

LIL MILAGRO RAMIREZ (1946-1979):
THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUAL IN EL SALVADOR

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ABSTRACT

LIL MILAGRO RAMIREZ (1946-1979):
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Ryan Hightower Wilson

This study examines the life and work of a Salvadoran woman named Lil Milagro Ramírez. Born in 1946, Lil Milagro was a key member of a revolutionary struggle in El Salvador that began in the early 1970s. When she died in 1979, her life became an example of how authoritarian governments dealt with radicals in Latin America during the Cold War. Yet, there is so much more to her story than her tragic death.

Throughout her life, Lil Milagro assumed many roles. She was a Catholic, a daughter, a student, a poet, a traveler, a teacher, a friend, an intellectual, and most of all a Salvadoreña. Those who knew this woman saw her as a revolutionary and martyr whose compassion for the people of her country convinced her to lead a remarkably selfless life. Historicizing and humanizing her transformation from a young girl who enjoyed climbing trees into a revolutionary who challenged a repressive and violent society is the challenge of this study. Framing this challenge will be key questions about power, agency, class, gender, intellectuals, and revolutionary culture. Simultaneously, this study will reveal a fascinating saga set in the historical context of politics and culture in El Salvador as it explores how family, the church, personal travel, moral commitment, and the university worked together to facilitate Lil Milagro's commitment to a revolutionary paradigm.

While her life will be read as unique to both her and her circumstances, it is at times representative of the role intellectuals play in fomenting revolution and the

revolutionary culture it requires. By examining the choices made by Lil Milagro, students of revolution—in Central America and elsewhere—will find a narrative that addresses issues relating to intellectual agency, the pragmatic resilience of the oppressed, and the particular coincidence of domestic and external events that can create a space for the emergence of a revolutionary culture.

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After spending the last two years writing this thesis, I realize that working on a project like this is a luxury that few individuals can afford, but it would not have been possible without assistance from many people. Dr. Susan Deeds invested both her time and energy in my entire graduate experience. Over the past four years, her guidance nourished and challenged my intellectual development, and for this, I am forever indebted. I would also like to thank Dr. Sheryl Lutjens for helping me work through my ideas on Marx and gender. Her expertise in these areas and her critical eye were instrumental in shaping my framework for examining Lil Milagro. Finally, I am grateful for Dr. Leilah Danielson's perpetual willingness to discuss my ideas on this project. Our numerous conversations were key in keeping me excited about my work.

Above all, I am indebted to my wife, Robyn, who lent her support and expertise to this project. Whether she was helping me with my Spanish, setting up interviews with former commanders of the FMLN, or introducing me to the country of El Salvador, she did more for me in this process than most spouses will ever do for their partner in an entire lifetime. Thank you *mi amor!*

A mis amigos de El Salvador y la familia de Lil Milagro, no puedo explicar mi gratitud por su ayuda. La historia de Lil Milagro es parte de mis pensamientos y mi alma. Espero que esta tesis inspira más personas a continuar la lucha por la justicia, compasión, y igualdad en el mundo. Muchísimas gracias a Alfredo Ramírez, José Napoleón Ramírez, Alfonso Huevo Cordova, Amada Bendeck, Luz América Choi, Kwan Choi, Gloria Videz Ramírez. Finalmente, gracias a mi amigo y compañero Edgard S. Ramírez, el sobrino de Lil Milagro y el abogado de los pobres.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGEUS	Asociación General de Estudiantes Universitarios Salvadoreños (General Association of Salvadoran University Students)
ANDES	Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños (National Association of Salvadoran Educators)
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (National Republican Alliance)
BPR	Bloque Popular Revolucionario (People's Revolutionary Bloc)
CROS	Comité de Reorganización Obrero Sindical Union Workers Committee for Reorganization
ERP	Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army)
FAPU	Frente de Acción Popular Unificada (United Popular Action Front)
FARN	Fuerzas Armadas de Resistencia Nacional (Armed Forces of National Resistance)
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)
FPL	Frente Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Front)
MESC	Movimiento Estudiantil Social Cristiano (Social Christian Student Movement)
MNR	Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Movement)
MPSC	Movimiento Popular Social Cristiano (Social Christian Popular Movement)
ORDEN	Organización Democrática Nacionalista (Nationalist Democratic Organization)
PAR	Partido de Acción Renovadora (Renewal Action Party)
PCN	Partido de Conciliación Nacional (National Pralogus Party)
PCS	Partido Comunista de El Salvador (Communist Party of El Salvador)
PDC	Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PRTC	Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Centroamericanos (Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers)
PRUD	Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática (Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification)

