CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTING A REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

> No matter how the tyranny reacts, it cannot prevent the revolutionary process from advancing; history does not stop, for if one road closes another opens.
>
> Lil Milagro Ramírez[1]

When a country slightly smaller than Massachusetts experiences war, chaos can easily engulf even its most distant corners. From 1932 to 1992, the people of El Salvador confronted violence and repression as a seemingly quotidian reality. This, however, did not prevent individuals from challenging the government's repression. As Lil Milagro notes above, tyranny cannot stop the revolutionary process and history will open future roads for contesting domination. Words like these exemplify the revolutionary spirit of Salvadoran leaders from 1970 to 1994 and their fight against injustice and inequality in El Salvador manifested itself through a brutal 12-year civil war.

Not surprisingly, leaders who spoke out against the repression of the Salvadoran government were some of the first to die during the buildup to the civil war. Among the most famous included Mario Zamora, a government general in charge of the poor, Enrique Alvarez Córdova, president of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Catholic leader of El Salvador, and four Catholic nuns from the United State who were conducting solidarity work with their colleagues in El Salvador. With these high profile deaths, El Salvador began to separate into oppositional

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[1] Lil Milagro Ramírez to Tránsito Huezo Córdova, no date, Alfonzo Huezo Córdova private collection, San Salvador, El Salvador (hereafter referred to as AHCPC). Spanish: *Pero cualquiera que sea la reacción de la tiranía, no puede impedir que el proceso revolucionario avance, la historia no se detiene y si le cierran un camino, encuentro otros.*

factions. As Arthur Schmidt explains, "under these conditions, 1980 became a year of division into revolutionary and counterrevolutionary poles."[2]

Coinciding with these deaths, several organizations of the Left joined forces and began planning for a full-scale uprising. Known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), this group consisted of five revolutionary groups.[3] The Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS), the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) and the Central American Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRTC) originated from Marxist-Leninist roots, while the other two, the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN) and the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), emerged from youth who previously worked with the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). On January 10, 1981, the FMLN launched its first major military offensive in the country. Although the offensive failed to gain control of the government, it allowed the FMLN to create a haven of support in the western part of El Salvador, particularly in the municipality of Morazan and its capital Perquin. This "rear guard," as the FMLN would refer to it, aided the guerrillas in maintaining a zone of political, military, and cultural control that proved essential to the insurgency's success. As Schmidt explains:

> While [the 1980 offensive] proved that the insurgents could not topple the government through an all-out insurrection at that moment, the offensive helped to equip the guerrillas to wage a long-term conflict under adverse conditions against a much larger armed forces establishment.[4]

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[2] Arthur Schmidt, "Introduction: The Continuing Significance of El Salvador," in Mario Lungo Ucles, *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 1-39, 17.

[3] See Appendix B for a political map of the FMLN.

[4] Schmidt, *Introduction*, 19.

Reacting to this offensive and fearing another "communist uprising" similar to the Sandinista's rise to power in 1979 in Nicaragua, the United States quickly became a key player in maintaining the solvency of the Salvadoran government. Beginning under Carter's administration and then escalating under Reagan, the U.S. "disbursed about ten billion dollars in military and economic aid as part of its efforts to prevent revolution in Central America between 1980 and 1992."[5] This aid directly contributed to the longevity of the war in El Salvador and the death of more than 75,000 Salvadorans during the conflict.

When the war finally ended in 1992, the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) government and the FMLN signed a treaty that provided for military and political reforms. As Irina Carlota Silber explains, "elites conceded political democracy and the FMLN conceded a liberalized market economy."[6] Nevertheless, the events of this study took place before the outbreak of war in El Salvador. Specifically, I focus on Lil Milagro and her contribution to a revolutionary culture in the 1970s. For this reason, this chapter creates a framework that attempts to remain authentic in its pursuit to uncover the life of Lil Milagro Ramírez and her transformation into a revolutionary intellectual.

Building from the ideas of philosophers, historians, and political scientists such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, William Roseberry, Florencia Mallon, Theda Skocpol, and Ted Gurr, this chapter will circumnavigate the tendency to romanticize revolutionaries by looking at different ways of conceptualizing revolutionary intellectuals, revolutionary

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[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Irina Carlota Silber, "Not Revolutionary Enough?" in *Landscapes of Struggle*, ed., Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 148-166,163.

culture, hegemony, gender, and power. Unpacking such large concepts is a challenge, but it is the only way to create a practical blueprint for framing Lil Milagro's life. With this map as the starting point, we can begin to conceptualize her life in broader terms and place her within the story of El Salvador's revolutionary past.

A Brief Historiography of El Salvador

From an academic standpoint, El Salvador offers fertile ground for examining social constructions of class, gender, race, and power, and their relationship to politics, conflict, and revolutionary struggle. In 1971, two historical studies made significant original contributions to the historiography of El Salvador in the 20th century. In that year, both David Browning and Thomas Anderson published monographs that explored distinctive aspects of El Salvador's past.

Browning emphasized the relationships between different groups of inhabitants and their interaction with the land through four specific eras.[7] He began by exploring how the Pipil and Mayan indigenous groups of the area worked with the land as they emphasized spirituality and stewardship. He then highlighted how Spaniards attempted to impose a different cultural understanding of land use during the colonial period, one that gave priority to extractive industries like mining, which required the exploitation of indigenous labor. In his last two chapters, Browning demonstrated how capitalism, cash crops, and industrialization changed concepts of land use, dramatically altering political and cultural structures in El Salvador after independence.

