Salvadorian Women’s Diaspora

Ana Rivera’s Story

MIRNA E. CARRANZA WITH ANA RIVERA

La diáspora salvadoreña a envoyé des milliers de Salvadoreños dans les États nord américains. Cet article raconte l’histoire d’Ana Rivera qui a quitté son pays d’origine pour une terre d’exil. Elle nous parle de ses difficultés et aussi de sa résistance et sa résistance face à des circonstances accablantes.

La Diáspora salvadoreña trajo millones de personas de El Salvador a Norteamérica. Este artículo presenta la experiencia de vida de Ana Rivera, en su país de nacimiento y en el país donde se estableció. Su narrativa incluye sus dificultades, el proceso de adaptación y la resistencia a las circunstancias opresivas de su vida.

From 1980 to 1990 El Salvador was engaged in a bloody civil war (Cienfuegos 164). During this time the Salvadorian government unleashed a wave of terrorism against the civilian population. This violence, along with constant psychological warfare, drastically impacted the lives of Salvadoran women and their families (Martín-Baró 111-12). Many lost beloved family members, and many endured persecution and torture at the hands of “death squads” (Diez 15). Millions of Salvadorans fled to North America. In 1982 and 1983, nearly 3,000 refugees came directly from El Salvador to Canada. A second wave of approximately 7,000 people arrived in Canada during the mid-1980s and included people who had first settled illegally in the United States (Da 2). Between 1974 and 2001, a total of 33,860 Salvadorans came to Canada, a fairly small number compared to other immigrant groups (Garcia 32).

This article presents Ana Rivera’s narrative of her life experiences in both her country of origin and her settlement country. I have been privileged to know Ana for about 15 years. I witnessed not only her struggles, but also her strength and remarkable resistance to oppressive circumstances. Her is one of the millions of stories of people who came to North American countries during the Salvadorian Diaspora as refugees.

Family History

Ana was born in the city of Santa Ana on August 3, 1955, the third of five sisters. Her father, José, owned a carpentry workshop. He was the Salvadorian representative of the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC) (Central American Workers’ Political Party). He was also the regional leader of the Sindicato Nacional de Obreros (National Factory Workers’ Union [NFWU]). He worked in collaboration with Julio Pinto in the publication of the emerging newspaper El Independiente (The Independent). The goal of the newspaper was to protest the injustices and to expose the secret killings of civilians that were happening at the time.

Ana worked as a pharmaceutical assistant, during her spare time she helped her father organize the union meetings and kept track of the paperwork. She was also a sympathizer of the emergent resistance movement Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). The FMLN was a left-wing political party formed on October 10, 1980, as an umbrella group for several left-wing guerrilla organizations: the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (FPL), the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), the Resistencia Nacional (RN), the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS), and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (Cienfuegos 154-162).

Ana’s father was also the leader of a youth group, and he played an important role in educating young people about the oppression endured by Salvadorian people. Ana recounted how listening to her father talk to the youth group “opened [her] eyes” to social justice and human rights issues. Ana reported that these experiences made her acutely aware of the inherent social inequalities in Salvadorian society, which many perceived as “normal” and part of the social order of her country. She felt compelled to align herself with the oppressed, exploited, and excluded.
Persecution and Flight

In August of 1981, Ana’s life was changed forever. Three army trucks came to her father’s shop to perform an cateo [search for arms and propaganda without a court order]. They destroyed the place and killed one of the workers, thinking he was Ana’s father. Ana’s father went into hiding, but not without first letting her know what had happened. Ana refused to submit to fear and continued her work at the pharmacy where she was employed, and her activism/involvement with the union and the youth group.

However, she refused to leave El Salvador and told her that even the thought of leaving his compañeros made him feel like a traitor. During this time, the communication with family members left in El Salvador was sporadic; via telegrams using pseudonyms and containing only a few code words that let the receiver know that they were still alive. Ana’s partner supported the idea to travel to Mexico as he was afraid for his and the children’s lives. During this time, the Salvadoran army made it their practice to kill entire families or relatives of the person they were looking for in order to instill fear and intimidation.

“I was late for work that day. One of my kids was sick. When I arrived my boss and all my other coworkers were very pale. They told me that the military broke a lot of stuff looking for me…. My boss told me that it was better for me to leave…. I left my four children and went to Guatemala only with what I had on me...”

