

TEACHER'S GUIDE

UNFORGETTING
A MEMOIR OF FAMILY,



MIGRATION, GANGS,



AND REVOLUTION
IN THE AMERICAS



ROBERTO
LOVATO



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Note to Instructors

The purpose of this instructor's guide is to accompany instructors and educators in teaching and guiding classroom discussion for *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* by Roberto Lovato. *Unforgetting* is a memoir that follows Lovato's journey of navigating through history, national borders, and the silences and half-truths in his life. Through this journey, Lovato excavates his family's past and migration, his participation in the Salvadoran revolutionary process, and structural violence in El Salvador.

In this teaching guide, you will find short introductions for 9 sections of the book, the introduction, prologue, and epilogue. Each section is accompanied by several discussion questions designed to reinforce the main ideas from the chapter. Each question has the chapter it is referencing in parenthesis. Questions can be used to guide group discussions or can be answered independently. Also included is a writing and research project section that provide opportunities to further explore the themes and topics covered in *Unforgetting*. This teaching guide is not exhaustive, but rather an illustrative example of possible questions and writing assignments instructors can use in the classroom or study groups.

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Book Parts

INTRODUCTION AND PROLOGUE

In the Introduction, Lovato begins his memoir through a conversation with his father, Pop. Through the introduction, Lovato states the purpose of the memoir and important conceptual frameworks such as the “machete of memory” and “the gangs-as-cause-of-every-problem thesis.” In the Prologue, Lovato gives a guided tour of MacArthur Park in Los Angeles to a potential corporate funder for the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN). While on tour they meet a youth, who is part of MS-13, and witness a drive-by shooting.

Questions:

1. What does the machete metaphor represent? (Introduction)
2. What does Lovato mean by “the gangs-as-cause-of-every-problem thesis” when speaking to his Pop? (Introduction)
3. Why did Lovato decide to write this memoir? (Introduction)
4. What topics does Lovato introduce in the Prologue? (Prologue)
5. How does Jose's life describe Lovato's argument that “violence moves in spirals as the innocent choose between becoming the violent or the violated—or both”? (Prologue)

PART I

Part I begins with Lovato visiting Karnes Immigrant Detention Center in Karnes City, Texas. At Karnes, Lovato visits with Elena, a Salvadoran refugee, her son, David, and Ursula, a community activist. In this section, Lovato explores the origin of the term *maras*, a Spanish slang word used to describe Salvadoran gangs. Finally, Chapter 2 and 3 introduce readers to Lovato's childhood in the Mission District of San Francisco and Pop's upbringing in 1930's Ahuachapán, El Salvador.

Questions:

1. What happen during Lovato's visit at Karnes Immigrant Detention Center? (1)
2. Who is Alex Sanchez and what did Lovato learn from him? (Ch.1)
3. What is the origin of the term *mara* according to Lovato (Ch.1)
4. What did Lovato's parents do for a living? How did this influence Lovato's childhood? (Ch.2)
5. What secrets did Pop have that shaped his relationship with Lovato? (Ch.2)
6. What was Ramoncito's (Pop) family background in Ahuachapán, El Salvador? (Ch.3)

PART II

Part II begins in Ciudad Merlot, El Salvador, where Lovato meets Giovanni, a deportee. In this section Lovato explains the policing strategy known as "mano dura" ("firm hand") and its effect on gang violence in El Salvador. In Chapter 5, Lovato is with his family in 1975 El Salvador and learns about his family's view on his country of birth, the U.S.A, and its effects on El Salvador. Chapter 6 returns to 1930's Ahuachapán and discusses indigenous worker's struggles and Ramoncito's (Pop) difficulties in getting a formal education.

Questions:

1. What is "mano dura" and how did it shape Giovanni's life? (Ch.4)
2. What does Lovato mean by the most destructive gangster in El Salvador's history wore suits and were protected by "even more violent gangsters in military uniforms"? (Ch.4)
3. Why does Lovato say his American identity became a liability in El Salvador? (Ch.5)
4. Who was Alfonso Luna? (Ch.5)
5. Why did Ramoncito want an education? What happen to his opportunity to receive one? (Ch.6)
6. What were the conditions of indigenous workers in the coffee plantations? (Ch.6)

PART III

Part III introduces readers to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the role of the U.S. and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in policing gangs in El Salvador. In Chapter 8, Lovato has a fight with Pop that shapes their relationship while Lovato's cousin, Adilio, shares revolutionary literature and poetry with him. In Chapter 9, 1930's Ahuachapán faces an economic crisis and the preparation for a revolutionary insurrection.