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

In contrast to Browning, Thomas Anderson examined the country from a more political lens, emphasizing the rise of the Communist left and its role in creating the campesino[8] uprising known as La Matanza.[9] This seminal work laid the foundation for understanding not only Salvadoran history in the 20th century, but also the implications this uprising had in creating a culture of fear based on a repressive and militaristic political culture.

Of these two studies, Anderson's proved to be more influential in the work of subsequent scholars of El Salvador such as Robert Armstrong, Janet Shenk, James Dunkerley, and Hugh Brynes.[10] In fact, his work overshadowed Browning's analysis to such an extent that almost every study published in English after 1971 examined revolution and ideology in one way or another. This methodological bent typically pointed to economic disparity and repression as the sources of conflict in the country, or as Yvon Grenier suggests, "the dominant paradigm."[11] John Booth's explanation of the dominant paradigm effectively sums up this argument. He states:

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[8] I use the term campesino in this analysis to refer to both the ladino and indigenous peasants in El Salvador who lived and worked in rural areas. Because the root of this Spanish word is campo, which means rural areas, I believe it is a more accurate depiction of the rural nature of this class.

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

[10] See 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), and Hugh Brynes, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996).

[11] Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 10.

> Recent economic development trends worsened the region's historically extreme misdistribution of wealth and income, intensifying grievances in the '70s with the rapid expansion of Central America's rural and industrial proletariats, declining urban and rural real incomes and increasing concentration of wealth (especially agricultural land). Such problems led the aggrieved to demand change and sparked growing opposition to incumbent regimes by political parties, labor unions, religious community organizers, and revolutionary groups. Violent repression of opposition demands for reform in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala not only failed to suppress mobilization for change, but actually helped forge revolutionary coalitions that fought for control of the state.[12]

While the present study acknowledges and even perpetuates this paradigm, my analysis emphasizes the individual, specifically Lil Milagro, who both facilitated and was influenced by a revolutionary culture sweeping through Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Through this focus, hegemony and the hegemonic process provide the means for conceptualizing Lil Milagro's actions. As this study will show, Lil Milagro challenged the hegemony of the elite because she questioned the underpinnings of the dominant social order. Through this questioning, Lil Milagro became part of a hegemonic process similar to the one posited by William Roseberry and Florencia Mallon.

The Hegemonic Process in El Salvador

According to Roseberry, hegemony is a "common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination."[13] From this perspective, domination is the key to analyzing the underpinnings of a specific social order. This is certainly true in the case of El Salvador

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[12] Quoted in Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency,* 11. John Booth, *The End and the Beginning, the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982).

[13] William Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico,* eds. G. Joseph and D. Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 355-366.

as an elite oligarchy, military, and government maintained their control of society through fraudulent elections, self-appointed presidents, and initiatives that benefited capitalist expansion. The problem with Roseberry's definition is that it places too much emphasis on domination and overlooks the ability of non-elite groups to change a given social order. For this reason, I turn toward Mallon's suggestion that hegemony is a "a set of nested, continuous processes through which power and meaning are contested, legitimated, and redefined at all levels of society, [therefore] hegemony is a hegemonic process: it can and does exist everywhere at all times."[14] Because Mallon detaches domination from hegemony, she creates a space for recognizing that individuals from non-dominant classes can participate in the creation of a country's social order.

Combining these definitions, my analysis sees hegemony as a process in which all individuals have the capacity to challenge the dominant narrative. In order to accomplish this task, however, revolutionaries often create a fissure in the social order perpetuated by the actions of the dominant class. As we will see, intellectuals like Lil Milagro and institutions like the UES opened this crack in the social order by espousing an alternative conceptualization of the world. Mallon reminds us, however, that individuals struggle with the disparate levels of power and knowledge accorded to them by their respective class position in society.[15] With this caveat in mind, my study addresses how intellectuals used the advantages afforded to them by their class (i.e. advanced education,

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[14] Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

[15] Ibid., 10.

a voice in society, time to study and develop intellectually, etc.) as a way to interact with the hegemonic process in El Salvador.

This does not mean that the poor in El Salvador could not participate in the hegemonic process. In fact, as it is defined here, everyone interacts with this process by either substantiating or challenging the dominant narrative. For instance, Lil Milagro challenged the government's oppression of the poor because it was counterintuitive to her sense of justice and morality. From this perspective, the poor helped Lil Milagro claim agency because they opened her eyes to injustices she would then fight to rectify. Still, Lil Milagro was born into a middle class family that encouraged her to develop an alternative class perspective that allowed her to not only identify with the poor, but also to voice and act upon their concerns as if they were her own. This idea, that an individual can cross class lines, exposes the role that individual experiences play in determining whether or not an intellectual chooses to join a revolutionary cause. Such a statement builds directly from the ideas espoused by Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci concerning how an individual becomes a revolutionary intellectual.

The Gramscian Intellectual

While Karl Marx believed that the proletariat held the most potential for creating social change, he also viewed intellectuals as the framers of revolutionary thought. This understanding reflects the fact that Marx himself was not a member of the proletariat. In Michael Löwy's analysis of Marx and revolution, he suggests that movement between classes creates a dilemma of "imputed consciousness," or, as he questions, "by what criterion are we to attribute a set of ideas to a certain class or social grouping?" Löwy responds by suggesting that in industrial societies ideas tend to emerge from the "petty-

bourgeois intellectuals" whose professional activity is "spiritual production." Because individuals can move beyond their class origin, it is more important to understand what class an intellectual represents than the class to which she belongs.[16] This point identifies the first characteristic of a revolutionary intellectual, in that she/he must have the capability of bridging the gap between different classes and bringing the concerns and ideas of the oppressed to the forefront. As we shall see, Lil Milagro excelled in this area.