List of Abbreviations continued

RN	Resistencia Nacional (National Resistance)
UCA	Universidad Centroamericana ‘José Simeón Cañas’ (Central American University ‘José Simeón Cañas’)
UES	Universidad de El Salvador (University of El Salvador)
UNO	Unión Nacional Opositora (National Opposition Union)

INTRODUCTION

A REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN IN EL SALVADOR

The development of a revolutionary frame is obtained through daily actions.
Lil Milagro Ramírez¹

In the fall of 2001, recently married, I followed my wife to live in the country commonly known as the *pulgarcito*, or little thumb, of Central America. For an innocent and perhaps naïve boy from the Southwest who had never traveled further than the Gulf of Mexico, my experience in El Salvador forever changed the way I would view the world. Living in a small pueblo named San Pedro Massahuat, I was continuously shocked to discover the unbelievable resilience of the human spirit and the disappointing reality of third world poverty and oppression. It was in this context that I became familiar with the revolutionary passion many Salvadorans possess as they search for a way to deal with injustice and extreme inequality. At the time, it was difficult to understand how these people could believe that change was possible in a country notorious for violent dictators and an elitist oligarchy. Then in March 2005, a good friend from El Salvador sent me a letter written by a woman, his aunt, explaining to her father why she chose to take up arms and fight for equality in her country. This woman's name was Lil Milagro de la Esperanza Ramírez Huezo Córdova.

¹ Lil Milagro Ramírez quoted from Curriculum Brochure of the FMLN Escuela Central “Lil Milagro Ramírez”, H2 CE. 99J N68, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador. Spanish: *El desarrollo de un cuadro revolucionario se logra en el que-hacer diario*. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author. Moreover, in respect to Lil Milagro, her family, and Salvadoran scholars, and to compensate for the subjective nature of translations, I am including the Spanish original of any direct quotes taken from Lil Milagro's documents or other Spanish sources in the footnotes. At times, I also include portions of Lil Milagro's writing that are not included in the translated version. This is done to allow bilingual readers to gain further understanding of these passages.

Born in San Salvador, El Salvador, on April 3, 1946, Lil Milagro Ramírez began her life during a new era in world history. With the end of World War II, peace and prosperity seemed a viable possibility. Unfortunately, brewing within the backdrop of nuclear war, a new, more insidious battle was beginning to take shape—one that would have a dramatic impact on the entire world for more than thirty years. Infamously known as the Cold War, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics faced off in an ideological struggle between capitalism and communism.

For Latin America, this war was a draconian reality that transformed national battles for justice and freedom into proxy wars fought by the world's new superpowers. Like thousands of others, Lil Milagro became a victim of this war when a right-wing organization known as the Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN)² put her in a prison cell in 1976, and tortured her until her death in 1979. Her life bore testimony to how authoritarian governments dealt with radicals in Latin America during this epoch in history. Yet, there is so much more to her story than her tragic death.

Throughout her life, Lil Milagro assumed many roles. She was a Catholic, a daughter, a student, a poet, a traveler, a teacher, a friend, an intellectual and, most of all, a Salvadoreña. Those who knew this woman saw her as a revolutionary and martyr whose compassion for the people of her country led her to a remarkably selfless life. Historicizing and humanizing her transformation from a young girl who enjoyed climbing mango trees into a revolutionary fighting against a repressive and violent state is the challenge of this study. Key questions about power, agency, class, gender, intellectuals, and revolutionary culture frame my analysis. This study reveals a

² Throughout this thesis, please refer to translations for acronyms on page viii in the “List of Abbreviations.”

fascinating saga set in the historical context of politics and culture in El Salvador as it explores how family, the church, personal travel, moral commitment, and the university worked together to facilitate Lil Milagro's adoption of a revolutionary paradigm.

While her life will be read as both unique to her and her circumstances, it is a testament to the importance of intellectuals as they aid in the construction of social movements and revolutions. In examining the choices made by Lil Milagro, students of revolution—in Central America and elsewhere—will find a narrative that addresses issues relating to intellectual agency, gender, and the particular coincidence of domestic and external events that can create a space for the emergence of a revolutionary culture.

