CHAPTER TWO

A MIDDLE CLASS REFUGE FROM FEAR (1929-1964)

There are two words that we pronounce, which transform our voice into a sacred oration: the word GOD and the word MOTHER.

Lil Milagro Ramírez[1]

Introduction

During her second pregnancy, Tránsito Huezo Córdova read a children's book written by the French author Guy de Chantepleure. Translated into Spanish as *Lil, de los Ojos Color del Tiempo*, this book followed the adventures of a young girl named Lil whose lively green eyes gave people hope.[2] Enamored of the book, Tránsito and José Ramírez Avalos named their own "miracle of hope" Lil Milagro de la Esperanza Ramírez.[3] As a child, this wide-eyed girl exhibited an innate compassion for others, and an uncommon awareness of the world at a very early age. Nevertheless, it was her family's position in society that shielded her from the oppressive and often violent culture that engulfed her country.

This chapter begins before Lil Milagro was born by focusing on an event in 1932 that shaped Salvadoran politics. Known as *La Matanza*, or The Massacre, this seminal moment in Salvadoran history defined the circumstances in which Lil Milagro grew up as

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[1] Lil Milagro Ramírez, "Palabras de Ofrecimiento" (San Salvador, El Salvador: AHCPC, 1965), Spanish: *Dos palabras hay que al pronunciarlos, convierten nuestra voz en oración sagrada: la palabra DIOS y la palabra MADRE.*

[2] Although *Lil, de los ojos color del tiempo* was originally published in French, it gained widespread notoriety throughout Latin America after Luis César Amadori directed a film version of this novel that he released in Argentina in 1952.

[3] Literally, Lil Milagro de la Esperanza means "little miracle of hope," but her uncle Alfonso Huezo Córdova coined this phrase in an unfinished monograph entitled "Lil, La Esperanza de un Milagro [Lil, the hope of a miracle]."

a child.[4] As we will see, economics, ethnicity, and local politics all played a role in this peasant uprising. Consequently, this chapter looks at the circumstances surrounding *La Matanza* and then illustrates how the Catholic Church, a coffee oligarchy, and the military inculcated a fear of communism that weighed heavily on the collective memory of many Salvadorans, particularly campesinos in the rural areas. With this fear inhibiting activism in the countryside, the nascence of counter-hegemonic forces occurred primarily in urban centers after modernization in the 1950s fostered the creation of a middle class. Particularly in the capital city, radical ideas engaged the children of this middle class as they began to question the repressive policies of their government.[5]

The story of Lil Milagro's life begins at this juncture. Her experiences as a child growing up in a middle class barrio provide many clues for understanding why revolutionaries emerged in the 1970s. As we will see, her family's liberal beliefs shaped her notions of gender, class, and power, while her class and ethnicity afforded her a

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[4] In addition to Armstrong and Shenk, *The Face of Revolution*, the historian Jeffrey Gould suggests that "both the Left and the Right have long regarded the events of 1932 as pivotal in modern Salvadoran history." (Jeffrey Gould, "Revolutionary Nationalism and Local Memories in El Salvador," in *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History,* ed. Gil Joseph (Duke University Press, 2001), 138-171, 139. Moreover, in *1932: cicatriz de la memoria*, (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Indiana University/distributed by First Run/Icarus Films, 2002), a documentary which Gould directed and produced, we see how the Salvadoran Right used La Matanza to instill an anticommunist rhetoric within the general population. Interestingly, the primary symbol utilized by the right to create this sentiment was the construction of ethnicity. Although not all participants in the 1932 uprising were Nahuatl-speaking Pipil natives, conversations with peasants that resided in this region of the country illustrate how they collectively remember this uprising as a native endeavor instigated by the PCS.

[5] Although most resistance originated in the urban centers, there are examples of campesinos who confronted the Salvadoran government. The most famous of these was Salvador Cayetano Carpio, who grew up in rural El Salvador but became a prominent member of the PCS in the 1950s. Still, most of the revolutionary vanguard was made up of individuals from San Salvador who received their formal education at the UES.

refuge from the fear of government repression. The second part of this chapter navigates through the evolution of Lil Milagro's ideas as a child and adolescent before concluding that the seeds of her revolutionary understanding were indeed planted at an early age.

The Moment Before La Matanza

When the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras conquered the Nahuatl-speaking Pipil natives of El Salvador in 1528, the *encomienda* system defined much of the country's local economy. While this forced labor system fomented the growth of large haciendas, it did not completely disrupt or displace the native population. Instead, communal lands (*tierras comunales* and *ejidos*) coexisted with these large haciendas.[6] As Browning explains, "This coexistence was made possible not only by deliberate Crown policies to protect the Indian forms of land-ownership, but also by the nature of all forms of land tenure in the colony."[7] Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago reiterates this point when he suggests that indigo, El Salvador's first export commodity, gave indigenous and peasant farmers considerable autonomy because they were able to grow it on a small-scale. With local farmers competing in the indigo market, the labor pool remained small and prevented the expansion of large estates. Nonetheless, indigo laid a foundation for converting El Salvador into a cash-crop economy by stimulating the

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[6] In general, tierras comunales were lands held by a community of Ladinos, half indigenous and half latino, whereas ejidos were lands held by a community of indigenous people. For a more thorough description of these terms and their use in Salvadoran law see, Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *An Agrarian Republic: Commercial Agriculture and the Politics of Peasant Communities in El Salvador, 1823-1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 56.

[7] David Browning, *El Salvador: Landscape and Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 87.

formation of haciendas.[8] These large-scale farms then provided the infrastructure for growing new cash crops.

When prices for indigo finally plummeted in the 1870s, the labor pool increased and haciendas were able to grow. Aiding in this process, the government abolished both communal lands and *ejidos* in 1881 and 1882, opening new lands for cultivation and expansion. With these indigenous customs now abolished, latifundia became an institution of the elite and capitalist thinking flourished. This is particularly evident in the language of the Law for the Extinction of Communal Lands:

> The existence of lands under the ownership of communities impedes agricultural development, obstructs the circulation of wealth, and weakens family bonds and the independence of the individual. Their existence is contrary to the economic and social principles that the Republic has accepted.[9]

Although this law would establish El Salvador's place as a haven for capitalist expansion, the privatization of communal land was not designed to intentionally destroy peasant landholding.[10] As Lauria-Santiago explains, this law helped remedy many land disputes

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[8] Ibid.

[9] William Durham, quoting the Law for the Extinction of Communal Lands, Feb. 26, 1881, in *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford University Press, 1979), 42.

[10] El Salvador has a long history of capitalist expansion. Beginning by privatizing the banking system, El Salvador continued to encourage free-trade agreements with other countries, quickly ratifying agreements such as the CACM and CAFTA. This trend continued, as Robyn Wilson explains, when the country established 17 free-trade zones in 1972. In addition, the U.S. government has always supported the pro-business oligarchy and the party of the elite, ARENA. In 2001, El Salvador became the first Central American country to use the U.S. dollar as its currency. See Robyn Wilson, "Permaculture in El Salvador: An Alternative to Neoliberal Development" (Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, Masters Thesis, 2007), and William Durham, *Scarcity and Survival;* On the formation of haciendas see Lauria-Santiago, *Agrarian Republic*, 163.

between ladino and indigenous communities. This positive result would be short lived, however, when the coffee bean became a ubiquitous cash crop in El Salvador by the turn of the century. Demanding large tracts of land for cultivation, the coffee bean encouraged *hacendados* to purchase farms that were left unclaimed or idle. In time, this forced local farmers off their land.