Another defining characteristic of revolutionary intellectuals involves understanding their class origin. Again, Löwy suggests that as class outsiders, intellectuals will always introduce "elements which are quite remote from the habitual concerns of [the poor]."[17] This creates the possibility that although intellectuals can claim to represent a class different from their own, it does not mean that this class will immediately or wholeheartedly accept their ideas. To acquire the support of a different class the revolutionary intellectual must work through a dialectic in which she/he "takes account of the opinions and attitudes of his 'public,' subjects his work to continual self-criticism, and directs it in accordance with the responses of his audience."[18] Only through this continuous cycle can an intellectual become a class's "theoretical representative," who is both trained in the institutions of the dominant culture and also "transcends these limitations" by "laying the foundations of a new conception of the

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[16] See Max Löwy , *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 6-7.

[17] Ibid., 8.

[18] Löwy builds from Gramsci's "Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce," (1978, L.U. Japadre, L'Aquila, 1978), 24-27 in this quote, Löwy, *Young Marx*, 7.

world."[19] Once an intellectual becomes a theoretical representative of an oppressed class, he/she transforms into a revolutionary intellectual who then acts in the interests of the poor.

Applying this framework to Lil Milagro, we see a similar dialectic at work. Born into a relatively small middle class in El Salvador, Lil Milagro would be influenced by experiences that only the middle class could have, such as education, travel, and security. In turn, these experiences exposed Lil Milagro to a conception of the world based on a Christian socialist understanding of equality, justice, and freedom. Having embraced this vision, Lil Milagro sympathized with the poor and fought for their liberation by assuming an impoverished lifestyle as a clandestine operative for the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) and later the Resistencia Nacional (RN). Thus, she bridged the gap between the middle classes and the poor, making her a "theoretical representative" of this latter class. In other words, at this point in her life she embodied the characteristics of a revolutionary intellectual.

With this process in mind, it is important to remember that individuals become intellectuals in different ways. The ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci offer some guidance in this area. For Gramsci, intellectuals may be classified as either organic or traditional intellectuals.[20] To explain these categories, he asks, "Can one find a unitary criterion to characterize equally all the diverse and disparate activities of intellectuals and to distinguish these at the same time and in an essential way from the activities of other

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[19] Ibid., 10.

[20] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

social groupings?"[21] The answer, he suggests, is not found in delineating the different types of activities intellectuals undertake, but by examining these activities in relation to their place in society. For Gramsci, this perspective reveals organic intellectuals as individuals who are likely to be from rural areas, outside urban centers where professionalism and a national philosophy are encouraged. He then sees their actions in society as representative of the "thinking and organizing elements" of their social class. In contrast, Gramsci suggests that traditional intellectuals emerge from urban areas trained in the professional organizations of the dominant society, such as politics, religion and education. Gramsci believes that this training enables them to reinforce the hegemonic domination of the elite.[22] George Lipsitz provides an interpretative definition of these categories that is worth quoting in length.[23] According to Lipsitz:

> Unlike traditional intellectuals, whose support from patrons, universities, and cultural institutions allows detachment from practical life, organic intellectuals learn about the world by trying to change it, and they change the world by learning about it from the perspective of the needs and aspirations of their social group.[24]

These interpretations, while important, do not completely apply to the situation in El Salvador. While traditional intellectuals often emerge from the institutions of the dominant culture to advance the ideas of the elite, this was not the case at the UES. Instead, the university served as an intellectual center for future leaders in the insurgency.

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[21] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 139.

[22] Ibid., 131.

[23] George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

[24] Ibid., 9-10.

Although it is common for universities to produce intellectuals that criticize society, in the 1960s and 1970s, the UES opened its doors to a new generation of students whose families had previously been excluded from higher education. With this access, the UES facilitated the creation of a cadre of individuals that could apply the ideas they learned at the university, which typically emphasized a Marxist understanding, to their own experiences.[25] This combination of theory and experience created passionate individuals who threatened the social order of El Salvador through both violent and non-violent means.

Second, traditional intellectuals are not always confined to the instructions of their training. For example, the government of El Salvador at first accepted Oscar Romero as Archbishop of El Salvador because it believed that his quiet nature and conservative teachings would not interfere with its power. However, Romero changed his perspective after a right-wing paramilitary group murdered his friend and colleague Rutilio Grande García. This experience with injustice transformed Romero into one of the most important figures in the Salvadoran resistance movement as he spoke out against violence and poverty. This example illustrates that a traditional intellectual's contact with "real life" can serve as a radicalizing experience, creating a parallel trajectory to that of an organic intellectual.

Lil Milagro's life story reveals traits of both the traditional and organic intellectual. On the surface, she qualifies as a traditional intellectual who was born in the urban center of San Salvador, attended an exclusive high school that would prepare her

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[25] In addition to the UES reform movement that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the UES also acquired a reputation of adhering to a strict Marxist perspective that infiltrated all levels of the university. See Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency,* 97-124. These ideas will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

for a career at the university, and was a teacher at the same high school she attended as a youth. If we move these characteristics into a localized context, however, a different picture emerges. For one thing, when cash crops were introduced to El Salvador in the twentieth century, a diverse and rurally oriented population came to live in the capital city. This migration allowed an urban middle class to emerge and even challenge some of the long held beliefs of the Salvadoran elite. Then in the 1950s, a university reform movement transformed the UES into a semi-autonomous institution controlled primarily by the growing urban middle class.[26] Already a breeding ground for revolutionary thought and discontent, the UES became the institution in which El Salvador's future revolutionaries formed their intellectual worldview. Finally, with the rise of liberation theology, the Catholic Church began to undermine the hegemonic control of the elite. Within this context, Lil Milagro's life and actions apply to both the organic and traditional categorization of intellectuals.

