

Beyond El Barrio

Everyday Life in Latina/o America

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

2010

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The Mission in Nicaragua

San Francisco Poets Go to War

CARY CORDOVA

This shared cement ground
Surrounded by a sweet shop
A fast food store and four bus stops
Was renamed by
WE THE PEOPLE
From a radius of twenty miles or so
"Plaza Sandino"

—Nina Serrano

In the late 1970s, a community of poet-activists rechristened their usual gathering spot, the plaza above a subway station in the heart of the barrio, as "Plaza Sandino." Otherwise known as the BART station at Twenty-fourth and Mission streets in San Francisco's Mission District, their literary seizure of the land, in the name of Nicaraguan peasant hero Augusto Sandino (1893–1934), signaled the ways this public space in San Francisco had become a meaningful place to express solidarity with the leftist struggles in Nicaragua and elsewhere. The poet Roberto Vargas described the mood of the barrio as follows: "The Mission is now aware of itself as a body of many people, all tribes aware of themselves . . . There is a collective feeling of compassion for each other Nicas Blacks Chicanos Chilenos oppressed Indios. The sense of collective survival, histories full of Somozas Wounded Knees written on the walls: Muera Somoza Free Angela."¹ Seeing the fight to overthrow Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua as intertwined with the fight to free Angela Davis was indicative of the poet-activists' efforts to build an internationalist civil rights movement in the barrio.

Nina Serrano's poem "I Saw It Myself on the Corner of Mission and Twenty-fourth Streets" perfectly illustrates the ways that protests at Plaza

Sandino collapsed transnational struggles into a single vision for change. She writes:

We chanted / incanted
circling circling
circling circling
"Pinochet Romero
Y Somoza
Son La Misma Cosa"
And it was raining

We chanted / incanted
circling circling
circling circling
"se siente
se siente
Sandino esta presente"
And it was raining
Ending a three year drought.

I saw it myself on the corner
Of Mission and Twenty-Fourth streets²

According to the poem, "Pinochet, Romero, y Somoza Son La Misma Cosa" are the same thing. For Serrano, and for many others, the dictatorial heads of Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Augusto Pinochet, Carlos Humberto Romero, and Anastasio Somoza Debayle) had merged as a single oppressive entity. The brutality of these U.S.-sponsored, right-wing regimes propelled a global solidarity movement critical of U.S. politics and supportive of left-leaning guerrilla mobilizations.³ Simultaneously, Serrano's poem celebrates the presence of Augusto Sandino ("Sandino esta presente" / Sandino is present), the heroic antithesis of these regimes, the soldier for the underdog, whose magical presence in the rain suggests an almost saintly ability to end a real and spiritual drought. In the poem, Sandino symbolizes hope for another way of life, not just in Nicaragua, but everywhere, and perhaps especially in the Mission.

At the time, the Mission District certainly might have benefited from some saintly guidance. In the late 1960s, the Mission average income was substantially below the city average, the unemployment rate was high, if not

the highest in the city, and only 5 percent of graduates from the local high school continued on to college.⁴ The socioeconomic circumstances of the Mission are exactly why it became a focal point for 1960s civil rights activists and artists, or "cultural workers," to demand social justice. Drawing on revolutionary struggles around the globe became a key means for cultural workers to advocate for revolutionary change at home. As Vargas writes, "My ideal is along the broad horizon of internationalism, the right to be free and to demand justice, although to reach this state of perfection it may be necessary to shed one's own and one's neighbor's blood."⁵ The poet's sympathies for the working class propelled his interest in revolution, nonviolent or otherwise.

Poet-activist Alejandro Murguía describes how the neighborhood zeitgeist transformed his identity. In 1971, after reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he states, "Suddenly we reinterpreted our existence, we were no longer exiled in the cold north, in the pale United States. We transposed our Latino roots from Central America, land of volcanoes and revolutions; from the Caribbean, land of palm trees and salsa music, and from Aztlán, land of lowriders and *vatos locos*, and fused these tropicalized visions to our barrio and made the concrete sidewalks, the asphalt streets, and the sterile buildings sway to a Latin beat."⁶ By importing these tropicalized sensibilities, the dimensions of difference between Central America and the Mission District collapsed.

In many ways, Nicaragua came to represent a place where the problems of the Mission could be solved. Especially from 1972 to 1979, San Francisco cultural workers mobilized to support Nicaragua's Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) as part and parcel of local community organizing. Pro-Sandinista sentiment flourished in San Francisco, not simply out of sympathy for Nicaraguans, but because the situation abroad represented an inextricable extension of the problems defining life in San Francisco's Mission District. If the Sandinistas succeeded, Nicaragua promised to become a new and better Cuba, an amends for the loss of Chile in the 1973 coup, and a model for freedom and equality around the world, including within the United States. The activism of the Sandinistas articulated the Marxist ideals of San Francisco cultural workers and expressed their dissatisfaction with U.S. capitalism from a war front of their own, the Latino barrio of San Francisco. The parallels were ready-made, and the struggle was the same.

