become commonplace in their home in El Salvador continued in Canada. When prompted by Alejandra, she gave an example of a time when law enforcement came to investigate the situation. Her account provides a look into Lorena's life at the time and demonstrates how the cultural shift that she perceived affected her children. Furthermore, it highlights that, despite gaining increased autonomy in Canada, the Canadian system still fell short of protecting women in Lorena's position.

ALEJANDRA: You never had problems with the police or anything like that?

LORENA: No, never. Also back then when you called because a man was hitting you or something, they asked you if you wanted to press charges or not. Not now, now they charge them immediately. Back then, never, we never had that.

ALEJANDRA: Did you ever call them?

LORENA: I personally never did, but my son, yes.

ALEJANDRA: Your eldest son?

LORENA: My eldest son, yes. He had already been told that if he saw something he didn't like, he had to dial 911 and he did.

ALEJANDRA: How old was your son?

LORENA: He was small, like maybe seven, eight years old.

ALEJANDRA: And the police came?

LORENA: The police came and they took [her ex-husband] and they asked me if I wanted to press charges, and I said no, that he was just having a bad time, that he was angry. That maybe it was my fault because I had provoked him. That he wasn't like that. And then when he came back he said, "Look, I was drunk, this is never going to happen again." That story.

ALEJANDRA: As always.

LORENA: As always.¹¹⁵

Lorena did not mention how she reacted to her son calling the police. It is unclear if the boy was reprimanded for his actions or not. The fact that her young son knew that he was to call 911 "if he saw something he didn't like," demonstrated how deeply he had integrated into Canadian society. Lorena did not detail if she talked to her children about domestic abuse or if she took special care to have them assimilate precepts of gender equality, but it would have been a challenge to explain the situation to her son in any case—especially if he had learned from trusted adults (at school or at church) that what he had seen was wrong. Maintaining

¹¹⁵ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 19–20.

family cohesion and harmony in the face of such a volatile situation would have required the deft use of hybridized social conceptions on Lorena's part.

The excerpt above is also a good example of an episode that an interviewee may have presented differently to a different interviewer. At this point in her narrative, Lorena was not speaking in a monologue; Alejandra was both prompting her with questions and showing her understanding through verbal cues. The exchange was fully collaborative. When Lorena was missing a word, Alejandra would jump in to provide it. The interaction at the end of the excerpt above demonstrated that both women were familiar with scenes like the one Lorena described—not necessarily personally, but through their shared cultural paradigm. Throughout the discussion of Lorena's experiences with abuse, Alejandra never offered condolences or drew attention to the sensitive nature of the topic. These reactions would have been out of place since Lorena's account largely focused on how common this relationship dynamic was among newcomers. Instead, Alejandra offered her attention and solidarity which encouraged the open and self-reflexive dialogue presented above.

In brief, Salvadoran refugees raised their children in a social unit which differed both from the one they had been familiar with in El Salvador and from the one that their children's Canadian-born peers were living in. Despite being exposed to Salvadoran culture through their parents and other community organizations, it was nearly impossible for refugee children not to integrate certain aspects of Canadian culture into their worldviews. Whether these new concepts and values were tolerated or accepted by their parents varied from family to family.

Conclusion: Maintaining Old Ties, Forging New Relationships

Refugees needed to build viable communities after emigrating to feel at home in Winnipeg. Having a support network helped them integrate more smoothly and kept up morale through difficult times. With modern technologies that allowed Salvadorans to send

letters and packages as well as make long-distance phone calls to El Salvador, these networks could extend back to the refugees' home country, but individuals who could quickly build relationships in Winnipeg felt less lonely than those who did not. The interviewees found community along diverse paths. Salvadorans forged friendships at the Balmoral Hotel, near their places of residence, at ethnic community social events, through immigration services, or at church. Each interviewee's interests influenced where they went to look for connections and what groups they formed positive associations with. From the narratives provided by the interviewees in the SVM project, Salvadorans who arrived in Winnipeg during the 1980s were more comfortable building networks among wider Spanish-speaking groups than with other fellow Salvadorans to minimize political conflict. Relationships with family members also influenced how easily refugees felt comfortable in Winnipeg. Spouses who had disagreements about long-term goals or beliefs often found that these were exacerbated after emigrating. Ultimately, every interviewee analyzed here succeeded in building a functioning support network in Winnipeg. The next chapter will explore what the interviewees remember about interactions with people outside their social network, meaning people in the host society.

I finished the [English] lessons on a Friday and I had a job by Monday. The International Centre [...] found me a job and I started working, with what little I knew. I spoke only ten, twenty percent; everything else was hand gestures.

—Roberto 2012¹

It has been hard, but [...] we feel like we made a home here, that we made it well and that everything was part of the process of being where we are.

—Cristina 2013²

CHAPTER THREE

Taking Part in Canadian Society: The Path to Integration

From their first moments on Canadian soil onwards, refugees interacted with Canadians and began crafting a space for themselves within the societal framework their hosts employed. Cross-cultural contact took place at grocery stores, in schools, on playgrounds, and at work. The connections interviewees formed in these public spaces were distinct from their private relationships discussed in the previous chapter. By the 1980s, Canada actively promoted multiculturalism and encouraged ethnic groups to maintain their cultural distinction, but ultimately Canadian norms and values composed the foundation of all public relations. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth and post-colonial scholarship, Loewen and Friesen describe interactions in which immigrants and the host society meet and mingle as taking place in an imagined “boundary zone.”³ In these spaces, cross-cultural sharing and acculturation are ever-present and never ceasing.

As an immigrant-focused analysis, this chapter is primarily concerned with the actions and perceptions of newly arrived Salvadorans in this shared space—not those of Canadians engaging with newcomers. The first section describes the interviewees’ experiences with learning English. Since English was—and remains—the primary language of communication in Manitoba, becoming functionally proficient in it was a foundational step in Salvadorans successfully interacting with Canadian society. The following section delves into each

¹ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 11.

² Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 18.

³ Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 5.

interviewee's individual experience with employment and education; two spaces where refugees needed to conform to Canadian standards. Finally, the last section will focus on Salvadorans' social and cultural integration and the process by which they began to feel at home in Canada.

1 - Developing English Proficiency

One of the most pressing challenges refugees faced in Winnipeg was learning one of Canada's official languages. According to Statistics Canada, 82.5% of the refugees from El Salvador spoke neither English nor French upon their arrival.⁴ All individuals in this analysis fell into this category. While some interviewees had taken basic English classes in primary or secondary school, none felt that they spoke English proficiently at the time of their migration. And since Manitoba is a primarily anglophone province, interviewees were not concerned with learning French. The following section will review how refugees first began to learn English, the tools and strategies they used to communicate with English speakers, the difficulties they encountered while learning English, and how they felt about their English proficiency at the time of their interviews.

English as a Second Language Classes

Government-assisted refugees who arrived in Manitoba in the 1980s had access to four months of government-subsidized English classes. In Winnipeg, Applied Linguistics Centre Ltd and Red River Community College held the contracts to provide these courses. Unfortunately for the interviewees, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses were in high demand in the 1980s. As a result, wait times to get into the government-sponsored classes extended from three to five months.⁵ In the interim, immigration services encouraged refugees to attend ESL courses at other institutions. The most common location to take these

⁴ Statistics Canada, *Longitudinal Immigration Database* cited in Hou, Picot and Zhang, *Labour Market Outcomes Among Refugees to Canada*, 15.

⁵ Kelley Teahan, "Refugees Marvel at Supermarkets, Endure Weather," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Winnipeg, MB, January 13, 1986.

additional English lessons was at an education centre on Elgin Avenue only a few minutes walk from the Balmoral Hotel. Like many other early arrival services, refugees discovered this course through the International Centre which allowed them to sign up within days of their arrival.

The primary goal of ESL classes was to teach refugees the basics of the English language. This provided them with the skills necessary to pursue future goals in Canada, including further education and gainful employment. It was also in ESL classes that newcomers to Canada had their first exposure to Canadian culture and values. By the 1980s, public policy was shifting away from Canada's long history of assimilation through education and multiculturalism was the new foundational point of the Canadian identity.⁶ ESL instructors had a professional responsibility to present Canadian values to newcomers and teach in a manner that represented multicultural ideals.⁷ Interviewees did not, however, remember English classes as sites of cultural immersion. Although cultural exchange would have unavoidably taken place in an ESL classroom, most interviewees described the classes as a step in their linguistic journey, not as an avenue to get to know Canadian culture.

What did stand out in the interviews was that none of the interviewees recalled speaking English proficiently after having completed their government course. This pushed some refugees to take supplementary ESL classes after their four-month class had ended. Gilberto, for example, took classes at five separate institutions throughout his first year in Canada. Shortly after arriving, he registered for classes at the International Centre, then after three or four months he was able to take the government course. Feeling that the English he had learned by that point "wasn't sufficient" for him to continue his studies at a

⁶ In Canada, public discussions on official multiculturalism began with the 1960s Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. Multiculturalism was institutionalized as a federal policy through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988.

⁷ Seonaigh MacPherson et al., "ESL and Canadian Multiculturalism: Multilingual, Intercultural Practices for the 21st Century," *TESL Canada Journal*, special issue 4 (2004): 4–5.

post-secondary level, he found three other ESL classes around the city to continue learning.⁸ At multiple points during his interviews, Gilberto expressed frustration around feeling pressured to find work—and therefore forfeit financial assistance from the government—rather than being free to focus on learning English. He felt that if he had had the means to study longer, he would have had an easier time integrating.

Conducting informal language practice with family members and friends also allowed refugees to improve their English skills outside the classroom. Laura and her husband signed up for English classes within their first week in the city, but she recalled that it was their private studies that helped them improve the most. “My husband and I made a rule for ourselves to learn two verbs every day. [...] That’s how we ended up learning around 200, 300 verbs in quite a short period of time. At the school we passed level one, level two, level three, we got to four quickly [laughs], in like three months, because we dedicated so much time at home.”⁹ In her interview, Laura reflected that facing the challenge of learning a new language together with her husband had a positive effect on their relationship. She described how they would resolve issues as a united front, each playing to their respective strengths, in their interactions with the English world around them.

Speaking was hard for me. I understood—I learned to read and write English fast, but my husband didn’t. Whereas he was slower in reading and writing, he learned to speak quickly. He would practise speaking what he was learning. So when we went out shopping—to the supermarket, someplace—we would both go. I would interpret and he would respond; it worked really well. [...] Now we see it as something that helped us grow together as a couple, that made us strong so we could survive.¹⁰

It is worth noting that—at least in theory—government-assisted refugees received the same language support and educational opportunities regardless of their gender or marital status. This was not the case for immigrant wives who came to Canada as sponsored dependents through the points-based immigration system established in 1976. As a separate

⁸ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 8–9.

