CHAPTER FOUR

AWAKENING THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE WITHIN (1971-1979)

Awakening

I was gentle and peaceful,
A flower.
But gentleness isn't a wall
That hides misery
And I saw injustice,
And strikes and rebellions
By ordinary people
Exploded before my astonished eyes.
And instead of absurd pity
And sympathetic hypocrisy
My indignation burst forth
And I felt myself united with my sisters and brothers.
And every strike hurt me,
And every cry struck me
Not only in my head or ears
But in my heart.
My white gentleness fell
Dead at the feet of hunger,
I undressed myself, weeping at its veils
And new clothing clung to my flesh.
My arms now in the springtime of struggle,
My red-hot blood protesting,
My body olive green
An incendiary passion consumes me
…and nevertheless
I keep feeling as before,
A lover of peace,
I want to fight for it—desperately
Because from the beginning
I have dreamt of peace.[1]

--Lil Milagro[2]

During the summer of 1970, Lil Milagro's dream of living in Paris came true. "One day she just decided to go, " explained her friend Miriam Medrano, "she said I am

[1] Translation: Barbara Paschke.

[2] Lil Milagro Ramírez, "Awakening" in *Volcán: Poems from Central America: A Bi-lingual Anthology*, eds. Alejandro Murguia and Barbara Paschke (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1983), 14.

going and that was it."[3] Obviously, she felt that fulfilling this dream was an important step in her maturation and thus made the decision despite her parents' hesitation to bless her journey. Perhaps they understood that their daughter was entering a new phase in her life, and thus were worried about the consequences. Although they did not view her desire to live in Paris as a dangerous activity by itself, they became concerned over the ramifications of her defiance. Karen Kampwirth offers some clarity on this tension when she suggests, "the same parents who had inculcated anti-dictatorial values in their daughters were terrified when they realized that she was actively involved in opposing the dictatorship."[4] Without a doubt, Lil Milagro felt some conflict over this decision, evident in the fact that her first letter from France begins by thanking her parents for respecting her decisions even if they disagreed with her actions.[5] In the end, however, her parents' suspicions proved to be true.

Upon her return from Paris, Lil Milagro made the biggest decision of her young adult life and left the university to join the revolutionary organization known as the ERP. For a woman from a family who placed an extraordinary value on education, this monumental decision changed Lil Milagro's life forever. At that moment she transformed from a daughter, student, and Christian activist into a revolutionary intellectual willing to make extraordinary sacrifices in the name of social justice and equality.

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[3] Interview, Miriam Medrano, June 8, 2006, San Salvador, El Salvador.

[4] Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements,* 62.

[5] Lil Milagro to Parents, July 27, 1970, AHCPC. Spanish: *Antes que nada, agradecerles en el alma, lo comprensiones que han sido; es bastante difícil, casi imposible encontrar padres que respetan las decisiones de sus hijos aunque no están de acuerdo con ellas.*

Her poem "Despertar," or "Awakening," that opens this chapter, provides a glimpse into Lil Milagro's unsettled emotions during this crucial moment in her life. Using metaphorical language, she explains her conversion from a "gentle and peaceful flower" who burst forth with indignation to join her "sisters and brothers" in a revolutionary armed struggle. Moreover, this poem shows that the sense of peace and compassion that underpinned her identity as a woman and possible mother could no longer shield her from the repressive nature of the Salvadoran government after she witnessed its brutality during events such as the ANDES strikes. In this poem, Lil Milagro sacrifices her identity as a woman on the altar of social justice. This gendered perspective alludes to the process many women experienced when they joined an armed struggle. In fact, the idea of sacrifice is a common theme in women's studies, particularly among scholars like Heidi Hartmann who adhere to a Marxist feminist perspective. According to her work, women's liberation "requires first, that women become wage workers like men, and second, that they join with men in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism."[6] Although, in this case, Lil Milagro did not become a member of the working class, this chapter will illustrate why she believed that the revolutionary struggle to liberate all people took precedence over women's liberation.

Another theme that we can extrapolate from this poem is the interplay between violence and nonviolence. Clearly, Lil Milagro felt a need to justify her actions, particularly if they were of a violent nature. This justification revolved around a sense of desperation that located her actions as a decision forced by the government's

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[6] Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,* ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 1-42.

determination to prevent social change from occurring through any other means. As her poem explains, "I saw injustice, and strikes and rebellions by ordinary people exploded before my astonished eyes." At the same time, she did not justify her violent actions as solely motivated by the repressive nature of the military. Instead, Lil Milagro viewed the hypocrisy of her peers as one of the greatest obstacles to overcome in her country. Her frustration with the complacency and complicity of her fellow Salvadorans guided many of her decisions both violent and non-violent. Quite visible in her decision to leave the UES as a symbolic protest or in the justification of her actions to her parents, a disdain for hypocrisy was always at the center of her worldview. As her poem again explains, "sympathetic hypocrisy" could not prevent her "indignation."

Finally, this poem provides some clear imagery of Lil Milagro's radicalization as she begins to see herself as a revolutionary intellectual who understood her role as a theoretical representative of the poor. Poetically describing this process, she states, "I undressed myself, weeping at its veil and new clothing clung to my flesh." In this phrase, she metaphorically shed the skin of her social class and embraced poverty by isolating herself from society. She figuratively evokes her passion and desire to fight for change, a goal she believed could be achieved through the hardship of clandestine guerrilla activity. Through these actions she became physically and emotionally tied to the very injustice that validated her role as a theoretical representative of this class.

In an attempt to combine these themes into a cohesive narrative, this chapter traces the last steps of Lil Milagro's evolution into a revolutionary intellectual. It begins with an examination of key letters she wrote to her parents in 1971 and 1972 to determine how she justified her decision to join the ERP. Understanding her justification for armed

struggle then opens the door for illuminating how she interacted with the revolutionary culture that surrounded her. In this section, we will also see that revolutionary figures, international events, and local repression aided in solidifying Lil Milagro's revolutionary worldview. Once in the revolutionary vanguard, however, her gender, family and friends forced Lil Milagro to make difficult decisions in the name of social justice. Finally, this chapter ends with the story of Lil Milagro's capture and death in the secret jails of El Salvador's president, General Carlos Humberto Romero. The chapter not only explains Lil Milagro's radicalization through her actions and words, but also illustrates how this woman became a martyr for the left.

