

“POETRY IS SUBVERSION”: Writers and Revolution at *La Pájara Pinta*, El Salvador, 1966–1975

Thousands of soldiers swept onto the campus of the University of El Salvador with tanks and planes, ransacking buildings and arresting more than eight hundred students, professors, and staff. It was July 19, 1972, and the university had “fallen into the hands of the Communist Party of El Salvador and a minuscule group of opportunists of the most disgraceful immorality,” said the recently inaugurated president Army Colonel Arturo Armando Molina.¹ Troops handcuffed the rector, Fabio Castillo, and the dean of the medical school and sent them into exile in Nicaragua.² Early in the invasion, the troops sealed off and occupied the university’s printing press, where workers produced a magazine of arts and politics called *La Pájara Pinta* that essayist Italo López Vallecillos and novelist Manlio Argueta had founded in

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the panel “Women, Culture, Power: New Views on Archival Evidence from 20th Century El Salvador” at the 135th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association in New Orleans in 2022. I am grateful to Erik Ching of Furman University for inviting me to participate in that panel and for the example of his scholarship. At Georgetown, I received warm encouragement and feedback from John Tutino, Bryan McCann, Adam Rothman, Joanne Rappaport, and James Millward, among others, as well as a scholarship and research grant. Good advice and fresh perspectives came also from Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Miguel Huevo Mixco, Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, the late Matías Romero Coto, and Werner Romero. My thanks to the staffs of the Library of Congress (which has the almost complete series of *La Pájara Pinta*) and the library of the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA); to the editors and anonymous readers of *The Americas* for their insightful and constructive comments; and to the writers and others cited in this article who granted me interviews, particularly Manlio Argueta. Finally, I am hopelessly in debt, in the currency of gratitude, to the heirs of Roque Dalton and Italo López Vallecillos for opening those writers’ private correspondence to me. Dalton’s papers remain in his son Jorge’s house in Lourdes, El Salvador, where I reviewed them. López Vallecillos’s papers in the UCA library date mainly from late in his career and were of limited use to me; those I cite in this paper were still in boxes in his study in San Salvador. Both families have been generous about allowing scholars access to these collections, but I hope they will find their way into a university setting soon.

1. “Advertencia de Molina a rojos,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 20, 1972, 1, 22. All translations in this article are by the author, unless otherwise noted or borrowed with citation from a secondary source published in English.

2. Fabio Castillo to Italo López Vallecillos, letter, August 2, 1972, López Vallecillos Family Archive, San Salvador [henceforth LVFA]; Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982), 64.

1966, and of which Argueta was still the editor.³ The campus occupation lasted two years and proved a milestone in El Salvador's long march to civil war. The closing of *La Pájara Pinta* that day silenced the most important forum for Salvadoran dissident writers and marked, for many of them, the end of their literary careers and the start of their lives as fugitives and, eventually, guerrillas.

This article will show how an influential magazine embodied the ideals of El Salvador's brief-lived cultural revival of the late 1960s, and then, when military repression began to choke off that opening, gave voice to the goals of a leftist insurgency peopled to an extraordinary degree by radicalized writers and intellectuals.⁴ These included the doomed guerrilla poet Roque Dalton who, from exile in Prague and Havana, published frequently in the magazine and became its most distinctive voice. Using texts, letters, postwar memoirs, and interviews with *La Pájara Pinta's* surviving poets and illustrators, I will trace their evolution from writers to insurgents as it played out in the magazine's pages and show how this publication contributed decisively to El Salvador's revolutionary ferment.⁵ Previous studies on the role of intellectuals in the early Salvadoran insurgency have focused on Catholic progressive grassroots organizing, school teachers' unions, the influence of the Cuban Revolution, and the rise of provincial "peasant intellectuals" in the 1960s.⁶ All these factors were important, but this article stresses that the poets and playwrights who embraced radical change were heirs to a potent mix of secular, peaceful dissent and literary experimentation that started much earlier. Their spirit of literary

3. *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 66 (January–February 1972); Manlio Argueta, author interview, June 7, 2019; "Literatura subversiva hallan en sótanos de U.," *La Prensa Gráfica*, July 22, 1972, 4, 54; Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, *La rebelión de los sentidos: arte y revolución durante la modernización autoritaria en El Salvador* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2020), 87–88. Poets and artists prepared the magazine's contents, but linotype operators in overalls (*gabachas*) ran the printing presses where it was produced. The two groups had many common interests and sometimes overlapped in their roles. The linotype operators' union had left-wing leadership and clandestinely printed Communist Party publications, and many of its members wrote prose and poetry, including Ricardo Castro Rivas, discussed later in this paper. Authorities of the military government were well aware of the subversive power of the printed word. All printing presses were required by law to register with the government and to file regular reports to authorities on what they were producing. The government kept meticulous notes on the number and location of print shops. In 1960, there were 126 printing presses in the whole country, 74 of them in San Salvador, 14 in Santa Ana, and 12 in San Miguel, according to a document in the Archivo General de la Nación, in the Palacio Nacional, San Salvador. These included various, some now-obsolete categories including *imprentas*, *tipografías*, and *talleres gráficos*, as well as newspapers with their own printing facilities. Ministerio del Interior, República de El Salvador, "Nómina de Imprentas que Funcionan en el País," September 7, 1960, file "Cumplimiento Ley Imprenta," File no. 089, Policía 1962, Box 1. The "Ley de Imprenta," or Press Law, then in effect and stipulating fines for presses that failed to register was signed by military president Oscar Osorio in 1950. *Diario Oficial*, vol. 149, no. 219, 3500-01, October 9, 1950.

4. Joaquín Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

5. Erik Ching, "Relatos de la guerra civil en El Salvador: una batalla narrativa," *Realidad* 153 (January–June 2019): 23–47, on the rise and uses of memoir as war narrative.

6. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*; Héctor Lindo-Fuentes and Erik Ching, *Modernizing Minds in El Salvador: Education Reform and the Cold War, 1960–1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012); Paul Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925–2005* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

rupture, which soon shaded into political radicalization, arose in the anti-Martínez uprising of 1944 and flowered in the 1950s before being sidelined by anticommunist persecution, finding its voice (and readers) again in the pages of *La Pájara Pinta*. In the early 1970s, most of these writers—some gradually and apprehensively, others more emphatically—embraced the cause of armed struggle yet remained autonomous voices who joined with other antigovernment sectors only after the birth of guerrilla coalitions later in the decade.

La Pájara Pinta began publishing at the height of the “Cultural Cold War,” the term Patrick Iber in *Neither Peace nor Freedom* and others have used to describe the long struggle waged by the Soviet Union and the United States in the cultural realm to claim the “moral high ground and the superiority of capitalism over socialism or vice versa” as a corollary of their larger ideological and military rivalry.⁷ This contest, which occasionally cropped up in the magazine’s pages, with essays on officially favored Soviet poets or US playwrights, has been a focus of much research on the role of culture in the Cold War.⁸ In the case of Latin America, scholars have more recently delved into how literature evolved from a field in which the United States and the Soviet Union jockeyed for influence among educated elites to an activity that inspired and catalyzed guerrilla insurgencies. How writers and intellectuals went from ideological posturing to armed struggle—reluctantly or with gusto, with training or nothing but raw idealism—and how this evolution affected the course of war has drawn growing attention in the case of El Salvador, where the themes of competing Cold War propaganda and radicalized intellectuals overlapped. The shift of intellectuals toward a more combative position occurred largely as a reaction against heavy-handed cultural and educational “reforms” imposed by El Salvador’s military government with strong US support, as Héctor Lindo-Fuentes and Erik Ching show in *Modernizing Minds in El Salvador*.⁹ In *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance*, Joaquín M. Chávez describes how poets embraced armed struggle in the 1970s, in part out of frustration with the reformist funk of the Soviet-line Communist Party,

7. Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 21.

8. In addition to Iber’s comprehensive study, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999), which focuses on what Saunders calls US “cultural warfare,” 4–6, and Karen Paget, *Patriotic Betrayal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), on the CIA’s efforts to win favor among university students worldwide.

9. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 163–64. They recount how President Lyndon Johnson, in an emblematic moment of Cold War cultural one-upmanship, travelled to El Salvador in 1968, and cut the ribbon at the government’s new educational television studio. On state cultural policy, see also Knut Walter, *Las políticas culturales del estado salvadoreño 1900–2012* (San Salvador: Fundación AccesArte, 2014), 73–105.

focusing on a group of writers in the provincial city of San Vicente (discussed later in this article) who constituted a “quintessential cultural phenomenon of the Global Sixties,” writes Chávez, although their cultural impact proved fleeting.¹⁰ The rise of an artistic and intellectual counterculture in the shadow of the military’s official culture apparatus in the 1960s is chronicled brilliantly by Ricardo Roque Baldovinos in *La rebelión de los sentidos*, which draws heavily on *La Pájara Pinta* as a source and shows how it became a locus for free-thinking dissent in the arts and, by implication if not intention, politics.¹¹ Roque Baldovinos, more than these other writers, engages with the long tradition of literary dissent in El Salvador and the ways in which it informed the rise of guerrilla poets. The present essay will show how *La Pájara Pinta* acted as an essential bridge between generations of radical poets while it embodied a spirit of humanistic, pluralist inquiry that would soon be eclipsed in the hardline atmosphere of the 1970s, only to emerge again in El Salvador after war ended in 1992.

BROTHERS OF THE PROLETARIAT MOON

La Pájara Pinta’s seven years of existence coincided with most of the “key decade of 1962–1972” when the main outlines of El Salvador’s approaching civil war began to take shape, with the appearance of the civil society organizations, left-wing guerrilla groups, and rightist paramilitary squads that would become main actors of the conflict in the 1980s, as Lindo-Fuentes and Ching wrote.¹² In this “historic magazine,” as two Salvadoran critics wrote,¹³ writers bridged El Salvador’s first stirrings of avant-garde intellectual life in the 1950s to the revolutionary fire of the 1970s. Its first issues were aimed at ending the parochialism of Salvadoran cultural life by engaging with global trends such as existentialism, pop art, and absurdist theatre. It grew bolder in its criticism of El Salvador’s conservative order as military repression intensified, and by the end of its run it had become the main outlet for left-wing poets and essayists who were supporting or joining nascent guerrilla movements. No other magazine printed so many of the poets who fought, and in many cases died, for the rebel cause. Yet it was never a political pamphlet. In every one of its sixty-six issues, *La Pájara Pinta* aimed to raise El Salvador’s literary standards through its example with subtle and sophisticated writing. Its death, and the

10. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 111.