⁹ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 3.

¹⁰ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 3.

class of immigrant, refugees met different criteria to migrate to Canada and received different support upon their arrival. Until the early 1980s, the government often only funded ESL training for the head of an immigrant household—generally the husband.¹¹ While the government provided English instruction to all refugees, personal circumstances resulted in more women than men postponing or not attending the classes. For instance, both Cristina and Lorena were exempt from taking the government English course upon their arrival due to their pregnancies. Cristina took the course later once she had given birth, but Lorena never did.

While she never took the government ESL class, Lorena found other ways to learn English, some of which originated in formal classroom settings and others which were less orthodox. Within six months of living in Winnipeg, Lorena opened a daycare in her home. As a result, she was eligible to attend an ‘English for Work’ course offered through Child and Family Services, which focused on vocabulary used in childcare. While she did recall finding this course useful, Lorena found occasions where she learned English through personal interactions to be the most memorable. She remembered that the first child she took care of at her daycare was a Canadian boy whose mother wanted him to learn Spanish. While he was under Lorena’s care, they taught each other their respective languages in fun, accessible ways. Twenty-eight years after meeting the boy, Lorena still remembered his name and described their time together fondly.

The boy was seven years old and his mom was living with a Guatemalan man so she wanted her son and herself to learn Spanish. The boy’s name was Kent. I’m not sure how old he would be now—twenty-eight years ago he was seven. Kent would tell me in English what he wanted and he would make me little cards with English words and I would tell him in Spanish what the words were for ‘fork,’ ‘plate,’ ‘television.’ The boy put up signs for me all over my house so that I would learn the words in English and I would put them up for him in Spanish. That was my first client.¹²

¹¹ Little et al., “Family Matters,” 110.

¹² Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 10.

ESL classes taught Salvadorans the basics of the English language, but they were not comprehensive enough to result in students' fluency. Until refugees had the language skills needed to be self-sufficient, they were likely to rely on others to interpret important English conversations.

Official Translation Services and Informal Interpreters

While Salvadorans were learning English, they had access to interpretation services through the government. An interpreter was generally part of each refugee's welcoming committee at the Winnipeg airport and interviewees described an interpreter being present for many of their initial interactions with healthcare providers, government officials, and school administrators. The events of Lorena's youngest child's birth detailed in the previous chapter are an example of this. Lorena had translators join her for her prenatal appointments and eventually in the hospital for her delivery. Translators, however, only allowed Salvadorans to circumvent the language barrier they faced, not remove it. If an interpreter could not be contacted in advance then refugees had to find ways to get by with the English they knew.

Consequently, some interviewees described no longer needing an interpreter as an important step in proving to themselves and others that they had achieved the necessary level of fluency to meet their family's day-to-day needs. Laura told an anecdote about "pranking" an interpreter whom she had become friends with in Winnipeg. She noted that the translator, a fellow Salvadoran, had encouraged her and her husband to do as much as possible without assistance, "for our own good."¹³ In her interview, Laura agreed that this approach helped her and her husband learn English more quickly. After a year and a half of living in Winnipeg, when they wanted to change their children's school, she requested that the interpreter join them for a fake appointment. In reality, Laura and her husband had already completed the process on their own and they requested the meeting to prove to their friend that they were

¹³ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 4.

capable of managing administrative processes in English on their own. As Laura noted: “We knew how to look after ourselves.”¹⁴

Refugees’ children were often quicker at picking up language skills than their parents. This is a phenomenon commonly seen across immigrant groups. Not only do young people pick up vocabulary more rapidly, they also receive greater exposure to the dominant language at school.¹⁵ While Laura and her husband took a year and a half to feel confident doing business without an interpreter, their eldest son was already acting as a translator within months.

A couple months [after arriving in Winnipeg] a Nicaraguan woman called me and said, “Hi, I’m looking for [son’s name].” It startled me because he was only eleven years old and I said, “Why do you want to talk to him? What happened? Did you have an issue with him?”—“No, no, the school gave me your phone number because he is going to translate for my son.” And I said, “But we only just arrived, just months ago. My son doesn’t speak English,” and she said, “Yes he does, because the teacher recommended him to me, from [school name].”—“Oh okay, if that’s what happened, that’s fine,” I said. I mean, I asked him about it. “Yes Mami,” he said, “I already understand English, and they send me to translate for the kids who are new here”—“Oh good, *hijo*, then it’s okay.” That is to say, for me it was very flattering. I was happy that my son was helping others in such a short amount of time. Two months of being here and he was already a translator.¹⁶

Discovering that her son had adapted to his surroundings quickly was both a source of pride and relief for Laura. His rapidly obtained linguistic abilities would have also opened up the opportunity for her son to act as an informal interpreter for his parents who were learning English more slowly. Research focused on Spanish-speaking immigrant families in the United States has shown that adults frequently call on children to interpret for them.¹⁷ Parents and children thereby navigate white public space together.

¹⁴ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 4.

¹⁵ Elisabet Service and Fergus Clark, “Differences Between Young and Older Adults in Learning a Foreign Language,” *Journal of Memory and Language* 32 (1993): 608–623; Barry Chiswick, Yew Liang Lee and Paul Miller, “Parents and Children Talk: English Language Proficiency Within Immigrant Families,” *Review of Economics of the Household* 3, no. 3 (2005): 243–268.

¹⁶ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 4–5.

¹⁷ Jennifer F. Reynolds and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, “New Immigrant Youth Interpreting in White Public Space,” *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 2 (2009): 211–223; Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Lisa Dorner, and Lucila Pulido, “Accessing Assets: Immigrant Youth’s Work as Family Translators or ‘Para-Phrasers,’” *Social Problems* 50, no. 4 (2003): 505–524.

While it seems inevitable that Salvadoran children in Winnipeg would have acted as interpreters in certain circumstances—particularly in instances that related to them, like translating documents sent home from school—descriptions of this dynamic were absent from the SVM interviews. This should not be taken as an indication that Salvadorans in Manitoba never needed their children to act as family translators. The memories introduced in an oral history interview are malleable, shaped by an individual's initial understanding of an experience, their intervening life experiences and the circumstances of recall. Historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has underlined that the past, or pastness, is a position informed by the present.¹⁸ Interviewees may not have spoken on this subject because Alejandra asked them to describe their own life experiences rather than their children's. Alternately, they may have skipped over the subject because it had been a long time since interviewees needed any help interpreting English and they had forgotten instances in which their children helped them translate. A further explanation may be that interviewees' experiences with children acting as family translators were mundane and they therefore rarely described this dynamic in anecdotes. Silences enter the process of history for a variety of reasons and at a variety of times. Following the life story interview format, Alejandra did not ask interviewees follow-up questions on this topic.

All the interviewees eventually became proficient English speakers. This did not, however, mean that they felt equally comfortable in Spanish and English or that they did not remain highly aware of the barrier they had faced due to language.

Hurdles on the Road to Proficiency

After the refugees completed their government-sponsored English classes, they looked to integrate more fully into Canadian society. Language, however, continued to be an obstacle for many. Without sufficient English skills, Salvadorans often ended up underemployed or

¹⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.

unable to pursue the educational and professional opportunities they hoped for. Without developed English communication skills, refugees were also unable to advocate for their best interests within Canadian society. To this point, Cristina gave an example of her husband's initial struggles at finding fair employment when he could not yet speak English.

Sometimes they spoke harshly to him [at his first job] and he didn't understand what they were telling him, but he interpreted that they were saying ugly things, you know? From there, [...] he found [another job], but the same problem: he couldn't speak English well. They gave him the heaviest work, and that's where he ruined his back, that time, because he couldn't stand up for himself because he didn't speak English well, and with gestures and everything. And obviously they mistreated him at work, and his back bothered him, and well, he decided to resign all at once.¹⁹

Without the vocabulary to defend himself, the only recourse Cristina's husband had at the time was to resign and try to find a workplace with more equitable working conditions. In this case, the language barrier put him at a distinct disadvantage to a worker with more proficient English skills.

As time went on, refugees improved their English proficiency. By 2012–2014, all the interviewees spoke English regularly when they interacted with the non-Spanish-speaking population of Winnipeg; at work, with friends, while running errands. Many, however, noted that they still felt a barrier when having to communicate in English. When describing his English proficiency Ricardo noted, "I can read it and write it, I have good spelling. My problem is when it comes to speaking it; I know the words, but in the moment I forget them."²⁰ At the time of his interview, Ricardo assumed that this barrier would be permanent. Cristina also described feeling impeded in communication with native English speakers, not due to her lack of proficiency, but because of prejudice. "We have an accent, and we're never going to lose that accent, and a lot of people who don't have the patience to take the time and

¹⁹ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 15.

²⁰ Ricardo, interview, February 2, 2013, 13; further discussion of English proficiency: Ricardo, interview by Alejandra Salcedo, February 9, 2013, translated by Susana Meza, *Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba*, transcript, Winnipeg, 20.

try to understand you, so they treat you—They ignore you; they don't give you the importance that you deserve.”²¹

Since interviewees could speak English well by the 2010s, it is interesting to note that all the interviews in this analysis took place in Spanish. Some interviews in the larger SVM project took place in English, but this was entirely dependent on the interviewer's linguistic abilities and not interviewee choice. Alejandra never gave her interviewees the option to conduct their sessions in English. She recalled that everyone—herself and the interviewees—was more comfortable speaking Spanish.²² For long and detailed narratives, Salvadorans still felt more at ease speaking in their native tongue. Interviewees did, however, use English words and phrases sporadically throughout their narratives which demonstrated how immersed they had become in a dominantly English-speaking society.

As the Salvadorans' English competency improved, they became more comfortable interacting with Canadians unconnected to their social networks. Learning to speak the primary language of communication in Manitoba allowed refugees both to learn more from their host society and to better exert their needs and rights within Canadian institutions. How quickly refugees were able to pick up English skills also had a significant impact on their experiences in the Canadian workforce.

2 - Employment and Education

Once refugees had completed a basic English course, their next priority was to find a job. To this end, Salvadorans faced several challenges beyond the language barrier. As recent arrivals, many refugees felt pressured to accept work in low-paying or exploitative environments out of fear, worrying that they would not find employment if they demanded higher standards from their employers. Some met resistance to having their Salvadoran credentials authenticated or found it difficult to integrate into the Canadian labour market

²¹ Cristina, interview, March 29, 2013, 4.

²² Personal discussion between Alejandra and author on October 27, 2022.

without prior Canadian working experience. While there were certain commonalities shared by multiple interviewees, it was at this point in the migratory process that the differences in refugees' experiences began to increase as each individual pursued diverging goals.

