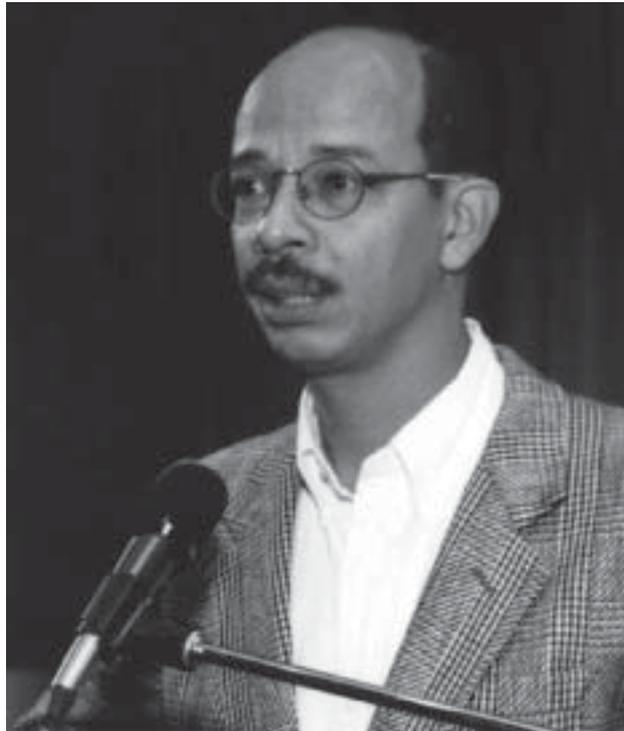


ENCUENTROS



El Salvador and the Construction of Cultural Identity

Lecture by

Miguel Huevo Mixco

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EL SALVADOR AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Miguel Huezco Mixco

I The Imaginary Bridge

Until the 1930s, Central America could still consider itself a unit. Not only in geographic, historical and, particularly, linguistic terms, but also, owing to shared cultural and ideological currents. Because of its continental position, Central Americans came to conceive of this narrow strip of territory as a cultural, economic, and social bridge between the Americas.

This idea, like many others that surfaced in the isthmus beginning in the 1930s, was based on the image of the United States as an inevitable and necessary counterpart. The construction of the Pan-American Highway, which symbolized the unification of the continent through the isthmus, would not have been possible without funding from the United States. U.S. support was also imperative for the building of the Panama Canal. The United States has been for Central America like the Siamese twin

who possesses the strength and vital organs to keep its poor neighbor alive.

We could say—and this is one of the central ideas in my talk today—that in the construction of cultural identity in El Salvador and all of Central America, the United States has also played an inescapable role. That United States policies in the region have been a determinative factor in the cultural arena, that imperialist actions cannot be circumscribed in purely economic or political terms, and that this very reality has helped mold our culture, making it even richer and more contradictory, is not easy for us to accept today. It is especially hard to accept because much of the debate swirling around the issue of identity in our countries is imbued with a “purist,” and otherwise anachronistic, notion of “national culture.”

Central American culture cannot separate itself from United States policies in the region. That said, I do not believe that that reality has ever detracted from the

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“validity” of our countries’ cultures. On the issue of culture, it is imperative that, rather than denounce the importance of the United States as an element in the development of our cultures, we accept it in a way that will enrich our analysis. We must extract so-called Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Panamanian, and Costa Rican culture from that imaginary autonomous capsule where the debate among intellectuals and politicians has been confined, as though our culture were diffuse, inaccessible, and concealed from the common field of vision (which is why we need to “search for it,” and “find it anew”). We need to define our culture in the context of our reality: that of a country emerging into history through a dynamic created by the rise of a new empire. Having laid down these suppositions, I will attempt to describe the panorama of relations between Central America and the United States, by trying to connect them to some of the most important artistic and cultural developments produced in this context.

II Armed Interventions

The North American idea to construct a sea canal through Nicaragua, and later Panama, came accompanied by a series of political, economic, and military actions on the part of the United States. There were successive imperialist interventions in Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. All of this plainly imperialist activity had a cultural impact that is clearly perceived in the media, in both the United States and in the countries of the region, and was intended to justify U.S. presence on Panamanian soil.