In the case of El Salvador and Lil Milagro, Gramsci's categorization of intellectuals requires some modification. Here it is more useful to suggest that the characteristics that typify a traditional or organic intellectual are not mutually exclusive; therefore, an individual can embody characteristics of both categories. Intellectuals are in constant interaction with the hegemonic process as they question and seek to redefine the parameters of society. Still, Gramsci's work emphasizes the importance of intellectuals within a revolutionary movement and it provides a way for understanding the attributes these individuals possess. At the same time, Lil Milagro's story underscores the importance of examining intellectuals within the historical circumstances of their time.

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[26] James Dunkerley points out that between 1962 and 1969 the student population doubled in size at the UES. See Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 70.

Historian Jeffrey Gould offers some insight on this point. According to Gould, those who view revolutionary movements from a top-down approach that privileges class and political conflict over its historical environment, deny the uniqueness of an individual's experience.[27] In his study of the Nicaraguan province of Chinandega, Gould places the origins of campesino resistance in 1912, decades before the Sandinistas rose to power. Gould's study emphasizes the idea that radicalization is not solely dependent on a particular class ideology. Instead, Gould illustrates that in Chinandega, a collective experience with sugar barons over the course of sixty years gave campesinos the tools to resist the Somoza dictatorship in 1912.

Like these campesinos, Lil Milagro did not simply awake one day and decide to be a revolutionary adhering to a Christian socialist framework. Instead, her cumulative experiences with injustice, her middle class upbringing and her frustration with a corrupt and often violent political system influenced her decision to join the leftist insurgency in El Salvador. Understanding how she came to this conclusion underscores the importance of placing her actions within their historical context.

Identifying an Intellectual Revolutionary

One of the problems with suggesting that intellectuals have the capability of being both organic and traditional is that it is easy to categorize anyone who questions the social order as an intellectual. In fact, Jorge Castañeda reminds us that in "Latin America, where societies are polarized and knowledge and social recognition are rare,

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[27] Jeffrey Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

almost anyone who writes, paints, acts, teaches, and speaks out, or even sings, becomes "an intellectual."'[28] To avoid this trap, my framework for analyzing intellectuals and their characteristics emphasizes two points. First, a country's historical past must be considered before we can understand the emergence of intellectuals. Second, an intellectual's actions must be historicized according to the environment that surrounded her/him.

> In the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* Marx writes:
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> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.[29]

As this quote indicates, Marx sees revolutionary change as shaped by a society's past, particularly structural precedents created by the inequalities of capitalism. In El Salvador, however, a strikingly concrete manifestation of this idea is seen in the influence that the genocidal massacre of 30,000 indigenous people in El Salvador in 1932 had on the population. During the fifty years following this event, the military established a pattern of violent repression that was often directed towards anyone who challenged the social order. In fact, the Jesuit priest Martín-Baroí once argued that this repressive pattern led campesinos to develop a fatalistic attitude that prevented them from fighting for change.[30] As he explains:

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[28] Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1993), 177.

[29] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

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

> Fatalism is a way of understanding human existence as a condition in which everyone's fate is already predetermined and everything happens inescapably. Human beings have no choice but to defer to their destiny and submit to the lot that their fate prescribes for them.[31]

To break down this bulwark, campesinos needed a dramatic change in the theological underpinnings of Catholicism, which came in the form of liberation theology in the 1970s.

This idea, that campesinos needed guidance to overcome their fatalism, points to the role intellectuals play in creating an alternative social understanding. Whether it is organic or traditional intellectuals creating an alternate vision, they play a critical role in altering historical understanding. The difference between intellectuals and campesinos in this instance is that intellectuals are more likely to believe that they can change society despite an oppressive history. The reason for this belief is often found in an intellectual's upbringing. In other words, intellectual development within a privileged upbringing fosters a more idealistic understanding of the world because these individuals are not forced to deal with the hardship of poverty and, thus, can acquire knowledge and skills that allow them to believe that change is possible. In the case of Lil Milagro, we will see that growing up in a middle class family that encouraged an idealistic and even revolutionary understanding of the world was invaluable to her intellectual development. Over time, this strong support network allowed her to overcome obstacles that interfered with the manifestation of her ideals and remain convinced of her capacity to create an alternative social order.

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[31] Ibid., 200. Ultimately he argued that this fatalistic stance could be overcome through the recovery of memory, popular organization and class practice; see pages 218-219.

The idea that intellectuals believe they can create change also underscores the importance of contextualizing their actions according to their environment. When historians focuse solely on movements and shifts in political ideology within a country, it is easy to view the actors in this process as extraordinary and unique. Although there may be some truth to this assertion, revolutionary intellectuals do not emerge overnight. Instead, they encounter many experiences that shape their revolutionary passion and their ability to galvanize support for a particular cause. For this reason, understanding the process in which actors become revolutionary intellectuals requires a thorough examination of their entire life and not simply those moments when they acted out in the public sphere.

Moreover, distinguishing between public and private actions of resistance provides a way of conceptualizing individual radicalization. Given the level of military repression in El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s, revolutionaries accepted death as a real possibility if they challenged the dominant social order. Whether or not an individual acts in the public arena is therefore an important measure of agency and the degree of their radicalization. As we will see, the more radicalized Lil Milagro became, the more likely she was to act out in the public sphere. By looking at her radicalization within her historical context, this thesis will humanize her transformation into a revolutionary intellectual.