Workplaces and educational institutions were the spaces in which Salvadorans interacted the most with the Canadian host society. It was in these places that interviewees were exposed to Canadian values and people through their classmates, coworkers and superiors, where they improved their English proficiency, and where they developed new relationships with individuals outside their social network. In taking an active part in the Canadian labour market and taking steps to make their migration to Winnipeg permanent, refugees also furthered their integration into Canadian society.

In acknowledgement of how singular each interviewee's career path was, this section will review each individual's experience separately. This allows the analysis to present a wider spectrum of experiences and better explain each interviewees' motivations and troubles.

Ricardo: A Career in Cleaning and Maintenance

After completing his English course, Ricardo applied to the University of Manitoba as a mature student. Armed with a letter of recommendation from his ESL instructor he passed an initial admissions test and attended an admittance interview at the university. Starting in 1979–1980, the University of Manitoba required some students to complete an English language proficiency test as part of their admission process.²³ This presented a major hurdle for some Salvadoran newcomers. Ricardo remembered the interview process being an intimidating meeting arena with the Canadian host society. “They brought me into a room and sat me down, there were about ten people. They began to interview me and I was doubting, hesitating, I couldn't understand what they were asking me. I had barely been here

²³ Debbie Lyon, “Prospective U of M Students ‘May’ Face English Test,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), July 5, 1978.

four months and knew no English. They didn't accept anybody."²⁴ Discouraged by the dismissal, Ricardo turned his attention to finding employment.

In El Salvador, Ricardo had worked a variety of sales and personnel management jobs. Without speaking English proficiently, he was unable to continue this line of work in Canada. In Winnipeg, Ricardo's first jobs were in factories. He first worked briefly for a furniture manufacturer before working a few months as a candle maker; an experience that he did not remember fondly.

It started with maybe eight people and the work was done by hand. Maybe it was because the other workers were very young and they didn't have much work experience, but when we started production they acted like they were in a competition. One day we made five thousand candles, another day we made six thousand. So, I asked my colleagues, "Why? We should work normally. The more we produce, the more they are going to demand of us." And that's what happened. We were producing six, seven, eight to twelve thousand candles a day. They didn't increase our salary, so what were we gaining? But they didn't share my opinion. Perhaps it was because I was the oldest, that is, the one with the most work experience. And then in a bit of bad luck, one day I fell and I cut myself. I had a cut so I went to Workers Compensation and was incapacitated for about ten days. When I returned, things were already different and I had been relegated. Obviously I knew why, so I told the supervisor to lay me off in order not to complicate things. Well, in the end they laid me off. It was my first experience with unemployment. And what a surprise, two months later they were all out of the factory. They bought a machine [laughs] that did our work.²⁵

Around that time, Ricardo's wife gave birth to a child and the couple felt that they had to find jobs that allowed them to best care for the infant. As a result, Ricardo found work with a cleaning service which allowed employees to choose their hours. For the next few years, Ricardo worked a night shift while his wife worked days to allow one parent to always be home with the child. As will be demonstrated across other interviewee accounts, cleaning was a common avenue of employment for recently arrived refugees. It was also a desirable job for parents who needed to be home during the day. Immigrant women in particular favoured positions as night-time office cleaners and home-based garment workers since these jobs allowed them to continue to care for their children and their homes during the day.²⁶

²⁴ Ricardo, interview, February 9, 2013, 19.

²⁵ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 6.

²⁶ Little et al., "Family Matters," 110.

Although Ricardo never found working in cleaning particularly fulfilling, it allowed him to support his family. He continued working as a cleaner until his retirement, although in the later years, his focus had shifted to floor and carpet maintenance. Throughout his career, he worked for five companies and was critical of the industry.

The pay was not good, because here in Canada it is a poorly paid job, right. And it's strange, because many people who work as cleaners, in order to survive, they have to work three to four jobs because a normal full time won't give them more than eight hours, and what they make in eight hours is not enough to live on, it's not enough to cover monthly expenses.²⁷

Beginning in the 1970s, private enterprises and government departments in Canada increasingly contracted out their building cleaning. This led to an erosion of workplace protections in the industry since employers could dismiss demands for wage increases or benefits with threats of terminated contracts. Employers looked to hire cheap labour and the workforce increasingly shifted towards recent immigrants of colour.²⁸ As a result, disputes over the working conditions of contract cleaners led to tensions between sections of the immigrant population and their Canadian employers.²⁹ Ricardo did not say if he had quarrelled with his employers, but the fact that he had often changed companies and had past experiences with unemployment indicated that his career was not without moments of conflict. In 2013, Ricardo seemed pleased to say that, since his retirement, he no longer thought about work.

Roberto: Working in Solidarity with El Salvador

Roberto also had a quick turnaround between completing his English course and joining the Canadian workforce. He recalled, "I finished the lessons on a Friday and I had a job by Monday."³⁰ His first Canadian job, which he received through the International Centre,

²⁷ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 5.

²⁸ Luis Aguiar, "Restructuring and Employment Insecurities: The Case of Building Cleaners," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 9, no. 1 (2000): 64–93.

²⁹ Susana Miranda, "An Unlikely Collection of Union Militants? Portuguese Cleaning Women Become Political Subjects in Postwar Toronto," in *Sisters or Strangers?: Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Marlene Epp (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 393–408.

³⁰ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 11.

was with a clothing manufacturer. He still remembered that he made minimum wage and that without Canadian work experience, it was difficult to find anything better paid.³¹ Roberto worked at the factory for six months in what he described as exploitative conditions. Frustrated with his pay and working environment, he approached management to bargain. Bringing his ample experience working with unions in El Salvador into the Canadian work environment did not help his case; Roberto was let go: “When I asked for a raise, they didn’t give it to me and they fired me.”³² Over the next years, Roberto worked a variety of manual labour jobs: at gas stations, parking lots, and factories. While working at a sawmill, Roberto was in an accident which resulted in him losing several fingers. He then went on to work as the assistant manager of a hotel.

Throughout the 1980s Roberto’s focus was not his day jobs, but rather the work he did for Salvadoran solidarity organizations. He was a central member of numerous Salvadoran community groups and fundraising committees. Some projects he remembered being the most significant were the Oscar Arnulfo Romero Committee, an organization which raised awareness in Canada about the abuses taking place in El Salvador; the Mélida Anaya Montes School, a Spanish-language Saturday school; the English Program for Single Mothers; and the Salvadoran Canadian Cultural Centre. Disunity within the Salvadoran community, however, made the maintenance of these projects which relied heavily on volunteer labour unfeasible by the late 1980s. Roberto recalled that the central group of around twenty community organizers began drawing back as intercommunity divisions became more prominent.

We had a vision [...] but a lot of people got tired of so much gossip, of so much discredit, people accused us of supporting the guerillas—we never had the full support

³¹ In his interview Roberto distinctly remembered being paid \$3.70/hour at his first job. Minimum wage in Manitoba in 1983 was however \$4.00/hour. It seems more likely that Roberto had misremembered his exact wages after 30 years rather than that the company was underpaying its employees. Government of Canada, “General Hourly Minimum Wage Rates in Canada since 1965,” Minimum Wage Database, last modified September 12, 2022, <https://srv116.services.gc.ca/dimt-wid/sm-mw/rpt2.aspx>.

³² Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 25.

of the people. [...] When it came to solidarity we worked more with Canadians than with Salvadorans; the number of Salvadorans we worked with was very small. [...] Some even stepped down from the community as a whole, when they saw all of that discredit.³³

As Roberto alluded to in this excerpt, solidarity work extended beyond the network of Salvadorans in Winnipeg. Through these community projects, Roberto was constantly operating in public Canadian spaces. As such, Roberto expressly tailored his message to engage a Canadian audience. Additionally, any time organizers like Roberto sought funding for local community initiatives, they were necessarily operating within a Canadian framework and engaging in cross-cultural relations. It was therefore through his solidarity work, not his first paid positions, that Roberto became familiar with Canadian values.

It was only once the civil war in El Salvador had ended in 1992 that Roberto turned his attention to beginning a career in Winnipeg. He studied health sciences at Red River College, Manitoba's largest institute of applied learning and applied research. Until the time of his interview, Roberto had been working with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority as a home care worker providing out-of-hospital medical care to patients around the city. While Roberto was disappointed that controversies and rumours had impeded the continuation of his solidarity work, he did not regret the time he had spent working for his community: "I am sixty years old and if I die tomorrow I will be able to go happy because I've kept my principles intact, what I fought for and believed in."³⁴

Lorena: Manitoba's First Home Apartment Daycare

For Lorena, employment in Canada was a key step towards independence and empowerment. In El Salvador, she had completed training to become a kindergarten teacher but had not been able to work for more than a year before her ex-husband asked her to retire to take care of their first child. After migrating, Lorena's ex-husband struggled to have his civil engineering certificates authenticated so Lorena looked to find work to bring in an

³³ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 25.

³⁴ Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 15.

income for the family. Knowing only that she was interested in working with children, Lorena attended an information session that she believed was about working with children in the school system.

I went to the meeting [...] and I didn't understand anything that they were saying, nothing. Because I didn't know English, right? But at the end of the meeting, I grabbed a pamphlet, everyone had one on the table, and I took one home and my ex-husband, he knew more English, told me: "No, this is an application to have a daycare in your house, to take care of children at home," and it caught my attention.³⁵

With a newborn infant and two young children under her care, the opportunity to work from home appealed to Lorena. The largest impediment to starting her daycare was the one-hundred-dollar permit fee that she had to submit alongside her application. At the time this was an enormous expense for the family. Unsure of how she could collect enough money to pay the fee, Lorena turned to Manpower for assistance and was given a loan. From there, the process moved forward quickly.

To my surprise, the next day they called me. [...] A lady came and told me that she was surprised that I was applying to have a daycare because I lived in an apartment and that was not allowed [laughs]. I lived on the third floor, right. So she told me: "I don't think anyone has ever applied." She said, "I am going to submit your application because we need daycares in this area, especially for newcomer families. We need daycares for babies."³⁶

As indicated, Lorena applied to open a daycare at a time when childcare facilities were in high demand. Indeed, in the 1980s, daycare services were a hot topic, both provincially and federally. In 1987, the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported that the demand for Winnipeg daycares had reached "crisis proportions."³⁷ The year prior, a federally funded Childcare Task Force released a report that drew country-wide attention to the issue and recommended the implementation of a national childcare system.³⁸ The report also found that the lack of

³⁵ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 9.

³⁶ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 9.

³⁷ Pauline Comeau, "Emotional fears surface again over long-term risks to infants: Daycare Crisis," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), November 21, 1987.