11. Roque Baldovinos, *La rebelión de los sentidos*, 77–124.

12. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 208.

13. Jorge Vargas Méndez and J.A. Morasan, *Literatura salvadoreña, 1960–2000: Homenaje* (San Salvador: Ediciones Venado del Bosque), 82.

exile or guerrilla enlistment of its main writers, signaled the end of what could be called the poetic phase of the Salvadoran revolution and the start of the military phase. In the first phase, intellectuals conceptualized and aestheticized the idea of revolution through poetry and visual art. They were cast aside or abandoned their art, voluntarily or not, in the second phase as discipline and discretion became primordial concerns in the clandestine guerrilla organizations.

To understand the origins of *La Pájara Pinta*, how it arose from a complex interplay of literary and political aspirations, one must go back to the transformative year of 1944. Maximiliano Hernández Martínez had ruled since 1931 with a mix of fear and personalist appeal, banning trade unions and all but the most docile social organizations while instituting just enough reform to undermine pressures from below, including a timid land reform.¹⁴ In 1932, he had crushed a campesino revolt in the western coffee highlands with the loss of thousands of lives. Opposition grew through the war years and, in early 1944, a campaign of civil disobedience paralyzed San Salvador, with a general strike that later writers likened to Gandhi or the Danish resistance to Nazi occupation. Teachers cancelled classes, shopkeepers shuttered their storefronts, and taxis and bus drivers refused to drive to demand the resignation of the dictator, who, faced with loss of support of the army and pressure from the US ambassador, resigned and fled the country.¹⁵ The *huelga de los brazos caídos*—the “sit-down strike,” peaceful, popular, and successful—became the standard to which Salvadoran progressive movements aspired, until the 1970s when peaceful routes to change became exhausted in the face of army and death-squad assaults.¹⁶

The fall of Martínez had been promoted and chronicled by a circle of poets and essayists who called themselves “the group of anti-fascist writers” and had become activist voices for attention to the poor and opposition to military rule.¹⁷ The group’s two main creative forces were the communist poets Matilde

14. Erik Ching, *Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880–1940* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 334–35. Martínez was always known at second reference by his maternal surname.

15. Patricia Parkman, *Non-Violent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 90–91; Almeida, *Waves of Protest*, 53–55.

16. Almeida, *Waves of Protest*, 106. Almeida notes that candidate Duarte, leading a center-left coalition, was working on a plan for a general civic strike “of the 1944 ‘Los Brazos Caídos’ variety” to demand the military recognize his presumed victory in the 1972 presidential election when he was arrested and later forced to flee the country. Parts of the coalition later joined the guerrilla movement. The failed promise of the 1944 general strike as a model for later progressive action was referred to by other Left-leaning figures, such as Manlio Argueta in *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 66 (January–February 1972), quoted later in this article. Commenting on the rise of El Salvador’s activist Left in the cultural and political realms in the 1950s and ’60s, in which her husband, Italo López Vallecillos, played an important role, medical doctor Silva Castellanos recalled: “It all stemmed from the Martínez tyranny, and he [López Vallecillos] absorbed it. This came after the Martinato, which is what we called the period of Martínez, who was fierce.” Silvia Castellanos de López Vallecillos, author interview, August 31, 2009.

17. Manlio Argueta, “Los abuelos y los nietos en la literatura centroamericana,” in *Visiones del sector cultural en Centroamérica*, ed. Jesús Oyamburu (San José, Costa Rica: Embajada de España, Centro Cultural de España, 2000),

Elena López and Oswaldo Escobar Velado, who drew on the example of Spanish Civil War poets and embraced an unabashedly political function for literature. In his *Ten Sonnets for One Thousand and One Workers* (1950), Escobar Velado eschewed the romantic tropes to which Salvadoran tastes were accustomed and articulated a harsh, if at times melodramatic vision of Salvadoran society and its most exploited. In a paean to street sweepers, he wrote: “Brothers of the proletariat moon / Their bitterness granted by the night / Existing only for them: Garbage, / A broom, a cough, malaria!”¹⁸ The idea of the poet as advocate for the working class, using language to shame the powerful who fancied themselves lettered but ignored the misery of those around them, took shape in the works of Escobar Velado and others who emerged from the censorship of the Martínez years to publish widely in newspapers, magazines, and their own booklets through the 1950s. They rejected the romantic, the epic, and the bucolic. “We demand from poetry something more than *chuladas* (pretty things),” said a manifesto of poets including Escobar Velado, López, and Antonio Gamero, known as the Grupo SEIS in the final years of the Martínez dictatorship. “Poetry today must be something deeper and more transcendental, something intimate and sacred. We want a poetry that is anti-declamatory, anti-rhetorical, and anti-glorious.”¹⁹ They opposed “poetic poetry” in favor of a language of protest and self-conscious identification with the common people that would, over the course of the 1950s, evolve for some into a vision of revolutionary change.²⁰ Their world view, as López Vallecillos would write, owed more to Tolstoy than to Marx, and some of them ascribed to Catholic social doctrines prefiguring the rise of liberation theology.²¹

San Salvador had about a dozen daily, general-interest newspapers in the 1950s, and at least four of them carried a weekly literary supplement that published poetry and short essays or stories. Of those, the Saturday supplement of the *Diario Latino* was the main venue for nonconformist writers. Under the direction of Juan Felipe Toruño since the 1930s, “Sábados de *Diario Latino*”

95. Argueta wrote: “It was with the fall of international fascism in 1944 that we saw in El Salvador the rise of a literary group that turned this posture [of literature put to the service of political action] into a tradition. The most representative of them were Oswaldo Escobar Velado and Matilde Elena López, who saw themselves as militant intellectuals, under the influence of the Spanish poets of exodus and pain, actors in the Civil War of their country: García Lorca, Miguel Hernández, León Felipe, [. . .] They would influence as well the young poets of the generation of 1950 and 1960.”

18. Oswaldo Escobar Velado, “Soneto de los barrenderos nocturnos,” *Patria exacta y otros poemas* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1978), 35–36. My translation.

19. Italo López Vallecillos, “La protesta social en la poesía de Oswaldo Escobar Velado,” in Oswaldo Escobar Velado, *Patria exacta y otros poemas* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1978), 6.

20. Tirso Canales, *Ciudad sin memoria: todo sucedió* (San Salvador: Editorial Memoria, 2008), 54.

21. López Vallecillos, “La protesta social,” 8; John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 121.

became a space for writers to voice disconformity with El Salvador’s social conditions, criticism that may seem tame in comparison to the more radical positions of later decades but which still pushed boundaries and were excluded from other publications. Toruño published writers such as Dalton and Argueta who were too poor to self-publish, too young to be noticed by state-sanctioned publications, or whose work was too challenging stylistically or politically to be printed elsewhere. “It was open to young writers who had no other avenues for expressing themselves,” wrote Argueta, “either because they spoke for new options, or because they had not been consecrated [by more establishment media], or because the social fabric did not understand what an intuitive or humanistic approach meant.”²² They saw El Salvador’s literary conventions and its social and political conservatism as parts of one, oppressive whole. “The blockade of conservative prejudice came down on them, [. . .] those who sensed a different future was coming. That’s what a vanguard is for, among other things, to move ahead of its time, to break with those parameters,” wrote Argueta.²³

Diario Latino attracted the young and radical from across Central America, including a Nicaraguan poet named Rigoberto López Pérez who, during a visit of several months to San Salvador, impressed Jorge Pinto, son of the newspaper’s publisher, with poems about “love and democracy. At some point he decided to trade his verse for a revolver,” as Pinto wrote in his 1985 memoir.²⁴ López Pérez acquired a gun from Nicaraguan exiles in San Salvador, returned to his home country, and in 1956, assassinated the dictator Anastasio Somoza García at a public event. Somoza’s bodyguards immediately killed the twenty-seven-year-old poet. The murder of Somoza shocked Central America and alarmed the Eisenhower administration, which sent a military plane with a team of doctors to airlift the wounded dictator to Panama, where he died a week later.²⁵ In El Salvador, the assassination electrified Left-leaning writers and students, who took to the streets to celebrate in defiance of military rule. Hundreds gathered at a giddy celebration on the university campus, at which Dalton spoke to the crowd through a megaphone and declared “Rigoberto López Pérez, national hero.”²⁶ “The happiness was overwhelming,” wrote Pinto in his memoir. “Joy over the death of Somoza was unleashed over the Salvadoran capital, and Rigoberto was proclaimed in all the democratic forums as a Central American hero.”²⁷ Even more conservative media offered praise for

22. Argueta, “Juan Felipe Toruño, historia literaria y ‘Sábados de *Diario Latino*,” in *Juan Felipe Toruño en dos mundos*, eds. Rhina Toruño-Haensly and Ardis L. Nelson (Lawrence, MA: CBH Books, 2006), 275.

23. Argueta, “Juan Felipe Toruño,” 276.

24. Pinto, *El grito del más pequeño* (Mexico, D.F: Editorial Comete, 1985), 108.

25. “Se relata cómo fue el ataque a Somoza,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, September 28, 1956, 1.

26. “El mítin de ayer – El Br. Roque Dalton [. . .],” photo caption, *La Prensa Gráfica*, September 23, 1956, 3.