Months later, Ana’s father came out of hiding. They both thought that the military had forgotten about them. With sadness in her eyes, Ana recalled:

“We were wrong, very wrong. [The Army] came looking for me. I was supposed to be there, but... I was late for work that day. One of my kids was sick, I think. I had to take him to the doctor. When I arrived my boss and all my other coworkers were very pale. They told me that the military had made a mess in the pharmacy. That they broke a lot of stuff looking for me... My boss told me that it was better for me to leave... I left immediately... I didn’t know what to do. I left my four children and went to Guatemala only with what I had on me.... I sent a message to my family letting them know where I was. A couple of months later, my husband came to join me in Guatemala because [The Army] wouldn’t stop looking for me and we were afraid that they would do something to him just to send me a message... We couldn’t afford to bring the children. We thought it would be too hard to move around with them.

Ana always thought of herself as loyal to the Salvadoran cause, yet within 12 hours she found herself in a new country and away from her children and loved ones. Her journey did not stop there. Ana did not feel safe in Guatemala because of its proximity to El Salvador and the military collaboration between the two countries.

A Second and Third Migration

After a few months in Guatemala, Ana and her husband decided to venture to Mexico, and they lived there for a period of five years. Her sisters followed her and subsequently settled illegally in the United States. Ana’s father, once in Mexico, Ana’s strong work ethic helped her obtain employment as a pharmaceutical assistant in Guadalajara. She was 26 years old. Her husband became employed as a factory worker

A couple of months later we went to Mexico. We lived there illegally for several years... One day I had to go back to El Salvador in the middle of the night to get my dad because he had a close call. He had been shot. I was afraid for his life... I went because I thought that it would be easier for me to go in disguise than my husband, or maybe because I thought my husband did not have the courage to go and get my father and bring him safely to me.... Also, because my husband’s brother had disappeared. We later found out that he had been tortured and murdered by the Army.... The family found his remains in a trench. The Army used to dig these holes all the time. They would just throw in the bodies of the people they had tortured and killed.... He had been buried anonymously, together with other people. We did not know if they were looking for my husband. I did not want him to risk himself.... I mean I was afraid for his life too.... Or maybe I thought it was my responsibility, not his.

Ana, like many other Salvadorian women at the time, did not hesitate to put herself at risk to protect the men in her family. Ana eventually brought her entire family to Mexico without visas. She did so by paying mordidas (bribes) at each immigration site. She arrived in Mexico with her 70-year-old father, her 60-year-old mother, and her four children: Maria, eleven; Juan, nine; Tanya, eight; and Manuel, five. Their illegal status prevented the children from attending school beyond the elementary grades. Ana demonstrated her courage and resilience once again:
Mis zipotes [my children] couldn’t go any further in school. My bosses knew that were living in Mexico illegally. They really liked me and they offered to help me get my legal status, but that was going to take years…. I couldn’t wait. So we decided to apply to Canada. We waited about 18 months. We [Ana with her husband and children] came first, and a week later my parents arrived. We thought our hardships would lessen here, but we began a new adventure. It was very tough at the beginning.

Life in Canada

Ana and her family arrived in Canada as government-sponsored refugees. Ana requested to be sent to a small city, and the government brought them to Kitchener-Waterloo in September 1986. At that time, Waterloo Region did not have a history of receiving people of colour or refugees from developing countries. This meant that Ana and her family received very little support and understanding regarding unprocessed issues around the loss of their culture and the experiences of war and persecution.

Ana and her husband, Mario, attended English as a Second Language classes for about seven months. Ana received training as a seamstress and managed to find part-time employment in this field. Mario secured employment at a factory and worked there for 20 years.

Experiences of racism and prejudice became part of Ana’s daily life:

I remember that people would stare at us like we were animals in the zoo. People did not want to rent us an apartment. It was hard for us to find a decent place to rent because there was no appropriate housing. There were eight of us and we couldn’t find anything at the time…. Landlords were rude and would tell us, “No, we don’t want your kind here.” I remember feeling so alone. I could not find work in my field. I learned a little bit of English, enough to get around, and went to work in a factory. The coworkers treated me like an animal there. The manager would give me the toughest jobs there. I mean work that not even the men wanted to do. Look at me; I am a very small woman! … I had no choice but to work because I had my parents and my children to support. I did not want to live off the welfare system; you know, I thought, I am a healthy woman and [welfare] is for sick people.