Questions:

1. What is the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)? (Ch.7)
2. Who was Roberto D'Aubuisson? (Ch.7)
3. What was the role of the U.S. in the policing of gangs in El Salvador? (Ch.7)
4. What happened between Lovato and Pop in El Salvador? How did this shape Lovato's return to San Francisco? (Ch.8)
5. What did Adilio share with Lovato? How did Lovato react to what he saw and heard? (Ch.8)
6. Who was Agustín Farabundo Martí? What was his role alongside Alfonso Luna and Mario Zapata? (Ch.9)

PART IV

In Part IV, Lovato has a conversation with a police officer of the National Civilian Police (PNC) in Pachimalco, La Libertad, El Salvador about gangs and violence in El Salvador. In Chapter 11, a fight with Pop and the loss of his grandmother, Mama Tey, leads Lovato towards rightwing Christianity, but his enrollment in UC Berkeley introduces him to political theory and resistance movements against fascists regimes. Chapter 12 begins with a Hill Brother's 1939 Coffee brochure and ends with La Matanza of 1932.

Questions:

1. Who did Lovato meet at the police station? What did they talk about? (Ch.10)
2. Why did Lovato and Pop get into a fight? What hypocrisy were they both involved in? (Ch.11)
3. Why did Lovato become a right-wing Christian and what challenged his religious beliefs? (Ch.11)
4. What does the Hills Brother Coffee brochure reveal about foreign companies in El Salvador in the 1930s? (Ch.12)
5. What happen to the rebellion and the rebels? (Ch.12)
6. What was La Matanza? What did it do to those who witnessed it? (Ch.12)

PART V

In Part V Lovato visits a mass gravesite in Rosario de Mora, El Salvador with the Institute of Forensic Medicine (IML). At the mass gravesite Lovato meets Tico, a self-taught criminalist, and is questioned by a lawyer from the attorney general's office. In Chapter 14, Lovato meets G, a Salvadoran revolutionary visiting the offices of CARECEN. In Chapter 15, Lovato visits the Sumpul River where nine years earlier a massacre by the Salvadoran military and paramilitaries took place. In this chapter, readers learn of the role of the School of the Americas (SOA) in El Salvador. Finally, in Chapter 16, Ramon (Pop) and Mama Tey migrate to San Salvador from the countryside and he meets the Salvadoran military dictator, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.

Questions:

1. Why did the lawyer of the attorney general's office have the police erase Lovato's pictures at the mass grave site in Rosario de Mora? (Ch.13)
2. What is CARECEN? What was its role in the U.S.? (Ch.14)
3. How did Lovato and G meet? Why is she an important persona in Lovato's memoir? (Ch.14-15)
4. What happen in the Sumpul River 9 years before Lovato's visit? (Ch.15)
5. What was the role of the U.S. School of the Americas (SOA) in El Salvador? (Ch.15)
6. What were the conditions that led Ramon (Pop) and Mama Tey to migrate to San Salvador? (Ch.16)

PART VI

In Part VI, Lovato visits the IML forensics lab and views skeletons from the El Mozote massacre of 1981. Between Chapter 17 and Chapter 18, Lovato shares a Náhuat story of the underworld. While in Corral del Piedra with CRIPDES, the sister organization of CARECEN, Lovato has a realization of his vocation and political commitments. Chapter 19 describes life in a working-class neighborhood of San Salvador where Mama Tey and Ramon (Pop) live.

Questions:

1. What does Lovato mean when he says forensic scientists like Saul Quijada "make the bones speak"? (Ch.17)
2. What happen in El Mozote in December 1981? (Ch.17)
3. Why does the head of the IML, Dr. Miguel Fortin, say El Salvador is an amnesiac country? (Ch.17)
4. How does the "Náhuat Story of the Underworld" describe Lovato's own journeys in this memoir? (Ch.17)
5. What realization did Lovato have during the fact-finding mission in Corral de Piedra? (Ch.18)
6. Why does Lovato say rage is his vocation? (Ch.18)
7. What was life like for Ramón (Pop) and Mama Tey in the San Salvador? (Ch.19)

PART VII

In Part VII, Lovato meets with Santiago, a gang diplomat, and discusses the history of violence and trauma in El Salvador. In Chapter 21, Lovato meets clandestinely at a Mister Donut with members of the FMLN to plot revolutionary activity. While in San Salvador, Lovato is surprised by G. and both are chased by a death squad. In Chapter 22, Ramon (Pop) migrates to Mexico City and eventually follows Mama Tey to San Francisco, CA. In this chapter, Lovato shares how Pop meets his future wife, and Lovato's mother, María Elena Alvarenga.

Questions:

1. What does Santiago discuss with Lovato during his interview? (Ch.20)
2. Who did Lovato meet at Mister Donut and for what purpose? (Ch.21)
3. What did Lovato feel after talking with Pop? (Ch.21)
4. What happen when Lovato and G were together in San Salvador? (Ch.21)
5. How did Ramón (Pop) and Mama Tey get to San Francisco? (Ch.22)
6. How did Ramón (Pop) meet María Elena Alvarenga? (Ch.22)

PART VIII

In Part VIII, Isaias, Lovato's loyal driver, reveals his dark military past. In 1992 Los Angeles, Lovato and G explore post-riot Los Angeles and Lovato comes across a gang truce in Elysian Park. In Chapter 24, the role of the LAPD's Community Resource Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) in policing Salvadoran youth in L.A. is discussed. In Chapter 25, Lovato discovers his grandfather's role in the Matanza.