Beyond this discussion of agency and radicalization, we must not discount the possibility that a broader revolutionary movement can encourage an individual's actions in the public sphere. As Yvon Grenier points out:

> Radical ideologies and the romanticisation of armed struggle…were not merely a last resort response to injustice, exclusion and repression, as most analysts have

> asserted. [Instead] they were pivotal elements of a new post-developmentalist and countercultural disposition.[32]

Grenier's assertion suggests that radical ideologies were spreading across Latin America during the latter half of the 20th century. With this radical influence, armed struggle became a common event throughout Latin America at this time. This brings up the question: to what degree were these movements completely indigenous to their country or part of a broader political movement sweeping through Latin America? This is where the term revolutionary culture enters into my analysis.

Unpacking the Revolutionary Process

At first sight, terms such as revolutionary culture seem like a romantic way to describe the cultural manifestations of a discontented population. After all, the idea that revolutionary thinking can seep into a national culture is the stuff of leftists' dreams. Even the term "revolutionary" is difficult to accurately describe, not to mention the thousands of pages written about the term "culture." Grenier identifies this quagmire well when he states, "When a notion is so stretchable and 'enchanted' it becomes a slogan that, even though it is inspiring as an object of research, can hardly be used as a sufficiently neutral and circumscribed concept for research."[33] At the same time, I would argue that refraining from using the terms revolution or revolutionary altogether denies the understandings of those who viewed themselves as part of a movement that would bring about radical social change. Nevertheless, it is important to define how I will use

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[32] Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency,* 34.

[33] Ibid., 24.

these terms. Perhaps the best place to start is by examining the various ways political scientists have explained revolution.

In political science, the study of revolution has evolved in three stages. Beginning with what Jack Goldstone calls the "natural histories of revolution," scholars looked at this phenomenon by comparing the most famous revolutions in world history and then delineating the similarities among them.[34] Through this process, scholars found a number of seemingly indisputable characteristics. Among the ideas they argued, three are important for the purposes of this study. First, this school of thought pointed out that before a revolution takes places there is a tendency for intellectuals to cease supporting the regime in power. Second, as local and international conditions worsened, the state often made reforms as a last ditch effort to appease the masses. Finally, an untimely political crisis combined with the two previous factors served as the impetus for the weakening of the state and the outbreak of revolution. This simplistic explanation eventually gave way to scholarship that began examining the causes of revolution from a more psychological standpoint.

Through the 1950s and 1960s scholars such as Ted Gurr, Samuel Huntington, and Charles Tilly added psychological behavior and modernization theory to the field. For Ted Gurr, a frustration-anger-aggression theory could explain why groups in society rebelled. He states, "the basic frustration-aggression proposition is that the greater the frustration, the greater the quantity of aggression against the source of frustration."[35] In

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[34] Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* (Chicago, IL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1986), 2.

[35] Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 9.

other words, when a group in society has its expectations raised without being provided the means to change their conditions, their frustration escalates, thereby creating a politically destabilizing situation and, ultimately, a violent revolution.

Although Gurr's thesis is a compelling one, it fails to acknowledge many of the structural factors involved in revolutions. According to the second generation of revolutionary scholarship, structural is defined as how a society organizes its political, cultural, and governmental systems. Building from Gurr's work, Samuel Huntington therefore offered another perspective. In his estimation, revolutions were the result of political development lagging behind social and economic advancement. Huntington moved beyond Gurr by suggesting that revolutions are a "rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership and government activity and policies."[36] Although this definition seems plausible, Huntington confined revolution to a phenomenon that must be violent and rapid, thus denying the possibility that other types of insurrections such as passive resistance or non-violent coups be included. At the same time, he created a space to argue that revolutions are a subset of modernization and therefore a "historically limited phenomenon" that only occurs in modern times. He makes this argument by assuming that revolutions are a manifestation of the "belief that it is within the power of man to control and to change his environment and that he has not only the ability but the right to do so."[37] Although Huntington attempted to look at

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[36] Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 264.

[37] Huntington, *Political Order*, 265.

structural factors precipitating revolutions, his narrow definition had many critics, perhaps the most recognized of whom was Charles Tilly.

Like Huntington, Tilly also builds from assumptions based on modernization within society, but he proposes a more nuanced understanding of why revolutions occur.[38] In his analysis, "multiple sovereignty" is the best prognosticator for revolution. As he explains, "a revolution begins when a government previously under the control of a single, sovereign polity becomes the object of effective, competing, mutually exclusive claims from two or more separate polities."[39] In other words, when two competing groups oppose each other they attempt to persuade others to support their cause. When enough people jump on the proverbial bandwagon, the two groups clash as if they were separate sovereign entities. Although it is valid to suggest that opposition groups must have enough support and resources to challenge those in power, Goldstone offers an important critique of both Huntington's and Tilly's analyses. He questions why irreconcilable differences lead to a revolution and not to a state's "gradual decline or decay."[40] In answering this criticism, the third generation of theories of revolution offers valuable insights, which also guide my understanding of revolution.

Among the most respected scholars in the third generation we find Theda Skocpol and her explanation of why revolutions occur. Skocpol examines revolutions from a structural perspective that focuses on relationships, to emphasize that "all modern social

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[38] Charles Tilly, "Does Modernization Breed Revolution?," *Comparative Politics* 5 (1973): 425-453.

[39] Ibid., 429.