Justifying the Revolution

Between 1971 and 1972, Lil Milagro wrote several letters to her parents explaining her justification for joining the ERP. In these letters, we learn that in addition to her upbringing and personal passion for social justice, her disdain for hypocrisy was the cornerstone of her struggle for change. Manifested through her fight against the theoretical gap that separated university idealism from the repressive reality of Salvadoran society, she refused to compromise her ideals. The justifications offered in these letters follow an almost formulaic pattern of radicalization proposed by the political scientist Karen Kampwirth who suggests:

> Women who had chosen to join the guerrilla groups or other organizations within the revolutionary coalition identified a series of factors that they saw as transformative, starting them on the path toward political activism. Those experiences included…hearing family stories of past political violence such as that of the Matanza of 1932, participating with a relative in a strike or with the Christian Democratic Party, and joining a preexisting network such as a student or church organization. Those transformative events led them to conclude that there was

> tremendous social injustice in El Salvador and that by challenging the military regime, they might help mitigate or even end that injustice.[7]

Despite the similarities between Kampwirth's characterization and Lil Milagro's own radicalization, it would be a mistake to reduce her decisions to a formula. As we will see, Lil Milagro was an independent, critical thinker who made decisions based on her experiences and understanding of the world. Although her parents, friends and colleagues influenced her worldview, we will see that her decisions were always true to herself and her situation. Examining Lil Milagro's personal agency and the influence of collective decision-making allows this study to humanize Lil Milagro's story and avoids essentialist understandings of radicalization.

As the previous chapter explained, Lil Milagro's work with Jornadas and Rubén Zamora in the MESC exposed her to individuals and ideas that helped her conceptualize Salvadoran subjugation. In particular, she learned that the path of Christian social resistance could not galvanize support among students at the UES. Still, her work with the MESC and La Jornada helped her develop an aptitude for building a coalition of support. Kampwirth emphasizes the relevance of this ability when she writes, "it was in [these] networks that [women] developed the political values and skills that would eventually lead them to take radical actions to end the dictatorship."[8] Lil Milagro explained what she learned from working with these groups to her father:

> The University was a refuge, a hiding place, a protection. I believed then that I needed to look for another way. It was not a decision that I made alone; after all I had my Christian social group in the university and in it were people who spoke the

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[7] Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements,* 59.

[8] Ibid.

> same language as I, felt the same deception, clearly saw the same problems, and we wanted to make an effort to find a solution.[9]

As this passage explains, colleagues at the university helped Lil Milagro develop her worldview, but she felt that social change could not come from within the institution. Instead, she suggests in the same letter that too many of her colleagues pass "their youth shouting and protesting" only to "embrace the establishment and yield to the errors of the past."[10] Such a statement illustrates Lil Milagro's conceptualization of the hegemonic structures that prevented social justice from occurring, which to her were embodied in the university itself. In this example, the UES fulfilled its role as a traditional institution for maintaining social order. From this perspective, Lil Milagro viewed hypocrisy as one of the worst sins the student population committed; such self-delusion, and even deceit, served as the primary reason behind her decision to leave school and dedicate her life to an armed resistance. As she explained to her father, "I am no longer able to be a hypocrite."[11] This statement is significant because it shows Lil Milagro exercising her personal agency independent of student radicals, and also illustrates her disgust with the discrepancy between theory and practice at the UES.

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[9] Lil Milagro to Father, August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *La Universidad era un refugio, un escondite, una protección, creí entonces que había que buscar otro camino, no fue una reflexión que hiciera yo sola, para entonces tenía mi grupo social cristiano en la Universidad y había en él personas que hablaban el mismo lenguaje que yo, que sentían la misma decepción y que veían con claridad los mismos problemas y se esforzaban por hallar una solución.*

[10] Ibid., Spanish: *Lo que es peor, andando el tiempo me hubiera convertido en uno de tantos profesionales que tan despreciables me parecen ahora, porque después de haberse pasado su juventud gritando y protestando, al doctorarse, al establecerse, comienzan a ceder a sus "errores del pasado."*

[11] Ibid., Spanish: *Ya no puedo, padre, ser hipócrita*

It is important to acknowledge that Lil Milagro's criticism is distinct in this example, considering that the UES had a long history of encouraging subversive thinking which continued to gain momentum in the 1970s. In fact, Grenier explains, "by the turn of the decade student organizations were totally controlled by Marxist-Leninist groups, prone to 'assemblyism' and permanent 'mass mobilization', and fully committed to the subversion of all national institutions—starting with the university."[12] With such an ideological bias, it is reasonable to think that students at the UES would have continued to fight against capitalist expansion in El Salvador after their graduation. Yet, Lil Milagro's letters give the impression that this was not the case. In particular, she pointed to the profession of law as an example. "In my profession, every day I become more and more convinced that everything we learned in books was only a theory," she wrote, "and that in reality, if you wanted to practice this profession, you had to give in to injustice and lack of shame at some point or another."[13] This comment illustrates the wide gap between theory at the UES and the reality of working in a society where an elite oligarchy controls wealth and its distribution. Nonetheless, she did not limit her criticism solely to her profession. In a letter to her sister in 1972, she commented on doctors in the medical profession and pointed to the failure of the UES to produce professional medics willing to work with the rural poor. Instead of criticizing the profession in this case, she was critical of the training doctors received. To rectify this problem she suggested that

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[12] Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency*, 114.

[13] Lil Milagro to Father, May 1972, AHCPC. Spanish: *En mi profesión por ejemplo cada día me convencía más y más de que todo lo que aprendía en los libros era solo eso teoría y que en la realidad, si quería ejercer mi profesión, tenía que ir cediendo una y otra vez a las injusticias y desvergüenzas de los demás.*

the UES should train doctors in more practical low-tech therapies in order to push them to work in rural areas. As she explained,

> Instead of training 35 high-powered doctors, they could have graduated 150 specialists in treating malaria, parasites, dysentery, etc. Then, everyone would not have been able to stay and work in San Salvador.[14]

This example places blame upon the institution as much as society. What we must understand is that these criticisms of her colleagues and the UES were a product of her ability to think critically about everyday societal problems. As we have already seen, however, her social conscience was strongly influenced by her upbringing.

Throughout her letters in 1970 and 1971, Lil Milagro repeatedly referred back to the lessons she learned as a child as motivations for her actions. She wrote to her father and explained:

> Life had given me so much, a home, intelligence, and parents who morally shaped me and placed me on the road to acquire culture and education, who taught me to love truth and justice, showed me that neither money nor material comforts are what makes a person, and gave me a social conscience and a path to follow.[15]

In addition to the respect she held for her parents' life and work, this passage implicitly shows that Lil Milagro chose the path of political activism put forth by her father, and ultimately let go her mother's emphasis on completing her education. It is impossible to

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[14] Lil Milagro to Mon petite (Luz América), No Date (most likely 1972 because this letter talks about the university reform by Molina, which occurred that year), AHCPC. Spanish: *Si en vez de esos 35 flamantes doctores, hubieran podido entregarle 150 especialistas en paludismo, parásitos, disentería, etc. que por supuesto no podrian haberse quedado todos en San Salvador.*

[15] Lil Milagro to Father, August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *A mí la vida me había dado tanto, un hogar, una inteligencia, unos padres que me formaron moralmente y me pusieron en el camino de la cultura y la instrucción, que me enseñaron a amar la verdad y la justicia, que me demostraron que no son el dinero ni las comodidades materiales lo que forja a una persona, y una conciencia que me indicaba un camino a seguir.*

know whether this decision was a product of her admiration for her father, the influence of her colleagues, or simply a compassionate personality. Most likely, all of these factors contributed to her thinking, but when she wrote to her father in 1971 she expressed a deep admiration for his teachings as well as a feeling of responsibility to act upon the circumstances affecting her country and all of Latin America. As she explained:

> In Latin America, a fight to the death against oppression, exploitation and imperialism had begun long before. When I realized that my country, far from being an exception, brutally suffered this miserable destiny, I felt deeply responsible.…How many times did I fail to say in the University, in my articles, at rallies, on radio programs and in personal conversations that there was a fight to join, or to realize that Camilo and Ché were the example to follow?"[16]

She described the plight of Latin America and singled out key revolutionary figures who chose to fight against oppression in their daily life. Repression throughout Latin America as well as the revolutionary culture in the region influenced her decisions. In addition, Lil Milagro viewed her father's actions as the most important influence in her thinking. She reminded her father that he too opposed the repressive actions of the Salvadoran government. Her words were particularly poignant:

> The revolution is a war between rich and poor, and you must decide which side you will be on. There is no middle ground; it is necessary to fight against the guns and the weapons, which can only happen by lifting the people from prostration and demonstrating to them that there is a way to prevail. But you can only achieve this by being with the people, not outside of them, not protecting yourself, but instead suffering with the people, living how they live, understanding them from the inside, feeling part of them. So that when a revolutionary who has belonged to the bourgeoisie says to the people: we must

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[16] Lil Milagro to Father, August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *en América Latina hacía mucho que había comenzado a librarse una batalla a muerte en contra de la opresión, la explotación y el imperialismo, y cuando me di cuenta que mi país, lejos de ser la excepción, sufría en carne propia ese miserable destino, me sentí profundamente responsable…¿Cuantas veces en la Universidad, en mis artículos, en los mítines, en los programas de radio y en las conversaciones personales con los demás no dije que había que luchar, no reconocía que Camilo y el Che eran un ejemplo que debía seguir?*

> fight, the people believe him, because they have seen him together with them exposing themselves in the same way and not from a distant and armored privileged class. For this reason I am here. Do not be burdened by having a revolutionary daughter, do not be overwhelmed by the critiques of this society that exploit the poor. Think of those 25 years of your life that you engaged in the fight that you believed in. You bore fruit in me with what you did in your historical moment. I am doing no more than carrying on your legacy by continuing the fight that I learned to love through you.[17]

This passage illustrates that Lil Milagro found strength in her father's legacy and political work, while also showing that in 1971 she understood herself to be an encarnation of the poor. Moreover, by adopting the hardships of this class she believed they would give her and the ERP their support. In the years that followed this conviction for social justice only grew as her country fell into unprecedented depths of extreme repression, beginning with the elections of 1972.

Dissolution of the PDC

El Salvador found itself at a revolutionary crossroad in 1972. Following a rise in nationalism after the "success" of the Soccer War,[18] the party of the Salvadoran oligarchy

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[17] Ibid., August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *La revolución es una guerra entre ricos y pobres, y uno debe decidir al lado de quién va a estar, no hay términos medios, hay que luchar contra los fusiles y las armas y eso únicamente puede lograrse levantando al pueblo de su postración y demostrándole que hay un camino para vencer, pero sólo puede lograrse estando en el pueblo no desde de afuera, no protegido uno, sino sufriendo con ese mismo pueblo, viviendo como él vive, comprendiéndolo desde adentro, siendo parte suya para que cuando un revolucionario que ha pertenecido a la clase burguesa le diga al pueblo: hay que luchar, este pueblo le crea, porque lo ve junto a él exponiéndose de igual forma y no de lejos acorazado en sus privilegios de clase. Por eso estoy aquí, que no te duela padre tener una hija revolucionaria, que no te importe la crítica de esa sociedad que explota a los pobres, piensa que los 25 años de tu vida que tú entregaste a una lucha en la que creías, tienen su fruto en mí, que tú hiciste lo que correspondía a tu momento histórico que yo no hago más que ser tu heredera, que continuar una lucha que aprendí a querer a través de ti.*

and military, the PCN, emerged victorious in the 1970 legislative elections. This significant victory erased important gains made by the PDC in the 1960s. For Duarte and the PDC, this meant that if they were to bring democracy and human rights to El Salvador they needed to reassert themselves in the 1972 elections. Little did they know, however, that electoral victory was impossible with the PCN in power and a repressive military government determined to reestablish its control over the country.

At first, the political landscape in 1972 seemed to favor the opposition. On the surface, the PCN's failure to deal with economic instability resulting from the collapse of the CACM, accompanied by increasing violent repression by the National Guard, resulted in a decline of nationalistic fervor among the population. In addition, newly formed leftist organizations such as the ERP began challenging PCN military control. In this milieu, a new party known as UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora), came to the forefront. Created by Duarte, the PDC, and two leftist organizations, UNO quickly became a viable political force. Shortly after establishing this organization, Duarte resigned as mayor of San Salvador and ran for the presidency of El Salvador under UNO's banner. Feeling threatened, right-wing paramilitaries threatened Duarte's family and assassinated various party members throughout the country. Nevertheless, Duarte and UNO refused to yield as they continued to campaign on a platform of democracy and land reform.

When the elections finally came on February 22, 1972, few members of UNO believed they would be victorious. Despite a largely fraudulent election in which ballot

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[18] Although there was a truce declared between Honduras and El Salvador after the Soccer War, the Hernández regime painted the war as a Salvadoran success to inculcate a patriotic, nationalistic pride among the people. See Durham, *Soccer War*.

boxes were pre-stuffed and the National Guard intimidated voters at various polling places, electoral results at first proclaimed UNO the winner and Duarte as the next president of El Salvador. Shortly after announcing these results, however, Colonel Arturo Armando Molina of the PCN imposed a three-day news blackout to stifle further pronouncements of UNO's victory. Three days later, the Central Election Board emerged from the shadows of its government offices to publish another set of figures that declared Molina the victor.

With Molina in power, the National Guard quickly targeted leftist groups throughout San Salvador, beginning with former members of the PDC and Duarte himself. After torturing Duarte and forcing him into exile in Venezuela, the National Guard then turned its attention toward the UES. As a way of preventing the resistant culture emanating from the UES from expanding, the National Guard invaded the campus, arrested 800 students and faculty, and forced the university president and the dean of the medical school into exile on July 19, 1972.

Within this context, Lil Milagro's conviction to remain with the revolutionary vanguard became a reality. Unlike some of the other revolutionary organizations of the time, the ERP believed that after the elections of 1972 the only path to real change lay in an armed struggle led by an urban intellectual vanguard. Lil Milagro reiterated this belief in a letter she wrote to her mother after the election:

> I think that the PDC will be abolished as a party, and that we will possibly arrive at the same extremes of countries like Argentina that have prohibited oppositional parties from participating in the political system over the past four years, or like Uruguay where people have lived for two years in a "State of Siege"…This is the problem with tyrants: they do not allow the opposition to legally organize because the people might become aware and through peaceful means (elections) defeat the exploiters. The tyrants themselves are opening more radical paths and forcing revolutionary violence…These people create more radical ways and force violent

> revolutionaries to emerge….Never before, in the history of this country has there been a situation so radical.[19]

Lil Milagro's frustration with the electoral system led her to believe that she had no choice but to force a violent revolution in her country. Moreover, at this point in her revolutionary worldview, violence became her preferred mode of resistance. No longer did she believe that non-violence was a viable option.