Initially, coffee production took place in small and medium-sized landholdings, but the long-term investment it required in land and time eventually favored large landowners. By 1910, coffee accounted for 99 percent of total exports.[11] This transformation, however, did not occur overnight. At first communities had to decide the logistics and pricing of communal lands before they could privatize them. This led to numerous confrontations between communities, particularly those that sat between Ladino and indigenous lands.[12] Over time, the inability for poor campesinos to buy land led to the emergence of a new social order in El Salvador. As large tracts of land went unclaimed or were left idle, wealthy Salvadoran investors purchased this land and used it for their own expansion. This allowed an elite oligarchy, known as the fourteen families, to rise to power.[13]

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[11] Ibid., 132.

[12] Lauria-Santiago explains the circumstances following the abolishment of communal lands in detail. His assessment is both nuanced and well-researched in conceptualizing the complex environment that surrounded the distribution of communal lands. See Lauria-Santiago, *Agrarian Republic*, 163-222.

[13] The term "fourteen families" refers to a core contingent of fourteen family groups that encompassed 65 families in all. By 1974 "67 family firms exported coffee on a commercial scale while an inner group of 37 enterprises dominated the production of coffee, sugar and cotton." See James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982), 7.

Contrary to most of the literature on these families, this group did not obtain control simply by monopolizing property in El Salvador. As Lauria-Santiago points out, this elite class emerged because coffee provided them the opportunity to amass wealth by reinvesting in institutions that controlled credit, processing and exporting in the country.[14] Before this, the government did not wholeheartedly support the elite in society, but as this group gained control of every economic institution in the country the state became an extension of the oligarchy.

By the 1920s, coffee production forced the next generation of campesinos to depend on seasonal coffee harvests to support their families. Dependent on these harvests and lacking sufficient land to grow their own food, campesinos began purchasing the majority of their daily food in an inflationary market. As William Durham explains, "between 1922 and 1926, maize prices increased by 100 percent, rice by 300 percent, and beans by 225 percent."[15]

Within this agricultural milieu, the poor of El Salvador hung in a precarious balance that came crashing down after the Great Depression of 1929 reduced the market for Salvadoran coffee. By the following year, coffee producers refused to pay seasonal workers and preferred, as Anderson explains, "to let the harvest of 1930 rot in the fields."[16] Without any safety net to compensate for the collapse of the coffee market such as communal land, subsistence farming, and government control of public institutions,

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[14] Lauria-Santiago, *Agrarian Republic*, 162.

[15] Durham, *Scarcity and Survival,* 36.

[16] Thomas Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1971)*,* 10.

some campesinos adopted an indigenous version of Marxism that focused on rural exploitation instead of structural inequalities within the urban population. Espoused by a charismatic figure named Agustín Farabundo Martí, this modified version of Marxism appealed to campesinos who encountered hardship, particularly after the collapse of the coffee market in 1932.

To understand which campesinos embraced Martí's vision, it is necessary to examine how his organization, Socorro Rojo, gained support. In turn, this paves the way for connecting the rise and fall of the left in El Salvador with its influence on future generations of leaders that would include people like Lil Milagro in the third quarter of the 20th century.

Constructing Revolution in the 1930s

Inspired by the labor movements in Mexico and the United States, as well as the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, radicals in the urban centers began espousing ideas that would give rise to the left in El Salvador. The key figure of this communist-inspired left was the passionate radical Farabundo Martí. Known by his *compañeros* as "El Negro" because of his dark complexion, his story is one of passion, persistence, and resilience.[17]

Yet, Farabundo's story is not unique in Latin America. In fact, his life holds many of the characteristics that came to define Lil Milagro 40 years later. Both grew up in middle-class families with campesino roots from the western part of the country; both had activist parents who valued education; both traveled extensively through Latin America absorbing the ideological currents of their time; both studied law at the National

[17] Because of his stature in the leftist culture of El Salvador, from here on out I refer to Farabundo Martí as simply Farabundo. This also prevents any confusion that might arise between Farabundo and José Martí.

University (UES); and both were executed by the National Guard in response to an imminent uprising. Despite these similarities, Farabundo occupies a much larger space in the collective memory of the Salvadoran left. His political trajectory, therefore, offers important insights for our understanding of Lil Milagro.

Born in Teotepeque in 1893, Farabundo grew up with an appreciation of the harsh reality of life in the rural countryside. Although the family had poor campesino roots, they "had managed to rise to the local aristocracy."[18] Still, living on his father's farm as a child, Farabundo formed a strong relationship with campesinos and understood their plight. Over time, this perspective aided in Farabundo's development of a revolutionary worldview. Also encouraged by his father, who changed the family name from Mártir to Martí because of his admiration for the Cuban revolutionary José Martí, this revolutionary spirit influenced Farabundo as he received educational training at a Catholic academy and then studied law at the UES.[19] In fact, Farabundo's passion for politics prevented him from graduating with his law degree. As Anderson explains, "more happy when discussing Marx or playing politics than when working seriously on his law degree, [Farabundo] Martí never completed his studies." Eventually, his defiant posture resulted in his exile in 1920 when he directly criticized President Jorge Meléndez.

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[18] Both Thomas Anderson and Farabundo's biographer, Jorge Arias Gómez, suggest that Farabundo's families were originally poor campesinos, but neither of them explain how his father was able to acquire 1,280 hectares of land. It is possible that he benefited from the land reform that abolished communal lands and ejidos in the early 20th century. See Anderson, *Matanza*, 33 and Jorge Arias Gómez, *Farabundo Martí* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1996) 23-27.

[19] Jorge Arias Gómez, *Farabundo Martí*, 28.

As the story goes, Farabundo's good friend José Luis Barrientos organized a protest meeting directed against the Cabrera dictatorship in neighboring Guatemala and was then singled out for imprisonment by the Salvadoran president. When Farabundo insisted that the punishment be applied to all of the participants, the president sent both Farabundo and Barrientos into exile.

For Farabundo exile was a welcome adventure. As Anderson explains, "exile meant the opportunity to travel and learn new ideas, to meet new comrades, and to rethink one's own positions."[20] During the next 10 years, Farabundo worked with revolutionaries in Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua, and even became the personal secretary to the famous anti-imperialist, Augusto César Sandino. Eventually, the two parted ways because of their differing views of communism, but this relationship reaffirmed Farabundo's desire for armed insurrection. Eventually, Farabundo returned to El Salvador and continued his work by becoming a leader in the Latin American branch of Socorro Rojo Internacional (SRI), or International Red Aid, a popular service organization linked to the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS).