But, as we all know, the presence of the United States did not only generate ideas intended to consolidate the North American vision of its right to intervene in our affairs; on the contrary. Beginning in the mid-1920s, intellectuals and students in many Central American countries began to formulate projects for national renewal. The Salvadoran thinker Alberto Masferrer advanced a program that was at once nationalist, anti-American, and inspired by Bolívar’s vision of Pan-American unity. Like him, other intellectuals, writers, and artists, including Froylán Turcios from Honduras, elaborated a concept of social redemption in which aesthetic, religious, and political ideas were marshaled to defend sovereignty in the face of U.S. power in Central America and the Caribbean.

Ariel, the magazine edited by Turcios in Tegucigalpa, published texts by José Vasconcelos from Mexico, and Julio Antonio Mella from Cuba, both of whom maintained relations and carried on correspondence with numerous Latin American intellectuals in Europe and the United States. *El repertorio americano*, edited by Joaquín García Monge in Costa Rica, also fostered a continental perspective, becoming a veritable “resonating chamber” for literary and journalistic activity throughout Central and Latin America.

These texts called for urgent social reorganization in both political and cultural terms, and these appeals, together with the rise and consolidation of numerous magazines and newspapers founded by the emerging sectors of the middle class, facilitated greater independence and autonomy in the practice of journalism. This also allowed for the dissemina-

tion of ideas that challenged the traditional strongholds of power—that is to say, the families whose power derived from the expropriation of land and exploitation of the work force.

It is striking that, unlike writers of other cultural backgrounds in the hemisphere, the Salvadoran and Central American writers who wished to explore these problems turned not to the novel, but to journalism, the philosophical-aesthetic essay, and poetry. Exceptions to this current are the novels *La mala sombra y otros sucesos* by Joaquín García Monge and, later, *El tigre* by the Guatemalan Flavio Herrera. The appearance of the novel, a literary genre historically associated with the rise of cities, is a relatively recent phenomenon in Central America.

The modernist art and literary paradigms, in effect since the verbal reign of Rubén Darío, were faced with a radical change. The artists and writers who emerged in the thirties no longer conceived of art as a means of escape from the degrading forms of co-existence that characterized post-colonial societies. Those were forms which the process of economic modernization made possible by North American investments seemed to exacerbate rather than resolve. Art became one more method of addressing social problems. The poetry of the future, according to the Salvadoran writer Alberto Guerra Trigueros, author of the essay *Poesía versus arte*, was to be intimately involved in “the exploration and solution” of social and human problems. Ideas of this type transcended the bounds of literature and art; they not only determined the political decisions assumed by the artists themselves, they also had an impact in the media and in intellectual

circles. In these years, Central American literary figures became authentic opinion leaders, helping to develop national reform projects which were, of course, underestimated by those in power.

In this context arose one of the seminal personalities of Central American history and culture: Augusto C. Sandino. For the fifty years between the 1930s and the final decades of the twentieth century, this Nicaraguan hero was a highly symbolic figure. The background music of the thirties was Sandino’s resistance against the intervention of U.S. troops. That was a fight which attracted the sympathy and support of many Central Americans, indeed of all Latin America. Years later, in the midst of the enthusiasm that unleashed the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, writers, musicians, and artists, among them, the painter Armando Morales, immortalized the man who had been capable of confronting U.S. military power and bringing about the departure of the U.S. Marines from Nicaraguan soil.

The assassination of Sandino in 1934 sparked a wave of indignation throughout the continent. This event—comparable to the Central American fight against the filibuster William Walker—was one of the few incidents in the century capable of uniting social and political sectors throughout the region.

The U.S. invasion of Nicaragua not only confirmed the fears of the intellectual elite, but also raised the consciousness of the more popular sectors which, throughout the decade of the thirties, launched numerous social actions, notably the banana workers’ strikes in Costa Rica and Honduras. In this period, there is a series of narrative works related to life

on North American plantations, among them we must cite *Mamita Yunaí* by Carlos Luis Fallas from Costa Rica, and *Hombres contra la muerte* by Miguel Angel Espino from El Salvador. All over Central America, with the sole exception of Costa Rica, political systems evolved to become dictatorships which imposed censorship in the media and annulled possibilities for dissent.