³⁸ The number of articles published in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on the topic of child care sharply increased following the release of the Childcare Task Force report. See for example, David Koulack, "Studies Favor Daycare Centres: Could Enhance Child's Intellectual Growth, Psychologists Maintain," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), February 10, 1987; Brian Cole, "Child Credits Favored," *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg,

“culturally sensitive” childcare programs that fostered “security and a sense of belonging” in the children of immigrant families and ethnic minorities was a “serious weakness of many Canadian child care programs.”³⁹ Lorena therefore applied to open a daycare at a time when Winnipeg needed new childcare facilities and the government was encouraging daycares to be more culturally diverse.

While having a home daycare run by an immigrant was an advantageous addition to the care facilities already available in Manitoba, the government could not immediately approve Lorena’s application. There was no precedent for a licensed daycare in Manitoba being in an apartment building. Lorena’s request was therefore subject to a hearing. Soon after, she found herself far outside the confines of her social network, taking part in a Canadian legal proceeding with limited knowledge of Canadian laws and limited linguistic abilities to comprehend the situation.

The City of Winnipeg sent me some posters that I had to put up at a certain distance from the building so that people would know. It’s the signs that they put up when they’re going to open a restaurant for a license permit—now I know, but back then I didn’t know what I was doing. I only did it because they told me to, right? [...] And then later I got a letter saying that I had to go to court. I did not sleep for that whole week, crying about what was going to happen. You come from El Salvador traumatized, when you say the word police or trial, or things like that, right? And we didn’t know what was going on, Alejandra. I hadn’t slept, I was scared and I didn’t even know what I was going to say. [...] I said to [her ex-husband]: “I don’t want to go, something is going to happen because I put up those signs on the street” [laughs]. So we [Lorena and a bilingual acquaintance from church] went to the judge at the City of Winnipeg and I didn’t know what was going to happen. There were so many people, Alejandra, because they call it case by case, right? And then, “Such and such a case, such a number, referring to such a thing and to Lorena [last name]” and I stopped. I thought they were going to ask me something and the person who was there said: “Does anyone oppose putting a daycare at 33 Hargrave, apartment number so-and-so... No one, done, approved.” [Laughs] I said to the person who was with me, “Johana, what did they say?”—“That you can have your daycare.” And I went: “Ooh” [laughs].⁴⁰

Lorena went on to run a daycare out of her home for the next eighteen years. Over that period she moved houses multiple times (always applying for a new daycare license for each

MB), March 31, 1987; Editorial, “Priorities in Day Care,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), November 24, 1987; Letters to the editor, “Day-Care Concerns,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), December 5, 1987.

³⁹ Katie Cooke, *Report of the Task Force on Child Care*, (Ottawa: Status of Women Canada, 1986), 89–90.

⁴⁰ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 9.

address) and had taken care of more than one hundred and twenty children. When speaking with Alejandra, she highlighted how important earning an income was for her sense of self-worth and how it allowed her to eventually set boundaries with her ex-husband. “I made myself independent by looking for a job. That made me independent because I didn’t depend on someone giving me money to buy things and for my own personal things.”⁴¹ “It was a privilege for me to be at home, to be able to care for my three children at the same time as providing for my family.”⁴² Lorena found the experience so fulfilling that she began to help other Salvadoran women set up their own home daycares. “I dedicated myself to helping people who were interested in having daycares, licensed daycares. [...] I helped all of them with the paperwork. I told them what they had to do, what to have.”⁴³

In 2005, once Lorena’s children were adults, she decided to shut down her daycare and begin a new career as a residential supervisor in a group home for people with intellectual disabilities. Lorena described finding her passion after working with several children with special needs at her daycare. She was initially hesitant to apply for a job with a Canadian organization due to her level of English proficiency, but this proved not to be a barrier. At the time of her interview, Lorena was still passionate about her work: “I don’t see myself retired yet, I feel I have a lot to give. I love my job.”⁴⁴

Cristina: A Canadian University Experience

Before coming to Canada, Cristina was an architecture student in San Salvador. While she enjoyed her topic of study, her years at university were tumultuous and often interrupted by the civil war. Once she arrived in Canada, Cristina turned her focus from education to her newborn daughter. After her year of government support had ended, Cristina began a computer training course for immigrant women while her husband began to work as a cleaner

⁴¹ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 19.

⁴² Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 13.

⁴³ Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 11.

⁴⁴ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 24.

at a hospital. Looking back, she described the year-long program as “not bad” but ultimately unhelpful since she could not find work with her training.

I feel like there were a lot of courses that the government gave with the intention of helping immigrants, but in reality people only offered them to save their jobs and to have a job to do and take money from the government, kind of. They wouldn't give the follow-up or the support that you needed after, so that you could keep a job. [...] There were like twelve to fifteen of us in the course, and maybe only three of them found a job out of all of us.⁴⁵

Pressured to find work quickly to support her family, Cristina found a summer position working at the hospital in the laundry. Meanwhile, her husband had kept his eye on internal advancement opportunities at the hospital and was working in administration in the kitchen. Since he was receiving a higher salary, the couple decided that Cristina should be the first to resume her studies. Pregnant with her second child, Cristina applied to the University of Winnipeg and began studying at the Faculty of Arts. Unlike other interviewees, Cristina did not find the language barrier to be an obstacle. Despite feeling that the English she had learned in El Salvador was “minimal,” she had had enough experience to qualify for the highest level of the government English course.⁴⁶ She felt prepared to study in a second language and was surprised at the basic level of her university English course.

When I got into the university, for me it was a shock when I had to take a course called Rhetoric. It was mandatory because English was my second language and I went into Adult Education to study. [...] When I got to the course, what surprised me was that it wasn't about rhetoric, because rhetoric is for making speeches, for being able to read and write in an educated manner [laughs]. This course was practically basic grammar, and there were Canadian kids there who had just graduated from high school here, who hadn't received good enough grades in English to get into university, and they needed the requisite. So, yes, I took the course because it was mandatory for me; they told me that it was mandatory to take it, but in reality it didn't end up being a big thing.⁴⁷

Despite her interest in sciences, Cristina heeded the advice of a school counsellor and registered for arts courses. “The first year I took courses for anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural geography. I think it was my worst year at university because I

⁴⁵ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 22.

⁴⁶ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 21.

⁴⁷ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 23.

didn't like any of it."⁴⁸ After extensive discussions with her professors, Cristina changed faculties and ultimately graduated with a four-year bachelor of science degree with a major in environmental studies and a minor in chemistry. She recalled enjoying her studies and doing well in her courses, but also not being able to dedicate herself fully to her education because of her responsibilities to her children and her home.

Armed with her new degree, Cristina looked to find a job linked to her field of study. However, apart from a summer student job at the university, she was again unable to find employment in her chosen field. Cristina faced a common conundrum, she either didn't have enough Canadian work experience or she was overqualified for the jobs she was applying for. "I sent applications all over and always for my position at first, but I wasn't qualified enough because I didn't have experience. Well I said, 'Then let's lower the bar, let's look for lower jobs,' you know, and then I didn't qualify because I had so much education."⁴⁹ As a Canadian university graduate, Cristina did not struggle to have her credentials recognized, but she did lack the work experience that other Canadian-born candidates her age may have had. She also noted that it was more difficult to navigate the workplace as an ethnic minority. She felt that she was constantly having to prove herself to employers because of her background. "One of the biggest struggles that we've had is making ourselves look and feel like we are capable, that we are good workers and honest people who are capable of doing a lot of good things, because in the workplaces here they don't give us those opportunities."⁵⁰ Supporting Cristina's view, scholars researching the racial barriers faced by Canadian immigrants suggest that a demand for Canadian experience "most likely is used as a euphemism for racism."⁵¹ To complicate her situation further, all entrants to the labour market in the 1980s and 1990s saw

⁴⁸ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 23.

⁴⁹ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 25.

⁵⁰ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 18.

⁵¹ John Samuel, "Are There Racial Barriers to Access to Professions and Trades for the Foreign-Trained in Ontario?" *Race Policy Dialogue Papers* (Toronto: Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2004).

their earning trajectories and employment rates decline.⁵² Finding well-compensated work in a regulated occupation that matched an individual's field of study was difficult even for the Canadian-born workforce.

Cristina found the years after university difficult. She looked for a job in her field for two years—going as far as to consider moving to the United States for additional opportunities—without success. While she was job hunting, she began working as a translator on the side. Eventually, she changed course and opened a home daycare and continued to do translations in the evenings and weekends. Despite liking children, Cristina did not find herself suited to running a daycare. After two years, she shut down her operation: “I lived in constant fear that something was going to happen to some kid and that they were going to put the blame on me. [...] I was dying. I couldn't do it anymore.”⁵³

Having amassed Canadian work experience, Cristina began to work in translation services full-time. She worked for a private company for five years but ultimately found their focus on cutting costs at the expense of employee wellbeing to be unacceptable.

I was living to work [laughs]. I would bring work home. I came home to make supper, I attended to everyone and then worked, sometimes until ten, eleven at night, and then the next day I would get up again to work all day. [...] But for me the main thing that made me quit was that the bosses or owners of the company weren't trustworthy. As a private corporation they had to look out for their own interests the whole time. I was clear on that, but the untrustworthiness was what drove me out of the company.⁵⁴

On this occasion, Cristina was able to find another position quickly as a customer service representative for a global packaging group. She began working as a coordinator for the company's American export portfolio and by the time of the interview had taken over large parts of their Latin American client list.

⁵² David Green and Christopher Worswick, “Entry Earnings of Immigrant Men in Canada: The Roles of Labour Market Entry Effects and Returns to Foreign Experience,” in *Canadian Immigration: Economic Evidence for a Dynamic Policy Environment*, eds. Ted McDonald, Elizabeth Ruddick, and Arthur Sweetman. (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 78.

⁵³ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 28.

⁵⁴ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 29.

Looking back, Cristina believed that she had taken the hard way to settle in her career. Her husband's experience was more straightforward. He worked his way up through the hospital's internal structure which included a training program at Red River College for him to become a system administrator. Cristina reflected that she would also have benefited from specializing earlier.

I should have gotten a technical degree, something that would qualify me for something specific that I would be able to use to get a job quickly and build on, but the university didn't provide that. [...] Your time in poverty is doubled or tripled [by going to university], and if you add age on top of that, um—I mean it's totally wrong, totally wrong. So that part yes I did poorly, but well, you can't go back in time [laughs].⁵⁵

Ultimately, despite not working in her desired field, Cristina was proud of what she had achieved: “It has been hard, but all the same there are opportunities and it's just about looking for them and being positive in order to get ahead.”⁵⁶

Gilberto: Mechanics and Engineering Technology

A major motivating factor in Gilberto's decision to leave El Salvador was his desire to build on his industrial diploma and complete a mechanical engineering degree. Starting in the late 1970s the civil war continuously interrupted Gilberto's studies. He completed four years of study at the Faculty of Engineering at the University of El Salvador and when the situation there became untenable, transferred to José Simeón Cañas Central American University for another year. Forced to leave the country due to the increasing prevalence of violence, he travelled to Mexico in an unsuccessful attempt to continue his education. Once he arrived in Winnipeg, Gilberto's top priority was completing his degree. He used his year of government support to learn English and once that was over, applied to the Faculty of Science at the University of Manitoba. Gilberto did not have to pass an oral English exam to study at the university, but he did attend an additional English class at the Adult Education Centre. After

⁵⁵ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 16–17.