Questions:

1. What is Isaias's story? What did Lovato learn about his past? (Ch.23)
2. What is the "war on gangs"? How does it relate to El Salvador? (Ch.24)
3. How did the LAPD's CRASH unit affect the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles? (Ch.24)
4. What does Lovato learn about is family's history while speaking to professor Morán? (Ch.25)

PART IX

In Part IX, Lovato is an instructor and program coordinator of the Central American Studies Program (CAS) at California State University, Northridge. His students question the corporate media's stereotypical depictions of Salvadorans in the U.S. In 2000, Pop shares with Lovato his *testimonio* of La Matanza in 1932. In Chapter 28, Lovato visits Nahuizalco while learning more about Isaias past. In the last chapter, Lovato is in Los Angeles, CA at the Youth Leadership Conference learning from refugee youth.

Questions:

1. Why were Lovato's students critical of media coverage of Salvadorans? (Ch.26)
2. What did Pop share with Lovato about 1932? How did this change Lovato's relationship with Pop? (Ch.27)
3. Who and how was Isaias trained during his time in the military? (Ch.28)
4. What does Reynaldo mean by the silences in Nahuizalco? (Ch.28)
5. What does Lovato mean by Salvadorans living half dead? (Ch.28)
6. What were the stories Lovato heard from the youth at the Homies Unidos Youth Leadership Conference? (Ch.29)

EPILOGUE

In the Epilogue, Lovato ends his memoir with two scenes, one is a conversation with Pop about the apocalyptic volcanoes of El Salvador and the other at his favorite table at Café La Bohème. In these two last scenes, Lovato reflects on the history of violence in Central America, its effects on Central Americans in the U.S., the role of U.S. empire, and the importance of unforgetting.

Questions

1. Why does Lovato say his story is apocalyptic?
2. What is Lovato's "shit travels downward" theory of violence? How does it shape intergenerational trauma?
3. Why is the violence described by Lovato throughout his memoir an expression of forgotten U.S. violence?
4. What does Lovato mean by unforgetting?

Writing and Research Project Section**1. BOOK REVIEW | *UNFORGETTING* REVIEW**

- Have students write a book review of *Unforgetting* that covers the major themes of memory, family, migration, gangs, and revolution. The book review should provide examples of each theme and how they all coalesce to understand Lovato's "apocalyptic" story (pg. 295).

2. MEMOIR ANALYSIS | *UNFORGETTING* ANALYSIS

- Have students write an analysis of Lovato's memoir that discusses the structure of the book. Why did Lovato structure the narrative the way he did and what does it do for the memoir?
- Have students write an analysis of dominant metaphors that reconstitute the bones of memory (pg. 173) in the memoir (e.g. machete of memory, forensics, sewing, unforgetting, and writing).

3. RESEARCH PAPER | “EXPRESSION OF FORGOTTEN AMERICAN VIOLENCE”: U.S. INTERVENTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA RESEARCH PAPER

- In this research paper, students research U.S. foreign policy in Central America in the 20th and 21st century. Students should rely on peer-reviewed academic research, primary documents, and investigative journalism to develop their research paper.

4. MIGRANT ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW | THE MACHETE OF MEMORY

- Using Lovato’s metaphor of the *machete of memory* (Prologue), students conduct an oral history of someone who has migrated to the United States. The essay should cover major themes and events that have shaped the interviewee’s life. Alongside the interview, students should research the history of the interviewee’s country of origin and its relationship to U.S. foreign policy.

5. ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL TEXTS | SONGS AND POEMS

- Students read Roque Dalton’s poem *Todos* (pg. 300-301) and write an analysis of its themes and connection to Lovato’s memoir.
- Student listen and read the lyrics of Silvio Rodriguez’s “Dias y Flores” (available online in Spanish and English) and write an analysis of its themes and connection to Lovato’s memoir.

6. FILM SCREENINGS

- Watch *Eternos Indocumentados: Central American Refugees in the U.S.* (available here: <https://vimeo.com/399545727>).
 - Students write a film review and discuss themes covered in film that are covered in *Unforgetting*
- Watch *Harvest of Empire* (available here: <https://harvestofempiremovie.com/>)
 - Students write a film review and discuss themes covered in film that are covered in *Unforgetting*

About the Author



Photo by Beth Mickalonis

Roberto Lovato is a journalist and a member of The Writers Grotto. He is one of the country’s leading writers and thinkers on Central American gangs, refugees, violence and other issues. Lovato is also a co-founder of #DignidadLiteraria, the national movement formed to combat the invisibility and silencing of Latinx stories and books in the U.S. publishing industry. He is also recipient of a reporting grant from the Pulitzer Center and a former fellow at U.C. Berkeley’s Latinx Research Center. His essays and reporting have appeared in numerous publications including *Guernica*, *Boston Globe*, *Foreign Policy*, *Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *La Opinion*, and other national and international publications. He lives in San Francisco. Visit robertolovato.com.

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