Begun in 1925 as a small underground party, the PCS gained notoriety when a Mexican labor organizer named Jorge Fernández Anaya came to El Salvador after working with the Aztec Farm Workers Union in Mexico. Once in the country, he used his ability to speak Nahuatl, the native language of the Pipil, to remain undetected by the government and organize eight thousand workers over the span of three-months. Miraculously, he staged an eighty thousand man march that paraded through the streets on May Day in 1930. Despite the success of this massive demonstration by the PCS, it

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[20] Anderson, *Matanza*, 34.

would not become the most popular and wealthiest radical group in El Salvador. That distinction was given to the SRI.[21]

With the SRI as his voice, Farabundo galvanized support through a massive propaganda campaign that used students from the UES and village schoolmasters to distribute the message of communism and anti-imperialism to the rural poor. Although he was not an accomplished public speaker, Farabundo was very persuasive and captivating in a one-on-one setting, and his participation in these teach-ins attracted attention throughout the country.[22] To elicit the support of indigenous communities in fomenting a communist rebellion, however, Farabundo required help—and that included the assistance of an indigenous leader named José Feliciano Ama.[23]

A prestigious cacique that inherited power from his father, Ama lost political capital when he supported an oppositional candidate who failed to win in El Salvador's first democratic elections in 1931. With Arturo Araujo as president, Ama became more receptive to left-wing propaganda.[24] When members of the PCS visited Ama, he became convinced that the communist cause would triumph in the near future. Although his reasons for supporting the PCS and the SRI were different from Farabundo's, he became a prominent figure in the insurrection of 1932. Except for Ama, however, the PCS failed

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[21] Ibid., 24-25.

[22] Anderson, *Matanza*, 69.

[23] Beginning in pre-colonial times, caciques were leaders of indigenous communities. Ama acquired this role for the *barrio* of Asunción from his father-in-law, Patricio Shupan. See Anderson, *Matanza*, 69.

[24] Ibid., 70.

to attract Indian leaders in other areas of the country. As a result, the rebellion remained limited to the western hamlets of Izalco, Ahuachapán, Sonsanate, and Juayúa.

In addition to his efforts to raise the consciousness of campesinos, Farabundo found ammunition in the unstable political environment overseen by Arturo Araujo. Although collective memory in El Salvador tends to portray Araujo as a kind and generous man, the National Guard became a repressive force under his rule. Much of the blame for this cruelty rests at the feet of Araujo's vice-president, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. With General Hernández Martínez at the helm, the National Guard violently squelched a number of communist-inspired revolts in the western provinces during 1931. To further prevent the spread of revolutionary ideas, Araujo imprisoned Farabundo that summer. Ironically, in prison Farabundo staged a hunger strike that increased his popularity throughout the country and ultimately undermined Araujo's authority.

On December 2, 1931, increased dissatisfaction with the Araujo government's inability to deal with the economic crisis resulting from the Great Depression encouraged a cadre of military officers to stage a coup. Seizing this moment, General Hernández Martínez assumed control of the new government and began an infamous reign of terror. Discovering the seeds of a communist rebellion brewing in the west, Hernández Martínez recaptured the recently freed Farabundo on January 19, 1932. Two days later, the PCS launched the peasant rebellion that engulfed the western regions of the country in a violent display of destruction. Over the next three days, campesinos took control of the region by occupying businesses, farms, and government buildings.

In response to this uprising, General Hernández Martínez ordered the armed forces to reclaim the area through a violent military campaign. On February 1, 1932, a military court found Farabundo guilty of inciting the insurrection and ordered his execution to be fulfilled that same day. In this context, most of the Salvadoran oligarchy saw General Hernández Martínez as a man who could maintain order and law in their country. Meanwhile, in the areas of rebellion, particularly in the indigenous community of Izalco, the actions of Hernández Martínez bordered on ethnocide, as 30,000 primarily indigenous campesinos were killed in a matter of months.[25] The result was the destruction of the Pipil indigenous culture. As the scholar Jeffrey Gould points out, "for the next forty years, campesinos caught practicing traditions of the Pipil culture or wearing native garments were ostracized from their communities because being indigenous meant being communist."[26] As a result, identifiable ethnic communities ceased to exist in El Salvador and communism became the root of all evil in society.

Creating the Communist Fear

With an overt communist threat now in retreat, Salvadoran society fell prey to terror and extreme repression. Robert Strong and Janet Shenk explain this moment well:

> For the wealthy, 1932 was the dark night of their worst fears. Henceforth, the oligarchy would cede the responsibility for governing El Salvador to the armed

[25] Most conservative estimates suggest that 10,000 people were massacred by Martínez, while the most liberal estimates place it at 30,000.

[26] See Jeffrey Gould, "Revolutionary Nationalism and Local Memories in El Salvador," in *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History,* ed. Gil Joseph (Duke University Press, 2001), 138-171.

> forces. For workers and peasants, 1932 was an evil memory that dared not speak its existence.[27]

Using these sentiments, General Hernández Martínez fostered his control of the country by creating a fear of communism that prevented anyone from challenging the hegemonic domination of the military and the elites who supported him. This led to a collective understanding among the poor that resistance would be met with torture, disappearance or even death. As one campesino explained in Anna Peterson's work on martyrdom and religion in El Salvador, "repression can come at any moment."[28]

Not surprisingly, among the most victimized groups in this environment were the intellectuals. In John Beverly and Marc Zimmerman's study of literature in Central America they note that an entire generation of intellectuals was "forced into exile or silence after 1932." Using their often-loose association with leftist organizations, Hernández Martínez literally forced dissent from the country.[29] The expulsion of these intellectuals also reveals the difference between how this culture of fear inculcated in the minds of those who lived in rural and urban areas. For those who lived in rural areas, repression could come at any moment and could be applied to any individual or family. In contrast, in urban areas it was the intellectuals who were the primary recipient of this

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[27] See Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador, The Face of Revolution* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982), 30.

[28] Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 157.

[29] Marc Zimmerman and John Beverly, "Salvadoran Revolutionary Poetry," in *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 120.

fear as they were repeatedly persecuted for their actions, particularly if they challenged the government's and oligarchy's authority.

With his opposition gone, Hernández Martínez could now maintain a culture of fear through a number of strict social controls and laws that assured campesinos would never again resort to communism as a means of resistance. From the top of his military command, officers like Colonel Marcelino Galdámez viewed communism as the ultimate evil. "Communism is a tree shaken by the wind," this colonel told a researcher. "The moving tree causes the seeds to fall; the wind carries the seed to other places, and the seed falls on fertile soil. To be done with communism it is necessary to make the ground a sterile place for its seed."[30]

Carrying out this metaphor, Hernández Martinez's regime began by abolishing the right of civilians to carry weapons, assuring that only the military would possess the power to claim control of the country. He then rewarded his rich supporters by giving them the keys to the economy. This included creating a central reserve bank to be controlled by the private sector, and instituting the "*ley moratoria*," which granted a 40 percent reduction of interest on debts, making agricultural credit easy for large landowners to obtain.[31] With the oligarchy now in full possession of El Salvador's financial system, it then demanded a better infrastructure for transporting goods and services. Hernández Martinez complied with this request by creating vagrancy laws that forced thousands of men into public work projects such as the construction of the Pan-American Highway.

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[30] Anderson, *Matanza*, 148.

[31] Ibid., 149.

Yet, the dictator was not the lone architect in destroying campesinos' ability to resist. In keeping with a long history of the Catholic Church's support for authoritarian governments in Latin America, Salvadoran bishops openly supported his regime through propaganda and appearances at many of his state functions. On April 9, 1932, Archbishop José Alfonso Belloso y Sánchez spoke at his inauguration and claimed that the "Catholic Church is against all ideas hostile to the current social and political system." He then specifically pointed to communism and the Bolshevik Revolution as ideas "which we must oppose with fervent and ardent rhetoric."[32] Anna Peterson explains the impetus behind such comments when she recognizes that the "church shared wealth, power, and prestige with the ruling military and political elites…[therefore] it buttressed the order that maintained their privileged position."[33]

Over time, the cumulative effect of the church's support for the status quo abetted entrenchment of a fatalistic attitude among Catholic campesinos and indigenous groups who believed that they could not legitimately act to change their material conditions.[34] Of all the legacies from this period, this one remained one of the most formidable bulwarks future generations needed to destroy in order to gain rural support in their struggle for freedom and justice. In the 1970s, however, a Latin American revolutionary

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[32] Archbishop José Alfonso Belloso y Sánchez, "Contra Communistas," *El Diario de Hoy*, April 9, 1932. Quote in Spanish: *la iglesia es contra todas las ideas que están en contraposición con el actual sistema social y político; pero muy especialmente contra las ideas comunistas o bolcheviques, a las cuales quiere oponer su oratoria fogosa y ardiente*.