⁵⁶ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 18.

his year of government aid was over, Gilberto also began to pick up cleaning work in the evenings to support himself.

The reality of the Canadian university experience was disappointing for Gilberto. Like Cristina, he considered the orientation he received from the university to be lacking. Feeling pressured to complete his education and start working as soon as possible, Gilberto began his studies before he was fully proficient in English. In his interview he noted, “If my English had been better, I could have gotten better grades on some exams. However, at that time, I wasn’t yet able to completely understand the questions; I probably understood about 80%.”⁵⁷ After a year in the Faculty of Science, he applied to the Faculty of Engineering without success.

I had problems because I didn’t have transcripts from El Salvador and those that I had were incomplete. [...] The university required that everything be in English and that was the whole problem. At that time, they didn’t have all the resources that they have today, [...] there weren’t many places from which we could get help in translating such a large quantity of documents.⁵⁸

As Gilberto described, finding an individual or organization to translate documents for an affordable price was difficult. Many regulatory educational, professional and trade bodies held transcripts and accreditations to rigorous standards and required issuing institutions or certified translation services to oversee the translation of these documents. Many immigrant services now offer document translation or verification services, but in the early 1980s, Salvadorans relied largely on personal connections to find someone qualified to translate their documents.⁵⁹

Looking for another way to complete a degree in his chosen field, Gilberto then successfully applied to Red River College and completed a two-year certificate in Mechanics

⁵⁷ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 10.

⁵⁸ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 9.

⁵⁹ Lorena’s husband, who was a civil engineer, had his credentials translated by a Spanish engineer at the University of Manitoba. Lorena recalled that they were put in contact with him through a friend of a friend, not through an official agency. Lorena, interview, July 18, 2013, 17.

and Engineering Technology. Since these courses focused on his area of expertise, he found it easier to manage the language barrier. “Even though English was still a problem, the courses weren’t difficult for me because I had already taken most of them at the Universidad de El Salvador.”⁶⁰ To pay for his two years of study at Red River College, Gilberto took a government loan and received a bursary. He also remembered being on employment insurance for at least a year while he was attending classes. While his initial goal had not been to complete a trade certificate, Gilberto found his change in institution to be worthwhile. Within six months of graduating, Gilberto found a job that matched his field of study.

Laura: A Lifelong Dedication to Healthcare

Since she was a young girl, Laura dreamed of becoming a nurse. Because she became organized at a young age and had children to care for, she was never able to pursue such a career in El Salvador. While she was living in Mexico, she studied to become a certified nurse, but was unable to complete her degree since she could not find a work placement as a political refugee. After moving to Canada, Laura initially put her dream on hold. When her husband started working and their family stopped receiving government support, Laura began to work with a cleaning agency to supplement the family’s income. Her first step into the Canadian workforce was abrasive and steeped in unequal power dynamics.

I worked two weeks; it was three days per week all day, from like eight in the morning—the owner of the company picked me up and took me home at four in the afternoon. We cleaned three or four huge houses. I remember her saying, “Hurry up,” in English. I still didn’t understand English very well, but she was telling me to pick up the pace, for me to go faster. And she sat down outside and she would light a cigarette: “Hurry up, hurry up,” so I went faster. We would clean the house and then move on.⁶¹

Despite the unpleasantness of her working environment, Laura was happy to receive her first pay cheque after two weeks. To share the good news, she called a Canadian friend she had met through the International Centre’s Host Program. Her friend, however, did not

⁶⁰ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 10.

⁶¹ Laura, interview, April 25, 2013, 6.

share her joy once she found out how little Laura had been paid. The check Laura recalls receiving was for sixty-five dollars—a significant underpayment of Manitoba’s \$4.70/hour 1988 minimum wage.⁶² Outraged, her friend came over to see if there had been a mistake. When she saw the check herself, she first tried to convince Laura to apply for Employment and Income Assistance, then helped her look for another job. In this search, she ultimately set Laura on the path to becoming a qualified nursing assistant. Looking back on this moment in her interview, Laura was grateful to have made a friend so willing to help her navigate the Canadian system.

She came to my house and told me, “No, this is unfair. You’re not going to work there anymore. If there’s not enough money, I’ll buy food for you.” And I said no, and then she said, “There’s an institution here called Welfare.” I said, “No, don’t even mention it, because my husband doesn’t want to know about Welfare. He says that he will never depend on anyone, so we can’t go there.” [...] She called Donwood Manor for me, which is a personal care home, an old folks home. And she asked the director if he would be able to give me work. I filled out my application, they asked me if I had studied to be a healthcare aide, and I told him that I had studied nursing but in Mexico. So he said, “Yes, we have an opening, but nursing assistant classes start at Red River in September. Would you be interested in taking it?” And I said to her, “I’d like to, but I don’t know if I’d understand everything, because it’s in English.” She told me, “You could try it.” That’s how I took the Nursing Assistant course, recommended by [...] the director of Donwood Manor, who was the friend of my friend.⁶³

Laura worried that she would not be able to understand the course material because of the language barrier, but studying a topic she was passionate about proved not to be as challenging as she feared. “I remember that when I went to the first class [laughs], I crossed myself, and I said, ‘Lord, you know my needs. [...] So help me understand the classes.’ I remember understanding my classes as if they were in Spanish.”⁶⁴ Besides some initial difficulty with deciphering the vocabulary in multiple-choice questions, Laura performed well in her classes and completed her practicum. Donwood Manor hired her immediately after she graduated.

⁶² Government of Canada, “General Hourly Minimum Wage Rates in Canada since 1965.”

⁶³ Laura, interview, April 25, 2013, 6–7.

⁶⁴ Laura, interview, April 25, 2013, 7.

She first began working casually and after a few months was hired part-time to work an evening shift. With her husband working days, this allowed the couple to care for their children without a daycare service. As her children grew older, Laura changed to a daytime shift and began to take on more hours. She considered returning to school to become a nurse but ultimately decided against it since her family would have had to get by on one income throughout her studies. In the end, Laura enjoyed her work despite its challenges.

It was tiring, physically and mentally, [but] I like feeling like I'm useful to people, which is why I liked my job. [...] A lot of patience is needed to work with [patients with Alzheimer's]. So because they don't know what they are doing, with them you have to explain to them even if they're not aware or they can't say "thank you" because they don't know that you're doing something for their benefit. [...] It's the opposite: if they are distraught, they can spit at your face, they kick at you, they pinch you, they do a lot of things, right? That's the kind of work. But at the same time it gives me satisfaction to know that these people need care and that there is someone who can give it to them with love—feeling useful in that way, and feeling like a servant of God, lending that service to someone who isn't going to thank me, that I can't expect anything from. So that was the most wonderful thing about my job.⁶⁵

Laura continued working at Donwood Manor until she retired. By working consistently since their arrival in Canada, she and her husband had both planned for an early retirement. At the time of her interviews, she was happy to have stopped working since it allowed her to dedicate more time to her church and her grandchildren.

Concluding Remarks on Refugee Employment

Entering the labour market was a central step in refugees' integration into Canadian society. As employees of Canadian workplaces or students of Canadian institutions, refugees spent a significant part of their days interacting with the host society. Navigating the expectations of a new culture in a potentially high-stakes environment could be overwhelming and uncomfortable, but all interviewees learned and grew from these interactions—both positive and negative—and gradually found spaces within which they could assert themselves.

⁶⁵ Laura, interview, May 16, 2013, 14–15.

While it bears repeating that the experiences of six individuals are not representative of all Salvadoran refugees in Winnipeg, there are certain common points in these narratives on work and education that are worth noting. To begin, almost every interviewee found their first job through the International Centre. The jobs the Centre found for them focused on manual labour and did not require advanced English skills. These jobs paid minimum wage and had little to no worker protection. Recently arrived Salvadorans seemed to prefer jobs with flexible hours that allowed them to take care of their children at home or go to school during the day. To this end, at least for the small sample in this analysis, working for a cleaning service or opening a home daycare were the most popular forms of employment.

Furthermore, interviewees with children, regardless of gender, made childcare a central consideration in their choice of employment. When possible, couples arranged their schedules to be able to care for their children both day and night. Several interviewees indicated that they refrained from taking career risks which may have resulted in future monetary or professional payoffs in deference to their children's needs. Overall, the interviewees prioritized family welfare over their career fulfillment.

Many interviewees described a desire to pursue further education, but barriers—including level of English proficiency, concerns about income, responsibilities in the home, and difficulties transferring previously obtained credentials—held them back. When interviewees completed studies in Canada, they demonstrated a preference for practical or trade certifications since the programs were shorter, more affordable, and had higher rates of post-graduate employment. Interviewees who attended university in Canada felt that the university system was ill-suited for refugees and immigrants since it did not adequately acknowledge previous certifications or provide students with work experience.

None of the interviewees had worked in a regulated profession in El Salvador before migrating. As such, no one detailed the process of having their licences or licensed work

experience recognized in Canada.⁶⁶ While increasing the sample size of this analysis would have virtually guaranteed the inclusion of a refugee who had arrived in Canada with foreign credentials (Lorena's ex-husband for example came to Canada as a civil engineer), it is nonetheless true that refugees were less likely than other immigrant groups to have post-secondary education.⁶⁷ Instead, like many of the interviewees discussed here, over 65 percent of refugees with post-secondary degrees received their highest education in Canada.⁶⁸ The non-recognition of foreign credentials was, however, a significant obstacle across all immigrant classes. By the 2000s, less than 30% of newcomers with foreign credentials had these recognized within four years of migrating to Canada.⁶⁹ Therefore, it is highly likely that this would also have been a predicament for Salvadoran refugees.

Overall, the interviewees felt that their careers had been fulfilling. All interviewees had been steadily employed in Canada and had experienced some level of career advancement over their working lives. While few followed through on the career goals they had set for themselves before arriving in Canada, they all found a place in Canadian society.

3 - Integration into Canadian Life

Thanks to their increasing forays into public spaces, Salvadorans slowly integrated into Canadian society. However, none of the refugees immediately felt at home in Winnipeg and for some, it took over a decade to feel fully at ease in their new cultural milieu. Since the major focus of this analysis is oral interviews, quantitative indicators will not be used to measure the interviewees' level of integration. Instead, this section will present how

⁶⁶ Gilberto's narrative tangentially touched on this subject, but at the time of his migration he had not yet completed his engineering degree.