In addition, this passage illustrates that Lil Milagro possessed a keen awareness of the repression sweeping through Latin America in the 1970s. Referring to Argentina and Uruguay as testaments to what El Salvador would experience if organizations such as the ERP did not act, she manifests her Latin American identity. Such rhetoric also suggests that outside influences, from a revolutionary perspective, helped validate her decision to embrace the vision of the ERP. During this epoch of her life, her letters bear witness that a revolutionary culture was integral to her intellectual worldview.

Historical Memory and Lil Milagro within the Revolutionary Culture

Always an avid reader, Lil Milagro thoroughly understood Latin America's revolutionary heritage when she joined the ERP. Not surprisingly, letters to her parents are full of allusions to many revolutionary figures. On several occasions, she uses the lives and work of Latin American heroes such as José Martí, Camilo Torres, Símón

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[19] Lil Milagro to Mother, No Date (1972), AHCPC. Spanish: *Yo creo que el PDC va a ser cancelado como partido, y que posiblemente lleguemos a los extremos en que se encuentran países como Argentina que han pasado casi cuatro años sin partidos de oposición porque los prohibía el régimen, o cómo en Uruguay que tenía dos años de vivir en "Estado de Sitio"....El problema de los tiranos es el siguiente: No permiten que la oposición se organice legalmente porque entonces puede llegarse a los extremos de que el pueblo tome conciencia y por la vía pacífica (elecciones) derroque a los explotadores;...están ellos mismos abriendo caminos más radicales, y forzando la violencia revolucionaria…Nunca antes en el país se había presentado una situación tan radical.*

Bolívar, and Ché Guevara as a way of contextualizing her own revolutionary consciousness and establishing her identity within a broader culture of resistance. Identifying with nationalist heroes serves as a source of strength and resilience for intellectuals.

The work of Durkheimian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory provides a theoretical understanding of this process.[20] In his analysis, memory is a tool that social groups use to conceptualize the origins of their present needs and desires. Halbwachs asks, "How can currents of collective thought whose impetus lies in the past be recreated, when we can grasp only the present?"[21] Halbwach's framework reifies memory within a social group's present situation by suggesting that the needs of the present dictate the memories that group chooses to remember. Here, the historian Peter Novick provides an excellent way to conceptualize Halbwachs' ideas. He explains, "Typically, a collective memory, at least a significant collective memory, is understood to express some eternal or essential truth about the group—usually tragic.[22]

Novick offers the example of the Jewish memory of Masada, where a group of Jewish exiles committed suicide in order to avoid becoming slaves of the Roman Empire. He explains that the Masada suicide did not exist within the Jewish memory "for almost two thousand years, though the text describing the event was readily available." He attributes this lack of consciousness to the fact that traditional Judaism focused on

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[20] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, with an introduction by Mary Douglas (New York: Harper-Colophon Books, 1950).

[21] Ibid., 80.

[22] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999), 4.

"survival and holy study rather than on military resistance."[23] Yet, when Zionists in the twentieth century discovered the tragedy at Masada, it instantly became a relevant way for understanding their own self-actualization.

George Lipsitz adds to this discussion when he explains the creation of "counter-memory." In this construction, individuals reevaluate the collective memory purported by the dominant class. Counter-memory thus "focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent a universal experience."[24] This is where Halbwachs detours from traditional thoughts on memory. As Novick states, "Freud treats memory as imposed, while Halbwachs treats it as chosen."[25]

The idea of counter-memory and collective memory are seen in Lil Milagro's use of figures like Martí, Bolívar, Ché, and Torres. Together, these revolutionaries helped her locate her own situation within the revolutionary movements of the past. In effect, her understanding of these figures helped her counter the dominant understanding that El Salvador was a repressive society that could easily destroy any uprising. Indeed, this was the collective memory espoused by both Lil Milagro and many of the intellectuals in the revolutionary vanguard. This memory is particularly evident in the letters Lil Milagro wrote during the first years of her work in the ERP.

When Lil Milagro mentioned revolutionary figures in her writing, she used them in different ways. Her letters to her father referred to strong Latin American liberators

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[23] Ibid., 5.

[24] Lipsitz, *A Life in Struggle,* 213.

[25] Novick, *Holocaust*, 5.

such as Ché and Camilo Torres as a way of validating a physical battle between oppression and social justice. On the other hand, when she wrote to her mother, she used these figures in a more literary vein, emphasizing their beliefs over their actions. This pattern underscores the fact that while her father's life encouraged her active resistance, her mother had nurtured her intellectual and compassionate, Christian identity. As Lil Milagro explained to her mother, "if I learned from my father the revolutionary cause, I learned from you to love life itself, to look in every moment for beauty and truth, to love God and to respect myself and everyone."[26] This compassion, however, came at a price for her mother, as she expressed fears about her daughter's work and repeatedly referred to Lil Milagro's "Quixotian" ideals.

As a result, when she wrote to her mother she often focused on calming her mother's worries and justifying her decisions. For example, in a letter written in 1971 she told her mother:

> They say that you have been sad. Although this is natural, please don't be so sad that you worry us….Little by little, I want your anguish to turn into resignation and then into understanding my decisions that have made you so profoundly sad.[27]

She then referred to José Martí and a poem in which he spoke to his mother. As Lil Milagro explained:

I do not mean to be vain in comparing myself with him, but his actions are the ones

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[26] Lil Milagro to Mother, August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *Si de mi padre aprendí a amar una causa revolucionara, de ti aprendí a amar la vida en sí, a buscarla en todo momento la belleza y la verdad, a amar a Dios y a respetarme a mi misma y a los demás.*

[27] Ibid., Spanish: *Dicen que te encuentras triste, es natural pero por favor no lo estés tanto que llegues a preocuparnos, por eso quiero hablar contigo largamente, quiero que tu angustia se convierta poco a poco en resignación y luego en comprensión para estas decisiones mías que parecen haberte llevado a una profunda tristeza.*

> I want to follow and his words the ones I repeat to you. They have always been engraved in my, soul perhaps because I always knew I would make you suffer for my ideals:
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> Look at me mother and for your well-being don't cry
> If enslaved by my age and my ideology
> Your martyr with heart full of thorns
> Think among the thorns flowers are born.[28]

This passage draws on a Latin American revolutionary consciousness enshrined in poetic memory to validate her own work, and reflects Halbwach's explanation of how individuals use memory according to their needs in the present.

