

**Final Report**  
**ACS Mellon Foundation Faculty Renewal Grant**

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Original Title: “The Municipal Archive in Suchitoto, El Salvador: Determining the Possibilities”

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Amount Awarded: \$1,880

Original Goals

The original purpose of the project was to investigate the contents of a newly-opened municipal archive in the town of Suchitoto, El Salvador. The intended goals were twofold: 1) determine the possibilities for future service-learning opportunities for students; and 2) advance my own research on the history of El Salvador.

Changes to Original Goals

The goals of the project remained the same as originally specified. However the investigative plan changed slightly. The dates of the trip had to be moved back due to instability caused by the presidential elections in March 2009. Also the duration of the trip had to be reduced due to family demands on me. While I was reticent to shorten the trip, I used the lag time productively to counter the loss of time. Before leaving, I interviewed by phone Francisco Altshul, a key figure in the recent history of Suchitoto. I hired a research assistant to conduct an initial cataloging of the Suchitoto archive prior to my arrival. The use of research assistant became possible only because restrictions on the archive were relaxed after the presidential elections during my delay in arriving. The combination of the interview with Altshul and the discoveries of my research assistant suggested that pursuing some interviews and documentation in the capital city of San Salvador would be more productive than spending all of my time in Suchitoto, so I split my time between Suchitoto and the capital city of San Salvador. Finally, and most importantly, my delay in departure allowed me to coordinate my trip with my co-author, Héctor Lindo Fuentes from Fordham University. He is a Salvadoran native and well known in both government and academic circles. Working alongside him during my time in El Salvador facilitated my project enormously. More doors were opened more quickly with his presence than would have occurred had I traveled alone. I accomplished more in a shorter period of time as a result.

Meeting Goals

During my interview with Altshul, he discussed the location in San Salvador of some potentially beneficial reports about Suchitoto that had been produced in the early 1970s. As a young architect in the early 1970s, Altshul was recruited to join the “Relocation Committee” that

was created in 1973 as part of the government's program to build a large dam outside of Suchitoto. Altshul and his fellow committee members were charged with developing a plan to relocate potentially tens of thousands of people that were about to be displaced by the flooding of their lands behind the new dam. The building of the dam was begun in 1972 and completed in 1976. The massive lake (Suchitlán) that formed behind it has come to define the recent history of Suchitoto. Many thousands of people who lived and farmed along the banks of the Lempa River outside of Suchitoto were displaced, and it is widely believed that the alienation caused by that process and the failure of the relocation committee to meet their needs contributed decisively to the groundswell of support for popular resistance in the region. In fact, the community that Sister Peggy O'Neill and her Art Center for Peace is connected to (Copapayo) was one of the communities affected by the dam. Following Altshul's lead, I discovered three large reports on the dam in San Salvador. I reproduced them and sent them to Sister Peggy's Center for later use.

Following another lead from Altshul, and employing references from both him and Héctor Lindo, I gained an interview with Héctor Recinos. He was a union leader in the Hydroelectric Commission of the Lempa River (CEL), the government body created in the 1940s to direct the country's electrification and related infrastructure, including the dam outside Suchitoto. The interview with Recinos was revealing in and of itself. But additionally, he informed me that CEL contains a large archive of documentation. Gaining access to such an archive is difficult. El Salvador has a legal mandate to grant public access to government archives, but the law is not observed, particularly in organizations that oversee potentially sensitive projects, like CEL. Nonetheless, the potential rewards for the present project of gaining access to CEL's archive are substantial, so I pursued it. I would like to say at the time of this writing that I was able to gain access to that archive before I left, but I didn't. Nonetheless, after much diligence and perseverance, I have established contact with the head archivist and as a consequence of Héctor Recinos' recommendation, she has expressed her willingness to assist the project in the future. Achieving that commitment was a major step forward, and in the coming weeks I will continue to follow up with her and determine the research possibilities.