⁶⁷ Statistics Canada, "Labour Force Status By Period Of Immigration, Admission Category, Highest Level Of Education And Location Of Study, For Immigrants Since 1980: Canada, Provinces And Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas And Census Agglomerations With Parts," last modified November 23, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?>

⁶⁸ Aziz Rahman, "Refugee Resettlement And Economic Integration In Canada," *Canadian Issues* Fall/Winter: 2022: 56.

⁶⁹ Rene Houle and Lahouaria Yssaad. "Recognition of Newcomers' Foreign Credentials and Work Experience," *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 22, no. 4 (2010): 19.

Salvadorans talked about their comfort level in Canada during their interviews. As a result, this final section of the chapter will explore points at which interviewees felt either excluded or accepted by Canadian society.

Integration Challenges

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Canada had built up a reputation of humanitarianism and tolerance in the eyes of the international community. Following high levels of refugee admittance throughout the 1980s, however, worries about the number of migrants admitted became increasingly commonplace.⁷⁰ Discussions on racism in Manitoban newspapers steadily increased after 1986 into the next decade. For instance, in the summer of 1990, the *Winnipeg Free Press* ran a multipart series titled “Racism: the Cracks in the Cultural Mosaic” in which journalists interviewed “some of those most affected by racial intolerance” which included both immigrants and Indigenous Canadians.⁷¹ The articles showed that discrimination was unavoidable for many people of colour at the time.

Interviewees seldom described instances of discrimination unless Alejandra asked them about it directly. When prompted, most interviewees indicated that they believed Canadian society to be generally accepting and equitable, but this did not mean that they had not experienced instances of racism and prejudice. In the latter half of the 20th century, when it became more likely for immigrants in Winnipeg to come from non-European countries, immigrant service providers and education advocates became increasingly concerned about racism. As a result, they began taking concrete steps to diminish racist attitudes and promote cultural exchange. The International Centre became an active advocate for immigrants in their confrontations with discriminatory behaviour and Manitoban educators began

⁷⁰ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge*, 144–156.

⁷¹ Ruth Teichroeb, “Racial Intolerance on Rise, Groups Say,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), June 2, 1990; Ruth Teichroeb, “There’s Good, Bad News in Racism Fight,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, (Winnipeg, MB), June 3, 1990; Ruth Teichroeb, “Native Youth Told to be Ready to Stand Up for Equal Rights,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), June 4, 1990; Ruth Teichroeb, “Racial Lessons Apply to Parents,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB), June 4, 1990.

emphasizing the importance of “cross-cultural or multicultural understanding.”⁷² The city also took steps to institutionalize the celebration of ethnic diversity through the creation of the Folk Arts Council of Manitoba in 1965 and the inauguration of Manitoba’s long-standing multicultural festival Folklorama in 1970.⁷³ While these activities could not fully remove discriminatory sentiments from the Canadian population (and have been criticized for trivializing or commodifying cultural differences), they did increase the visibility of people of colour and tried to educate Canadians about cultures that differed from their own.

The most common type of discrimination interviewees mentioned emerged from dismissive attitudes and ignorance. When Ricardo was asked if he had experienced any discrimination he answered, “Admittedly yes, but it is not particularly marked. It’s more hidden and underhanded, not open.”⁷⁴ In his experience, the best way to combat this type of bigotry was to draw attention to it and stand up for himself: “You don’t need to start a fight with them or with anyone, as long as you answer them and say some bullshit back then they’ll stay quiet and that’s enough, there’s no need to fight.”⁷⁵ Cristina also felt that discrimination in Manitoba was passive. She did not share any directly confrontational interactions she had had with Canadians, but felt that many white Canadians held ethnocentric beliefs—even if they rarely explicitly voiced these views.

ALEJANDRA: In all these years here in Canada have you felt discriminated against?
 CRISTINA: Personally, only like they say in English ‘patronized’ and I consider it more—I don’t put it in the same category as discrimination. I put it in the category of ignorance because Canadians, because of being white with blond hair—which isn’t even pretty because for me it’s not pretty—They feel superior to an extent, or because they live in what’s considered to be a First World country, they believe to a certain extent that they’re superior, and that they always know better. And I categorize the situations in which I’ve found conflict and everything as ignorance from not having culture. The majority of Canadians and Americans have hardly travelled or even have

⁷² Gerald Friesen, “Racism, Anti-Racism, and Race in Winnipeg,” in *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 144–145.

⁷³ Sylvia Todaschuk and Stephen Walter Mical, *Winnipeg’s Folklorama: Canada’s Cultural Celebration* (Winnipeg: Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg, 2001).

⁷⁴ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 30.

⁷⁵ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 30.

much cultural contact, and that makes them ignorant, and sometimes they can seem discriminatory, to my way of seeing it.⁷⁶

Interviewees also shared stories of explicitly discriminatory behaviour. Laura's most memorable experience with discrimination took place at work, shortly after Donwood Manor hired her as a nursing assistant. This early ordeal showed her that some Canadians were prejudicial despite Canada's official multicultural rhetoric, but also that others defended and advocated for individuals experiencing discrimination.

When I had just started my job, [...] a person told me, "This job is for Canadians, not for immigrants. I don't know what you're doing here." I [laughs] turned around, went to sit down and I started to cry. The floor manager for the nurses saw me and heard what they said to me. They brought me to the manager, told me, "Come with me, let's go." She took me to the nursing manager. I said, "If all of your workers—your employees are like her, I don't want to work here." That's what I said: "I don't want to work here if all of them are like her." And she told me, "No, Laura," she said, "Stay here. They are not all like her, and this won't happen again." And so I stayed, and that's why I stayed at my job for twenty-five years.⁷⁷

Both the floor manager and the nursing manager acknowledged that what had been said to Laura was unacceptable and took measures to reassure her that they valued the contribution she was making. While this did not undo the hurt of the other employee's comments, it did make Laura feel safe and welcome at her place of work—so much so that she continued working there until her retirement. Laura also recalled that her children had experienced discrimination while attending private schools in the city—not because of their ethnicity or immigrant background, but because of class.

[My son] did experience discrimination, thank God he could tell me about it, because we—our family is an immigrant family—So when they were talking, they talked about going to Europe, going on their holidays and all that. So when he said he wasn't—Well, we took them camping and sometimes somewhere else, but not with luxurious amenities like the others went to. [...] It wasn't as much because he was Salvadoran, but more like because he was from a lower social class—he did feel it. [...] With [my daughter] it was more for—maybe for being different [laughs]. One day she just said, "Mami"—because I would buy them used clothing. I always did what I could in order to pay, to pay for school. In order to have enough for other things, I bought used clothes—nice ones, but they were used. But one day she told me, "I don't want used

⁷⁶ Cristina, interview, March 24, 2013, 48.

⁷⁷ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 29.

clothes anymore, Mami. I won't buy a ton of clothes, but don't buy used clothes for me."⁷⁸

Discourse on discrimination in the SMV interviews opened avenues for further discussion on the topic. For example, it was not clear from the interviewees' accounts if they had noticed a shift in how tolerant Canadians were towards immigrants and people of colour over time. Laura's narrative called back to her first years in Winnipeg, but Ricardo and Cristina's responses seemed to extend to the time of the interview. Further questions would need to be asked to determine if interviewees remembered a change.

Feelings of Belonging

Not all interactions with the host society were adversarial. The interviewees shared numerous anecdotes that highlighted positive relationships with Canadians and demonstrated how they had adopted certain aspects of Canadian culture into their lives. The impetus to change came from multiple different avenues: from Canadian friends, from their children, or simply from observing typical behaviour in their surroundings.

One story told by Laura demonstrated how developing friendships with Canadians allowed refugees to experience cross-cultural relations in safe spaces. The friend who helped her find a job as a nursing assistant was a steadfast supporter of Laura's family throughout their early years in Winnipeg and Laura told several stories about their friendship.

Our friend would take us shopping on Saturday. She would take us in a little car, she had a little Toyota which she later gave to us as a gift. She gave us that little car when she bought a new one. It lasted us several years, that little car. [...] She helped us so much. In fact she is still our friend. [...] She learned a lot of Spanish, and we practised English with her a lot. [...] Back then we would go to her house, and she would come to ours, everything was in English. My children were happy when she came to the house, "It's great, Mami, because now we don't have to eat with a fork," because I was making pupusas. She loves pupusas—"and we can eat with our hands, with our fingers [laughs] because that's how she's going to eat," because she would say, "If that's how you eat them, that's how I eat them, with your hands"—and they loved that—"And we don't have to speak Spanish. Now we have to speak English." Because it was the rule when she came over, "Now yes, you can speak English, no problem"—when a Canadian friend came over—"Now we can all speak English." And we all spoke in English when

⁷⁸ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 29–30.

she came over. [...] And my children were happy. They would shout and jump around: “Today we can speak English at home!” [Laughs], because we spoke Spanish at home, but we could speak English with her because she was our friend. They were happy, so I remember.⁷⁹

This story illustrates well how vastly integration differed from assimilation. Laura noted that the reason her friendship with this particular Canadian woman was so successful was because both parties made attempts to learn from the other. Since they both met each other halfway, they succeeded in building a long-lasting connection.

Even with the help of outside agents, social and cultural integration took time. Lorena measured how her values had shifted to be more Canadian through her children. Rather than presenting these changes as positive or negative, she viewed them as inevitable. As with the English language, refugees’ children often adapted to their new surroundings more quickly than their parents. Lorena felt that to maintain a favourable relationship with her children it was vital for her to adapt. “We came with other values, but at the same time I adapted because I didn’t want to lose my kids, I wanted to keep them. Many families lost their kids because they wanted to implement the values and customs from our country, which was very difficult to do here.”⁸⁰ Lorena noted that she had different expectations and rules for her older children than she did for her younger ones. Giving two examples, the first about curfews and the second about sexual health, Lorena described how she became less strict and more open with her children over time.

A super easy example is that due to the war, due to our own society in El Salvador, a young person couldn’t walk in the street for a long time at midnight, in the early morning, right? So with my eldest son and my niece who lived with us, the two oldest, I wanted to implement an eight o’clock curfew. But all of my children’s friends went home at ten, eleven at night. So they rebelled against that aspect because we wanted to impose those things. A very essential thing that I lived and that I experienced when I was involved in the community was that parents totally refused to allow young people to be sexually active outside of marriage, but in reality, young people were doing it here, there were very few who were virgins when they got married, right? So we started to see that that was like a taboo that we brought from our country. [...] I made that mistake, I never talked to my daughter about sex, you understand. Now she is surprised

⁷⁹ Laura, interview, May 9, 2013, 10–11.