The most tragic episode, whose sequel persisted until the end of the century, was the uprising of Indians and peasants in western El Salvador in January 1932 (which represented the historical debut of the Salvadoran Communist Party); this was met by the government's ferocious counter-offensive which left thousands dead. The massacre is usually attributed to the collision between a communist vanguard leading desperate peasants and a military regime at the service of oligarchic interests—although there are doubtless other optics on the issue. From the vantage point of culture, this was the event that defined the “bloody nature” of relations between a Mesoamerican state (that is to say, a state no longer controlled by a colonial authority) and its indigenous population; from this moment on, the Indians would be subjected to a process designed to make them socially invisible. In El Salvador, the Náhuatl population renounced its language, and only continued its traditional social guilds and organizations clandestinely. That cultural tragedy constituted a veritable ethnic cleansing. In a sense, the massacre of 1932 represents the culmination of a whole process of conquest and colonization. The control of the land and labor force used to guarantee coffee production was won through the violent nega-

tion of the workers' cultural specificity, especially in the regions of Ahuachapán and Sonsonate, where indigenous communities had maintained a high degree of ethnic solidarity.

III From Crisis, Splendor

The collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929 fell like a thunderbolt across the Central American agro-export economies. The result was a long period during which U.S. policies directly affected one of the fundamental pillars of the culture, that is to say, education, by incubating political and social discontent. The large landowners relied on the over-exploitation of their plantations, delaying a process of industrialization that, had it been allowed to occur, would probably have created conditions for the development of more self-sufficient economies.

A fundamentally agrarian vision of the world in general defined Central American culture. Since the nineteenth century, the visual and official symbols of nationality throughout the region have been essentially agrarian. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, art and literature also explored the peasant world, converting so-called “costumbrismo” into the reigning image of Central American identity.

Beyond the obscure folklore of tyrants, and the reconstructions—sometimes quite correct—of the legends and travails of the peasants, there was a constellation of artists who produced works of real quality. Chief among them were two novelists with great linguistic gifts and extraordinary points of view: Miguel Angel Asturias who, in his 1927 *Leyendas de Guatemala*, crystallized a radically new vision of in-

digenous mythology, as appropriated through *mestizaje*, and Salarrué (Salvador Salazar Arrué), whose *Cuentos de barro* placed the peasant characters on a wholly new human plane.

In poetry, the most important phenomenon was the emergence of the Nicaraguan avant-garde, which coincided with the United States invasion of that country in 1928. These poets, among them artists of international stature like José Coronel Urtecho and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, advocated a restitution of sovereignty, which immediately clashed with both liberal and conservative forms of exercising power.

These two literary currents represent the first cry for independence in Central American literature, which does not mean that, as happens everywhere, one or the other developed without the generous influence of movements and tendencies outside the region; they were, however, appropriated and expressed in the context of a process congruent with the cultural development of their respective Central American countries.

Just as the Central American economy began to recover from the Great Depression, the world was ravaged by the Second World War (1939-1945). Once again, the strategic location of Central America, and particularly the Panama Canal, imposed new political functions and pressures on the isthmus. New sources of economic help coming from the United States were complemented by intensified efforts to modernize and equip the region's military. And, although the explosion of war led to the closure of European coffee markets, the United States government apportioned quotas in its own markets to the coffee-growing na-

tions of Central America. The banana trade suffered a worse fate because the boats used for the crop's transport and commercialization were requisitioned by the United States for its war effort. Once again, it is impossible to understand the national profile of any of our countries without bearing in mind the role of the United States' penetration into the marrow, not only of our economies and political systems, but of our culture as well.

The very dynamic of the war helped accelerate the process that eventually put an end to the long period of dictators in our countries. A heightened civic consciousness, united with a renewed focus of U.S. policies on the region, provoked the emergence of movements against dictatorships. The participants in these movements were urban workers, intellectuals and, with the exception of Nicaragua, young army officers. While Rafael Calderón Guardia was beginning an early process of reform in Costa Rica, the rest of Central America was fighting against dictators. The fall of Jorge Ubico in Guatemala and of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador was a transcendental step, opening the way for reforms that modernized the economies and politics of both countries. Honduras also began a reform process, carried out by the military itself. New labor codes, laws for industrial promotion, the ratification of constitutions more appropriate for the times, and attempts at agrarian reform, characterized this historical moment. The most notable example is what came to be called "Revolutionary Guatemala."

Guatemala experienced its first political spring time between 1944 and 1954. After the fall of Ubico, under the civilian governments of Juan José Arévalo and,

later, Jacobo Arbenz, there was a rise in public investment, intensified literacy campaigns, and the founding of the National Indigenist Institute. The Law of Agrarian Reform, promulgated under Arbenz, issued more than a thousand land expropriation decrees which, for the moment, favored over a hundred thousand peasants. The landowning sectors and the Catholic Church forged an alliance, with the support of the United States, to organize a military invasion from Honduran territory. The Guatemalan army withdrew its support from Arbenz, who was then obliged to resign. Backed by the United States, Coronel Carlos Castillo Armas assumed power and reversed the reforms that had been won, drastically cutting back political freedoms.