[40] Goldstone, "Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation," *World Politics,* 13, 3 (April 1980), 434.

revolutions must be seen as closely related in their causes and accomplishments to the internationally uneven spread of capitalist economic development and nation-state formation on a world scale."[41] Given this idea, states with little influence in an international capitalist arena are more likely to have difficulty implementing modernizing initiatives. From this perspective, Skocpol places modernization at the core of her theory by suggesting that agrarian bureaucracies must undergo fundamental structural changes in order to join the modernized world. At the same time, she departs from scholars such as Huntington and Tilly who use modernization as a way to focus on "socioeconomic tendencies and conflicts within national societies." Instead, Skocpol believes that it is a mistake to assume developing countries will progress in the same manner as modernized capitalist countries. In her words, "as capitalism has spread across the globe, transnational flows of trade and investment have affected all countries—though in uneven and often contrasting ways."[42]

Skocpol then suggests that states are "potentially autonomous." By this, she means that states act according to their own vested interests in the international and national arena, regardless of whether or not they claim to represent a particular class.[43] States act to "maintain order and to compete with other actual or potential states."[44] Therefore, states that support the interests of the dominant class are not inevitably tied to

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[41] Theda Skocpol, *State and Social Revolutions: Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 18.

[42] Ibid., 20.

[43] Ibid., 27.

[44] Ibid., 30.

this relationship. In fact, Skocpol meticulously illustrates that throughout history states sometimes work with marginalized groups in order to maintain their power in society. As she sees it, a state has "a structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to, or fused with, the interests of the dominant class in society or the full set of member groups in the polity."

Although Skocpol's emphasis on state autonomy is revealing in the cases of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, in El Salvador it is difficult to separate the interests of the state from those of the oligarchy. In fact, after the genocidal massacre in 1932, the oligarchy ruled with an iron-fist, with General Martínez as their henchmen. Within this oppressive environment, a culture of fear began to emerge, particularly among rural campesinos. As the historian Anna Peterson explains:

> Poor people have lived, at least since 1932…and arguably since the conquest, in a culture of fear. This culture includes [among other things] lack of access to information…impediments to social organizations…vagueness of legal definitions for criminal activity…and open physical coercion, including torture, death, and the impunity with which these crimes are committed.[45]

Then, when the oligarchy felt that Martínez was not acting in their interests, it staged a revolutionary coup to oust him from power. These actions underpin the idea that state autonomy in El Salvador did not exist until modernization forced the country to reevaluate the structure of this agrarian bureaucracy in the 1950s.

To Skocpol's credit, she suggests that the extent to which states are autonomous varies depending on the historical circumstances of a given case.[46] In the case of El

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[45] Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 157.

[46] Skocpol examines the three great revolutions of France, Russia and China to illustrate that in each case the state acted in its own interests in order to maintain power. These actions illustrate that the government in these countries exercised some autonomy that

Salvador, eventually modernization divided the oligarchy between agrarian traditionalists and modernizing reformers. At this point, the state found some autonomy and exercised it by granting limited political participation to labor groups, students, and theologians in the country. Granted, these groups were also the most oppressed sectors in society, but at different periods in El Salvador's history the state did make concessions that appeased these groups, if only temporarily. Because of these actions by the state, Skocpol's understanding of the international context of revolutions and her emphasis on the potential autonomy of the state are applicable in an examination of revolutionary culture in El Salvador.

Latin American scholars have also suggested that Skocpol underestimates the role revolutionaries play in creating revolution. Specifically, the work of Eric Selbin and Yvon Grenier stresses the importance of intellectuals as agents in creating revolution. As Grenier states:

> Skocpol once asserted revolutions are made by countries, not by revolutionaries… [but] in contemporary developing countries, insurgencies are initiated by insurgents, not by countries. Countries make them more or less successful, but insurgents provide the impetus.[47]

Although Grenier's suggestion that "countries" make revolutions is confusing, his emphasis on the revolutionaries themselves is what this thesis emphasizes. Similar to Grenier, Eric Selbin believes that the "social revolution in particular—defined as it is by the effort to transform society—is largely the result of, composed of, and driven by

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was at times counter-productive to the interests of the elite. This conflict between the elites and the government opened a space for competing groups to use the state's actions as a way of claiming power or instigating a revolution. See Skocpol, *State and Revolutions*.

[47] Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency,* 2.

human action, not simply structural phenomena."[48] This strand in the third generation of revolutionary scholarship places the emphasis for understanding revolutions at the feet of the revolutionaries themselves and not on the structural factors that might encourage or determine revolutionary action.

While each generation of revolutionary scholarship offers unique and compelling ways to study the phenomenon, historical studies do not claim to predict when and how revolutions will occur. Instead, the goal of the historian—particularly if one adheres to a perspective that emphasizes a cultural history—is to present a complex and nuanced representation of power, culture, and resistance in the past by looking at case studies where these forces intermingle. This can be advanced by employing a cross-disciplinary approach that focuses not only on political science and history, but also uses anthropology, sociology, religion and any other discipline that might aid in our understanding of complex events from the past.[49] For this reason, I have drawn on a variety of theories and approaches to revolution as a means of creating a framework that can be used to study revolution and the revolutionaries who create it.

My framework assumes that revolutions are a process and revolutionaries are a catalyst for this process. The process begins when organic or traditional intellectuals become frustrated with the social, economic, and political situation created by the regime in power. Thus, Gurr is useful for emphasizing the frustration of intellectuals, who,

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[48] Ibid., 66.

[49] Among others, Steve Stern discusses how the incorporation of different disciplines in historical research creates new "sensibilities and questions" that aid in the understanding of culture and politics. See Steve Stern, "Between Tragedy and Promise" in *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History,* ed. G. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 32-77.

according to the natural history perspective, are the first contingent in society to question the regime in power. At the same time, intellectuals must either have or create a valid and recognized space in society to successfully challenge the old regime. This space can be created through violent actions, protests, strikes, or even "hidden transcripts" as explained by James C. Scott.[50] Without this space, intellectuals might not believe that societal change is possible.