[33] Peterson, *Martyrdom and Politics*, 43.

[34] The Salvadoran Jesuit Ignacio Martín-Baroí discusses this fatalistic understanding in *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

movement buttressed by the proliferation of liberation theology would spread ideas of emancipation throughout the hemisphere. Meanwhile, in El Salvador's urban center this movement would coincide with the rise of labor unions that represented a burgeoning proletariat.

The Labor Movement

One of the traps scholars encounter when examining El Salvador's past is the tendency to reduce its problems to the actions of a ruthless military and a repressive oligarchy. Kati Griffith and Leslie Gates address this issue specifically when they suggest, "scholars traditionally portray El Salvador's military leaders as monolithically repressive and commonly refer to the military as a repressive political instrument of the economic elite."[35] With Hernández Martínez in power, repression was rampant, as El Salvador resembled a police state. By 1935, however, his control began to disintegrate as the population increased and urbanization conflicted with a primarily agrarian social order. With these pressures, the government became less repressive and even considered the demands of some non-elite groups. Then with the end of World War II, a growing industrial sector of the oligarchy became annoyed by the regime's insistence to rely on coffee for the country's wealth. Along with pressure to industrialize from the United States and a lack of support from the military, these factors forced Hernández Martínez to abdicate his power and flee into exile. Shortly there after, a provisional government led

[35] Ken Griffith and Leslie Gates, "Colonels and Industrial Workers in El Salvador, 1944-1972," in *Landscapes of Struggle*, ed., Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 71-84.

by Andrés I. Menéndez assumed control in 1944 and attempted to democratize the country. For the first time since 1932, opposition to the government began to flourish.

The most well known oppositional group in 1944 was a radical union known as the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT). By organizing strikes in the country's urban centers, the UNT gained some political capital as it attracted more than fifty thousand constituents by October of 1944.[36] Nonetheless, their success was short lived. Watching these oppositional forces gain power, the military worried that the country would turn towards a more socialistic society. To prevent this from happening, the former police chief of Hernández Martínez, Colonel Osmín Aguirre y Salinas, staged a coup on October 21, 1944. Although El Salvador once again placed a dictator in power, the efforts to democratize in 1944 had opened the door for future reformers to seek office in the country.

In 1950, a fraudulent election put Colonel Oscar Osorio in power. In contrast to his predecessor, Osorio believed that in order for El Salvador to join the developed world, it needed to modernize. He began this process by creating a new party modeled in the image of Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Instiucional (PRI). Known as the Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática (PRUD), Osorio's party imitated the strategy of the PRI by diversifying the economy and allowing moderate union organizers to participate in the political system. It was in this context that the Comité de Reorganización Obrero Sindical (CROS), a labor union made up of railroad workers, bread makers, cobblers, and tailors, emerged from an underground operation to help workers achieve concessions such as collective bargaining, an eight-hour workday, and

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[36] Anderson, *Matanza*, 152.

the right to strike. Suddenly, urban workers—a relatively new class in El Salvador—found a space in politics where they could not only voice their opinions in the public realm, but also participate in the promulgation of laws that advanced the working class. CROS even helped draft the Constitution of 1950 and introduced labor initiatives that established institutions such as social security and subsidized housing for the urban poor.

With these concessions, the oligarchy complained that Osorio was creating an unstable economic environment. In response, Osorio pointed to the rise of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala as proof that these concessions would curb the spread of communism in their country.[37] At the same time, he continued to enjoy the blessing of the coffee oligarchy because rural workers were excluded from his labor reforms. As Armstrong and Shenk explain, this limitation "was part of the deal with the agro-front, the price for their support of modernization."[38]

Eventually, Osorio's experiment with urban labor began to disintegrate when the communist leader Salvador Cayetano Carpio joined CROS. Fearing Carpio's communist influence, Osorio quickly outlawed the organization and incarcerated its leader. In his testimonial entitled *Secuestro y capucha*,[39] Carpio exposes his detention and subsequent torture claiming that it was part of the government's effort to target communism as an

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[37] Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 65.

[38] Armstrong and Shenk, *Face of Revolution*, 39.

[39] Salvador Cayetano Carpio, *Secuestro y capucha*, (San Jose, Costa Rica: EDUCA, 1979).

inherently revolutionary threat.[40] By the time Osorio handed power over to Colonel José María Lemus in 1956, an economic depression fueled by falling coffee prices hung like a black cloud over the country.

Coincidentally, the elections that placed Lemus in power signified the beginning of Lil Milagro's political awareness. Barely ten years old at time, Lil Milagro commented on this period in Salvadoran history in her personal diary. For her and her family, the elections were the first of their kind to take place without a prior military coup to predict the outcome. On the second page of her diary, this precocious child grappled with the issue when she wrote:

> The entire country is excited that we are going to have elections. We fear that the *Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática* (PRUD) will stage a revolution, but God willing, nothing will happen because we believe that very quickly everyone will try to see that things are fixed and will go forward . . . We are Paristas, people of the Party of Renovation (PAR), and we hope that Dr. Enrique Magaña Menéndez who is the embodiment of the party will carry this out."[41]

Lil Milagro's family embraced the alternative vision espoused by the PAR, a nationalist party of workers, intellectuals, and some progressive members of the oligarchy, as it emphasized ideas relating to agrarian reform, the redistribution of wealth, and an end to

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[40] Later, this experience guided the former bread maker to become the leader of the PCS.

[41] Lil Milagro Ramírez, Diary, March 2, 1956, AHCPC. Spanish: *Todo el país está excitado puesto que van a ser las elecciones, tememos que haya revolución por el partido revolucionario de unificación democrática (PRUD) pero Dios mediante que no pase nada pues creemos que sin pérdida de tiempo todos trataran de que se arreglen las cosas y marchen bien… Nosotros somos "Paristas" o sea de el Partido "Acción Renovadora" (PAR) y esperamos que desde el Dr. Enrique Magaña Menéndez ya que el es el bandidote de el PAR.* Editor's note: grammatical errors are common in Lil Milagro's diary.

military repression.[42] Moreover, because the PAR had received 43 percent of the vote in the 1950 elections, its participation in the elections of 1956 seemed promising. In these elections, the future of El Salvador's economic trajectory remained uncertain. As Armstrong and Shenk explain:

> The small schism that had developed within the oligarchy in the 1920s opened once again: on the one hand the modernizing oligarchs, intent on diversifying their own wealth and the country's economic base; and on the other the entrenched landowning families—the agro-front—committed not to change but to stability.[43]

Although it is doubtful that Lil Milagro understood the economic implications of the oligarchy battling over a future that emphasized either agricultural production or industrialization, her statement proves that she saw violent coups as part of her country's political history.