27. Pinto, *El grito*. 107.

the assassin, noting unfailingly that he was a romantic poet. Luis Mejía Vides, editor of *La Prensa Gráfica's* weekend literary section, wrote:

The death of the deplorable dictator Somoza [came] at the hands of a young man from León, a lover of letters, a dreamer, an idealist, in short — a poet. It was not the untrained hands of Rigoberto López that carried out the regicide of the violent General, but rather the spirit of Rigoberto López, grappling with the humanist and humanitarian ideas for which he was shoved bloodily into death in return for casting a ray of light in that monstrous, 20-year-old tunnel of political corruption and unspeakable abuses against freedom.²⁸

The same paper printed a selection of poems in tribute, including Escobar Velado's "Lullaby for Rigoberto Pérez López," in which the Salvadoran poet vowed that "your heart, small, sleeping eagle / will remain in our midst. / We will tend to your universal silence / your lamp, your example, / of the roses that they opened in your chest / we will be gardeners." Although expressed here in grandiloquent language that later protest poets avoided, the idea of the poet as avenger of the oppressed had been established.

The late 1950s was a time of unprecedented but, it turned out, fleeting cultural flowering in El Salvador, with high coffee prices creating a buoyant atmosphere.²⁹ Poets and essayists led by Dalton, Argueta, and López Vallecillos formed the University Literary Circle (CLU), a deceptively benign-sounding name for writers who were developing a sharp, at times radically critical vision of Salvadoran society. Their sense of the possibilities of disruptive change accelerated with the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and many travelled to Cuba for guerrilla training or to join literacy brigades. In 1964, Dalton was arrested in San Salvador and interrogated by a US intelligence officer named Hal Swenson, who had flown from the United States to try to "turn" Dalton and employ him as an informer among Salvadoran intellectuals, assisted by a Cuban defector, Vladimir Rodríguez Lahera, who had trained Dalton in espionage work in Cuba. Their plans were frustrated when Dalton, after the first of several planned interrogation sessions, escaped from jail in the city of Cojutepeque and made his way to Mexico City, a harrowing experience he

28. Luis Mejía Vides, "Humanismo contra barbaric," *La Prensa Gráfica*, October 21, 1956, 12–13. The text reads: "[L]a muerte del repudiado dictador Somoza a manos de un muchacho leonés amante de las letras, soñador e idealista, 'poeta' en una palabra. [. . .] No fueron las manos inexpertas de Rigoberto López quienes hicieron posible el 'regicidio' del violento General; fue el espíritu de aquel, de Rigoberto López, confrontado por ideas humanistas y humanitarias quien le hizo afrontar el cruento empellón de la muerte, a cambio de un rayo de luz dentro del monstruoso túnel de 20 años de corrupción política y abusos incalificables contra la libertad."

29. Turcios, *Autoritarismo y modernización: El Salvador 1950–1960* (San Salvador: CONCULTURA, 2003), 118.

recounted in his autobiographical novel *Pobrecito poeta que era yo*.³⁰ His story of interrogation and escape elicited much skepticism for years, many rivals asserting that the jailbreak must have been a hoax, and that either the CIA had allowed his release or powerful friends had arranged it with the government.³¹ In the late 1990s, the release of fifty-six previously classified cables from the US Embassy in San Salvador proved that Dalton’s account was, in its broad outlines, accurate. The documents record Swenson’s attempts at bullying Dalton into becoming a spy and then the embassy’s surprise and dismay when newspapers reported he had escaped.³² The same documents suggest that several Salvadoran intellectuals *did* become CIA assets, although their names are redacted. The drive to recruit writers as spies reflected how US intelligence and allies in the Salvadoran state understood the power and influence of poets, who, in turn, would write often about the gnawing fear of being spied on by friends and colleagues.³³

TO SHAKE THE EARTH

It was in this context of intellectual ferment and intrigue that in late 1965 Argueta and López Vallecillos gathered about six fellow poets and artists, all from humble or middle-class backgrounds and several from provincial cities who had come to San Salvador to study, to plan a new publication. They did not intend *La Pájara Pinta* to be a revolutionary journal, nor even a political one. When its first issue appeared in January 1966, with López Vallecillos as its editor, *La Pájara Pinta*’s express aim was to publish important foreign writers little known to Salvadoran readers. That first, four-page issue contained a translation of Dylan Thomas’s “Poetic Manifesto” and a short story by Mario Vargas Llosa, a young Peruvian talent whose works were not easily obtained in military-ruled El Salvador because he was a vocal supporter of the Cuban Revolution.³⁴ Nor did the journal’s name give any hint of politics. Meaning “the little painted bird,”

30. Luis Alvarenga, *El ciervo perseguido: vida y obra de Roque Dalton* (San Salvador: CONCULTURA, 2002), 84–86; Brian Latell, *Castro’s Secrets: The CIA and Cuba’s Intelligence Machine* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113–16; Charles Lane, “Reclutar, desertar o anular,” *Letras Libres* 166 (October 2012).

31. Alvarenga, *El ciervo perseguido*, 80–81; Roger Atwood, “Las intenciones de la CIA para reclutar a Roque Dalton,” *El Faro*, August 12, 2014.

32. Key cables in the Dalton affair include “Tribuna Libre, Salv Afternoon Paper, Headline Article Stating Dalton. . .” CIA, 17 de junio de 1964, no. 104-10187-10179; “Cable – Officer and Cuban Defector Once Alone Saw Dalton Morning 30 September,” CIA, September 30, 1964, no. 104-10187-10113”; “Cable – In Accordance Refs (Deletion) Met (Deletion) Morning,” CIA, September 28, 1964, no. 104-10187-10070. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Some of the cables can be found online.

33. Alfonso Quijada Urías, author interview (by telephone), June 10, 2019. See, for example, his poem “Los buenos servicios,” in which the poet describes the shock at learning that a once-idealistic friend has become a police informant. *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 38 (February 1969): 8.

34. *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 1 (January 1966): 2–3; Argueta interview, 2019.

the title was taken from a popular nursery rhyme and was meant to convey the idea of a journal that would shun pomposity, circulate widely, and be printed in color.³⁵ The light-hearted moniker had the added advantage of not drawing the immediate scrutiny of military surveillance, as the magazine—more like a flyer at this early stage—was distributed free at newsstands and bookstores in San Salvador. “People knew very little about what was happening abroad,” said its chief illustrator Carlos Cañas in 2011.

There was a sense that this kind of magazine had to exist, but it did not exist, one that was about culture but not about television or the movies or that sort of thing, but rather about literature, poets or painters that no one here knew about. [. . .] The political content came later.³⁶

The editors also endeavored to turn the magazine into El Salvador’s voice in a developing, continental network of progressive publications that exchanged content and correspondence, including *Siempre!* in Mexico, *Marcha* in Uruguay, and *Imagen* in Venezuela. Sluggish mail was not the only barrier to entering this transnational space. López Vallecillos complained to Mexican poet Emilio Pacheco that envelopes containing copies of *Siempre!* were regularly held up for inspection in the Salvadoran postal system, “and you can imagine why,” hinting at government surveillance.³⁷

With a circulation that grew to about one thousand, *La Pájara Pinta* published experimental, sometimes radically innovative poems, essays, and short plays that ranged from provocative to ponderous. From its first year, the magazine spoke for urban, aspirational Salvadorans who were chafing against the hidebound values embodied by oligarchs, the military, and the Catholic church. The country was again prospering, at least on paper, thanks to strong coffee prices and the rise of other export crops like sugar and cotton. But intellectuals, students, and workers felt only a stifling cultural and political environment, particularly in light of the ethos of dissent and nonconformism challenging old orders abroad and seeping into provincial El Salvador. Books by left-wing authors could not be obtained. Despite reforms of labor laws in the early 1960s, workers still faced “the machinery of repression” when they tried to organize, demanded recourse for labor violations, or expressed political

35. Argueta interview, 2019. He coined the name.

36. Carlos Cañas, author interview, November 22, 2011.

37. López Vallecillos to Emilio Pacheco, letter, October 9, 1969. LVFA, unnumbered box. In the same letter, López Vallecillos asks Pacheco for permission to reprint content from *Siempre!* in *La Pájara Pinta* and tells Pacheco he is sending a “collection” of *La Pájara Pinta*’s recent issues, along with poems by Alfonso Quijada Urias and a passage from Argueta’s novel *El valle de las hamacas*. No one promoted Salvadoran literature and creativity as tirelessly as Italo López Vallecillos; Argueta interview, 2019.

opinions.³⁸ Cotton and beef export booms forced peasants off their meager plots and into shantytowns.³⁹ In every aspect of life, Salvadoran intellectuals looked around and saw a premodern society of injustice, stark class divisions, and hypocritical values. Economic elites and politicians were invested in maintaining the status quo, so intellectuals believed it fell to them to overcome barriers of ignorance and indifference and to spark change in the areas where they could effect change, which were ideas, books, and education. Their analysis was gloomy. “In our country, you can barely speak of culture,” said López Vallecillos in 1967. “Almost everything in this area is copy, imitation, or reflection. We live culturally on loans.”⁴⁰ Literacy rates were growing but the country still had only six bookstores, he wrote to an Argentine publisher. Books could be imported freely and without customs duties, he wrote, as long as they were not “of a scientific or literary nature that explain or develop Marxist themes. [. . .] Surveillance of books on political literature is, in the whole country, quite effective.”⁴¹

From the first issue, *La Pájara Pinta* was a collaborative effort by editors and employees of the university’s publishing unit, Editorial Universitaria, which López Vallecillos, as director since about 1960, had turned from a factory of vanity editions into a serious imprint of academic books. In Argueta’s recollection, López Vallecillos initially wanted the magazine’s content to be less “vanguard” than the others. This split between editors who wanted a sedate cultural journal and those pushing for a more questioning, political outlook would characterize the magazine’s early years, with López Vallecillos leading the first faction and poets such as José Roberto Cea and Tirso Canales the latter. Nearly all had published their own poems, essays, or stories in newspaper cultural supplements in the late 1950s, but the mainstream press had stopped publishing them in the hardening climate of the early ’60s because they were considered too left-wing. Nearly all had been arrested or temporarily exiled several times for supposed political crimes, including López Vallecillos, who had been expelled to Nicaragua in 1961.⁴² Thus the new magazine would allow these now virtually banned poets to publish their own work again.⁴³

38. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 78; Almeida, *Waves of Protest*, 72.