Ana’s experience in Canada represents the experience of many Salvadorians and other people of colour. Everyday experiences of race discrimination remind people like Ana that Canada is not the safe place they thought it would be.

Ana noted that the Salvadorian community was almost nonexistent at the time. Therefore, she had nobody to turn to in this process:

We were the fourth Salvadorian family to arrive in Kitchener in 1986. A lot more Salvadorians arrived in the following years. It was very hard back then because we were so few. We would be so surprised and happy when we found people on the bus or the street who spoke Spanish. We would come home and share that we had met other people who spoke Spanish…. There were no stores that would sell our spices or any of our foods. It was very hard because our diet was so different.

Meanwhile, Ana’s sisters, who had been living illegally in the United States, moved to Canada and settled in Kitchener-Waterloo. Ana told me, “I was so happy. I thought I would never see them again. My parents were so happy too.”

In the meantime, Ana’s father had an aneurism. One of her sisters looked after him, while Ana continued working part time. Her father died on November 28, 1995. More than ever, Ana felt a sense of responsibility and duty to continue her father’s work. In spite of this, she felt that she had no choice but to begin working full time at Kitchener Printing. She worked there for ten years, before she hurt her shoulders and became incapacitated.

Ana reported that she felt very frustrated and useless at the time. She found that the existing services did not meet her needs. Therefore, she began to do volunteer work in the community; her primary goal was to help decrease the multiple barriers that immigrants and refugees encountered during their acculturation process. In 1999 she founded an initiative called Bridging Resources, which was funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Immigration in partnership with K-W Counselling. She recalled:

There were so many injustices committed against immigrants at the time. There were no resources available for immigrants. We were treated like second-class citizens, especially when you did not speak the language. There were agencies that supposedly [were there to help and to] advocate for the needs of immigrants but they didn’t do so. [The workers in these agencies] are as oppressive as those working in mainstream agencies as well. Some staff members in those centers have very little power or authority, but they use it to oppress other immigrants.

As the leader of the Bridging Resources initiative, Ana was able to help numerous people in her community. She collaborated and networked with agencies such as Lutherwood and Family and Children’s Services, as well as several schools.

Ana also received training as a facilitator for Wrap-Around, a community-based program that responded to families that had multiple needs. She became the regional leader in advocating for the needs of immigrant families. However, most of the problems that Ana and the families she worked with faced were related to blatant discrimination:

142

CANADIAN WOMAN STUDIES/LES CAHIERS DE LA FEMME
The problem was that the families were facing discrimination as much as I was. I called the Ministry to complain but nothing was done. I called the MP and nothing was done. I called the Mayor and nothing was done. I felt so frustrated. The bureaucracy here was, and still is, so big that one person cannot even make a dent in the glass ceiling that predominates in Canada.

It is important to note that Ana uses the imagery of “glass ceiling” to denote the prejudice and discrimination that many immigrants and refugees of colour experience while trying to incorporate themselves in Canadian society. That is, the contradictions that exist between the welcoming national Canadian policy of multiculturalism and the lived realities of people of colour. Discriminatory hiring practices due to accent, lack of acceptance and validation of foreign experience, negative stereotypes, apathy and rudeness from frontline workers, managers and government officials toward the needs of immigrants and refugees of colour are some examples.

While caring for her children and her aging mother, Ana found time to do volunteer work. When her mother, Dolores, died on May 23, 2003. Ana felt “overwhelmed with grief, and abandoned by the system.” She decided to give up on social justice issues for a while.

On November 1, 2005, Ana opened her own business selling second-hand clothing. Ana thought that she was finally going to be able to relax. However, her husband lost his job in December 2005.