⁸⁰ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 26–27.

when we talk, she says: “Mom!” and I say: “I understand now, I understand that youth are sexually active and that the best education that a parent can give a child is: ‘Okay, these are the ways to prevent disease, an unwanted pregnancy.’” I feel that we were a bit closed off when I came to Canada. My youngest son had more freedom than the eldest son because I was already learning.⁸¹

To conclude the last interview session, Alejandra would often ask interviewees about their views on Canada. It was then that interviewees demonstrated that although they had faced many hardships on their path to integration, after almost thirty years they felt at home in Winnipeg. Some explicitly noted that they were happier for having come to Canada. Even Roberto, who was initially reluctant to view Winnipeg as anything more than a temporary stop before returning to El Salvador, said, “The fact that I came to Canada was for the best, because now I see Canada as my saviour.”⁸² He commented that migration did not provide solutions to all the problems refugees faced, but that newcomers could live fulfilling lives in Canada if they made an effort to integrate.

I have learned to love Canada; I consider that this country has given a lot to the Salvadorans who come here. Sadly, there are many who do not take advantage, who did not know how to take advantage of what this country was offering us. But there are many people who have been able to outdo themselves and have been able to stand up for El Salvador. [...] I feel, right now, happy to be in this country, and happy to be part of history.⁸³

Another step in the integration process was to become a Canadian citizen. All refugees became permanent residents upon their entry to Canada and after they had lived in the country for three years, they were eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship. To become a citizen, refugees had to fill out an application and pass an examination in which they demonstrated knowledge of one of Canada’s official languages and Canadian history, government, and geography. Gilberto recalled that out of the first group of Salvadorans to come to Winnipeg, he was the most eager to become a citizen. This decision was straightforward since both Canada and El Salvador permitted the holding of dual

⁸¹ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 26–27.

⁸² Ricardo, interview, February 2, 2013, 13.

⁸³ Ricardo, interview, February 2, 2013, 15.

citizenship.⁸⁴ Having lived in the United States illegally after leaving El Salvador, he knew that he would have trouble visiting his family there without proof that he would return to Canada. He therefore applied for citizenship as soon as he was able.⁸⁵

Conclusion: Successful Integration

Integration was a lengthy and complex process for the interviewees. To begin interacting with Canadians, refugees first needed to learn a new language, an objective that was both challenging and time-consuming. Since most interviewees had little exposure to English in El Salvador, they had to learn the language essentially from scratch after they had arrived in Canada. After a year or less of living in Winnipeg, refugees faced the challenge of entering the workforce or completing a post-secondary certificate or degree with their limited English knowledge. Every individual took a different path to find careers that they hopefully found both stimulating and fulfilling, but that in the very least allowed them to support their families. Once refugees had started working, their exposure to Canadians and Canadian culture greatly increased. Sometimes, these interactions were discouraging or hurtful, other times they were uplifting and helpful. What the interviewees who had been living in Winnipeg since the 1980s and who had agreed to share their stories with the SVM project had in common, however, was that they ultimately found living in Winnipeg to be a positive experience. Over time, they developed a better understanding of the culture around them and were able to bring certain aspects of this culture into their own daily lives.

For Salvadorans to feel a sense of belonging in Canada, they needed to feel comfortable both within and outside their personal network of friends. Learning to understand Canadian norms and values allowed interviewees to have smooth public interactions which further

⁸⁴ El Salvador has allowed its citizens to hold dual nationality with other Central American nations since 1950 and all other countries (as long as the other country also permits it) since 1983. Canada allowed Canadians to hold dual citizenship with the implementation of the *1977 Citizenship Act*. Isabel Rosales, *Report on Citizenship Law: El Salvador* (Florence: EUDO Citizenship Observatory, 2015), 8–9; Ben Herzog, “Being Canadian: Dual Citizenship in Historical Perspective,” *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2014): 448–466.

⁸⁵ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 11–12.

facilitated their integration. Interviewees began to feel at home in Winnipeg once they had found a balance between Salvadoran and Canadian culture that worked best for them.

CONCLUSION

Talking About the Past, Affirming the Present

In the life histories of the Salvadorans presented in this study, coming to Canada was a point of rupture, a biographic break in which they travelled from ‘there’ to ‘here.’ Many of the interviewees noted that—although they were proud of their Salvadoran heritage—by the time of their interviews, they felt more at home in Canada than they did in El Salvador. This did not mean that they had stopped thinking of El Salvador as home, but that their notion of home had expanded over time. Ultimately, however, what the Salvadorans demonstrated through their interviews was that they had succeeded in building fulfilling lives in Winnipeg and that they felt integrated into Canadian society.

The goal of the SVM project was to create a legacy for future generations of Salvadoran-Canadians. The project was deeply rooted in Winnipeg from its conception. The participants had settled in Winnipeg, the interviews were conducted in association with a Winnipeg university, and while the intended audience was global, the interviewees often shared their stories in the hopes of providing a legacy for Salvadoran Winnipeggers. It is therefore logical that, although the explicit purpose of the interviews was to record life histories, the interviewees used their narratives to justify their migration to Winnipeg—to themselves, to Alejandra, and to future generations.

By dividing this analysis into three chapters that focused on the refugees’ initial arrival, their efforts in community building, and their interactions with the host society, I have endeavoured to give an overview of the diversity of the resettlement experience. It was not possible to define an exact amount of time it took for refugees to feel fully integrated—indeed, the process of integration is perpetual and was still taking place during the Salvadorans interviews—but by presenting the refugees’ memories of their first years in Canada, I was able to focus on the adjustments Salvadorans found the most significant. Early

integration experiences laid the foundation of future growth. In the 1980s, Winnipeg had been nothing more than a point on a map for Salvadoran refugees, but by the 2010s it was home.

Freund has argued that oral history is in itself an act of making home or homing.¹ In reconstructing their lives for an audience (the interviewer and imagined future listeners), interviewees engage in a performance in which they present how they conceive of home and belonging. This process of making home during the interview certainly took place with the six Salvadorans presented in this study. While participating in an oral history interview, the interviewees did much more than share memories, they also actively created meaning for their past and deciphered their memories through their present.

The central focus of this thesis was, however, to share the stories of six Salvadoran Winnipeggers. While theory and analysis were of course necessary for an academic investigation, it was important to me that these did not supersede the interviewees' voices. I strove to preserve each narrator's individuality in my writing. Describing the past from the point of view of ordinary people has many academic advantages: it democratizes history, it shines a light on marginalized experiences, and it illustrates the impacts of systemic changes, but my main motivator for sharing the interviewees' stories in their own words was to carry on the original goal of the SVM project—to create a legacy for future generations. When the six individuals presented here consented to share their stories, they shared something immensely personal. I wanted to honour that commitment by giving readers a broad view of refugees' experiences rather than mining a larger quantity of interviews for semantics or inaccuracies.

A quote by Roberto stayed with me on this subject while writing. When asked if he agreed to having his interview recorded and archived—as all interviewees were in each interview session—he responded: “Of course; if it's used for a good thing, for studies, of

¹ Freund, “Narrating Home,” 529–542.

course. I do not know if it's going to be useful. I haven't talked about anybody; I've talked about my own experience. Possibly some people might not like it or might not agree, but this is my truth."² Through this study I have asserted that the experiences of individuals can indeed "be useful." Each interviewee's narrative added nuance to the larger academic discussion on Manitoban immigration. It was precisely because interviewees were sharing their truths—and therefore speaking on topics that they felt were meaningful—that their narratives were so engaging. In the very least, the stories of the six narrators presented here have had an impact on my life and on the way I understand Canadian immigration. I hope that my presentation of these six stories qualifies as a "good thing."

In this thesis, I only described a single period of the interviewees' lives. The interviews still have much more to offer. The SVM project would be a valuable source for anyone writing about rural life and kinship ties in El Salvador, about the Salvadoran civil war, about experiences living in countries of first asylum, or about the lives of long settled immigrants—to mention a few alternate avenues of historical research. The interviews would also lend themselves well to a linguistic analysis of immigrant speech patterns, not to mention that several accounts are extensive enough to inform full biographies.

There is one topic that took place during the Salvadorans' initial arrival that I chose not to include in this analysis (a lacuna which anyone familiar with Winnipeg's ethnocultural community scene will notice): Folklorama. The Salvadoran community did run a pavilion throughout the 1980s, and several of the interviewees discussed their participation with the festival. At the time of the interviews, the community had stopped putting on a pavilion. The interviewees' memories of Folklorama did present an interesting case on the Salvadoran communities (dis)unity, but they were also filled with vague accusations of criminal behaviour, disappointment and resentment. With the scope of the story I was presenting in my

² Roberto, interview, December 13, 2012, 28.

thesis, I did not feel that I could accurately portray the history of the Salvadoran pavilion using the interviews as sources. I believe that the Salvadoran community's participation in Folklorama—and the effect the festival had on internal community relations—merits a historical study of its own. This story has further developed in recent years as the Salvadoran community reopened their pavilion starting in the late 2010s.

By the time of their interviews, the narrators had integrated into Canadian society and had made deep connections to Winnipeg. Their conception of home, however, remained complex, transnational, and in evolution. Despite similarities in their overarching experiences, each narrator presented their memories in a unique way, influenced by their personality and individual ambitions rather than their common status as Salvadoran-Canadians. To reiterate my argument on a small scale, I would like to give the final word to the six interviewees. I have gathered a quote from each narrator in which they reflect on their migration experience, on home, or on how Winnipeg and Canada have influenced their sense of self:

CRISTINA: When I left home [El Salvador], I got married and I went to Canada. I had my home, my family, my children—it was two completely different kinds of life: the one I lived in El Salvador and the one I had lived in Canada. But after some time of being [in Canada] [...] El Salvador wasn't my home anymore, it wasn't my place anymore. My house was here. This was my home. This was where I had flourished. This was where my children had everything, where I had everything.³

GILBERTO: When I arrived here [...] I noticed it was very different. I thought that maybe they had sent me to a place that I wouldn't like, but eventually you get used to it. [...] This city doesn't look as modern or as beautiful as others in the United States, but it has everything one needs.⁴

LAURA: I feel a lot of love for Canada. I have learned to love Canada. I tell them, when I talk with people who become too patriotic but towards Canada—I tell them, “I love El Salvador. El Salvador gave me life, but Canada gave me food,” like in the way of a joke. Canada has given me food. We don't lack anything: a job, food; we never went without—but El Salvador gave me life. I was born in El Salvador, so I can be just as much help to El Salvador as Canada.⁵

³ Cristina, interview, March 29, 2013, 9.

⁴ Gilberto, interview, July 24, 2013, 13.

⁵ Laura, interview, May 16, 2013, 7.