39. On rural labor conditions and pauperization in the decades leading up to civil war, see Robert G. Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 26–35, 66–69, and 170–71, and Carlos Rafael Cabarrús, *Génesis de una revolución: análisis del surgimiento y desarrollo de la organización campesina en El Salvador* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1983), 71, 81–98.

40. Luis Gallego Valdés, *Panorama de la literatura salvadoreña* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, fourth edition, 1996), 420.

41. López Vallecillos to Fernando Vidal Buzzi, letter, January 24, 1969. LVFA, unnumbered box.

42. His Nicaraguan asylum certificate is dated July 25, 1961. LVFA, unnumbered box.

43. Argueta interview, 2019.

That first issue also included a selection of poems by Cea, whose inclusion sent a clear signal that the new journal drew on the example set by the circle of nonconformist, politically active poets who had gathered in the CLU in the mid-1950s and later called themselves the Committed Generation. By the time of *La Pájara Pinta's* founding, the Committed Generation's pitch in the 1950s for a radical reassessment of El Salvador's history looked prescient. Their rejection of the conventional view of Salvadoran society as a harmonious amalgam of the indigenous and Hispanic, in which Indians and the poor knew their place and stayed there, had become more mainstream among the educated classes. In its place, they posited a history of class violence, exclusion, and elite mediocrity.⁴⁴ Their perspective, in a sense, mirrored that of the Beat poets and novelists in the United States of the 1950s, whose radical take on the oppressive conformity and racism of American society, instead of looking dated in the fast-moving cultural currents of the 1960s, seemed to grow in stature and prescience. (They would soon publish translations of Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish" and "A Supermarket in California" in *La Pájara Pinta*.) Mario Hernández-Aguirre, an older critic, believed they arose from a profound crisis of values in Salvadoran society, which preached respectability yet relied on a code of corruption and violence to enforce conformity. "Not that earlier generations [. . .] found things so much better, but never has a generation of writers found the country faced with political corruption as such a philosophy of government and such an absolute crisis in spiritual values," he wrote in the first serious assessment of the Committed Generation in 1961. "In the new poetry of these men, a river of protests and sweeping demands for reconstruction has found its course. They want to shake the earth [. . .]."⁴⁵ They expressed that vision in poetry that would speak to the concerns of ordinary people and articulate a critique of society that rejected sentimentality and euphemism, he wrote.

"The term 'Committed Generation' can be understood as the common denominator of a class of Salvadoran writers who believe that those who create literature must have a commitment to the people, a commitment to help in the job of raising consciousness about themselves, and about the great problems affecting humanity in our time," said the now-exiled Dalton in an interview published in 1965.⁴⁶ These writers were united in their belief that the job of modernizing literary expression in El Salvador meant that all writers should be responsible to the somewhat vaguely defined "people," to ordinary readers, not to elites. Like Oswaldo Escobar Velado (who died of cancer in 1961) and the

44. Mario Hernández-Aguirre, "La nueva poesía salvadoreña: La generación comprometida," *Cultura* 20, April–June 1961, 91.

45. Hernández-Aguirre, "La nueva poesía salvadoreña," 79.

46. Hildebrando Juárez, "Entrevista con Roque Dalton," *El Imparcial* (Guatemala City), February 20, 1965, 17.

other poets of the 1944 revolution, they rejected the rhyming, metaphysical poetry to which Salvadoran tastes were accustomed, and which, said Dalton, “is nothing more than an innocuous handicraft, a beautiful object for the use of the well-off. And beautiful objects are, to put it charitably, horrible.”⁴⁷ They ascribed a critical, subversive function to poetry, while seeking a more sophisticated, ironic kind of language than the earlier generation of protest poets.

“For us, literature has an essentially social function,” wrote López Vallecillos, adding: “The *Generación Comprometida* knows that a work of art must necessarily have some purpose. It must be useful to the man of today. [. . .] The literary movements whose formula was to write without saying anything have abused words and twisted the content of letters.”⁴⁸ Now, with *La Pájara Pinta*, the writers of the Committed Generation were effectively updating their 1950s ideals influenced by European socialism of the type championed by Antonio Gramsci and marrying them with new trends sweeping Latin America in the 1960s, such as Cuban-style revolution, liberation theology, and later, feminism. Many remember hippie counterculture as an important cultural marker and influence. “We were the hippies of that time, innovators, reading *Howl* and Ferlinghetti. Not so much Italo, who was a little older than us,” Argueta, who was born in 1935, said in an interview in 2019.⁴⁹ Alfonso Quijada Urías, one of the youngest Committed Generation poets, born in 1940, raised in the working-class San Salvador suburb of Quetzaltepeque and a frequent writer in *La Pájara Pinta*, recalled the subversive charge of the hippie aesthetic. “We went around with long hair and beards, and we were discriminated against because long hair in El Salvador in those days meant you were a communist or terrorist,” he recalled years later.⁵⁰ These concerns were not groundless. The Salvadoran press published hysterically antihippie articles in late 1968 and 1969, rarely bothering to define or describe hippies while accusing them of promoting drugs, confusing gender roles, and introducing dangerous foreign ideologies. In January 1968, the military government officially banned the entrance into El Salvador of all hippies (or beatniks, as they were sometimes called), informing all border posts, airports and police stations of the prohibition. Announced by the National Migration Office, the order followed Guatemala’s expulsion of hippies a few weeks earlier and was aimed at preventing them from coming over the border into El Salvador.⁵¹

47. Juárez, “Entrevista con Roque Dalton.”

48. Argueta, “Juan Felipe Toruño,” 277.

49. Argueta interview, 2019.

50. Quijada Urías interview, 2019.

51. “Prohíben ingreso de ‘hippies,’” *La Prensa Gráfica*, January 9, 1969, 1. The director of the migration office Colonel José Angel Berdugo was quoted as saying: “If they are expelled from Guatemala, they ought to be sent back to their countries of origin. No reason for us to think twice about letting these people in, we’ve got problems enough.” On the antihippie backlash, see also *El Diario Latino*, January 8, 1969.

The magazine's subversive spirit extended to the graphic arts, as well, with design innovations that the editors believed were unprecedented in El Salvador. They used psychedelic colors (one cover was occupied by a portrait of Marilyn Monroe in vivid green; other covers were in hot pink), jarring and unconventional layouts, and visual allusions to pop art that were intended to break with the staid formalities of Salvadoran print media and establish a correlative to the new ideas expressed in words. "The Committed Generation was concerned with how we would modernize the aesthetic experience in this rural, peasant society. We were proposing things that were daring for the time, things that no one had proposed before, and that included modernizing language and [. . .] incorporating new forms and techniques, such as intertextuality and collage," said Cea in an interview in 2006.⁵² Cañas, whose collages and illustrations in the magazine exuded late '60s cool, expounded on the new aesthetic values that he and other artists were trying to implant. Landscape and still lifes were out, and painters or sculptors who made only strict representations of reality were not artists but artisans, for "art is creation, invention," he proclaimed in an essay.⁵³ "One hears insistently, and without any reasonable proof, that only when a painter or a sculptor represents the human physique does that painter or sculptor become a humanist painter or sculptor. This is false. As false as a realistic-looking set on a theatre stage."⁵⁴ With this analysis, Cañas was implicitly rebuking the old masters of Salvadoran art such as the Spanish-born figurative painter Valero Lecha, whose academy in San Salvador had taught a generation of artists how to paint tastefully turned nudes and colorful market scenes. It was said that one could not tell apart the graduates of the Valero Lecha school, so similar was their work. Visual arts rarely broke free of these traditional themes and forms, although a circle of painters gathered in an avant-garde space known as Galería Forma in the late 1950s had tried.

Despite this interest in overdue cultural rupture, Cañas and López Vallecillos still voiced skepticism in *La Pájara Pinta*'s first year of the advisability of extending the subversive spirit to political questions. Focused on the cultural realm, although seeing it as intertwined with politics, López Vallecillos wrote at the time:

After some years of ideological measles, getting mixed up with various labor, political, and "promotional" organizations of passing philosophical interest, we were able to see that the phenomenon of culture in a backward, multi-miserable society like El Salvador, is not a question of poetic broadsides, aesthetic speeches, or thumping our chest or making acts of contrition along

52. José Roberto Cea, author interview, January 30, 2006.

53. Carlos Cañas, "Las artes visuales de hoy," *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 11 (November 1966): 1–2.

54. Cañas, "Las artes visuales."

literary lines. The problem goes beyond the printer’s ink. It is about the petty-bourgeois conscience of those of us who want, and intend to create, a new literature [. . .] through real actions that will effectively generate a culture – a new culture.⁵⁵

Those words reflected a desire by López Vallecillos to endow El Salvador’s “new culture” with a critical distance from the “ideological measles” of left-wing sectarianism. Born in 1932, and a childhood literary prodigy who won a government scholarship in his teens to Spain, where he published his first volume of poetry, he was an admirer of Gramsci and early leader of a social-democratic group known as the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR). Yet the magazine he created soon began to stake out more radical positions.

The roster of editors of *La Pájara Pinta* was constantly shifting, in part to keep government monitors guessing about who was really in charge and in part because the magazine was a genuinely collaborative effort. Each issue’s masthead named a different editor. In December 1966, with playwright José Napoleón Rodríguez Ruiz listed as editor, *La Pájara Pinta* published a group of seven poems by the exiled Dalton, a sign that its cultural and aesthetic preoccupations were giving way to an edgier, more political perspective.⁵⁶ Dalton remained an enemy of the state, a provocative figure who had been arrested at least four times in El Salvador and once in Guatemala and had led a Salvadoran delegation to the International Youth Festival in Moscow in 1957, writing rapturous verses about the achievements of Soviet Communism on his return. Yet Dalton took pains to reject sectarian or “pamphlet” poetry of the kind that circulated in semi-clandestine party newspapers, usually anonymously, or by the more ideological *La Pájara Pinta* poets such as Tirso Canales. “I believe that all poetry is, in one way or another, political, and that is precisely the reason why weighing down a poem with politics does it mortal damage,” he wrote in the magazine in June 1968 from Prague, when that city was engulfed in anti-Soviet activity.⁵⁷ His time in Prague had soured his feelings toward Soviet-style Communism while sharpening his desire for revolt in Latin America and for intellectuals to be part of it. Publishing to a high standard was their obligation not just as poets but as revolutionaries, wrote Dalton: “Any communist who tries to make revolution with a bad poem is, objectively, making counter-revolution.”⁵⁸

55. Gallegos Valdés, *Panorama*, 421–22.

56. Roque Dalton, “Él pasa por una fábrica” and other poems, *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 12 (December 1966).