In this same period, the peak demand for coffee required once again expropriating land from the peasants. Exile and migration became essential elements in the cultural profile of Central America. In the countryside, there was a drastic reduction of forests and an increasing depredation of natural resources, resulting in ecological effects which proved, within a few years, to be catastrophic.

By then the United States had consolidated its hegemony in the region. North American cultural standards, purveyed through movies and the media, held real fascination for those who lived in the cities.

Throughout Central America, the idea of the nation derived from the concept of a *mestiza* culture, composed of the racial and cultural cross between the region's indigenous peoples and the Spaniards. The question of *mestizaje* surfaces in Central America at the moment

when groups that are traditionally subordinated or excluded, but also connected to a European ethnic tradition, begin to have a visible presence on the national scene.

Traditionally, the centers of power have been composed of members of the indigenous-Spanish *mestiza* community. This often derives from an exclusionist attitude toward "non-*mestizo*" sectors—descendants of Africans, Arabs, and Chinese—but, overwhelmingly, the exclusion is directed at the indigenous peoples, who are still a significant portion of the population, especially in Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Blacks in particular suffered discrimination. The descendants of Africans had no place in the emerging *mestizo* nation; even progressive governments in this period demonstrated little understanding of ethnic issues, as the case of Guatemala under Arbenz makes clear. The Arbenz administration took the first steps in establishing bilingual education and literacy programs in rural areas; however, the landowning reforms essentially favored the peasants, engendering frustration in the Mayan villages of the high plains, and provoking new tensions between the Indians and the Ladinos. The situation reached its climax in October 1944 with the Ladino massacre of the Indians in the village of Patzicía, during which every adult Mayan found by the attackers was killed. At the same time, young Mayans were beginning to constitute the essential base of the army, owing to an abusive and discriminatory system of recruitment.

The indigenous-Spanish *mestiza* conception obscures the fact that the culture of these countries had become over the

centuries a rich amalgam of ethnic and cultural ingredients. What today is considered autochthonous—that is to say, the surviving cultural elements of those Central Americans who had resisted the Spanish expeditions five hundred years ago—was at one time composed of the vestiges of earlier invading peoples.

Mesoamerican culture, integrated into the cultural complex wrought by the invasions of Mexican peoples from the Gulf of Mexico, is a fundamental component of contemporary culture, but it is not the only element. The Atlantic coast of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama have for centuries been associated with South American societies. The destruction of Pre-Columbian structures during the Conquest, owing precisely to the different forms this took in each region, led to two perfectly distinct traditions which still survive today: the Mesoamerican, and the culture of southeast Central America. In addition to these components, we see today an increasingly strong North American presence in urban culture, and a marked Mexican influence in the countryside. While the former is certainly an effect of United States domination in the region, we should refrain from labeling all of these cultural or sub-cultural manifestations as perverse, simply because they derive from the U.S.

IV The Search for Identity

Since the middle of the twentieth century, intellectuals and artists in Central America have rekindled a debate that goes back to the end of the nineteenth century and which can be defined succinctly as “the search for identity.” The problem of identity begins to gain ground

in the educated circles feeling the first effects of the cultural and social shifts of the modern epoch. Before the founding of a modern State, which in Central America did not really begin to happen until the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was very difficult to speak of a national identity, let alone a Central American one. Rather there were, and to an appreciable extent still are, in the period we are examining, distinct identities ascribed to different social strata, economic classes, and ethnic groups, as well as to different political-ideological positions.

Following the end of the Second World War, this debate, influenced by Marxist and generally socialist ideas, culminated in a proposal to reconstruct the cultural imaginary in a way that rejected national symbols established through liberal thought, and that reclaimed the characters censored by official history. Thus there was a resurgence of figures like the Nonualco caudillo Anastasio Aquino, and the aforementioned Sandino; and the silence surrounding the 1932 massacre in El Salvador was broken.

In this debate, two tendencies have predominated in the interpretation of cultural phenomena and, while distinctive, they are not mutually exclusive. The first establishes a position of “resistance” in the face of that which is foreign (particularly coming from the United States), and concedes little or no space to local integration of outside elements. The second stresses that culture is valid to the extent that it is strictly “one’s own.”