Beyond individuals, Lil Milagro also used the memory of past revolutionary events as justification for her actions. This is particularly evident in a letter she wrote to her mother explaining that her participation in the revolution did not come from a vain selfishness that sought glory and fame, but from a true compassion for the poor. She wrote:

> I am more than convinced that if I were in India, I would have already been converted to a human torch as a signal of protest; if I were in Vietnam, I would go around with my little straw hat and combatant's uniform pushing the North Americans into the ocean; if I were in the US, I would be organizing strikes against the war and fighting for the civil right of blacks. How could I be any other way? If you believe in inequality and injustice, and that human rights exist in a country only for a higher class, you offend your own human dignity. You have to fight, and not with flowers and music. Unfortunately, the economically powerful use weapons to maintain their exploitation and theft; this obligates us to respond in this same manner if we want to defend the people from their enemies.[29]

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[28] Ibid., Spanish: "*No pretendo ser tan vanidosa como para compararme con su figura, pero suyas son las acciones ejemplares que yo quiero seguir y suyas las palabras que yo ahora te repito a ti y que desde siempre se me grabaron en el alma quizás porque presentía ya que iba a hacerte sufrir por mis ideales:*

Mírame madre y por tu bien no llores.
Si esclavo de mi edad y mis doctrinas
Tu mártir corazón llené de espinas
Piensa que nacen entre espinas Flores.

[29] Ibid., Spanish: *Estoy más que convencida que si estuviera en la India, ya me habría convertido en antorcha humana en señal de protesta, si en el Vietnam, andaría con mi sombrerito de paja y mi uniforme de combatiente echando a los norteamericanos al mar;*

This passage illustrates that Lil Milagro was well aware of struggles around the world that fought to bring justice to the people. This awareness allowed her to utilize the symbols of Vietnam, India, and civil rights, as a way of ascribing validity to her own cause and revolutionary identity.

Beyond these international allusions, she includes a Marxist interpretation of class exploitation in her criticism of the complicity of the middle class. The presence of these elements suggests that the Marxist-Leninist ideas of the ERP mixed with the Christian socialist identity she had come to embrace during her time at the UES. This does not mean that she abandoned her Christian understandings. Instead, she began to form a worldview that combined Christian beliefs with strategies of violence, the liberation of the poor, and social and economic equality for everyone. In fact, this syncretic socialism was evident in her letters when she referred to the Colombian Catholic priest turned guerrilla, Camilo Torres, as a source of her inspiration.[30] Even her friend Miriam

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si en Estados Unidos, organizando huelgas antibélicas y manifestaciones a favor de los negros. ¿Cómo podía ser de otra manera? si se cree en la inigualdad y en la injusticia y se siente que los derechos humanos en el país sólo existen para los que pertenecen a una clase superior, se siente uno ofendido en su misma dignidad de ser humano y decide que no es justa esta situación, cruzarse de brazos sería de alguna manera admitirla y ser sus cómplices, y por lo tanto hay que combatirla, y no precisamente con flores y con música, desgraciadamente la clase económicamente poderosa se sirve de las armas para mantener su explotación y su robo, con ello nos obliga a responder de la misma manera si queremos defender al pueblo de sus enemigos.

[30] Camilo Torres preceded the liberation theology movement, but he embraced many of the ideas that would underpin it in the 1960s. Most of all, he tried to reconcile revolutionary Marxism with Catholicism, a task that ultimately led him to join the National Liberation Army in Colombia and fight for the rights of the poor. He was killed in combat in 1966. One of his most famous quotes was "If Jesus were alive today, He would be a guerrillero." See Camilo Torres, *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camilo Torres*, ed John Gerassi, trans. June de Cipriano Alcantara. (New York, NY: Random House, 1971).

Medrano suggested in an interview that by the end of her revolutionary career, Lil Milagro's beliefs were most similar to those of this Colombian martyr.[31]

Also contributing to this shift in ideological understanding were the dissolution of the PDC and the fall of Salvador Allende in Chile. These events proved to Lil Milagro that the work of the Social Democrats could not change society enough for social justice to occur on a broad scale. In fact, Lil Milagro wrote to her brother in September of 1973 and expressed her extreme disillusionment with the coup against Allende, who was the first socialist President of Chile. She wrote:

> I cannot avoid telling you that everything that occurred in Chile has pained me more than anyone. You don't know what it is like to be reading and hearing the news and feel a tremendous lump in your throat to remember the beautiful city of Santiago and think that it is a scene of a bloody class war. To me Chile and its tragedy hurts me as if it were my own country, and if I were not far away fighting for our own liberation here where I belong, rest assured that I would be there fighting in some battle, behind a carbine, together with those people. I am absolutely sure that armed struggle to become free one day has begun.[32]

Not only does this passage show Lil Milagro's veneration for the people of Chile, but also the intensity of her revolutionary passion at this point in her life. By 1973 Lil Milagro, clearly embraced the revolutionary culture sweeping through Latin America, but this acceptance came at a price. In the years that followed, Lil Milagro was forced to

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[31] Miriam Medrano, interview, June 8, 2006.

[32] Lil Milagro to Benjamin, September 1973, AHCPC. Spanish: *No puedo dejar de decirte que todo lo ocurrido en Chile, me ha dolido a mí más que a nadie, tú no sabes lo que es estar leyendo y escuchando los noticieros y sentir en la garganta un nudo tremendo al recordar aquella ciudad de Santiago tan linda y pensar que es ahora el escenario sangriento de la lucha de clases, a mi Chile y su tragedia me está doliendo tanto como mi propio país, y si no fuera porque estoy luchando por nuestra liberación aquí donde me corresponde, te aseguro que hubiera querido esta allá en algún puesto de batalla, detrás de una carabina, junto a ese pueblo que estoy segura, segurísima que ahora ha iniciado la lucha armada para ser libre algún día.*

make difficult decisions that sometimes compromised not only her values but also her relationships with those she loved the most.

Making Revolutionary Decisions

During her career with the ERP, Lil Milagro overcame several obstacles that challenged her revolutionary worldview. At various times, she found herself struggling to cope with issues relating to her family, her colleagues, and her gender. Whether it was the assassination of her close friend and colleague Roque Dalton, the despair of being separated from her family, or the prospect of sacrificing her gender for a revolutionary paradigm, Lil Milagro always remained resolute in her conviction to fight for social justice. The dynamics of these situations illustrate that women in the revolutionary vanguard faced a difficult path both in the larger society and within the revolutionary culture.

It should be evident by now that Lil Milagro felt a deep connection to her family; thus not being able to communicate with them on a daily basis posed a constant burden. She explained this struggle to her father when she wrote:

> Even though the sacrifices are enormous and painful, I will not deny how hard it is to be separated from you and everything I loved, especially on the dates of birthdays, anniversaries, and family reunions that we celebrated together. Still, I am sincere when I confess that if I had stayed, shielded in my comforts, I would have cowardly ignored the voice of my conscience.33

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[33] Lil Milagro to Father, August 1971, AHCPC. Spanish: *Aunque los sacrificios sean grandes y dolorosos; porque en ningún momento voy a negarte lo duro que es estar separado de ustedes y de todo lo que me era tan querido, sobre todo cuando llegan las fechas de los cumpleaños, de los aniversarios, de las fiestas familiares que siempre celebramos unidos; pero así mismo, soy sincera al confesarte que si me hubiera quedado, desoyendo cobardemente la voz de mi conciencia, si me hubiera escudado en mis comodidades."*

Passages like this are found throughout her letters to her family. Whether she was asking them for money, telling her parents not to worry about her safety, or justifying her decisions, it is clear that she struggled with this separation between her personal and revolutionary lives.