57. Roque Dalton, “Queridos compañeros. . .,” letter to Manlio Argueta et al., dated June 20, 1968, *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 39 (March 1969).

58. Dalton, “Queridos compañeros. . .”

The other significant literary magazine in El Salvador at the time was *Cultura*, a journal created by the military government in 1955 and given editorial independence within certain boundaries. *Cultura* had become the arbiter of official cultural policy and national myth-making. From 1962 to 1970, it was directed by the distinguished poet Claudia Lars, who inspired intense loyalty and affection amongst her writers, who included Argueta, novelist Claribel Alegría, and Matilde Elena López.⁵⁹ Lars had a strong record of promoting women writers, unlike *La Pájara Pinta*, where (as discussed below) López Vallecillos lamented the lack of female voices. Yet Lars avoided the more political poets, rarely engaged with foreign trends and printed few works in translation, tending to enshrine the work of established figures rather than venturing new ones. Eduardo Sancho, a free-verse poet who became one of *La Pájara Pinta*'s main writers and later a top guerrilla commander, esteemed Lars but accused her of censoring younger poets.⁶⁰ With its finely-honed literary aesthetics and whiff of complacency, *Cultura* became both the journal and ethos that *La Pájara Pinta* rebelled against even as they shared some of the same writers. Tirso Canales, one of the more hardline poets of *La Pájara Pinta*, viewed the magazine's differences with Lars not as political, exactly, and certainly not personal, but rather aesthetic and perhaps generational. He said in an interview in 2011: "There were so-called consecrated writers, such as Claudia Lars, who was our friend [. . .] but whose performance did not satisfy us. Their poetry did not satisfy us. They represented a kind of literary theosophy, Lars and [painter and poet] Salarrué, which was nothing like us. We were more materialist, or at least tried to be."⁶¹

Engagement with global cultural trends preoccupied *La Pájara Pinta* in its first years, yet its contributors were also opening new avenues of inquiry into El Salvador's own history. In particular, they began to disinter the story of La Matanza, the 1932 peasant uprising annihilated by Martínez's troops and whose memory had been buried beneath decades of officially-coerced silence and forgetting.⁶² Canales described how protesters in the 1950s would paste homemade posters to walls that read, "Long live the heroes and martyrs of 1932!"⁶³ Dalton, in a book published in Cuba in 1963, refers to the massacre "in which tens of thousands of workers and peasants died and democratic organizations were destroyed for many years."⁶⁴ These

59. *Cultura*, no. 83 (September-December 1998): 7–8.

60. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 123.

61. Tirso Canales, author interview, November 25, 2011.

62. Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching, and Rafael Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2007), 5.

63. Canales, *Ciudad sin memoria*, 84.

64. Dalton, *El Salvador* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1963), 46.

fleeting references aside, there had been little inquiry of any kind into the unhealed scar of 1932 and few firsthand, written testimonies about its circumstances.⁶⁵

Thus, it fell to the novelists, poets, and essayists of *La Pájara Pinta* to begin telling the story of La Matanza, in writing, to the Salvadoran people. Among the first was a story called “El fusilado” (“The Executed Man”) by Ricardo Castro Rivas, an autodidact poet from a poor background who had worked at *Cultura* as a printing-press operator, started reading the poetry he was printing and writing his own, and later trained as a guerrilla in Cuba with Dalton.⁶⁶ The transition from poet to guerrilla was seamless. Lars and López Vallecillos recognized his innate talent and published him regularly, seeing him as an example of the genuinely proletarian poet they dreamed of. His name appears in some of the US Embassy cables, unredacted; US agents had tried to recruit Castro Rivas, apparently giving up when they decided he was too guileless to be the intellectual infiltrator they were seeking. In “El fusilado,” a man named Miguel Martínez is picked up by army troops during La Matanza, brought to a ditch with a crowd of other prisoners, where army troops shoot them all but somehow miss Martínez, who crawls out from among the bodies and escapes. Castro Rivas tells the story in a series of interior monologues, overheard whispers, and voices directed at the protagonist, including a radio broadcast that announces “the national situation is returning to normal and the government, with the firm resolve of the armed forces, has stopped the maneuvers of international communism in the nick of time.” The story seems based on the experiences of Miguel Mármol, a Communist Party organizer and survivor of the violence whom Roque Dalton interviewed in 1966 in Prague, resulting in a testimonial book that remains one of La Matanza’s few eyewitness accounts. But that *testimonio* had not even been written when Castro Rivas was writing—it was not published until 1972, in Costa Rica. Castro Rivas was, in effect, relaying an oral account passed down from mouth to mouth until, like the protagonist, it started crawling out of the grave and into print. The story, published in *La Pájara Pinta* in February 1967, ends with a long stream of consciousness in which the man repeats his alias to himself, over and over, interspersing it with “what fog . . . what fog,” an apt metaphor for the forgetting from which Salvadorans were slowly emerging.⁶⁷

65. Lindo-Fuentes et al., *Remembering a Massacre*, 44.

66. Ricardo Castro Rivas, author interview, February 7, 2014; Alvarenga, *El ciervo perseguido*, 78–79.

67. Ricardo Castro Rivas, “El fusilado,” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 14 (February 1967). He sometimes signed his works simply *Castrorrivas*.

The story appeared almost simultaneously with a novel, *Cenizas de Izalco* (*Ashes of Izalco*), by Claribel Alegría and her US-born husband, Darwin Flakoll, in which La Matanza forms the backdrop to a story of doomed love between an alcoholic US expatriate and a Salvadoran woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. Published in Spain in 1966, the novel ends with a graphic account of army troops gathering indigenous peasants in the village square of Izalco and slaughtering them, while the American, Frank, watches in horror. The Latin American novel boom of the late 1960s had largely passed by Central America, where poetry still ruled literary tastes, and for a time *Ashes of Izalco* was seen as El Salvador's belated contribution to that phenomenon. Argueta wrote in *La Pájara Pinta* that it was the best novel ever written about El Salvador, an honor that perhaps not many critics would give it today, yet, told mainly in the form of letters and diary entries by the characters, the novel broadened the formal parameters of Salvadoran fiction.⁶⁸ Alegría, born in 1924, published a long excerpt from the novel and numerous poems in *La Pájara Pinta*. She maintained a lively correspondence with her champion López Vallecillos, who told her *Ashes of Izalco* "struck me as well-structured and with interesting characters and aspects that Salvadorans would recognize. Our novels amount to three; yours opens a new and important phase. Many young writers will follow your example."⁶⁹ His words were shrewder than he realized, for Dalton was already well advanced in writing *Miguel Mármol*, which would build on *Ashes of Izalco* to establish La Matanza as one of the fundamental historical traumas of twentieth century Latin America and place its memory at the forefront of El Salvador's revolutionary discourse.

THE TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

Nineteen sixty-eight was the year US troops in Vietnam passed the half-million mark; students burned barricades in Paris, rioted in Chicago, and were massacred in Tlatelolco; and the Beatles' *White Album* seemed to call for revolution. "No one planned for or expected 1968 to become a year of global revolutions. The year evolved as it did because the local divisions and confrontations that built through the decade produced pressures for radical change across political parties, national boundaries, and distinct cultures," wrote historian Jeremi Suri.⁷⁰ The difference between those revolutions and El Salvador was that, in El Salvador, the "local divisions and confrontations" led to an actual revolution, in which subaltern groups organized and rose up against hegemonic elites in ways that were seldom linear or without

68. Manlio Argueta, "Diálogo," *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 21 (September 1967).

69. Italo López Vallecillos to Claribel Alegría, letter, October 13, 1969, LVFA, unnumbered box.

70. Jeremi Suri, ed., *The Global Revolutions of 1968* (New York: Norton, 2007), xi.

interruption but which ultimately marked an even more definitive rupture with the past than in the other, wealthier societies that also saw upheaval that year. They had upheaval but no rupture; El Salvador would have upheaval and rupture, although it would take two decades to play out fully. This process could be said to have started in 1968 as strikes and demonstrations exploded on the streets of San Salvador. A forty-two-day long strike by public school teachers marked the beginning of a rising scale of protests, labor activism, and state violence that would shake the country’s politics to the core and create the crucible in which leaders of the future guerrilla movement would learn to organize and mobilize and defend their supporters from the forces of repression. Strikes by bus drivers and steelworkers for better wages in 1967 had raised tensions, but it was the teachers’ strike which punctured the fragile, illusory climate of prosperity and social peace. As public employees, teachers had been known as loyal allies of the regime, particularly in small towns, and their turn to protests and militant politics alarmed the authorities.⁷¹ The 1968 strike and later stoppages, led by teachers Salvador Sánchez Cerén and Mélida Anaya Montes, proved pivotal in the development of popular organizations that would soon spin off their own guerrilla groups.

La Pájara Pinta dedicated its December 1968 issue to the striking teachers, marking a turning point in the history of the magazine and the radicalization of Salvadoran intellectuals. Setting aside the long, brainy essays of previous editions, this third-anniversary issue consisted almost entirely of hand-written poems by the main writers and the late old master Escobar Velado, with illustrations by Cañas that evoked Goya’s “Disasters of War” in their depictions of violence that balanced the visceral with the comic. The cover ([Figure 1](#)) showed a freakish, blood-red figure holding a bird and poking its eyes out with a stick. Another showed a detainee with his thumbs tied together behind him while others wailed in pain in the background.

The format was also innovative. Instead of the usual twelve-or sixteen-page booklet, this issue was printed on both sides on a single, large sheet of heavy paper like a poster. The whole presentation exuded engagement with global aesthetics and confidence that the magazine had become the voice of El Salvador’s insurgent intellectuals.