LORENA: I have never regretted [having emigrated to Canada] until now, despite the weather and all the things we went through. I think it was the greatest opportunity I have had in my life, for me, for my children and for future generations, it was worth it. Even my father, my mother, my family [living in El Salvador] have enjoyed the achievements that we have had here.⁶

RICARDO: I have always felt affected, in a good way, by Canadian society. Yes there are some people who have different opinions, but people are more cultured, more educated, and they are generous. Sometimes I have come across a situation in El Salvador—When I'm there, I can't find a place to throw away my trash. Since I don't want to throw it on the ground, I look for a place to throw it. And that is something we were not used to there. At least in my case, I have been affected.⁷

ROBERTO: My life has changed. It was the best choice I made to move to Canada. My life has changed; my political ideals have changed because I have always been tied up, devoted to the projects of El Salvador, not so much involved in politics but mostly with community projects, because I consider that my contribution to El Salvador, I gave it when I had to. [...] But I am telling you, at this age, life has been generous with me. I have learned so much.⁸

⁶ Lorena, interview, March 5, 2014, 25.

⁷ Ricardo, interview, March 1, 2013, 16.

⁸ Roberto, interview, April 12, 2012, 14–15.

APPENDIX - Narrator Reference List

Ricardo was born in San Julian in 1947 but spent most of his early life in Sonsonate and Santa Ana. One of the most important figures in Ricardo's childhood was his mother who, as a single parent, worked as a seamstress to provide for Ricardo and his two younger half-siblings. Despite the family's lack of funds, she prioritized her children's education and enrolled Ricardo in a boarding school during his teen years. In 1963, at the age of sixteen, Ricardo left school to find work to help support his family. He cycled through several jobs in Sonsonate but had trouble finding stable work due to his self-described "rebelliousness." While working as a builder for a hydroelectric dam in the Cuscatlán River from 1982 to 1984, Ricardo began to be harassed by army officers from the Cuscatlán battalion despite not being involved in the resistance movement. After some threatening interactions, Ricardo applied to leave El Salvador through SIM (Sociedad Internacional para las Migraciones). He chose to come to Canada since, among the countries he was offered to migrate to, it was the closest to El Salvador. Worrying about the prospects of finding a wife in a foreign country, Ricardo married shortly before emigrating and arranged for his new wife and her 12-year-old son to join him in Canada once he had settled. Ricardo flew into Winnipeg on September 10, 1985, and eventually found work as a cleaning supervisor. In leaving El Salvador, Ricardo left behind two daughters from previous relationships. At the time of the interview in 2013, Ricardo was 66 years old, retired and living in Winnipeg with his wife.

Alejandra Salcedo conducted three interview sessions with Ricardo. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg in February and March 2013, totalled approximately 7 hours and 15 minutes.

Gilberto was born in Apopa in 1956 to a middle-class rural family. After completing his grade nine education at local schools in the surrounding area, Gilberto moved to San Salvador to continue his studies at an industrial and technical institute. Having obtained his industrial diploma, Gilberto entered the mechanical engineering faculty at the University of El Salvador. He was, however, unable to complete his degree due to problems brought on by the Salvadoran civil war. A year of university closures and widespread insecurity led Gilberto to move to Mexico in an attempt to finish his degree. Once there, Gilberto was forced to suspend his studies to find work to support himself. Unable to find meaningful employment in Mexico, he crossed illegally into the United States to look for better opportunities. Not wanting to live as an illegal alien, Gilberto applied for the Canadian Refugee Program through the Canadian consulate in Texas. Arriving in Canada on September 9, 1982, he was one of the first Salvadoran refugees resettled in Manitoba. When difficulties with his Salvadoran university transcripts barred him from entering the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Engineering, Gilberto completed a certificate in Mechanical and Engineering Technology from Red River College which allowed him to find work in the field. At the time of the interview in 2013, Gilberto was 57 years old and had been in Winnipeg for 31 years.

Alejandra Salcedo conducted two interview sessions with Gilberto. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg in July 2013, totalled approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes. From discussions in the interviews, it seemed that Salcedo had planned at least one more interview session with Gilberto which never took place.

Laura was born in Canton El Rodeo in 1958 to middle-class landowning parents. The second youngest of eleven siblings, she had a happy childhood focused on religion and community service. In 1975, several of Laura's family members, most notably her older brothers, became involved in popular organizations. While her family ensured that Laura was kept separate from clandestine work, she nonetheless became involved with the *Federación Cristiana de Trabajadores del Campo* where she was given training to provide free basic medical services for her rural community. In 1976, the father of her first child was disappeared after attending a protest in San Salvador only five months after his son's birth. In the next few months, all five of her brothers were also disappeared. In 1977, Laura's family was forced to leave their home in El Rodeo due to military threats. They ended up living as refugees in camps organized by Monseñor Romero. This change in circumstances prompted Laura's own involvement in the popular movement. She joined the *Comité de Madres de Desaparecidos Políticos* and the *Bloque Popular Revolucionario* where she worked as a propagandist and a refugee camp coordinator. Through her work, she met the man she later married. In 1980, when Laura was two months pregnant, she and her sister were arrested by the National Guard and held captive and tortured for six days. They were only let go because Monseñor Romero himself called for their release. Once her daughter was born, Laura left the organization since her high-profile release had made her a target. She and her husband left El Salvador soon after, crossing illegally into Mexico on foot. After spending several years living in Mexico, her family decided to apply for refugee status in Canada. She arrived in Winnipeg on September 2, 1987, with her husband and three children. Building on the nursing training she received in Mexico, she studied to be a nursing assistant at Red River College in Winnipeg. At the time of the interview in 2013, Laura was 55 years old and had recently retired. She had been living in Winnipeg with her husband for 26 years.

Alejandra Salcedo conducted three interview sessions with Laura. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg in April and May 2013, totalled approximately 11 hours.

Lorena was born in San Salvador in 1962. Her father worked as a pharmaceutical company representative and her mother was a secretary for a rail company. Since both her parents worked, Lorena, her younger brother and their cousins were often taken care of by their grandmother who had a business selling traditional Salvadoran *dulces* (sweets). As a child, Lorena attended private Catholic schools and was very involved both in sports teams and the Salvadoran Girl Guides. She studied at the Evangelical University to become an early-year teaching assistant but was only able to work for a short time before she was married and stopped working to take care of her first child. When her husband, who worked as a civil engineer for the Salvadoran government, began receiving threatening letters and phone calls,

the family decided to leave the country. After applying through a Canadian refugee program, the family was only given two weeks' notice before they were relocated to Winnipeg on January 10, 1986. Lorena and her husband already had two children together and she was pregnant with her third while immigrating. To overcome the difficulties of relocation, Lorena was able to draw on the support of a local Baptist Church group, which eventually led to her conversion from a Catholic to a Baptist faith. Shortly after arriving in Canada, Lorena quickly set up a daycare in her home, which she ran for close to two decades. In 2005, shortly after she divorced her husband, Lorena shut down her daycare and became a Residential Group Home Supervisor for individuals with intellectual disabilities. At the time of the interview in 2013–2014, Lorena was 51 years old, a grandma of two, and living in Winnipeg with her new husband.

Alejandra Salcedo conducted three interview sessions with Lorena. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg between June 2013 and March 2014, totalled approximately 5 hours and 10 minutes.

Roberto was born in San Pedro Perulapán in 1952. He was raised largely by his mother and maternal grandfather who was a landowner in La Loma. While Roberto and his four siblings were well provided for, they were also taught to work the land at a young age. After completing the ninth grade, Roberto moved to San Salvador where he finished high school at night while working for the Christian Democrats during the day. Once in the capital, Roberto was exposed to many of the injustices present in El Salvador's governance and he became organized with the Christian Democrat youth by age fifteen. His involvement with leftist organizations continued into his adult years and Roberto eventually became a national syndicate leader, entering workplaces undercover to help workers set up unions and organizing protests and strikes. He was captured and tortured by the National Guard or police three times for his involvement in leftist organizations in 1972, 1977 and 1980. Over this time, many of Roberto's family and friends were disappeared and Roberto was forced to conduct all his work in complete clandestinity. This need for secrecy prevented him from spending much time with his family, including his wife and two children. The toll of fighting in a guerilla organization for over a decade came to a peak while Roberto was preparing for the Final Offensive of 1981. With his mother's help, he left El Salvador by bus and arrived in Mexico where he was granted political asylum. After living in Mexico for two years, he applied to the United Nations political refugee program which brought him to Canada. He arrived in Winnipeg with his family on February 22, 1983. He continued to work for solidarity organizations providing aid to El Salvador after he had emigrated and later trained to become a healthcare worker. At the time of the interview in 2012, Roberto was 60 years old, a grandfather of two, and had been living in Winnipeg for 29 years.

Laura Castillo and Alejandra Salcedo each conducted one interview with Roberto. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg between April and December 2012, totalled approximately 5 hours and 10 minutes.

Cristina (pseudonym) was born in eastern El Salvador in 1960. Her mother, a nurse, stemmed from a family of farmers. When Cristina was seven years old, she moved to San Salvador with her mother to live with her mother's new husband and his son. Living in this lower-middle-class area, she became disillusioned by the rampant machismo which prevailed both in her family and those around her. In her teenage years, Cristina devoted herself to her studies and extracurricular activities like volleyball in an attempt to leave her misogynistic environment. While she was still in high school, she attended a few revolutionary meetings but decided not to become further involved. She went on to study at a vocational school then entered university to study architecture at the turn of the 1980s, right at the height of the Civil War's tensions. By the mid-1980s, both of Cristina's older half-siblings had immigrated to Canada, and in 1986, Cristina was also granted political asylum. Once her application was accepted, Cristina's long-term boyfriend proposed to her, and they were married a month before her departure to Canada on March 4, 1987. Her husband came to join her in Winnipeg nine months later, only a few days after the birth of their first child. In Winnipeg, Cristina completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Winnipeg while raising her two children. After completing her degree, she operated an at-home daycare for two years and subsequently worked as a translator. She then began working for a global packaging group in customer support for Latin American exports. At the time of the interview in 2013, María was 53 years old and living with her husband in Winnipeg.

Alejandra Salcedo conducted three interview sessions with Cristina. The interviews, which took place at the University of Winnipeg between April and December 2012, totalled approximately 7 hours and 40 minutes.

Alejandra Salcedo is a journalist from El Salvador. Before coming to Canada, she worked for *El Diario de Hoy*, one of the most widely circulated daily newspapers in El Salvador, writing about Salvadoran immigrants abroad. In 2012, she became involved in the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba Project through personal connections. She attended workshops on oral history interviewing led by Dr. Alexander Freund and conducted fourteen of the twenty-five SVM interviews.

Laura Castillo was a Salvadoran student who worked as a research assistant for the Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba Project. She conducted one interview for the project.

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