Exponents of one and the other tendency have disqualified the dynamic and heterogeneous character of culture, since they consider that the basic cultural manifestations of Central America are essen-

tially produced through imitation of, and dependence on, North American culture. Central America is seen by these intellectuals as a wasteland where, as the novelist Sergio Ramírez has written, many possibilities “are defeated en route, or die in the womb.”

In this period, Central American intellectuals’ frequent denunciation of “the foreign” was motivated by considerations less “cultural” than political. Historically, intellectuals and artists in Central America have played a key and constructive role in importing ideologies and aesthetics to a region avid for ideas and “the world.” Many writers were diplomats: first and foremost, Darío, who had postings in various countries; Salarrué, who lived for a decade in New York and Washington; Asturias, who was a diplomat in Paris, as was the caricaturist Toño Salazar. Some writers lived abroad for political reasons, like the Guatemalans Mario Monteforte Toledo, Augusto Monterroso, and Roque Dalton, whose international reputation would have been impossible without the support of the Cuban Revolution. Others left for personal reasons, including the painters Carlos Mérida, Armando Morales y San Avilés. Central American intellectuals and artists have long acted as intermediaries between their countries of origin and the outside world, functioned as bridges for the exchange of exotic ideas from Central America to the rest of the world, and vice versa.

It is precisely this privileged and irreproachable situation of some artists and intellectuals that has prevented Central America from remaining isolated from the international context, from being deprived of memory, and as Ramírez himself writes, from “living on memories

borrowed from literature, architecture, and political forms of organization”; resigned to a perennially “provincial” state with few possibilities for achieving “universality,” or from being a static extension of pre-Hispanic cultures surviving on the mercy of tourism.

These claims, which echo those made by the literati at the end of the nineteenth century, have become part of a consciousness and self-image born of the historical conditions in which our countries emerged. Yet it is no longer possible to celebrate the autochthonous as though it were the original defining manifestation of our cultures.

We must not lose sight of the waves of migration from Central America to U.S. cities, which increased in the 1970s to become a veritable human river in the 1980s; this migratory process is creating a culture which, in turn, is transforming those metropolitan societies in infinite ways.

Those impulses to define a Central American culture impermeable to the influences of the contemporary world are similar to the ultra-conservative movements that have surfaced in cities like Los Angeles, which seek to prevent contamination from the “invasions” of migrants from Central America. Both positions are untenable.

This is the road that led to the so-called “search for identity,” which is more a nicely-turned phrase than a revealing concept. It is as though this quest, this process in perennial development and definition, would one day find itself a completed object, the desired fruit of infinite explorations, located in a place alien to our contemporary ways of being and living. The bonds of identity are

forged through much more than an articulated discourse; they are established when a community renews the interests it holds in common in its day-to-day life; when it finds expressions of solidarity that strengthen human connections in its social context, reinforcing both a sense of the past, and a belief in the future; when it adopts traditional or learned symbols that enhance its sense of belonging.

Between the 1940s and the end of the 1950s, the cultural identity of the countries of Central America was also forged in the consciousness of their own deficiencies. The artistic movements that surfaced in Guatemala prove this point. With consummate skill, Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Miguel Angel Asturias in literature, and Carlos Mérida in the visual arts, employ local elements to crystallize not only the reality of their own country, but of all of humanity. The same can be said about the aforementioned Carlos Luis Fallas from Costa Rica, and Miguel Angel Espino from El Salvador.

This debate takes a new turn beginning in the decade of the 1970s. The collision of social movements with entrenched power tends to displace identity issues, relegating them to a secondary plane of importance. The cultural debate is now defined between “internationalist popular (or proletarian)” stances, and (official) “pro-imperialist bourgeois nationalist” positions. Moreover, the debate is colored by the conflict between east and west. Not until the 1990s—following the failure of revolutionary strategies and in view of the need to create environments for understanding and a climate of peace—does identity regain prominence in the cultural debate, establishing a discourse where there is very

little difference between the official culture and its antagonists.

At the end of the twentieth century, the debate about identity is not an idle debate. Today, our world is characterized by the increasing closeness and co-existence of large entities. At the same time, in these new regional and international contexts, it is important for each entity and sphere of the culture to be conscious of its own identity, to understand exactly what distinguishes it from the others, and to accept that that difference, far from being an impediment, contributes to the rich variety of the world.