On the other hand, if they believe they have not only the ability but the right to change society their efforts can lead to a change in the dominant values and myths of a society. Clearly, this statement agrees in part with Huntington's understanding of revolution, in that he sees revolutions as the "ultimate expression of the modernizing outlook, the belief that it is within the power of man to control and to change his environment."[51] Moreover, the ability to believe in radical change comes partly from international events and actors that encourage intellectuals in other countries. In fact, the scholar Carlos Rafael Cabarrús illustrates this dynamic in El Salvador when he suggests:

> Inside the [solidarity movements of socialist countries] we clearly see the role the Socialist International played in supporting both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutions; without this nexus they would lack the external relations, the money, and a front of support to successfully resist North American pretensions.[52]

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[50] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[51] Huntington, *Political Order*, 2

[52] Cabarrús, *Génesis de una revolución*, 390. Spanish: *Los límites del apoyo europeo son más restringidos que la solidaridad de los países socialistas….Dentro de este marco internacional aparece con claridad el papel que juega la Internacional Socialista. Es sostén del proceso salvadoreño como también lo fue para Nicaragua; sin ese nexo faltarían las relaciones externas, el dinero, y un frente de apoyo capaz de oponerse a las pretensiones norteamericanas*

As this passage indicates, international support was critical for Salvadoran revolutionaries to acquire the resources necessary to challenge their government. Because of this international support, the United States then reacted by sending aid to the Salvadoran government in the form of weapons, financial support, and military advisors. Many scholars believe that the battle between these international forces largely explains why the war continued for 12 years.

Although it is impossible to deny that the U.S. played a large part in extending El Salvador's civil war, we must not ignore the agency of the revolutionaries themselves. I explain their capacity to endure extremely harsh conditions as they pursued their goals of social justice in terms of moral commitment and pragmatic resilience. Without their efforts and commitment to build a network of support, military aid from the United States would have ended the war quickly. Instead, the revolutionaries were able to bring the Salvadoran government to the negotiating table, suggesting that they not only convinced the population to embrace their vision but that they also achieved what Eric Selbin calls a "negotiated revolution."[53] In his words,

> The Salvadoran peace accords raise the question of where this leaves the revolutionary process. The glib response is that the revolution is over. Yet that is not entirely clear. The revolutionaries were not militarily defeated and were able to negotiate a political and social accord with the government as equals. Although the primary focus of the accords was on the military and the security forces, implicit in the agreement reached was acceptance of some core elements of the revolutionary project.[54]

[53] Selbin, *Modern Revolutions*, 135.

[54] Ibid.

Debates about the successes of the revolutionary movement notwithstanding, it should be clear that my analysis combines these theories as a way of emphasizing revolutionaries, like Lil Milagro, as the catalysts for the emergence of a revolutionary process.

Centering Gender and Culture

To this point, I have explained a framework based in particular understandings of hegemony, intellectuals, agency, and revolutionaries. Yet perhaps the most important contribution of my study is to show how Lil Milagro's ideas and actions were informed by gendered cultural traditions. Fortunately, access to Lil Milagro's diaries, letters, poetry, and relatives' memories allows me to not only understand how she came to embrace a revolutionary paradigm, but how her feminist ideas interacted with her involvement in a revolutionary culture.

Most of the work on women and revolution in El Salvador focuses specifically on the outcomes of the revolutionary struggle/civil war. This might reflect the nature of revolutionary struggle itself, since most scholars agree that women's issues often took a back seat to a more class-based approach that emphasized the liberation of the poor. In fact, Enrique Baloyra points out that the principal objectives of the Salvadoran struggle failed to include women as a primary emphasis.[55] On the other hand, the feminist scholar Linda Lobao suggests that the revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador recognized women's rights as a significant component of their struggle.[56] Valentine

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[55] Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 165.

[56] Linda Lobao, "Women in Revolutionary Movements: Changing Patterns of Latin American Guerrilla Struggle" in *Women and Social Protest,* eds. G. West and R. Lois Blumberg (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 180-204.

Moghadam goes further to categorize the revolutionary movement in El Salvador as part of her "women's emancipation or modernizing model,"[57] because women were not only leaders within the revolutionary vanguard but also combatants.

After the signing of the peace accords in 1992, this recognition of women expanded as organizations such as the Association of Salvadoran Women championed women's rights more vocally within the public realm. This post-conflict period of the revolution has been examined thoroughly by scholars such as Julie Shayne[58] and Karen Kampwirth.[59] Although these authors offer important perspectives on women and revolution, scholars have yet to examine women's roles during the build-up to the civil war. This emphasizes the gendered nature of scholarship on revolution, particularly when considering that the first organization to directly resist the government consisted of primarily women constituents. Known as the Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños (ANDES), this group held massive demonstrations in 1968 and 1971 that opened the door for further resistance later in the decade, yet it has received little attention in the scholarship on revolutions. Lil Milagro's story provides an opportunity to close this gap in gendered scholarship because she was a prominent woman in the revolutionary vanguard.

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[57] Valentine Moghadam, "Gender and Revolutions," in *Theorizing Revolutions*, ed. J. Foran (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 137-165.

[58] Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

[59] Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).

As we will see in subsequent chapters, Lil Milagro encountered feminist influences from an early age. Yet despite these circumstances, she often chose to ignore desires that would accentuate a traditional female role while she participated in the revolutionary struggle. For instance, she resisted romantic relationships, criticized the institution of marriage, and often argued with her mother about the role of women in society. From this perspective, we can claim that Lil Milagro sacrificed traditional female roles for the revolutionary cause. Yet, to explain her stance and actions, it is necessary to examine how culture determined women's roles in Salvadoran society.