Resources and Methodology

In July 2006, I traveled to El Salvador to do research on Lil Milagro. While there, I found that uncovering her story was like walking into a Gabriel García Márquez novel. Stories spontaneously appeared and then collided, weaving a tapestry of magical realism. Whether I was in the mountains of Morazán or the urban jungle of San Salvador, I found pieces of her story scattered in the most obscure places. Through these experiences, I was reminded that Lil Milagro was one of more than 30,000 people who were disappeared or killed in El Salvador between 1979 and 1981.³

I became acutely aware of this fact when I visited a memorial at the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA) honoring Archbishop Oscar Romero and the six Jesuits who were massacred by the National Guard on November 16, 1989. Hanging on a wall in this museum was a collage of more than 400 faces, an illusion

³ British Broadcasting Corporation News. “Timeline of El Salvador.” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1220818.stm (accessed March 28, 2006).

which at first glance masked the fact that they were organized in a way that created an outline of Romero's face. After a deliberate effort to examine each person, I found Lil Milagro's eyes staring at me from the upper right-hand corner. It was as if she was patiently waiting to be rescued from relative obscurity.

During that time in El Salvador, I was fortunate enough to collect personal letters and a diary written by Lil Milagro that spanned her childhood and young adult life. I was also invited into the homes of her family and friends to record their memories of this fascinating, perhaps even mystifying, woman. Finally, I uncovered a variety of primary source documents dating from the 1970s to the 2000s, including newspapers and magazines that either comment on the revolutionary culture in El Salvador or speak of Lil Milagro's life and legacy.⁴ Contextualized within the secondary literature on revolution,

⁴ Primary sources include Lil Milagro's personal diary, which spans her childhood into her early 20s; an autograph book signed by various friends; records from the University of El Salvador and the Instituto de Cultural "Miguel de Cervantes"; letters written to friends and pen pals she acquired throughout her life; letters to her parents and family written during her clandestine activity; poetry she wrote for a women's Catholic organization (Ateneo Salvadoreño de Mujeres); written correspondence she had with members of a Catholic Movement known as La Jornada de Vida Cristiana; interviews with family members José Napoleon Ramírez, Luz América Choi, Kwan N. Choi, Gloria Videz Ramírez de Mulera, Amada Bendeck, Alfredo Ramírez, and Alfonso Huezo Córdova; interviews with her friend Miriam Medrano, who is a professor at the UES and is currently working on a monograph about Lil Milagro; newspaper articles from Salvadoran periodicals dating from 1970 to 2005, including *El Diario De Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *COLatino*, and *El Universitario*. Unless otherwise noted, all primary documents written by Lil Milagro are from Alfonso Huezo Córdova's private collection, San Salvador, El Salvador (hereafter referred to as AHPC). In addition, I found the testimonies of both Carlos Eduardo Rico Mira, *En silencio tenía que ser: Testimonio del conflicto armado en El Salvador*, (San Salvador, El Salvador: UFG Editores, 2004) and Ana Guadalupe Martínez, *Las cárceles clandestinas*, (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1992) useful for contextualizing Lil Milagro's experience within a broader revolutionary culture.

women, and culture, these sources offered a primary vehicle for analyzing how revolutionaries are made and the role they play in creating a revolutionary culture.⁵

Structure of Study

I begin, in chapter one, by establishing a framework for analyzing Lil Milagro's life, and the choices she made. Building on the work of scholars who emphasize individuals as the agents of revolution, including Michael Radu, Yvon Grenier, and Eric Selbin,⁶ my study examines an almost formulaic process in which individuals transcend class and gender as they evolve into revolutionaries willing to make extraordinary sacrifices in the name of justice, equality, and freedom. Although scholars such as Grenier and Radu have looked at the role of intellectuals in creating dissent in El Salvador, few have considered how they came to accept their revolutionary calling. As

⁵ Important secondary literature on El Salvador's civil war and the history leading up to this event includes: David Browning, *El Salvador: Landscape and Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Thomas Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971); Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador, The Face of Revolution* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982); James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982); Hugh Brynes, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996); Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004); Carlos Rafael Cabarrús, *Génesis de una revolución: Análisis del surgimiento y desarrollo de la organización campesina en El Salvador* (México, D.F: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1983).