In the case of El Salvador, the massive migration of one-third of its population, principally to cities in the United States, as well as the increasing globalization of culture brought about by electronic media, has greatly complicated the issue of what it means to be Salvadoran.

The way we perceive our country, our home, our natural environment (family, community, organizations, businesses, and institutions)—that is to say, the different contexts in which we form our identities and in which live our lives—has substantially changed in the last twenty years.

Since the end of our civil war, El Salvador has renewed an often confusing discussion on the subject of identity. In past decades, the issue was handled almost exclusively by the intellectual elite; today, it is part of the post-war semantic shared by everyone who participates in official cultural discourse—politicians, citizens groups, and artists. Identity is also a theme in cyber-exchanges between Salvadorans near and far, and is a key word in the local media.

In this context, literature itself has

undergone changes. Traditionally, we have thought of Salvadoran literature as having been produced within the country's borders; but, since the end of the century, a significant portion of Salvadoran literature is being written in foreign countries and in languages different from those traditionally spoken by the majority of Salvadorans.

If we compare post-war literary fiction with that produced in the two decades before the war, we see that contemporary writers seem to have a much broader exposure; they are also notably more skeptical in terms of present-day cultural constructions (political, social and artistic movements); their predecessors were more *engagés*, advocating for change in social and political structures, and in modes of thought.

Strongly reflected in the works of writers born during and after the decade of the 1950s, we see the atrocious and destructive daily routine of loneliness in the cities, as well as the disenchantment with, and repudiation of, official culture.

The debate that has been established around the theme of identity departs from basically two points of view. 1) Identity is constructed through the relations among citizens, wherever they might be, within or away from the country, with or without their compatriots. This point of view, connected to a more traditional concept of identity as linked to the land and national territory, is designed to account for the economic remittances sent to their families by Salvadorans living in the United States (an aggregate sum equal to the gross domestic product). One is Salvadoran by virtue of one's material connection to the country and its inhabitants. Another aspect of this argu-

ment hinges on the yearning of thousands of exiles and migrants to return, if only for limited periods, to re-immers themselves in Salvadoran reality. This consideration can be extended to the rest of the countries of Central America. 2) Identity is constructed under the influence of communication media (television and, principally, the Internet). Identity is not necessarily molded by reference to, or connection with, a specific physical territory. Young Salvadorans living in the *barrios* of Los Angeles, and in the more modest neighborhoods of Long Island, communicate via email with their compatriots in the towns of Soyapango or Zacamil (both on the outskirts of San Salvador), sharing and exchanging the cultural elements peculiar to urban populations, and forged through the formats and genres of the cultural industry of the image.

All of these phenomena are reflected in post-war writing, which is the first essentially urban literature in Central America, and which re-creates the catastrophe of a fragmented and impoverished society. Paradoxically, this generation of writers, which has enjoyed more freedom than any other over the course of the twentieth century, does not project in its novels or narratives any enthusiasm for the political gains wrested from one of the bloodiest periods in the history of Latin America.

M. HUEZO MIXCO

Miguel Huezo Mixco (b. San Salvador, 1954) was one of the founding poets of an ephemeral literary publication, *El Papo*. Before reaching the age of twenty, he had written for various magazines in the region. In 1978, he published his first collection of poetry. This period coincides with the apogee of his country's social struggles, which he joined as a propagandist for revolutionary workers' organizations.

In 1980, he traveled to Costa Rica to participate in a working group with other writers, including Manlio Argueta, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Roger Lindo who, from San José, collaborated with the Salvadoran revolutionary movement. In 1981, he became director of the guerrilla radio station "Farabundo Martí," in the department of Chalatenango in the war zone. Between 1981 and 1991, he did radio broadcasts from numerous zones of conflict. During these years, he published three books of poetry.

In 1993, he resigned from his party positions in order to return full-time to literary pursuits. He worked for international organizations, like the Oscar Arias Foundation (Costa Rica), and with the Regional Center for Economic and Social Research (CRIES, in Nicaragua), on a documentary investigation of the role of the Armed Forces in El Salvador.

To date, he has published five books of poetry, two volumes on culture and literature, and one historical-political study of the Salvadoran army in the post-war period. He is cultural editor of *Tendencias*, a magazine published in San Salvador, and an editorial writer for *La Opinión*, a newspaper in Los Angeles. He is currently Director of the publishing house of the National Council for Culture and Art (CONCULTURA) in El Salvador.

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