In spite of her own financial struggles, Ana continued her leadership in the community, as people seeking help continued to knock at her door. She created a small space in her store where she met with people needing some guidance or support. Ana acknowledged that some changes had taken place in Kitchener since her arrival (29 years ago), both negative and positive. The negatives changes relate to the financial cut backs that the government has made to social programs through the years. The positives changes relay to the increase of service for immigrant and refugee women who endure domestic violence. Ana’s challenges had not ended yet. The City of Kitchener began street construction work in April 2006 and closed access to her store for what was supposed to be six months but continued for almost a year. The business declined, and Ana eventually had to close her small business:

I went to advocate for myself at the city hall. The K-W Record published an article in October 2006, but nothing was done. [The article] was done to bring light to the issue, you know. I hoped that something would be done. I mean like stop construction or at least to finish it in an appropriate amount of time. There was no financial compensation for any of the business owners in the block. I had no choice but to close my business on January 28, 2007.

Ana put all the store merchandise in storage and went to work at a department store in order to save enough money to open her store again. Her new job involved physically demanding tasks that made her old injuries flare up. Ana kept herself going with the idea of someday reopening her store. She reopened her own store on March 1, 2008, relocating it to Kitchener’s downtown area. She hopes that this time around there will be no construction or anything impeding her desire for self-employment. I saw that Ana was excited about reopening her store, and asked her, “What sort of hopes do you have for the future?” She responded:

I have ten grandchildren now. I think it is important to teach them about strong family loyalty between family members, about our ethnic heritage, and the history of oppression, survival, and resistance of the Salvadorian people. I also think that it is important to teach them about social justice so they can fight for themselves and for others who are at a disadvantage. I learned this from my father. He taught me to be proud of my indigenous roots. I taught the same thing to my children. I am teaching it to my grandchildren too. I just hope that God gives me enough life to do this, because some of them are still very young. I am teaching them to speak Spanish too. They are the fourth generation now. We only speak Spanish at home. I think they need to feel proud of their race and culture.
Ana will be 54 this August. In the more than two decades that she has lived in Canada, she has strongly advocated for increased access and inclusive services in Waterloo Region. Yet she has done so without recognition for her commitment to social justice and her dedication to helping those in need. Ana remarked:

I figure I am in [social justice work] for life. This is not something that I chose. This is my life purpose and I cannot get away. Believe me I tried [laughter]. I love it. I would have loved to go to school and obtain some sort of formal education for this, maybe then I would have more credibility…. But I did not have money to pay for university or college. I had to feed my family.

Ana’s close connection and commitment to her country of birth continued throughout the years, from a distance. She has maintained her relationships with close family members through telephone calls on a monthly basis. She has not visited her native land since that early morning in mid-August 1981. Ana stated that although El Salvador’s political upheaval has decreased, “fear for my life has kept me away from my homeland for about 29 years.”

Conclusion

It is important to draw attention to the fact that in her narrative, Ana did not use language that denoted trauma or victimhood. Ana thinks of herself as a strong woman who had to endure many life adversities as a result of oppressive circumstances and exclusion. However, fear has been an active force in her life, and it has been a key principle in the decisions she made in organizing her life. Most importantly, it has kept her away from her homeland. Her ethnic pride and her faith have been sources of strength and resilience during her moments of vulnerability.

This narrative describes the lifelong efforts of a woman whose work as a community advocate and organizer has remained largely invisible. Ana’s story also illuminates the struggles that immigrant women continue to face because of discrimination. Overt and covert racism continue to heavily influence the settlement process of women of colour and to cheat them of equal opportunities. Ana’s story is one of remarkable strength and resilience in oppressive circumstances. Thousands of Salvadorian women in Canada have faced many such challenges in their search for a safe haven.

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References


SUSAN MCCASLIN

Demeter, Drowning, Remembers a Lover of her youth

Demeter flails desperately, having lost sight of the beach with its small breathing holes for crabs, the figure eights of the tides, and dance of kelp-drawn lines. Breath folds, arms are weakening tentacles.

She sees in her mind black earth, new beans listing in their pods.

Soon she will relive the blue-black flanks of Poseidon who sought her once, became half-stallion for her skin.

Now she is a single spar, dragged to his Sargasso eye, lone witness of her self-abandonment sinking to his element, the sea.

Susan McCaslin has published 12 volumes of poetry and taught English at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C. for 23 years. Her most recent volume is Lifting the Stone (Seraphim Editions). She is currently working on a book on the poetics of mystical experience. More information: www.susanmccaslin.ca.