Yet its most important feature was an unsigned editorial in support of the teachers’ struggle that amounted to a manifesto of the magazine’s newly engaged principles. The piece made a stirring, direct call on intellectuals to abandon any remaining ties they had to the

71. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 147–48.

FIGURE 1



government’s cultural organisms and enjoin the rising, as-yet peaceful struggle against military rule and the technocrats who staffed its ministries. It singled out the Ministry of Education, which was carrying out an ambitious reform program that included using televisions to replace teachers in the classroom.⁷² The strike was against not just pitiful wages and dilapidated schools while elites grew richer off the booming economy; it was against the “bad power, autocracy, and barbarous technocracy” of the Ministry of Education, the editorial said. Although unsigned, the editorial echoed phrases in Dalton’s essays as well as Vargas Llosa’s “literature is fire” speech in Caracas the previous year. The editorial said:⁷³

The Salvadoran intellectual is aware of the country’s unjust social structures. He knows the way to solving the people’s problems is through popular and anti-imperialist revolution. [. . .] Perhaps because the writer is society’s living language, his word is fire, and, we say it once and for all, the writer and the artist carry within them the quality of the troubled conscience of their times. With their work, their testimony, and their demands, *authentic writers and artists are cooperating with the revolution*. This is where they will reveal themselves as progressives or reactionaries.⁷⁴

This editorial also included a swipe at “pseudo-revolutionary, mechanical views,” which would have been interpreted as a criticism of the unprepared adventurism of the Communists in 1932 and a brief-lived, amateurish insurgency by a Cuban-inspired group known as the FUAR in the early 1960s. Since the collapse of the FUAR there were no rebel groups operating in El Salvador, though many labor leaders such as Sánchez Cerén and Salvador Cayetano Carpio were studying guerrilla tactics and planning to break with the traditional leadership of the Communist Party and establish urban guerrilla organizations. By contrast, Argueta and López Vallecillos had both turned against the idea of guerrilla violence as risky and premature after seeing the infiltration and disarticulation of the FUAR. Yet as political repression hardened in the late 1960s, a split opened within *La Pájara Pinta* between those who thought writers and artists should join the brewing armed struggle on equal terms with workers and labor organizers and those, like Argueta, who sympathized with revolutionary violence if all peaceful avenues of dissent were foreclosed but did not think intellectuals should join it. Arguments among intellectuals about whether to join armed struggle could sometimes devolve into fistfights, wrote Sánchez Cerén in his memoir. Although the discussions at

72. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 174.

73. Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*, 211.

74. “En el tercer aniversario,” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 36 (December 1968). My emphasis.

La Pájara Pinta were always collegial and friendly, a fissure long latent was bursting into the open.⁷⁵

One influential voice who supported the turn to violence was Eduardo Sancho, a sociology student born in 1947 who broke into publication with experimental, often opaque poetry in the mold of Neruda in the magazine in 1967 and became one of the magazine's most frequent contributors. In works that blurred the lines between story and personal essay, Sancho used violent, foreboding imagery to describe the power of literature and create a coded, substitute language for a direct call to insurrection. "To write poetry is to bust your nose against the rancid, unwilling national bourgeoisie, so that when the authorities come, blood will run with water in the fountains," he wrote in the November 1969 issue. "Don't be frightened, because you have been forewarned. [. . .] Poetry is subversion, a tree whose roots are disintegrating the stone."⁷⁶ A few weeks after those words appeared, Sancho and nine others including fellow poets Lil Milagro Ramírez (who had published in *Cultura*) and Alfonso Hernández gathered on Christmas Eve, 1969, and created the underground guerrilla cell known then simply as El Grupo (The Group), which would form the nucleus of a new organization, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). Sancho bought a .22 caliber pistol and, in February 1971, the cell that would become the ERP carried out its first armed action, the ransom kidnapping of businessman Ernesto Regalado Dueñas, an act which gave a small taste of the horrors that would follow.⁷⁷ Scion of an oligarchic clan, Regalado was wounded during the kidnapping and agonized for days before dying in captivity. The ERP continued the campaign with an assault on a police post outside a hospital, taking responsibility for the attack in a statement on March 2, 1972, whose compressed, lapidary opening lines could only have been written by poets: "The peace of the rich has ended. The war of the people has begun."⁷⁸

Sancho had continued to publish work in *La Pájara Pinta* under his own name, instead of his new guerrilla pseudonym Ferman Cienfuegos, drawing the scrutiny of military intelligence. In 1970, he published a story in *La Pájara Pinta* entitled "Did I Leave My Umbrella at Claudia or Mirella's House?" a slang-laden monologue by a teenager named Claudia whose boyfriend, a university student, goes to secret political meetings. Claudia reacts skeptically, but the

75. Salvador Sánchez Cerén, *Con sueños se escribe la vida: autobiografía de un revolucionario salvadoreño* (Mexico, DF: Ocean Sur, 2008), 106; Argueta interview, 2019.

76. Eduardo Sancho and Mauricio Marquina, "2 preguntas, 2 respuestas, 2 poetas," *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 47 (November 1969).

77. Eduardo Sancho, *Crónicas entre los espejos* (San Salvador: Universidad Francisco Gavidia, 2002), 74; Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 61.

78. Sancho, *Crónicas*, 87; Chávez, 130.

sarcastic, pedantic boyfriend makes her question her own sanity—gaslights her, we would say today. “I know I’m not going to be able to argue with you, because you always convince me and change my mind,” she says.⁷⁹ Military intelligence officers led by the death-squad leader José “Chele” Medrano were convinced this story was a coded instruction to urban guerrillas. According to former ERP guerrilla Geovani Galeas, Medrano read the text and ordered one of his underlings to question captured ERP fighters about the meaning of it “to see if it was a document in ciphers.”⁸⁰

No longer the highbrow literary forum that López Vallecillos had envisioned, *La Pájara Pinta*’s intent to unite literary and political dissent found expression in March 1969, in an interview with Julio Cortázar, in which the renowned Argentine novelist attempted to contrast the political ferment shaking the continent with its cultural stasis. Latin Americans needed to take the revolutionary aspirations gripping their youth and extend it to the literary realm. “In Latin America, we need Che Guevaras of literature,” said Cortázar.

It’s not enough to throw out the Yankees. We must make revolution on every front, while casting aside dead words and methods. In language and style, we are backward. I’m speaking in general terms, if you see what I mean. When it comes to politics, revolutionary writers are using a language that has lost its value, even those in Cuba. That’s why their ideas fall like dead birds. They have no life; no blood runs in them.⁸¹

With those words—part lamentation, part exhortation, with a poetic flourish—Cortázar was speaking to a whole generation of Latin American writers who saw the need for radical change but wondered how they could contribute to it.

Still, the magazine’s content reflected the division between poets who wrote openly about joining underground cells and those who said intellectuals, however left-wing their views, should have no part in armed revolt. This was the critical question dividing the Salvadoran Left, and *La Pájara Pinta* never came down definitively on one side or the other. Dalton’s poem “Buscándome líos” (“Looking for Trouble”), published in the magazine in February 1969, alluded to a meeting of a Communist cell. Included in his work *Taberna*, which that month won Latin America’s most prestigious literary prize, the Casa de las Americas, the poem evoked the catacomb-like aura of underground political work:

79. Eduardo Sancho, “¿Dejé mi paraguas donde Claudia o Mirella?” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 60 (December 1970).

80. Geovani Galeas, *Héroes bajo sospecha* (San Salvador: Athena Editores, 2013), 76.

81. Julio Cortázar, “Las mismas preguntas a Cortázar,” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 39 (March 1969): 5.

The night of my first party branch meeting it rained
 my way of dripping was applauded by four
 or five characters straight out of Goya's world
 everyone there looked slightly bored
 maybe of the persecution and even of the torture they dreamed of daily.

Founders of confederations and strikes revealing
 a certain roughness told me that I had
 to choose a pseudonym
 that I had to pay five pesos a month
 that we'd stick to meeting every Wednesday
 and how was I getting on with my studies
 and that today we were going to read a pamphlet by Lenin
 and that we didn't need to call each other comrade all the time.

It had stopped raining by the time we finished
 My mother scolded me for getting home late.⁸²

The following year, an unsigned editorial appeared arguing against the idea that intellectuals should join armed groups, questioning also the Left's "ideological dependence" on Cuba: "Even if someone should judge us and throw the first rifle into our hands, it is clear that words will remain our weapons, and that we fight with them: another way of waging guerrilla struggle."⁸³

The co-existence of these two themes in the pages of *La Pájara Pinta*—invocations of clandestine life on the one hand, admonitions against poets joining armed struggle on the other—might have struck readers as incoherent. Opinions among the magazine's writers did indeed clash, as they did in universities and intellectual circles across Latin America, and Lopez Vallecillos's commitment to publishing writers holding both views gave the magazine its lively, humanist character. He risked military disapproval by urging Dalton, by then El Salvador's brightest international literary star whose books were still effectively banned in his home country, to take an even higher profile in the production of the magazine. Dalton was living in Prague at the time; letters between El Salvador and the east bloc had to be mailed via Mexico and could take months to reach their destination. Despite these logistical barriers, he invited Dalton to guest-edit the magazine, writing to him in a letter:

82. Roque Dalton, "Buscándome líos," *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 38 (February 1969); Roque Dalton, *Looking for Trouble: Selected Poems of Roque Dalton*, trans. Michal Boncza and John Green (Grewelthorpe, United Kingdom: Smokestack Books, 2016), 42.

83. *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 57 (September 1970), 1.

Send me, whenever you can, poems and stories for publication. It's only fair that those in involuntary absence be present, if only through their literary output. If you would like, in turn, Central American material to be published over there, let me know. It is very important to establish and keep up lines of communication. I invite you to edit issue number 24 of *La Pájara Pinta* [. . .] ⁸⁴

He had equally cordial relations with more old-fashioned writers, such as David Escobar Galindo, whose poems Lopez Vallecillos published and commented on in *La Pájara Pinta*. While others experimented with looser forms and unconventional subject matter, Escobar Galindo, born in 1943, wrote in a lyrical style that many critics saw as out of step with Central America's shifting cultural tastes. Escobar Galindo complained bitterly to López Vallecillos that, as a writer of a more conservative tone and inherited wealth, he had been attacked and excluded by the left-wing poets and critics then dominating literary discourse.