In the end, Lil Milagro's premonition that the PRUD would not allow a fair democratic election was correct. The PRUD acted in its own interests by manipulating votes in favor of Lemus and claiming that PAR candidate Magaña Menéndez received only 3 percent of the popular vote.[44] Nonetheless, Lil Milagro's interest in the election is

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[42] Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 51. It appears that the PAR was supported by a diverse contingency. Whereas Armstrong and Shenk see the PAR as a radical party influenced by the PCS, Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 38 claims that the PAR endorsed a "laissez-faire approach to economics favored by the oligarchy." Moreover, James Dunkerly, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Verso, 1985), 80, sees the PAR as the first party to adhere to a social democratic vision. I assume that this last interpretation classifies the ideology that attracted Lil Milagro's family because they would later support the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC), or Christian Democrats, after the PAR was outlawed in 1967.

[43] Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 37.

[44] Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, 38.

a testimony to her parents' influence. From the time they took her home from the hospital on 10a Avenida Norte in San Salvador, her awareness of the world would be nurtured through a loving and supportive household that emphasized critical thinking, cosmopolitan understandings, and compassion for the poor. To understand how this laid a foundation for future resistance, this chapter now turns to an examination of her family life and childhood. As the political scientist Karen Kampwirth claims, "by far, the single most important preexisting network for radicalization was the family that girls were born into."[45]

Lil Milagro's Class Origin

My examination of Lil Milagro's life, radicalization, and revolutionary spirit begins with understanding her class origin and its role in creating her intellectual identity. Growing up in an urban middle class family gave Lil Milagro the opportunity to nourish her intellectual abilities and creative mind, luxuries the poor of El Salvador did not have.[46] Being educated in a private school, traveling to other countries, and having the time to indulge in personal interests such as poetry and music, Lil Milagro's childhood experiences separated her from the majority of El Salvador's population. On the other

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[45] Karen Kampwirth, *Women & Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (University Park, PN: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 61.

[46] It is important to make a distinction here about the difference between the urban middle class in El Salvador and the Marxist category of bourgeoisie. Because of the large disparity between rich and poor, El Salvador's middle class lived in extremely modest surroundings. As Alfredo Ramírez, Lil Milagro's nephew, explained to me, the middle class live "con ventajas pero sin grandes lujos," Alfred Ramírez, e-mail message to author, June 22, 2007. It would be a mistake to suggest that the bourgeoisie were equivalent to the middle class in El Salvador. Instead, as is often the case in Latin America, the bourgeoisie is a category that describes the upper middle class and sometimes the elite, particularly throughout Central America.

hand, her family's rural roots exposed Lil Milagro to what it meant to be poor in her country. This nurtured her ability to think critically about the world and allowed her to bridge the gap between classes both in her intellectual life and later as a member of the revolutionary vanguard. Illuminating the origins of this class mobility begins with an examination of Lil Milagro's parents, Tránsito Huezo Córdova and José Ramírez Avalos.

Before moving to San Salvador with her family, Tránsito grew up in a small village named San Juan Nonualco. Located in the central municipality of La Paz, this town was initially an indigenous community that suffered under the demands of Spanish colonialism and later under a semi-indentured, agricultural system that produced indigo. Not surprisingly, these structures led to numerous confrontations between locals and Spanish *hacendados*, and even facilitated the rise of El Salvador's first revolutionary leader, Anastasio Aquino in 1833.

A Salvadoran version of Robin Hood, Aquino's legacy began when he became outraged at the brutal beatings his brother experienced as a worker in the haciendas. In retribution, Aquino began stealing from white landowners in the nearby Spanish city of Zacatecoluca and then shared his plunder with the poor.[47] By 1833, Aquino acquired enough support among several indigenous communities near San Juan Nonualco to wage a widespread rebellion that involved 3,000-5,000 rebels, primarily Indians.[48] After the rebels killed several hacienda owners and their families in San Vicente and Tepetitán, 8,000 government troops marched from San Salvador and defeated the insurgents near

[47] Lauria-Santiago, *An Agrarian Republic*, 106.

[48] Ibid., 107.

the town of Olocuilta. To deter future uprisings, the Salvadoran government publicly beheaded Aquino and executed those who supported him in 1833 and 1834.

This revolt provided the pretext for further government repression against indigenous communities in the area. With these actions, the population of San Juan Nonualco underwent a process of ladinoization. As Jorge Arias Gómez explains,

> In the last century, the defeat and execution of Anastasio Aquino initiated the process of ladinoization or racial and cultural mixing for indigenous peoples in the Nonualco communities, which continued to the point that it would be difficult today to identify any of their descendants.[49]

Although tragic, there was a positive outcome of this ladinoization. Tránsito's mestizo family would be immune from the persecution that indigenous communities experienced after Aquino's uprising in 1833 and La Matanza in 1932.

While most inhabitants of San Juan Nonualco worked on neighboring haciendas, the Huezo Córdova family chose education as a vocation. Tránsito's father, Felipe Huezo Córdova, was a well-respected teacher in the pueblo and his daughter followed in his footsteps. In 1931, she began teaching at the Escuela de Varones "José Simeón Cañas" in the capital city of La Paz, Zacatecoluca. She remained in this area teaching at a variety of different schools until 1938 when she moved to San Salvador to continue her education.[50] As her son explained to me, "teaching was in her blood; her father was a

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[49] Jorge Arias Gómez, *Farabundo Martí*, 113. Spanish: *En el siglo pasado, las comunidades nonualcas, después de la derrota y ejecución de Anastasio Aquino, entraron en un proceso de ladinización, al punto que, actualmente, con mucha dificultad puede identificarse a descendientes de dichas comunidades*.

[50] Corte de Cuentas de La Republica: Sra. Tránsito Huezo Cordova de Ramírez, San Salvador, El Salvador, March 18, 1980. AHCPC.

teacher, and she was the first of nine children to join this profession."[51] In the 1930s, the entire Huezo Córdova family moved from San Juan Nonualco to San Salvador to search out the opportunities and better education the capital city offered.

Like Tránsito, José Ramírez was born into humble origins in the south central part of the country near the town of San Juan Opico. His father, Timoteo Ramírez, grew up in the small *cantón* of Joya de Ceren—known as one of the most well-preserved pre-Colombian Mayan archeological sites in the Americas—and earned money by selling and buying land in the area. Although it is unknown where he received financial support for his business, it is possible that he benefited from the land reforms in 1881 and 1882. Eventually he earned enough money to purchase a family hacienda in San Felipe, which became a venerated place for Lil Milagro, her siblings and her cousins in later years.

As the first son of Timoteo, José worked with his father learning about business and finances; however, he possessed a desire to further his education in San Salvador. When he eventually moved to the capital city in the 1930s he rented a room from Tránsito's father. There he was introduced to his future wife and proceeded to develop a relationship with her by joining a literary society known as the *14 de Abril*. In this society, their relationship developed as José became Tránsito's pupil.

When the two married they began to live a modest middle class life dedicated to the pursuit of education and social justice. Using his experience in business, José found a job working as a market analyst at the national brewery of El Salvador, La Constancia. José then took advantage of a nationalized education system and received a degree in mathematics from the UES in 1954. With this degree, he was one of the first people in El

[51] José Ramírez Jr., interview by author, El Salvador, June 6, 2006.

Salvador to be versed in modern mathematics, which enabled him to teach at several schools throughout the capital city. Moreover, José was a political activist who worked with many organizations in their pursuit of justice. Although information is scarce on this part of his life, documents show that José worked with the PAR, the PRUD, and the PDC. Often, this work forced José to leave the country to avoid government persecution.