For the purposes of this study, culture is defined here within the parameters set forth by the cultural turn in historical studies. In particular, I have found the work of William Sewell, Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt to be useful.[60] According to Hunt and Bonnell, "the most important characteristic of cultural studies is that they depend on a range of explanatory paradigms and deal fundamentally with issues of domination, that is, contestations of power."[61] Because examining how power and domination were challenged in El Salvador is at the heart of my analysis, it is essential to look at this dynamic within the revolutionary culture itself. Often issues of power surfaced resulting in the disenchantment of party members, clashes between revolutionary organizations, and even executions of prominent members in the revolutionary vanguard by others

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[60] Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, "Introduction," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn:* New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*,* eds. V. Bonnell and L. Hunt (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 1-32.

[61] Ibid., 10.

within the movement.[62] Fortunately, Sewell's definition of culture helps to explain this phenomenon.

According to Sewell, culture is a "contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable"[63] phenomenon. This means that in any culture, whether it is dispersed throughout a society or localized to a specific group, there are always ephemeral elements that can change and evolve as individuals interact with each other. To understand this dynamic further we can look at how contestations of gender were common within the revolutionary culture.

When Sewell assumes that culture is contradictory, he is suggesting that "cultural worlds are commonly beset with internal contradictions." For example, in El Salvador machismo is a longstanding social construction that limits female agency in all sectors of society, even the revolutionary vanguard. On the other hand, women like Lil Milagro participated within this revolutionary landscape and often were leaders in the struggle. As already noted, even scholars such as Moghadam point to El Salvador as an example of a revolution that emphasized women's emancipation. As we will see, however, this was not the revolution's primary goal, and all too often, the liberation of the poor took precedence over women's emancipation. For instance, women were able to participate in many revolutionary activities, both violent and political, but once they became pregnant their capacity for working within the vanguard was limited. Although this gave women

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[62] The most well known example of the revolutionary vanguard executing members of their own party is the execution of the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton who was accused of being a CIA spy because he wanted to lead the ERP in a different direction.

[63] William Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn,* eds. V. Bonnell and L. Hunt (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 35-61.

access to the revolution, it denied the capacity of mothers to assume key roles within the revolutionary vanguard.[64]

Another aspect of Sewell's definition emphasizes culture as a complex and loosely integrated phenomenon. As individuals interact within a specific milieu they bring different and sometimes opposing viewpoints together. This creates a situation in which groups with different needs and goals contest the hegemony of the dominant social order. In the case of El Salvador, we will see that although gender issues would at times play second fiddle to class within the revolutionary culture, women were critical in organizing and building support for the insurgency. As sociologist Julie Shayne suggests, women acted as "gendered revolutionary bridges" that "partially closed the gap between the organized left and unincorporated citizens."[65] Shayne explains her assertion by pointing to examples where women were more successful in persuading campesino and urban communities to follow the leadership of the revolutionary vanguard.

Given these understandings, my analysis goes one step further by suggesting that gender is an important factor in a revolutionary's identity. For example, Lil Milagro constantly debated issues relating to her gender and a culture characterized by *machismo*.

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[64] There are examples of female leaders in the FMLN who were also mothers. The most recognized of these is Nidia Díaz, who fought with the FMLN and was captured by the Salvadoran military. Although her example suggests that women could be mothers as well as revolutionaries, her circumstances dictated that she conceal her identity as a mother because it jeopardized her family as well as her ability to withstand intense interrogation. Moreover, she became a mother before joining the revolutionary vanguard. Female combatants, however, relocated to refugee camps as soon as they became pregnant. Karen Kampwirth traces this trend in *Women and Guerrilla Movements Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (University Park, PN: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). For more on the decisions of Nidia Díaz see her testimony, *I Was Never Alone* (New York: Talman Co, 1992).

[65] Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 43.

To reconcile this conflict, she both ignored and affirmed her identity as a woman depending on the context of her interactions. For instance, when writing to pen pals in different countries, she exuded a caring personality that accentuated her nurturing side. Yet when confronted with issues that directly challenged her ability to perform in a male-oriented environment, she intentionally rejected any rules society placed on women by opting to take on a more masculine role. This can be seen in how male leaders within the revolution referred to her resiliency and passion in their writings. Such a dynamic suggests that as gender interacts with culture it shapes the range of outcomes that can emerge.

Conclusion

In a letter to her mother during her clandestine life, Lil Milagro wrote, "The one thing that we are sure of is that the economic crisis is getting worse and hunger will overtake everyone in the cities and countryside because there is no accountability for the government's incapacity to plan and for the rapacity of the exploiters, leaving the people to suffer once again."[66] Like Lil Milagro, revolutionary intellectuals in El Salvador looked at their country and saw rampant injustice. Yet, it would be foolish to claim that injustice was the only impetus for Lil Milagro to join a revolutionary movement. By historicizing her life, writings, and actions, subsequent chapters will tell a story that is both representative of revolutionaries in El Salvador, and unique to Lil Milagro. Using the framework outlined in this chapter, I will show how Lil Milagro embodied the

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[66] Lil Milagro to Mother, Date not available, AHCPC. Spanish: *De una cosa sí estamos seguros, se avecina una verdadera crisis económica, el hambre va a recrudecerse en el campo y las ciudades, porque la incapacidad de planificación de los gobiernos y la rapacidad de los explotadores, no miden consecuencias, y de nuevo el pueblo a sufrir.*

characteristics of an intellectual, how her actions can be explained by her experiences, how her writings provide insight into the process by which revolutionaries are made, and how Lil Milagro's ideas of womanhood changed according to the different environments in which she lived during her revolutionary struggle.