In addition to pursuing some additional documentation in San Salvador, I also used a variety of contacts to arrange a meeting with Fidel Recinos (no relation to Héctor). He is an employ in the Ministry of Public Security, another notoriously difficult entity to gain access. But because of recommendations from my contacts, Recinos agreed to meet with me. He had been a young peasant on the outskirts of Suchitoto who joined the popular organizations that emerged in the wake of the dam's construction. He became a widely recognized leader in the region. The interview with him was particularly beneficial.

In Suchitoto, I spent two full days in the municipal archive. Once again, the cataloging efforts of my research assistant greatly facilitated my ability to determine the archives' prospects for this project without having to spend more time there. Notwithstanding the efforts of my two former students to organize the archive last year, a portion of the documentation remains in cardboard boxes with minimal classification. Nevertheless, what I determined is that the archive is not the *Shangri-La* of sources for local history that I hoped it might be. For instance the archive contains no materials directly relating to the dam, the failed relocation program or the army's activities in the region during the civil war. Despite the dramatic history of those recent events around Suchitoto, the contents of the municipal documentation sticks pretty close to the byproducts of municipal bureaucratic activities—the registering of births, deaths and marriages, and so forth. Nevertheless, those materials present possibilities for a variety of research tracks, particularly the personal history of people who lived in surrounding communities. A centerpiece

of Sister Peggy's Art Center for Peace is a belief in the need to relate and reconstruct community history in order to facilitate the process of healing from the traumas of the war. So even though the documentation may not reveal information relating directly to, say, army massacres in the region in the 1980s, I can envision diverse research endeavors by future student interns as part of helping people reconstruct their lives and the lives of their communities through the archives' documentation. Many of those people are illiterate, and thus a particularly beneficial role for future students would be to serve as literate researchers alongside those people.

Finally, as part of my research, I arranged meetings with both Sister Peggy and Carlos Henríquez Consalvi (director of the Museum of Word and Image in San Salvador) to discuss prospects for future collaboration and coordination of programs and the involvement of student interns. One of Sister Peggy's future projects is to open a small museum, more of a living history archive, around the experiences of the surrounding communities, particularly Copapayo. Student interns could be involved in various aspects of that endeavor, including, but not limited to working with the documentary materials I deposited in the Centro, working with materials in the municipal archive and helping to conduct interviews with community members. Many more prospects and proposals were also discussed by both parties.

### Assessment

I can't say that I used a particular assessment tool to evaluate this project. I don't believe the nature of the project lends itself to that sort of assessment. I can say that the trip was an unbridled success to the extent that I accomplished the goals I had originally set out, along with some others that I hadn't initially envisioned (see above). The results of this trip will immediately impact the content of the book project that I am working on with Héctor Lindo Fuentes of Fordham University. Our manuscript is due to the press by the end of this summer (2009) and I am in the process of revising two of the existing chapters in light of the materials I obtained on this trip. The other half of the proposal revolved around student research, internships and study abroad. The affect of the trip on those areas will be longer term. I will aim to arrange for one or two interns to go to El Salvador in the summer of 2010 and pursue the possibilities I discovered on this trip, and Furman's next likely study abroad program to the region will be spring term 2011.

The project did not involve any additional faculty on Furman's campus as of yet. To the extent that the results of this project affect the design of future study-abroad programming, then the accompanying faculty member(s) on that program and their curriculum would be affected.

As for faculty on other campuses, the proposal as originally designed was to have an inevitable, albeit remote impact on my co-author, Héctor Lindo Fuentes at Fordham University. Some of the research from this trip will go directly into our forthcoming book. But as I mentioned above, this trip proved to have a more immediate impact on him because I was able to coordinate my travel to El Salvador with him.

No students were involved in the project at this point, although obviously a core component of this project was designed to impact future students. That impact will take the form of either programming on future study abroad programs, or internships in the summer following the model of the past three interns I have sent to the Museum of Word Image in 2004, 2006 and

2008. A likely site for future interns is also the Art Center for Peace in Suchitoto as a result of this investigation.

As for redesigning the project, in light of the success I had vis-à-vis the changes to the original program (as outlined above), I wouldn't do anything different. The trip produced more than I had hoped for and I believe it would be difficult to improve the results.

Expenditures

Total Expended: \$1,575.68

Please see accompanying Excel spreadsheet for detailed accounting.