Tránsito was a more reserved individual who empathized with actions of social justice, but remained less active in the public sphere. She began her foray into higher education by studying archival record keeping at the UES before finding work in 1951 at a Spanish school named Instituto Nacíonal General "Francisco Menéndez."[52] Her career continued to blossom there as she taught throughout San Salvador, reaching its peak in 1966 when she was appointed the Secretaria General del Departamento de Planificación del Ministerio de Educación (General Secretarist of the Planning Department of the Ministry of Education).[53]

José and Tránsito's mestizo identity and appearance facilitated their ability to transition from their rural origins to an urban lifestyle without incident.[54] Although they sympathized with many liberal ideas of the time, the fact that they could not be identified as indigenous was an asset in an environment that linked communism with native features. In fact, José worked with the PAR on Enrique Magaña Menéndez's campaign

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[52] Corte de Cuentas de La República: Sra. Tránsito Huezo Córdova de Ramírez.

[53] Ibid.

[54] It is important to note that in my interviews with the family, nobody identified ethnicity as an advantage in society, but given the pervasive fear of communism, which was always linked with being indigenous, it makes sense to conclude that their ethnicity did not hinder their social mobility.

in 1956. Later, José worked with his daughters and wife in the teacher's union known as ANDES. In interviews with Lil Milagro's siblings, Luz América, Amada and José Jr., they portrayed their father as a revolutionary, while they described their mother as a woman who believed in social justice, but worried about government retribution. Had José and Tránsito had appeared to have indigenous features, their political activism would have been more difficult in an environment that linked native people to communist subversion.

Beyond their political work, Tránsito and José also encouraged members of their family to take advantage of the superior educational system San Salvador offered. In this capacity, they housed several members of their extended family in the capital city. This environment not only encouraged their daughters to value education but also provided them with a stimulating and loving environment during their childhood. As Luz América described it, it was the "best of times" because their home was full of happiness and love.[55] Over time, the charitable contribution to their extended family allowed many of their nieces and nephews to live a more prosperous life, which was often dedicated to the pursuit of social justice.

In fact, their efforts bore fruit in the life of Jose's nephew, Antonio Ramírez. In 1960, Antonio moved into his uncle's house and attended high school in the urban suburb of Santa Tecla. After graduating, he studied human rights law at the UES where he eventually went on to become a professor. As with José and Tránsito, migration served as the catalyst for class advancement in his family, a trend that continues even today. Antonio continues to teach human rights law, while his son Edgard Ramírez received a

[55] Luz América, interview by author, Reseda, CA, August 13, 2007.

degree in law from the Universidad de Centro América and works in the small pueblo of San Pedro Massahuat as a "lawyer for the poor."[56] Both of these examples illustrate how the amenities of San Salvador gave families an opportunity for class advancement.

From the Eyes of a Child

When Lil Milagro was born in 1946, the family's middle class status and the values they would teach to their children were firmly entrenched. Her childhood diary provides us with many clues about her experiences within this environment. On February 26, 1956, Lil Milagro wrote her first words in a journal that would recount many events in her life.

> In these lines, I begin the diary of my life and everything that has transpired. My name is Lil Milagro de la Esperanza Ramírez. I am 9 years old and have already had my first Communion. I am prepared to record everything that happens, has happened, or will happen to me.[57]

As these words indicate, Lil Milagro was not only literate but also aware of her environment. In addition, she had enough leisure time to indulge her interests, an opportunity not easily available to the poor whose daily material struggles were often all consuming. Her words suggest that faith in God was an important component of her childhood worldview, illustrated by the fact that she took great pride in completing her first communion. This is not surprising because her parents sought to teach many of the moral underpinnings of Christianity. Although my research was unable to uncover the

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[56] Living in San Pedro Masahuat from 2001 to 2002, I witnessed numerous occasions when people in town referred to Edgard as the "*abogado del pueblo*."

[57] Lil Milagro Ramírez, Diary, February 26, 1956. Spanish: *En estas líneas empiezo el diario de mi vida poniendo lo que en este tiempo a transcurrido. Yo me llamo Lil Milagro de la Esperanza Ramírez tengo 9 años ya hice mi primero Comunión y estoy dispuesta a poner en este grabado todo lo que me pase me paso y este pasando.*

extent to which liberation theology played a part in the Christian identity of the family over time, in Lil Milagro's diary she explains that her father would read a passage of the bible to his children each morning.[58] At this time in the history of the Catholic Church, however, many orthodox clergy frowned upon interpreting the bible from a layperson's perspective. As Leigh Binford explains, the traditionalist current of Catholicism "interpreted poverty, disease, and infant death as trials mandated by God for which those who bore them with dignity would be rewarded in the hereafter."[59] Never did the church suggest that individuals should resist the dominant social order. Only in the 1930s did the Catholic Church create a program called Catholic Action that attempted to create a dialogue between lay members and the clergy. Although the Catholic Church crushed this movement after many young clerics began to espouse ideas related to the liberation of the poor, Catholic Action encouraged lay people to read the bible.[60]

Lil Milagro's family also augmented their Christian understanding by joining an organization that identified similarities between all religions. Known as *La Gran Fraternidad Universal*, this spiritual congregation pursued a different way of life that

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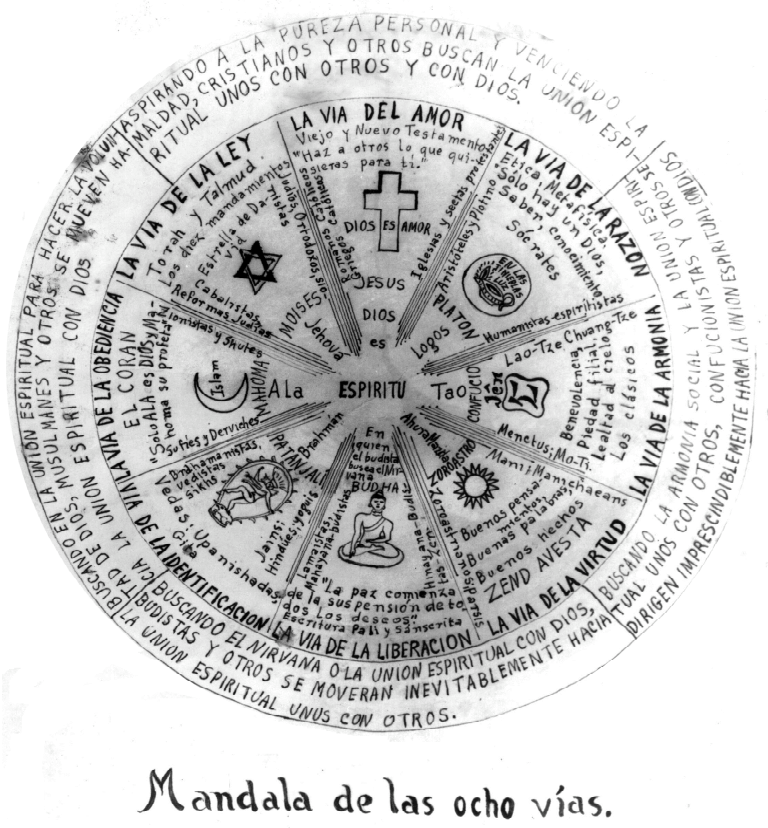
[58] Lil Milagro Ramírez, Diary, March 3, 1958. AHCPC.