Lil Milagro's separation anxiety reached a new high when she learned that her sister gave birth to a baby girl on her birthday in April of 1973. Writing to her sister that day, we understand exactly the extent of Lil Milagro's sacrifices. For her, the revolution not only robbed her of her family but also her identity as a future aunt. As she wrote:

> I didn't want to fail to write to this new little person who has paid me the great tribute of being born on the same day that I came into this world. Keep my words in your memory as best you can so that when your daughter is a conscious and responsible woman, you can tell her what her aunt wanted and hoped to be.[34]

Lil Milagro knew that her niece would grow up without her as an aunt. Her fatalism shows that this proud and idealistic woman was acutely aware that the odds of her survival decreased with each passing day. Although this did not hinder her passion to fight for social justice, it caused her to question her role as a woman and mother in society.

Writing to her mother in February of 1973, she commented both on her struggle with being a woman within the revolutionary vanguard and the specter of giving birth to a child in this environment. As she explained:

> I have always felt a strong inclination toward children….This means that I don't deny my human nature (capacity to love) or my feminine nature (capacity to be a

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[34] Lil Milagro to Luz América, April 3, 1973, AHCPC. Spanish: *No he querido dejar de escribirle a esa nueva personita que me hizo el gran homenaje de nacer el mismo día en que yo viene al mundo, guarda en tu memoria lo mejor que puedas mis palabras para que el día de mañana cuando tu hija sea una mujer consciente y responsable puedas decirle lo que su tía quería y esperaba de ella.*

> mother). But without abandoning these things, I am firm in the revolutionary convictions for which I fight, and for which I have sacrificed many things, including the possibility of actually having a child. You understand this as well as I and demonstrate it clearly when you tell me I do not have a right to complicate my life, to create a problem for my compañeros in the struggle, nor to bring a child into the world in such difficult circumstances.[35]

Lil Milagro sacrificed her femininity and her ability to be a mother in order to fight against injustice. Ironically, this did not prevent her from establishing a relationship with one of the most prolific poets of the left in El Salvador, Roque Dalton.

As one of the founding members of the ERP, Roque Dalton brought instant notoriety and revolutionary fame to the organization. Although the two originally met at the UES, their relationship prospered in the ERP.[36] A document found at the National Archives suggests that on December 24, 1973, Dalton flew into the international airport where he met the "female poet Lil Milagro Ramírez."[37] Like Lil Milagro, Dalton shared a passion for poetry and revolution. It comes as no surprise that the two formed a strong bond when they lived together in a "safe house" in the center of San Salvador.[38]

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[35] Lil Milagro to Mother, February 1973, AHCPC. Spanish: *Siempre he sentido inclinación fuerte por los niños…esto quiere decir que no reniego de mi naturaleza humana (capacidad de amar) ni de mi naturaleza femenina (capacidad maternal); pero sin renegar de ello, tengo firmes mis convicciones revolucionarias por las cuales lucho y a las cuales he sacrificado tantas cosas, entre ellas la posibilidad actual de tener un hijo, tú tienes al respecto tanta claridad como yo y me lo demostra rotundamente cuando me dices que no tengo derecho a complicarme la vida, a crearle problema a mis compañeros de lucha ni a darle al supuesto hijo una venida al mundo en tan difíciles circunstancias.*

[36] In my interview with Luz América, her husband explained that Lil Milagro first introduced Roque Dalton to him while she was still studying at the UES.

[37] "Incorporación de Dalton del ERP," in National Archive of El Salvador.

[38] Ibid.

At some point during this time, Dalton began a plan to expand the ERP by working with armed cells of the organization to bring workers into their struggle. Together, Lil Milagro and Dalton believed that incorporating the working class was the key to a successful movement. Nevertheless, by March of 1974, Dalton's plan became a point of contention within the ERP when its leader, Joaquín Villalobos, accused Dalton of being a CIA agent trying to undermine his power. As these accusations gained steam, the rank-and-file of the ERP executed Dalton on May 10, 1975.[39]

Profoundly disturbed by this event and mourning the loss of her close friend, Lil Milagro left the ERP at some point in May of that year. One document suggests that the ERP gave Lil Milagro and her friend Eduardo Sancho an anonymous message telling her to leave the ERP on May 1, 1975, and to seek refuge in an unarmed cell of the Resistencia Nacional (RN).[40] Once a part of the this organization, Lil Milagro continued her work and convinced members of the RN to embrace Dalton's ideas and take an even more militant stance against the brutal tactics of the Salvadoran government and the National Guard. In this capacity, the organization and Lil Milagro participated in several subversive activities to sabotage key industries of the oligarchy. In the end, however, Dalton's death and Lil Milagro's departure from the ERP put her on a trajectory that resulted in her capture in 1976 and her death in 1979.

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[39] The causes behind Roque Dalton's death are heavily debated. Some say he was a double agent for the CIA and others suggest that he wanted to search out broader support for the ERP, which was met with resistance. See "Origenes del ERP: Historia de un período de surgimiento y controversia 1968-1977." (San Salvador, El Salvador: National Archives of El Salvador).

[40] "Orígenes del ERP: Historia de un período de surgimiento y controversia 1968-1977," (San Salvador, El Salvador: National Archives of El Salvador), 52.

Lil Milagro's Capture

In 1977, El Salvador elected an even more tyrannical despot to the presidency, General Carlos Humberto Romero. Outraged by Molina's attempts to pass an agrarian reform that he viewed as a necessary concession to temper repression, the oligarchy searched for "someone who spoke the same language as Chile's Pinochet."[41] They found this man in Romero. As Molina's minister of defense, Romero gained his experience in politics by commanding the paramilitary group known as ORDEN. Under his rule, repression in the 1970s reached unprecedented levels as ORDEN created chaos in the countryside. As Anderson and Shenk explain, "[ORDEN] grew to a force estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000, providing a mass base for the ruling PCN and a cover for the killings in the countryside."[42] One document claims that between 1975 and 1979, 1,200 civilians were assassinated each month, a horrifying 40 deaths per day.[43] Lil Milagro fought against this tyranny with the ERP and the FARN, gaining a reputation as a subversive linked to a group of individuals known as "El Grupo." As one newspaper article explained, "the plans of this group included controlling campesino movements, staging worker strikes, sabotage, and assaulting banks in the area."[44]

Although Lil Milagro participated in many acts of resistance, it is difficult to know the extent of her involvement in their planning. We do know, however, that after a

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[41] Armstrong and Shenk, *Face of Revolution,* 56.

[42] Ibid., 101.

[43] "Orígenes del ERP," 52.