Like other chapters in this volume, especially the one by Ana Aparicio on Dominicans in New York, this essay situates "barrio politics" in a transnational context. Over the course of the 1970s, artists and activists used the ideals of revolution in Nicaragua to express the political needs of Latinos

in San Francisco and in the Americas. In order to capture this history, one must go beyond seeing the barrio in solely domestic or local terms. At a time when, as poet Alejandro Murguía complained, “the typical Anglo American couldn’t find Nicaragua or Colombia on a map, even if it bit them in the ass,” cultural workers in the Mission established an intimate and often romanticized relationship with Nicaragua.⁷ The imagined Nicaragua, circulated in San Francisco poetry, murals, and literature, propelled a leftist idealism for what could be. While many have heard of the Nuyorican poetry movement of the 1970s, few know that there was a similarly rich, transnational poetry movement evolving in San Francisco’s Mission District.⁸

In order to document this largely unwritten history, I am turning to three poets: Nina Serrano, Roberto Vargas, and Alejandro Murguía. None of the three was ever “just” a poet. Rather, they drew inspiration from a wide array of Latin American revolutionary poets, including Ernesto Cardenal, Ruben Dario, Roque Dalton, and Pablo Neruda. All three participated in the Neighborhood Arts Program and became leading activists in the community. Together, they organized a long list of intersecting events—poetry readings, rallies, and demonstrations—all calling for revolution in Nicaragua. Two of the three, Murguía and Vargas, even went to Nicaragua to join as soldiers in the struggle.

Notably, only one of the three—Vargas—is Nicaraguan. Murguía identifies as Chicano, originally from Los Angeles, and Serrano is a Colombian American, originally from New York. In various ways, the cultural workers of San Francisco asserted their solidarity with the people of Nicaragua, regardless of whether they were of Nicaraguan origin. Their priority was to draw attention to a struggle that encompassed both Nicaragua and the Mission District in a much larger quest for revolutionary change.

San Francisco, la ciudad de los nicaragüenses⁹

—Ernesto Cardenal

One of the reasons San Francisco established such a strong solidarity movement with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua can be tied to its demographics. The city’s large Nicaraguan American community had grown in tandem with trade routes between the United States and Nicaragua since the late 1800s, particularly owing to the coffee industry. In addition, a large influx of Nicaraguans came to the city just prior to, or in the wake of, the 1934 assassination of revolutionary leader Augusto Sandino. Most were supporters of Sandino, and with the ensuing rise to power of right-wing dictator Anastasio Somoza, they were unable to return to their home country for the next forty years. This was the case

for poet Roberto Vargas, who has stated, “We came in the human wave fleeing the brutality of the Somoza regime that still rules the homeland.”¹⁰ These earlier communities were important in establishing strong neighborhood migration networks, comprising family, friends, and even friends of friends.

Though Central Americans had established a strong presence in San Francisco since the nineteenth century, the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and increasing political turbulence prompted increased migrations over the course of the 1970s. The 1980 census shows that of the eighty-three thousand Latinos in San Francisco, 39 percent identified as of Mexican origin, 6 percent of Puerto Rican origin, 2 percent of Cuban origin, and 53 percent “of other Spanish origin.”¹¹ The large percentage of, “other Spanish origin” is largely due to the city’s sizable Central American populations, particularly from El Salvador and Nicaragua. Even so, the fact that no single nation dominated San Francisco’s Latino population helped popularize a pan-Latino, or Raza, identity in local politics and subsequently encouraged activism across national borders.¹²

Close ties between San Francisco and Nicaragua solidified when a devastating earthquake tore Managua apart in 1972. The disaster took the lives of up to twenty thousand people and destroyed more than three-quarters of the city’s housing and businesses.¹³ San Francisco cultural workers sought to make a difference through fund-raising—for instance, Roberto Vargas started the Comité Civico Pro Liberación de Nicaragua to send aid. Once established, El Comité Civico organized rallies, poetry readings, lectures, and even produced radio and television shows.¹⁴

Significantly, the earthquake also revealed the scale of government corruption to the world, since most of the international efforts to send aid never reached beyond the coffers of the Somoza regime. The year 1972 proved a turning point, or as Thomas Walker notes, “the beginning of the end” for the Somoza regime.¹⁵ By the mid-1970s, Walker adds, “Somoza stood out as one of the worst human rights violators in the Western hemisphere.”¹⁶