[59] Leigh Binford, "Peasants, Catechists, Revolutionaries: Organic Intellectuals in the Salvadoran Revolution, 1980-1992," in *Landscapes of Struggle* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 106.

[60] Scholars such as Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1991) suggested that Catholic Action created the foundation for the formation of Christian Base Communities (CEBs), which emerged when young members of the clergy worked with the poor and "pressed for more structurally far-reaching social changes. Typical of the time, however, the Catholic Church removed these "radicals" from the project, but when membership among the poor began to decline in Latin America, CEBs came to represent a reincarnation of Catholic Action."

emphasized ideas such as vegetarianism, yoga, meditation and metaphysics.[61] The understanding of this organization provided the entire family with a belief in an egalitarian form of Christianity as well as an acceptance of different ideas. As the diagram of the *Mandala de las ocho vías*, or Commandments of the eight ways, illustrates, spiritual enlightenment is obtained through liberation, harmony, reason, love, the law, obedience and identity. Unfortunately, no document mentions this organization and it seems that the only overt manifestation of Lil Milagro's embrace of this particular understanding was her as well as her siblings adherence to a vegetarian diet throughout their young adult life.

[61] Translated as The Great Universal Brotherhood, the entire family was baptized in this tradition. Information about activities this organization endorsed is from a license possessed by Alfredo Ramírez titled La Grand Fraternidad Universal Labora en el Bienestar Social: Noviembre de 1968.



Mandala de las ocho vías.

Figure 1: Mandala de las Ocho Vías

Beyond this almost syncretic melding of Christianity and eastern mysticism, Lil Milagro's experiences were similar to those of other middle class Salvadoran children of the time. On any given Saturday Lil Milagro could be found playing music on her guitar, listening to the sounds of Paul Anka, Doris Day, and Pat Boone, writing in journals, socializing with her friends, or composing letters to her friends.[62] Even more significant, however, were her adventures in other countries.

With relatives and friends in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, her parents often traveled outside of El Salvador. With them, Lil Milagro visited almost every Central American country. She explained the value of these experiences in her diary:

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[62] Luz América Choí and Amada Ramírez, interview by author, Reseda, CA. August 13, 2006.

> 1959 was a good year, enough so that I cannot complain. We went to Guatemala, and before that I was able to go to Costa Rica with my sisters Luchy, Maya and my mom; plus we went to Costa Rica as much as we went to Guatemala. [63]

These travels clearly gave her access to other cultures as well as future pen pals with whom she maintained relationships for many years. Moreover, the opportunity to travel and make contacts outside of El Salvador contributed to the formation of an understanding which, when combined with a middle class education, facilitated her transformation into an intellectual who witnessed first hand the potential for protest and change in other countries and its implications for El Salvador. Not surprisingly, her parents served as the catalyst driving her education and her cosmopolitan understanding.

Because Tránsito and José placed value on education, every one of their children attended a private secular high school known as the Instituto Cultural "Miguel de Cervantes." At this institute, their children engaged in many middle class intellectual activities such as learning to play musical instruments, creative writing, foreign languages, and international politics. Overall, her grades were "very good," but it was obvious that she possessed a proclivity for the subjects of Music, Literature and Language, always maintaining a mark of 9 or 10 on her report cards.[64] Understanding this, teachers developed her intellectual gifts through a creative pedagogy that emphasized student exploration and self-learning. For example, they encouraged her to

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[63] Lil Milagro Ramírez, Diary, San Salvador, El Salvador, January 17, 1960, AHCPC. Spanish: *En 1959 me fue bien, lo bastante bien para no quejarme, fuimos a Guatemala y antes habíamos ido a Costa Rica, Luchy, Maya, Mamá y yo; en Costa Rica, tanto como en Guatemala.*

[64] Instituto Cultural "Miguel De Cervantes," Report Card, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1960-1962, AHCPC. 10 is the highest score.

write acrostic poems that combined her faith in God with her affinity for her friends.[65] She became so proficient at writing these poems that by the age of sixteen she estimated she had written more than fifty of them for friends, relatives and acquaintances.[66] These poems even brought Lil Milagro some notoriety from her peers. As she recorded:

> I never believed that poetry could be my vocation, but on Tuesday, the 10th of this month, I made an acrostic for my friend Eva and showed her poems I wrote about Claudia Lars. She liked them so much that she read them to the class, excluding the one I wrote about her. It seems that she wants to publish them but I am scared of any ridicule because it would hurt too much.[67]

Although Lil Milagro feared the ridicule that might come from exposing her poetry, positive experiences like this probably gave her the confidence to publish in different magazines and newsletters later in her life. However, she always insisted on using the pseudonym Mily when submitting her work. We see this desire in a letter she sent to a journalist in Germany. In it she explains, "if you publish my work, I would be very grateful if you use my pseudonym, a feminine whim, you know?"[68]

This humble nature also defined Lil Milagro as a friend that many would come to cherish. In fact, her loyalty and compassion toward friends, relatives, and even

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[65] These particular acrostics were Catholic inspired poems that use the letters in a person's name as the letter in the first word of each line. Often times, the lines were then placed in a way that created the outline of a priest or other religious figure. See Figure 4.

[66] Ramírez, Diary, May 19, 1962, AHCPC.

[67] Ramírez, Diary, June 15, 1962. Spanish: *Nunca creí que mi vocación poética pasara a mas, pero el Martes 10 de este mes le hice un poema acróstico a la niña Eva y le enseñé los de Claudia Lars, y le gustaron mucho, tanto que los leyó en el curso exceptuando el que le hice a ella. Parece ser que quiere publicarlos, pero tengo miedo a la burla, porque sé que me dolería demasiado.*

[68] Lil Milagro Ramírez, San Salvador, El Salvador to Amigo Carlos, Germany, April 1965, AHCPC. Spanish: *Si publica Ud. mis trabajos, le agradeceré siempre conservar mi seudónimo, femenino capricho. ¿Sabes?*

acquaintances was a recurrent theme throughout her life. This is particularly evident in an autograph book Lil Milagro kept throughout her childhood. Her piano teacher, for instance, describes her kind nature, happy disposition, and loving spirit when she wrote:

> Little Miracle: As your name indicates, you are a miracle in the lives of all of those who love you; in the midst of this miracle, never lose your vibrant satiny laugh that sweetens every hour of the day. That you will always be happy are the desires of your piano teachers.[69]

Passages like this populate the entire book and are not solely limited to her teachers. Friends from school as well as people she met in other countries write about Lil Milagro's kindness, loyalty and intelligence. As later chapters will illustrate, this compassion benefited her work in the revolutionary vanguard as she befriended many in the movement. What is striking is that she seems to have possessed an inherent compassion for others even at a young age. This was particularly evident in her journeys to the family finca in San Felipe.