[44] "Terrorismo proyectaban miembros de "El Grupo," *El Diario de Hoy*, July 19, 1971, 28.

raid on a safe house in 1971, authorities found her national identification card in a room, thus linking her to subversive plots. Between 1971 and 1972, newspaper articles began showing Lil Milagro's face in the hope of finding her and bringing her to trial. After she left the ERP in 1975, her trail became more difficult to track as she chose to live in the western department of Sonsonate.

Although she continued to participate in subversive activities with the FARN, no document directly links her to the actions of this organization. In the early morning hours of November 17, 1976, the National Guard captured Lil Milagro "during a raid on a house of the RN" in the city of San Antonio del Monte.[45] Newspaper articles reported that she was killed during the ensuing battle.[46] Organization of American States (OAS) documents latter revealed that she suffered injuries in the fighting and was sent to a clandestine jail somewhere in San Salvador. Only 31 years old, Lil Milagro would spend the next three years in this jail cell operated by the National Guard.

Life and Death in a Clandestine Jail

Few words can accurately describe the physical and mental torture that Lil Milagro experienced in jail between 1976 and 1979. In fact, our only clues of her life during this time come from reports by the OAS and a testimonial written by Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Lil Milagro's cellmate and a future commander of the FMLN.[47] These

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[45] Organization of American States, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador," (Ser.L/VII.46 Doc. 23, rev. 1, November 17, 1978).

[46] El Diario de Hoy, "La Policía Detonará el Arsenal Encontrado en Sótano el Sábado" November 18, 1976.

[47] Ana Guadalupe Martínez, *Las cárceles clandestinas: Libertad por el secuestro de un oligarca*, (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1996).

documents reveal the harsh nature of prison life and the pain this created for the families of the victims. As one document explains:

> The families of Lil Ramírez, Sergio Vladimir Arriaza and Carlos A. Madrid and the Salvadorian public believed them to have been killed by the National Guard. All of them were kept nude in their cells, and their daily food consisted of four dry-corn tortillas, two in the morning and two at midday, with approximately 25 grams (dry weight) of beans, and, once a week, 5 grams of cheese.[48]

This passage suggests the "public believed" that the National Guard executed Lil Milagro during their raid on her house. At first, even her parents understood this to be the case, but discovered a year later that she was being held in one of the National Guard's secret jails. At the same time, this article, along with the numerous pictures the newspaper published of her between 1971 and 1972, illustrates that Lil Milagro's clandestine activities were a recognized part of the revolutionary movement in El Salvador. Even in jail, however, she continued to have an influence on the revolutionary vanguard as her resolution and conviction to liberate the poor remained an integral part of her survival and her ability to encourage others to continue the fight.

Tales of torture, sexual assault, and extreme hardship in jail cells of Central America abound. El Salvador is no exception in this regard. The 1978 OAS "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador" explains the methods the National Guard used to coerce Lil Milagro into giving them information about the ERP.

> During the early days of her detention, she was kept blindfolded, shackled hand and foot to a metal bed, completely nude. On three occasions she was interrogated under Pentothal (truth serum) in the presence of a physician. The hood was also applied to her.[49]

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[47] OAS, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador."

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

Martínez reiterates these accounts of prison torture in her testimonial. During the entire time Lil Milagro was in custody, "she was moored by one foot to a bed with chains and a padlock." She then explains that in "the first days, they hit her, they tightened the lines and everything else in order to get her to talk about her participation in the ERP."[50] For the next three years, Lil Milagro experienced this daily routine. Martínez paints a vivid picture of this life when she testified to the OAS. Her account reads:

> From the beginning I was subjected to innumerable forms of harassment, physical and psychological torture, including electric shock, applied selectively on the principal nerve networks….during all this I was shackled hand and foot, blindfolded and on the floor. There were pauses between the shocks to question me; they said to me: "Here we have made men talk, not to speak of women." I was [also] brutally raped by Sergeant Mario Rosales who served in that section….The entire first month I was blindfolded, with shackles on my feet and hands; at times I was completely nude. For certain periods they gave no food, and when my physical condition was very poor, they paid some attention to me in order not to let me die and then continued interrogating me.[51]

Despite this harsh reality, according to Martínez Lil Milagro remained a positive and optimistic person in jail. As one story in her testimonial explained, on the eve of a new year, a few prisoners asked Lil to recite the "Brindis del Bohemio," which was a common toast made by revolutionaries at celebrations. Then Martínez remembers asking Lil to recite a poem of the revolution entitled "El partido." This poem spoke of the sacrifice individuals must make in war and the promises the revolution would fulfill. According to Martínez, "When Lil finished, everyone was so emotional that for a moment, nobody applauded or said a word. Then, we heard the sirens announcing the

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[50] Ana Guadalupe Martínez, *Las cárceles clandestinas*, 258-259

[51] OAS, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador."

New Year and all of us yelled together: "Viva la Revolución! Viva el Pueblo!"[52] Despite extreme hardship, Lil Milagro remained true to her ideals in jail. In fact, Martínez' concluding thoughts in this passage suggest that her resolution gave everyone hope for victory in the new year. As she states, "We received the new year just like this, with the firmness and hope that outside our jail cells the fight continued."[53]

Although Lil Milagro remained in prison to the end of the decade, a few fortunate individuals were released during this time, including Ana Guadalupe Martínez who left prison in 1978. That year, the ERP captured Duarte's daughter and, in exchange for her safety, convinced the National Guard to release members of their organization. Tragically, because Lil Milagro had left the ERP after Dalton's death, she was not included in this contingent. After Martínez's departure from prison, Lil Milagro remained strong in her convictions, and encouraged Martínez to continue fighting for the revolution. As Martínez states, "Her words demonstrated a political interest, above all to take advantage of this experience to advance the fight for unity and maturation of the revolution."[54]

On the day Martínez left, she turned to Lil Milagro and asked, "Lend me your shoes." Lil Milagro complied. It was the last time the two saw each other. From this moment on,

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[52] Martínez, *Las cárceles clandestinas,* 295. Spanish: *Cuando Lil terminó, creo que todos estábamos tan emocionados que nadie aplaudió ni dijo palabra por un momento. Luego, empezamos a escuchar la sirena, anunciando el año Nuevo. Todos gritamos a coro: "Viva La Revolución! Viva El Pueblo!"*

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., Spanish: *Sus palabras mostraban un interés político, que estaba muy por encima de todo: aprovechar esta experiencia para avanzar en la lucha por la unidad y la maduración revolucionaria.*

Martínez recalls, Lil Milagro's compassion and revolutionary fortitude helped Martínez view her experiences in jail as a sign of her dedication to the people of the revolution and to continue the fight under any circumstance.

Following the ERP's strategy, the FARN tried to negotiate Lil Milagro's release in 1979 by capturing two British bank executives. A U.S. State Department memo retells the situation:

> Two of the prisoners whose release are demanded are Professor Manuel Rivera and Lil Milagro Ramirez, a student, both charged with being members of FPL (Popular Forces of Liberation). In February 1979, according to a FARN announcement, the two Britons had been executed. However, the two were released unharmed in mid-1979.[55]

While it is unclear why the release of the two bank executives did not free Lil Milagro, we know that it was her last chance to be released.