You know I have no standing in left-wing circles. On the contrary, they consider me reactionary, ivory-tower, that I look like a gringo, and to top it off I'm rich. Except for the third of those accusations, the rest are totally gratuitous. I know you can never win in a fight against people's prejudices and grudges, and I know that the only thing that saves a writer is his work. To refuse to follow certain dictates these days means to be marginalized by those who, with an enormous inquisitorial finger, decide what is modern, advanced, useful, and honest. ⁸⁵

This letter attests poignantly to the sharp crosscurrents in El Salvador's 1970s cultural milieu that were leaving behind people of more traditional thinking. In poetry and politics, divisions were becoming chasms as some remained stuck in old forms while others gravitated toward more radical views and actions. In *La Pájara Pinta*, despite López Vallecillos's efforts at steering clear of sectarianism and keeping the magazine ideologically diverse, he would have an increasingly difficult time negotiating those clashing opinions.

How did authorities view *La Pájara Pinta*, and did they see it as a threat? Few official archives from this period have been opened to scholars, so it is not clear if functionaries in the military government were monitoring its contents in real time. Yet authorities were keeping close tabs on many of the individuals associated with it. Archives of the Museum of Word and Image in San Salvador include two albums, compiled by intelligence services, of perceived enemies of the state.

84. López Vallecillos to Dalton, letter, October 9, 1967, Dalton Family Archive [henceforth DFA], unnumbered box. Emphasis in original.

85. Escobar Galindo to López Vallecillos, letter, August 27, 1973, LVFA, unnumbered box.

FIGURE 2

<p>37</p>  <p>Ob. RAMON CORTEZ SUAREZ. Origen: Villa Delgado. Padre: Guillermo Suárez. Madre: Orbelina Cortez. Viajó a Cuba: Julio 63.</p>	<p>38</p>  <p>Dr. ROBERTO CARIAS DELGADO. Origen: San Miguel. Padre: Miguel Angel Carrias. Madre: María de la Paz Delgado. Viajó a Cuba: 1960-1962.</p>	<p>39</p>  <p>Dra. Inf. SILVIA CASTELLANOS CALDERON. Origen: San Salvador. Padre: Rafael Castellanos. Madre: Laura Amanda Calderón. Viajó a Cuba: 1962.</p>
<p>40</p>  <p>Ob. OSCAR GILBERTO CARRANZA MARTINEZ. Origen: San Salvador. Padre: José Dionisio - Martínez Carranza. Madre: Antonia Carranza. Viajó a Cuba: 1963.</p>	<p>41</p>  <p>SRTA. EVA EVANGELINA CORNEJO. Origen: San Salvador. Padre: Encarnación Garay. Madre: Antonia Cornejo. Viajó a Cuba: 1963.</p>	<p>42</p>  <p>Cont. NAPOLEON CUEVA. Origen: San Alejo. Padre: Magdaleno Cueva. Madre: Marcelina Vargas. Viajó a Cuba: 1962</p>
<p>43</p>  <p>DR. ROGELIO ALFREDO CHAVEZ. Origen: San Salvador. Padre: Eugenio Salvador Chávez. Madre: Leonor Barillas. Viajó a Cuba: 1963.</p>	<p>44</p>  <p>Ob. FRANCISCO RENE DURAN CARCAMO. Origen: Cojutepeque. Padre: Aquilino Durán. Madre: Jesús Ramírez. Viajó a Cuba: Sepbre/62.</p>	<p>45</p>  <p>Br. ROQUE DALTON GARCIA. Origen: San Salvador. Padre: Winnall Dalton. Madre: María García. Viajó a Cuba: 1960.</p>

Created circa 1964, these two documents carry photographs of about four hundred known and suspected leftists along with their birth date, the names of their parents, and in one of the albums, the date of their first known trip to Cuba (Figure 2). Most are identified by their highest academic degree or profession and accompanied by a photograph taken from national identity

cards or police mugshots. There are journalists, teachers, doctors, and workers. A few have short updates penciled in. The entry for Communist Party leader Raúl Castellanos Figueroa, for example, carries the annotation “Falleció en Moscú” (“Died in Moscow”). Castellanos died in 1970, suggesting the document was consulted and updated for several years.⁸⁶

Yet the most striking element is the presence of about thirty Salvadoran writers, about half at least occasional writers for *La Pájara Pinta*. Except for *obrero* (worker), no other profession is so abundantly represented. The list includes writers who were definitely Communist Party members (Matilde Elena López, Canales, Dalton), others who had once been members but renounced their affiliation (anthropologist Pedro Geoffroy Rivas, Catholic essayist Julio Fausto Fernández), others whose political thinking was Left-leaning but not Communist (López Vallecillos, Argueta), and still others who never expressed left-wing views in print and whose presence in the album seems to be a case of guilt-by-association, such as playwright Álvaro Menen Desleal and anthologist Luis Gallego Valdés. In most cases the document identifies writers who published under pseudonyms by those pseudonyms, rather than by the name that would appear on their legal documents, suggesting that those who compiled the document were following, or were at least aware of, their literary careers. For instance, poet Ricardo Bogrand, a regular *La Pájara Pinta* contributor, appears under that *nom de plume* rather than his legal name José Antonio Aparicio. We have few other materials for gauging how the regime viewed dissident writers, but in any case, there were few other dissenting publications where they could print their work and involuntarily attract the surveillance of authorities.

In May 1970, Cea announced in the magazine that its cofounders and main creative engines, Argueta and López Vallecillos, were leaving. Their departure signaled that those opting for joining guerrilla struggle were taking the upper hand, although Cea’s article suggested the departure was amicable.⁸⁷ For the next year, the magazine was edited mainly by Cea, Alfonso Quijada Urías, and two poets who would soon join guerrilla groups—Salvador Silis, who was killed in combat in the mid-1980s, and José María Cuéllar, a sparkling talent who wrote under the influence of Dalton and Ginsberg and died in a

86. Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador. Colección Roque Dalton, Box 3, Folder 1.

87. José Roberto Cea, “La Pájara Pinta anuncia. . .” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 53 (May 1970). Quijada Urías recalled from that period: “There was a great diversity of opinions. It was very plural. Some were very radical, others more orthodox, such as Tirso Canales. That wasn’t the case with Manlio, Italo, or myself. We were more open, critical but open to other ideas. [. . .] But we never had [heated arguments], and you can tell that by the fact that the magazine lasted so long. Each one of us had his ideas and we respected them.” Quijada Urías interview, 2019.

motorcycle accident in 1980.⁸⁸ López Vallecillos left the Editorial Universitaria to accept an offer to create a new publishing house in Costa Rica, which became EDUCA, and which he led until 1975. Argueta, however, returned to *La Pájara Pinta* and resumed his role as its editor in April 1971. In its final issues, the magazine spread its roster to include younger voices from the provincial city of San Vicente, all friends of Sancho and including Manuel Sorto, Luisfelipe Minhero, Rigoberto Góngora, Roberto Monterrosa, and others who had created an organization that straddled the line between literary club and embryonic guerrilla group called Brigada La Masacuata and were turning out reams of self-consciously vanguard poetry. All in their late teens or twenties, they spent no time agonizing over whether to join armed struggle; they all joined, and nearly all were killed in the war. They published pages of free-form verse and rambling juvenilia in *La Pájara Pinta* expressing a fuming impatience with society. Sorto expressed the bleak outlook of a teenaged poet seeing his life foreshortened by war: “I answer / as one should answer the bad captain of a boat adrift / proud of his name and his bad metaphors / and my hair has gone gray from so much stroking and gazing in the mirror / my tongue so bombarded I can’t speak with a soul.”⁸⁹ His friend Minhero had no formal literary training but admired the magazine’s editors and their “inter-generational” willingness to publish untested poets like himself. He said in 2019, “I never thought of publishing poems as a dangerous act, no matter how rebellious they sounded, because the official culture and the incompetent and illegitimate repressive authorities of the time thought we were just a bunch of scatter-brained youngsters who would soon come to their senses. We didn’t.”⁹⁰ Minhero published poetry under his own name in *La Pájara Pinta* and *El Diario Latino* until he joined the ERP and then wrote only anonymous “pamphlets of revolutionary propaganda,” as he described them, until the end of the war.⁹¹

The last issue of *La Pájara Pinta* was perhaps its finest. The thirty-two-page issue dated January–February 1972 was a virtual anthology of Salvadoran literature and political thought after a decade of vertiginous growth when the country was tipping into civil war.⁹² Writing was becoming a tougher, riskier profession from which less politicized voices were withdrawing, and this extended to a

88. Vargas Méndez and Morasan, *Homenaje*, 39–40; “Jose María Cuéllar, el poeta de ‘Piedra y Siglo,’” unsigned essay, in *José María Cuéllar: poesía reunida* (San Salvador: Editorial Universitaria, 2016), 7–17.

89. Manuel Sorto, untitled poem (“mi historia no la conozco. . .”), *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 53 (May 1970). This group also included Alfonso Hernández, who, although described by some as the most talented of the San Vicente group, does not appear to have published in *La Pájara Pinta*. Of the San Vicente poets, only Sancho, Minhero, and Sorto were alive at the war’s end in 1992. See Chávez, 106–32.