Tránsito and José moved to San Salvador, but they never forgot their rural roots and they wanted to share them with their children. Almost every weekend, the family visited relatives at the family hacienda in San Felipe. These visits typically involved working on the family farm, harvesting fruits and vegetables, or cooking for her grandparents. On many occasions, Tránsito would tell Luz América, Amada, and Lil Milagro to scurry out and sell the day's harvests in the streets. With the best intentions in mind, however, Lil Milagro often searched for people less fortunate than herself and

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[69] Elia Ybana in Lil Milagro Ramírez, Libro de Dichos, San Salvador, El Salvador, No Date, AHCPC. Spanish: *Milagrito: Como tu nombre lo indica, eres un milagro en la existencia de los que te queremos, y en medio de ese Milagro, que nunca deje de vibrar tu risa argentina con la que endulzas todas nuestras horas. Que siempre seas feliz son los deseos de sus profesoras de piano.*

rather than selling her goods to someone who could afford them she quickly gave them away to anyone in need.[70] In fact, during my interviews with Lil Milagro's family both her sister and her brother mentioned on separate occasions that she would give you the shirt off her back if you said you liked it.[71]

These anecdotes also suggest that Lil Milagro did not value material possessions. Instead, she possessed an altruistic compassion fostered by her love for people and the relationships she established. I personally discovered this compassion of hers while traveling to the former guerrilla stronghold of Morazán. Staying at a hostel known as La Casa De La Abuela, I met a woman there who claimed that Lil Milagro knew her daughter through her participation in a student group at the UES. Because of their friendship, Lil Milagro frequently volunteered to help the family on weekends collecting oranges from a small orchard and sell them at a market in San Salvador.[72] This anecdote is a testimony to Lil Milagro's movement across class lines, as she understood both the realities of urban middle class life and life among the rural poor. As we will see, this understanding defined Lil Milagro's intellectual worldview in later years and it helped her develop a sense of right and wrong.

A childhood songbook of Lil Milagro's shows that she possessed a strong desire to search for truth and even morality. Sitting alone on a single page in this book, we find a definition for the word hypocrite. She writes, "Hypocrite: Someone who pretends or

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[70] Luz América Choí and Amada Ramírez, interview, August 13, 2006.

[71] Ibid.

[72] "La Abuela," interview by author, Morazán, El Salvador, June 22, 2006.

seems like someone she/he is not, or acts in a way she/he does not feel."[73] For this young woman, this word struck a discordant chord in her mind. In letters written later to her father, her desire to avoid hypocrisy emerges as a key factor in her decision to join an armed revolutionary struggle. At the same time, her mother's guidance helped Lil Milagro understand that gender also created injustices in her world.

During my interview with Luz América, she made the comment that her mother was "the first feminist in El Salvador."[74] Although perhaps exaggerated, Tránsito was heavily involved in many women's movements. To begin with, she was one of the founders of the *Liga Salvadoreña Femenina*, which fought for women's suffrage from 1946 to 1950. She also worked with the organization Mesa Redonda Panamericana, which was an international forum of women who fostered foreign relations. She was well-known for organizing groups of women intellectuals from the university to gather and discuss literary ideas. Finally, she was a prominent member of the Ateneo Salvadoreño de Mujeres (ASM), an organization of Catholic women who discussed women's issues in Salvadoran society.

Through the ASM Tránsito fostered Lil Milagro's identity as a strong and capable woman, as well as that of her daughters and nieces. A central goal of the lectures she organized for this group was to recognize individuals who embodied the spirit of women's ability to adhere to high ideals. As secretary of the organization in 1965, Lil Milagro gave a benediction in awarding a prize:

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[73] Lil Milagro Ramírez, Songbook, San Salvador, El Salvador, No Date, AHCPC. Spanish: *Hipócrita: Que finge o aparenta lo que no es o lo que no siente.*

[74] Luz América, interview, August 13, 2006.

> The Salvadoran Women's Club, the unified spirit of women who encourage the desire for the realization of high ideals, speaks this evening through my heartfelt words to proffer this woman who deserves all tributes, a spiritual offering that, although modest in material value, encompasses the magnitude of the most pure sentiments.[75]

Reading these words, it is not a stretch to think that such an organization would empower women to strive for advancement in society. This certainly shaped Lil Milagro's understanding of women and their place in the world, as she heeded this call and always held high and idealistic aspirations. In her role of secretary for this organization, she helped other women realize their own aspirations.

Lil Milagro's mother further manifested these ideals by insisting that all women in her family excel in traditionally male areas. For instance, academically her mother felt that women could perform as well as men in the subjects of math and science. To ensure this belief held true, she forced all of her daughters to study math on the weekends, often despite their personal wishes to do otherwise.[76] We might surmise from this that Tránsito believed in women's intellectual potential and capacity for equality with men. In later years Lil Milagro embodied this potential as she continued to remember the lessons taught to her by her mother. As the opening quote of this chapter illustrates, Lil Milagro viewed *Dios y Madre* as sacred forces in a just society.

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[75] Lil Milagro Ramírez, San Salvador, El Salvador, May 3, 1965, AHCPC. Spanish: *El Ateneo Femenino Salvadoreño, espíritu unificado de mujeres que alientan el anhelo de realizar excelsos ideales, habla esta noche por mi palabra emocionada y ofrece a esa mujer merecedora de todos los homenajes, un espiritual esparcimiento, que en su pequeño valor material, encierra la grandeza de los más puros sentimientos.*

[76] José Jr., interview, June 6, 2006.

Conclusion

Although El Salvador faced many problems between 1946 and 1962, it was a time of relative prosperity for the urban population. With modernization, families like Lil Milagro's benefited from an environment that created an urban middle class. For the first time in Salvadoran history, mestizo parents were able to offer their children opportunities that they were not afforded in their own childhood. For Lil Milagro, this meant education, travel, and participation in organizations that emphasized women's contributions and Christianity. Indeed, her parents encouraged Lil Milagro's development of an intellectual and emotional understanding of the world that emphasized compassion, critical thinking, and empowerment, and these traits would guide her decision-making in later years.

From the time that Lil Milagro graduated with a *bachillerato*, or high school diploma, in 1962, experiences during her childhood and teenage years would inform her life as a student at the UES. Moreover, growing up in a middle-class environment allowed these experiences to be abundant and diverse. As a student at the university, she would build on these experiences as they came into dialogue with more radical ideas and actions. Through everything, however, her parents remained an important part of her life.

The literary scholar Raymond Williams writes about the intellectual dynamic between different generations. In 1961, he published *The Long Revolution*, which suggested that a cultural revolution coincided with the democratic and industrial revolutions of the late 20th century. In this monograph, he explains:

> One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own

> structure of feeling….The new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting.[77]

While William's words do not necessarily involve familial influence, he recognizes the importance of previous generations in training their successors. For Lil Milagro, her understanding of the world began with her parents and their progressive and Christian teachings.

During the next phase of her life, her parents' lessons helped her realize what it meant to be socially conscious. Building from this understanding, Lil Milagro faced many experiences at the UES that further nurtured her sense of right and wrong, until finally, she became a revolutionary intellectual who chose to sacrifice her education, family, motherhood, and friends in the name of justice, equality and freedom. Understanding how she came to this conclusion begins by examining her life as a student at the UES.

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[77] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Harper and Rose, 1966), 48-9.

Figure 2: Wedding picture of Tránsito Huezo Cordova and José Ramírez, circa 1940.

Figure 3: The Ramírez family practicing yoga as part of the La Gran Fraternidad Universal, circa 1950.

Tránsito Ramírez is standing on the far left.

Figure 4: Luz América (right) and Lil Milagro (left), circa 1950.

Figure 5: Three sisters, circa 1954.

Luz América (front left), Amada, (front middle), Lil Milagro (front right),

Figure 6: Lil Milagro as a teenager, circa 1960.

Figure 7: Lil Milagro's Quinceañera, April 3, 1961.

The girl on the far left is Luz América, followed by Lil Milagro in the middle, and her mother and sister, Amada, on the right.

Figure 8: Lil Milagro graduating from High School, 1963.