⁶ For works that discuss the individual revolutionary's role in instigating revolution see Michael Radu, *Violence and the Latin American Revolutionaries* (New Brunswick: N.J., Transaction Books, 1988) and Yvon Grenier, *The Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999). For a discussion of agency and revolution, see Eric Selbin's *Modern Latin American Revolutions* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

Michael Radu comments, “one of the most amazing things about the abundant bibliography on Latin America’s revolutionary traditions and movements is the almost total absence of a serious analysis of the revolutionaries themselves.”⁷ Adding to this dynamic is the unfortunate lack of studies on women within this context. For this reason, this chapter includes in its framework a discussion of women and their role in the revolutionary vanguard.

Chapter one, therefore, creates the blueprint for mapping Lil Milagro’s life and its meaning. It does this by outlining three themes that will serve as the foundation for this study. First, it will define the meaning of hegemony and the local hegemonic process as it relates to El Salvador specifically. Second, it will delineate the specific traits that define individuals as intellectuals in El Salvador during the 1970s. Third, it will identify ways revolutionaries can create and be influenced by a revolutionary culture.

Chapter two explains the origins of El Salvador’s repressive 20th-century government and the ramifications of its violent policies on future generations of revolutionaries. It will conclude that a pattern of violence, first established in the 1930s, created a culture of fear that future intellectuals had to overcome. As one of these intellectuals, Lil Milagro’s middle class upbringing provides some clues as to how her identity helped her overcome this culture of fear. This chapter, therefore, explores how the hegemonic domination by elites did not hinder her intellectual development as a child and adolescent. Instead, living within a nurturing and intellectual middle-class family gave Lil Milagro the time and tools to construct a unique and even counter-hegemonic understanding of gender, class, religion, and morality at an early age.

⁷ Radu, *Violence and the Latin American Revolutionaries*, 1.

Chapter three traces the evolution of Lil Milagro's identity as she experienced life as a student at the Universidad de El Salvador (UES). Informed by relationships, religion, local events, and travel, this idealistic young woman began her adult life as a student and teacher, but ended it as a revolutionary. Her experiences provide the means for understanding Lil Milagro's transformation as well as the process through which individuals can come to embrace a revolutionary paradigm. Finally, this chapter portrays Lil Milagro as a passionate and rational individual who embraces revolution only in the context of extreme repression.

Finally, chapter four examines the last nine years of Lil Milagro's life as she worked as a clandestine operative for the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) and the Resistencia Nacional (RN), before finally spending four years in a secret jail. The chapter begins by examining the letters in which Lil Milagro justifies her decision to join an armed revolutionary struggle. After 1972, however, resources are less abundant and her story is told through the third-person accounts of her family and friends. Finally, this chapter ends with a brief discussion of Lil Milagro's legacy in El Salvador as it is seen through the eyes of family members, historians, and Salvadoran culture at large.

in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Jenny Pearce, *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1982); Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and the Pedagogy of Revolution: Popular Intellectuals and the Origins of the Salvadoran Insurgency*, 1998, unpubl. The support that the PDC offered the government during El Salvador's war with Honduras in *The couchsessions.com* "The fascinating and comprehensive book digs into Dali's influences and his development as an artist as well as how he is viewed today." ~ *Antiques and the Arts Weekly* "In an age when many artists make their life their work, seeing no separation between the two, it's important to revisit Dalí. The Making of an Artist allows us to do so, through a tandem overview of his life events and art production, accompanied by the works of artists who he influenced. The book is, in short, as genius and endlessly fascinating as its subject." ~ Download "LIL MILAGRO RAMIREZ (1946-1979): THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUAL IN EL SALVADOR. By Ryan Hightower Wilson". Error Born in 1946, Lil Milagro was a key member of a revolutionary struggle in El Salvador that began in the early 1970s. When she died in 1979, her life became an example of how authoritarian governments dealt with radicals in Latin America during the Cold War. Yet, there is so much more to her story than her tragic death. Throughout her life, Lil Milagro assumed many roles. She was a Catholic, a daughter, a student, a poet, a traveler, a teacher, a friend, an intellectual, and most of all a Salvadoran.