90. Luisfelipe Minhero, author interview (by telephone), August 2, 2019.

91. Minhero interview, 2019.

92. *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 66 (January–February 1972): 1–2. The magazine had changed to a bimonthly format in 1971.

disproportionate number of female writers. Of the seventeen writers whose work appeared in this issue, not one was female, a glaring omission that underlined a growing *machista* tendency in the magazine's content that López Vallecillos had lamented. In 1969, he complained to Claribel Alegría that women writers were ceding the field to men. "Except for Claudia Lars, female voices are of slight value in Salvadoran letters. Yours has begun to fill that gap. Dora Guerra has stopped writing, Mercedes Durand publishes very little. Juanita Soriano has withdrawn from all these concerns [about literature and politics]," he wrote to Alegría, referring to three writers who, with the possible exception of urban short story writer Durand, are now forgotten.⁹³

In a moving, reflective essay in the magazine's final issue, Argueta mused about the toll so much political persecution had taken on those who tried to make a living teaching classes, writing books, or creating visual art and the degree to which all intellectual and cultural life was being driven underground or dismembered as writers drifted into exile or early death in prison. They faced "political and social strangulation," he wrote.⁹⁴ "In El Salvador, you can barely find an interesting writer under the age of 40 who has not been thrown into prison a few times, been exiled as many times, or had the tough experience of life in hiding," he wrote, paraphrasing a passage from Dalton.⁹⁵ Out of that desperation, Argueta wrote, came the growing activism of El Salvador's writers, rooted not in Cuba's revolution or Marxism but in the experience of the Martínez dictatorship and the citizens' uprising of 1944 that brought it down. The new crop of protest writers was not simply reacting to military repression, he wrote, but were heirs to a tradition of resistance and radical questioning dating from the truncated Central American spring of that year, he wrote.

Those fourteen years of blood-drenched tyranny [under Martínez] gave the Salvadoran intellectual an experience of combativeness and militancy; later, the

93. López Vallecillos to Alegría, letter, March 10, 1969, LVEA, unnumbered box. While editor at *La Pájara Pinta*, López Vallecillos did his best to counter its patriarchal habit, publishing work by Alegría, Durand, and Matilde Elena López, as well as important voices in the growing canon of Latin American feminism, including Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos and, still very early in her career, Cuban playwright and future LGBT activist Ana María Simo. Soon after, Dalton began speculating on the subversive power of second-wave feminist theory in a traditional country like El Salvador. In a poem about sex and social class entitled "Para un mejor amor" ("For a Better Love"), which appeared in his last work, popularly known as *Poemas clandestinos*, written in 1974 and published posthumously, Dalton asserts that "when a woman says / that sex is a political condition / she can begin to stop being just a woman in herself / in order to become a woman for herself," and that "labors of the home themselves / are labors of a social class to which that home belongs." The poem is a lengthy allusion to the work of Kate Millet, whom Dalton quotes at the beginning of the poem in an epigraph. Roque Dalton, "Para un mejor amor," *Poemas Clandestinos/Clandestine Poems* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1986), 18–20, trans. Jack Hirschman.

94. Manlio Argueta, untitled editorial, *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 66 (January–February 1972).

95. Manlio Argueta, untitled editorial. The quote is from Roque Dalton, René Depestre, Edmundo Desnoes, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Ambrosio Fornet, and Carlos María Gutiérrez, *El intelectual y la sociedad* (Mexico, DF: Siglo XXI, 1969), 19.

generation of 1950, which practically created a new kind of intellectual in El Salvador, a wider vision of the world and a concern with national problems, not just against the local tyranny in the person of General Martínez but against the whole state of our country.⁹⁶

Whatever the origins of Salvadoran radical thought as expressed by the veteran editor Argueta, the new guerrilla poets could see it was headed to a violent denouement. Silis, future guerrilla commander, wrote a few pages later that a new revolutionary language had been born in the pages of *La Pájara Pinta*. He named it in capital letters, like Committed Generation: “I affirm that from this moment on, the new Revolutionary Poetry has begun to be born in El Salvador. No more improvisations. The false voices have hit a mental dead end. Let no one say they have not seen where this road is leading.”⁹⁷

Setting aside the benefit of hindsight, one can still read in those words a premonition of the civil war that would ravage El Salvador from 1980 to 1992. Within weeks of their appearance, troops had occupied and vandalized the building where *La Pájara Pinta* was printed and sent its writers into hiding. Argueta narrowly escaped detention on the campus and spent three months underground before escaping to Costa Rica.⁹⁸ The poet Bogrand had been released from prison for subversion only a few months earlier and “that day I just missed going back to the slammer,” he wrote to Dalton soon after.⁹⁹ At least a dozen others of the magazine’s frequent writers had already joined guerrilla cells or would in the coming years, a few becoming field commanders of the future FMLN coalition (and one, Sancho, signing the 1992 peace agreement that would end the war). The impatience with El Salvador’s provincial, insular life voiced by the poets of *La Pájara Pinta* had mutated into hot defiance against political repression. “Intellectuals are winding up in jail today because they do not feel they have to choose between their vocation and their social duty,” Dalton wrote in 1969, anticipating this turn.¹⁰⁰ A poetic tradition had arisen in struggle since 1944, as Argueta had noted in his editorial.¹⁰¹ That tradition had taken the commemorative language of marriages, funerals, and Saturday literary supplements, the spaces where people usually encountered poetry, and adapted it to armed struggle to counter military brutality and overturn an entrenched conservative order. “There is a legacy of poets in the origins of the armed movement . . . the news that there

96. Argueta, untitled editorial.

97. Salvador Silis, “Alfonso Quijada Urías, premio latinoamericano de poesía,” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 66 (January–February 1972).

98. Argueta to López Vallecillos, undated letter (1972), LVFA; Manlio Argueta interview, 2019.

99. Bogrand to Dalton, letter, August 28, 1974, DFA.

100. Ricardo Villares, “Testimonio y acción,” *La Pájara Pinta*, no. 38 (February 1969): 3.

101. Argueta, untitled editorial.

were poets in the guerrilla forces was a permanent motivator” for people to join, recalled Sancho, in describing the ERP’s formation.¹⁰²

In its last issues, *La Pájara Pinta* had lost interest in bringing international trends to Salvadoran readers and became more preoccupied with El Salvador’s growing mood of crisis. A new teachers’ strike in 1971 paralyzed the country’s education sector (although the government continued broadcasting tele-classes to classrooms without teachers) and led to mass mobilizations of up to fifty thousand teachers and their supporters that were met with violent repression. Leaders of the teachers’ union ANDES disappeared “under mysterious, death-squad like circumstances.”¹⁰³ Presidential elections in 1972 proved to be an even more abject charade than previous votes, with another military officer emerging triumphant. For a generation of Salvadorans of all stripes, the events of 1972 ended any chance for peaceful change and marked the moment when civil war went from possible to inevitable.¹⁰⁴ “With the spiral into war of 1971, young people, most of them university students of a later generation, did not want to take up poetry anymore, but rather the rifle of insurgency,” wrote Argueta.¹⁰⁵ Dalton had tried to bridge the gap between literature and revolution but found that, when he returned to El Salvador from Cuba in December 1973 to join the ERP, under an assumed name and having undergone plastic surgery to alter his appearance, such distinctions no longer mattered and could be lethal. *La Pájara Pinta* was now but a memory, an old gig remembered by poets scattered about various squalid guerrilla safehouses. Dalton had a bitter falling-out with the ERP leadership, which was promoting a hardline, militarist strategy of waging selective attacks on security forces and other targets without first building alliances with popular organizations.¹⁰⁶ Dalton disagreed, but the personal animosities ran even deeper. A heavy drinker and inveterate bohemian approaching forty, yet “resolute in his determination to bring the cause [of socialism] at least one small victory in El Salvador,” as a friend wrote later, Dalton was ill-suited to the strict discipline required for clandestine life.¹⁰⁷ Leaders of the ERP began to view him as a security liability. Defended only by two other former poets, Sancho and Lil Milagro Ramírez, Dalton was subjected to a show-trial on trumped-up charges of ideological diversion and CIA espionage and murdered on May 10, 1975.¹⁰⁸ No matter how much writers had contributed to the development of a revolutionary discourse in El Salvador, they entered the world of clandestine

102. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*, 107.

103. Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, *Modernizing Minds*, 207.

104. Sánchez Cerén, *Con sueños*, 62, 118.

105. Argueta, “Juan Felipe Toruño,” 282.

106. Eduardo Sancho, author interview, January 23, 2006.

107. Alma Guillermoprieto, *Dancing with Cuba: A Memoir of the Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 258.

108. Sancho, *Crónicas*, 109; Sancho interview, 2006; Alvarenga, *El ciervo perseguido*, 148.

armed struggle at the same level of peril as anyone else. Poets would not be spared, by either side.

CONCLUSION

La Pájara Pinta almost never printed texts by labor leaders, politicians, leftist priests, or other nonwriters, remaining to the end a space where intellectuals challenging El Salvador's conservative order were able to distill and cross-hybridize their thinking as an autonomous force within a larger, fast-growing progressive movement. Their voice did not last long, however, as poets became fighters or exiles or corpses. El Salvador was not unique in that respect. The guerrilla insurgencies that shook Latin America in the Cold War were often founded or inspired by intellectuals—university professors, artists, philosophers, dreamers. With a few important exceptions, they died or were pushed aside as these movements pursued more military objectives and hardliners took over, or as the movements were disarticulated by security forces. Dalton's murder by his own comrades could be seen as part of the Salvadoran analog to this pattern.

Yet that atrocity could not erase the fact that professional writers shaped and articulated the ideals that inspired the underground guerrilla movement in its early years, and that this process commenced long before El Salvador's slide into civil war. Progressive intellectual politics dated from the citizens' revolution of 1944, took shape in the crucial years of stunted modernization in the 1950s, and thereafter evolved into a more confrontational discourse. With their focus on exposing the pathologies of Salvadoran society and its impermeability to global forces, these writers foresaw the crisis that would engulf the country long before the governing and business elites. They were truth-tellers, even if they were powerless to stop the gathering storm. "Somehow literature anticipated the crisis," wrote poet and former guerrilla Miguel Huezo Mixco a few years after the end of war. "The country was on the road to a historic crisis, and among the first to notice were the writers, even before important sectors of the Catholic church, who, some years later, would experience their own revolution."¹⁰⁹ With their poems of dark foreboding and prescience, writers anticipated the war while the rest of society still averted its eyes from the abyss.

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109. Miguel Huezo Mixco, *La casa en llamas: la cultura salvadoreña en el siglo XX* (San Salvador: Ediciones Arcoiris, 1996), 42–43.