Toward the end of her time in jail, her family, friends, and colleagues heard very little from Lil Milagro. The last report came from a prisoner who had escaped from the clandestine cells. According to him, Lil Milagro's "hair had grown down to her heels, her face was a skull, her health had been broken by starvation, beatings, repeated rape and a brutal abortion."[56] Then on October 15, 1979, one year before the FMLN launched a large-scale revolution, a revolutionary government junta ousted the Romero from power. As a way of avoiding international embarrassment, Romero's National Guard executed every prisoner who was still detained in the PCN's clandestine cells. Among the dead was Lil Milagro Ramírez.

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[55] U.S. State Department, "Armed Forces of National Resistance Attacked Business Target," (Washington D.C.: November 30, 1979).

[56] Armstrong and Shenk, *Face of Revolution*, 124.

Conclusion: From Daughter to Martyr

Although cut short, Lil Milagro's life, actions, and transformation into a revolutionary intellectual serve as an allegory for how individuals come to embrace a revolutionary paradigm. From her humble origins in the countryside, to her work as a teacher, poet, and traveler, this passionate and caring individual interacted with and helped create a revolutionary culture in El Salvador that continues to exist to this day. Lil Milagro did not die in vain.

Documents that emerged after her death suggest that her sacrifices continue to live on in the collective memory of the left. Dagoberto Gutiérrez, one of the leaders of the FMLN, speaks eloquently of her martyrdom as he states, "In one of those cells…. Lil was given to martyrdom."[57] Women's organizations such as the Association of Salvadoran Women—Lil Milagro Ramírez took her name as a symbol of their resistance. A brochure published by the Asociación de Mujeres evokes her memory when it lists her as one of 11 women who "shed blood during the struggle of the people."[58] Finally, during the Salvadoran peace accords Shafik Handel, the leader of the FMLN, gave a speech at the negotiating table in which he paid homage to Lil Milagro, listing her name first among the revolutionaries who had died prematurely in the war. He stated:

> Lil Milagro Ramírez, Luis Díaz, Rafael Arce Zablah…offered their young lives for the ideals that are beginning to be realized today, when it was difficult to imagine this moment, they symbolized every one of us who has fallen and the

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[57] Dagoberto Gutiérrez, *Nadie quedará en el olvido: cuentos de la vida real*, (San Salvador: Ven y Sígueme, 2004), 154. Spanish: *En una de las celdas un día de tantos, una tarde de sol, una noche de insomnio, la vida de Lil se entregó al martirio."*

[58] Asociación de Mujeres de El Salvador, "Participation of the Salvadoran Women in the Revolutionary Process," San Salvador: Association of Women of El Salvador, 1980), 6.

> unity of the revolutionaries, without which we would not be here in this solemn and significant international ceremony.[59]

Lil Milagro left an important legacy to El Salvador. Her efforts as a woman helped future women's organizations work toward social equality, her poetry can be read in many different anthologies on guerrilla movements, her compassion for the poor continues to exist in the memories of those she touched, and her life as a daughter and friend will always be thought of with deep emotions by those who knew her best.

For scholars of revolution, Lil Milagro's story helps us understand how revolutionary intellectuals participate in the creation of a culture of resistance. She also illuminates how the process of radicalization is not instantaneous and often evolves as a result of compassion for the oppressed, an idealistic worldview, and a resilient determination to fight for the cause. Finally, Lil Milagro herself is a testament to the human spirit and the belief that some individuals will always resist injustice.

The best way to remember Lil Milagro's life and transformation from daughter to martyr is to end on a poem written about her by her friend Alfonso Hernández. The poem is entitled, *Shadowed by a Blossoming Girl*.

A poet says that Lil opens the daytime doors
so we all may enter,
her poetry is like the people: creative,
when she dreams an angel lowers his eyes
and when children cry Lil shares her smile
the light and the whole world.
She writes freedom from the dark cell
she sees everything and touches it silently like a child
we poor drink from her bounty, her exile from this life
usurped by blood and fire
we learn to love her in each skirmish

[59] Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, "Discurso del comandante Shafik Jorge Handal: Miembro de la comandancia general del FMLN y jefe de su comisión negociadora, durante la ceremonia de la firma del acuerdo de paz," (San Salvador, El Salvador, January, 1992.)

she is the perennial daybreak in our heats.

--Alfonso Hernández[60]

[60] Alfonso Hernández, "Shadowed By A Blossoming Girl," in Claribel Alegría and Darwin J. Flakoll, ed. and trans., *On the Front Line: Guerrilla Poems of El Salvador* (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1989), 8.

27 EL DIARIO DE HOY, Miércoles 21 de Julio de 1971.

SEÑALADA EN "EL GRUPO". Lil Milagro Ramírez, señalada como miembro de "El Grupo". En la documentación encontrada en la Colonia La Providencia, hay libros que tienen su nombre y firma. Se cree que convivió en esa residencia, donde fue descubierto el sótano y las bombas.

Figure 1: "El Grupo" Picture

Figure 2: Lil Milagro with Bandana

These two pictures were widely disseminated during Lil Milagro's clandestine life. The picture on top linked Lil Milagro in 1971 to a group of subversive individuals known as "El Grupo." The picture on the bottom became the most well known image of her after her death, appearing in newspapers, posters, and wall-murals.

LA CASA DEL POSIBLE SOTANO. — Esta es la casa marcada con el número 219, situada en la esquina de Calle Granada y Pasaje Valencia donde se supone existe un sótano o túnel en el cual se sospecha estuvo cautivo los últimos días de su vida el señor Ernesto Regalado Dueñas, después que fue secuestrado el 11 de febrero. La casa se encuentra al sur de la Colonia Málaga, a la cual se conecta por veredas. En las investigaciones ha resaltado el hecho de que en La Málaga hie asesinado el policía Santiago Díaz Rivas el 16 de febrero. (En ..º Pág. Caso Regalado Dueñas). (Foto de Romero)

Figure 3: "Safe house" where Roque Dalton and Lil Milagro formed a relationship as members of the ERP.

Figure 4: Lil Milagro Memorial at the UES

Throughout the UES, Lil Milagro's name can be found on many memorials dedicated to students who lost their lives in the conflict. Lil Milagro's name is the seventh from the bottom in the list on the right. Following her name is Roque Dalton.

Figure 5: Lil Milagro Mural

Photographed in 1992, this mural places Lil Milagro among members of the revolutionary vanguard in El Salvador. On the bottom of this mural are the figures (from left to right) of Farabundo Martí, Ché Guevara, and Augusto Sandino.

Figure 6: Author standing next to a mural of Lil Milagro at the UES.

Figure 7: Lil Milagro's sisters, 2006.

Lil Milagro's sisters and extended family who reside in Reseda, California. From left to right; Amada Bendeck (Lil Milagro's younger sister), Gloria Videz Ramírez de Mulera (Lil Milagro's cousin), Kwan Choi, Luz América Choi, and Lil Milagro Videz Ramírez de Mulera (daughter of Gloria Videz Ramírez de Mulera).