Alternatively, the guerrilla Sandinista Front promised a radical social revolution. While the FSLN struggled with internal divisions, its ideology promised social justice for the masses. According to Carlos Fonseca, who later earned the title “Supreme Commander” of the Nicaraguan revolution, “The question is not only to bring about a change of the man in power, but to transform the system, to overthrow the exploiting classes and achieve the victory of the exploited.”¹⁷ In 1978, the FSLN published a twenty-five-point list of objectives that clearly established the revolutionary ambitions of the organization. Their intentions were to redistribute land, create an agrarian revolution, enhance labor conditions, control prices, enhance public trans-

portation, provide utilities to rural areas, develop decent housing, provide free medical assistance and education to all in need politically incorporate indigenous communities, protect natural resources, eliminate torture and political assassinations, encourage free speech, and end discrimination against women.¹⁸ The utopian ideals for social reform perfectly intersected with the ideals of community organizers in San Francisco.

The student protest movements of the late 1960s grew out of the Bay Area's history of radical and leftist politics. The richness of San Francisco's activism encompassed a wide array of intersecting issues, from the Native American takeover of Alcatraz, to the controversial trial of "Los Siete de la Raza," to the Third World Strikes at San Francisco State University, to the Black Panther breakfast programs. As such, support for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was indicative of a more expansive cultural milieu.

San Francisco support for the Sandinistas swelled as migration from Nicaragua increased. Poet Ernesto Cardenal, who later became the revolution's Minister of Culture, describes how the cultures of San Francisco and Nicaragua merged in the Mission:

Como los puertorriqueños en Nueva York, los cubanos en Miami, y los mexicanos en Los Ángeles, eran los nicaragüenses en San Francisco. La calle Mission era la calle de los nicas; allí estaban los restaurantes y bares nicaragüenses, se vendía *La Prensa* de Managua, se bebía cerveza nicaragüense. Y allí había una oficina del Frente Sandinista: con la bandera rojinegra, retrato de Sandino, pósters revolucionarios; bajo la vigilancia y amenaza del FBI y de la CIA.¹⁹

(Like the Puerto Ricans in New York, the Cubans in Miami, and the Mexicans in Los Angeles, it was the Nicaraguans in San Francisco. Mission Street was the street of the Nicaraguans; there were Nicaraguan restaurants and bars, they sold Managua's newspaper *La Prensa*, they drank Nicaraguan beer. And there was even an office of the Sandinista Front: with the red and black flag, portrait of Sandino, revolutionary posters; under the threat and surveillance of the FBI and CIA.)

The politics of Nicaragua remapped the local landscape and the culture of the Mission in multiple ways. Not only did one find Nicaraguan food and drink in the Mission, but the neighborhood even served as a home for the FSLN. As poet Nina Serrano recalls, at the urging of her friend Roberto Vargas, "I went down to the Sandinista headquarters . . . right off Valencia Street . . . and met all

the compañeros, who barely, almost all exiles, barely spoke English. . . . They wanted me to help them with organizing a group to speak to the American people about Nicaragua, and to stop U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. And as a result, I helped to form NIN—Nonintervention in Nicaragua." Serrano adds that her recruitment efforts largely consisted of organizing "the only people I knew, which were all the poets."²⁰ As Serrano's story makes clear, the physical presence of Sandinista organizations, including a Sandinista headquarters, had a radicalizing effect on the neighborhood.

One reporter later stated, "There is a quasi-joke among certain sectors here that half the Nicaraguan revolution was planned in back rooms around Mission Street."²¹ In truth, it was hardly a joke. According to Ernesto Cardenal, "la célula sandinista de San Francisco era la más importante de los Estados Unidos."²² (The Sandinista cell in San Francisco was the most important in the United States.) Obviously, organizing for the Sandinistas was safer in San Francisco than it was in Nicaragua. Former soldier Walter Ferreti states, "The FSLN could operate in the United States, could make demonstrations, and could publicly expose the cruelties of the Somoza dictatorship. We had an office and made propaganda against the regime."²³ Protections of free speech and free assembly facilitated San Francisco support for the Nicaraguan revolution. The Mission subsequently served as a second home to various high-profile revolutionaries, including Walter Ferreti, Casimiro Sotelo, Raul Venerio, Lygia Venerio, and Berman Zúniga.²⁴

Nonetheless, FBI infiltration and surveillance was also a reality. Ferreti adds, "Of course, the office was vandalized, the printing press was broken, and the files stolen. To this day we don't know if this was done by Somoza's agents or by the FBI. And of course, those of us who worked there were stopped in the streets or in our cars by the police. They would ask us where we were going and what we were doing. They would call us 'communists' and tell us to go back to Nicaragua."²⁵ Regardless of official U.S. or Nicaraguan interventions, San Francisco proved a key location to support a revolution.

Stoned on Liberation and Love at the Risk of Seeming Ridiculous —Roberto Vargas

The sense of being part of the same struggle, "la misma cosa," profoundly shaped local Latina/o cultural production, from poetry, to filmmaking, to the visual arts. Cultural workers like Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, and Alejandro Murguía supported the revolution in Nicaragua as part of a larger internationalist vision of liberation. In 1975, writing in support of

the Sandinistas in the neighborhood newspaper *El Tecolote*, Roberto Vargas declared, "Every Latino has the responsibility to work toward the liberation of our people. There is no neutral or middle ground, and we must join the struggle."²⁶ The fact that this perspective pervaded the neighborhood is evident in the newspapers, the poetry, and the culture at large. For example, choosing to shed any sign of objectivity, *El Tecolote* editorial staff declared agreement with Vargas: "In doing research for this article, two themes have come up consistently: U.S. intervention, whether direct or indirect, which clearly has been used to the detriment of the Nicaraguan people, and their courageous and continuous struggle for control over their own lives and country. As Latinos we are part of this same struggle. It is important to show our solidarity with the progressive struggles of all people and to support them in any way we can."²⁷ The ideology of transnational liberation shaped the neighborhood's cultural production, defined what it meant to be Latino, and contributed to the ways that action abroad and at home merged.

Roberto Vargas, born in Nicaragua but raised in San Francisco, was dedicated to bringing revolution to both places. According to Murguía, "Roberto took the concept of organizer and expanded it to mean everything: organizer of poetry readings, writing workshops, film and theater projects, community dances, and eventually even political marches and rallies for Nicaragua."²⁸ For Vargas, the struggle was clear. His 1971 book *Primeros Cantos* collected a group of socially conscious poems, highly critical of the capitalist system. Poems such as "Elegy Pa Esso," "They Blamed It on Reds," and "Elegy Pa Gringolandia" ridiculed American love for the dollar. In "Elegy Pa Gringolandia," Vargas fantasized about the death of capitalism:

It seems . . . just the other day
The Wall Street Journal (His Masters voice)
Chanted extreme Unction rites
To the tinkle of a no-sale cash register
In the belly of the Stock-Exchange
Amerikka Hemmoraged internally
And died . . . Of an overdose of Hate
(Did they blame it on reds?)
(O say
can you
see . . .)

It seems . . . just the other day
A new world . . . began again
Chepito in Nicaraguan natural
Sticking life to drumskin
Splashing Tim-Timbale voodoo
On Santana's Mayan / pocho / Afro
Sinfonia (Jingo-Jingova)
And today the new children
Are STONED on Liberation
And love . . . (At the risk of
seeming
Ridiculous . . .)

For Vargas, the death of "Amerikka" birthed true liberation, a world returning to a mestizo culture of pounding drums and natural incantations of love. His dramatic reading of the poem, very much akin to the spoken word style of Beat and Nuyorican poets, is emphatically musical, playing with tempo and singing certain phrases ("O say / can you / see" and "Jingo-Jingova").²⁹

The poem captures Vargas's idyllic hopes. "Amerikka" might practice egregious financial activities ("The tinkle of a no-sale cash register / In the belly of the Stock-Exchange"), but people have another choice: fight for liberation and love. He uses the line, "STONED on Liberation / And love . . . (At the risk of / Seeming / Ridiculous)" as a call to others to risk being passionate about the world. Like love, liberation induces a drug-like high, a sense of purpose, and a willingness to sacrifice one's self for the sake of something more profound. It is a philosophy that filtered through Vargas's poetry and into his everyday life.

In 1974, Vargas cofounded the *Gaceta Sandinista*, a San Francisco Spanish-language newspaper dedicated to covering the struggle in Nicaragua. The fact that San Francisco became the home of the only newspaper in the United States devoted to the Sandinista cause is illustrative of the Bay Area culture.³⁰ Officially a product of El Comité Cívico Pro Liberación, the newspaper editorial staff reads like a list of Sandinista soldiers, including Casimiro Sotelo, Roberto Vargas, Raúl Venerio, Jr., and Walter Ferreti, who all served in San Francisco, while another set of "reporters" served in Los Angeles.³¹ The newspaper provided information in a way that would have been impossible within Nicaragua without serious repercussions from the government. Much of the reportage focused on the conditions of political prisoners, the

government's repressive violence and corruption, and the seemingly growing number of successful FSLN actions.

Gaceta Sandinista was just as much a product of San Francisco's independent publishing collectives as it was of FSLN organizing. Alejandro Murguía's experience illustrates the close ties that existed between *Gaceta Sandinista* and the various Third World publishing collectives that had mobilized throughout the city. After moving to San Francisco from Los Angeles in 1971, Murguía joined Editorial Pocho-Che, an organization first started in 1968 to serve the publishing needs of Latina/o writers and artists.³² He also cofounded Third World Communications in 1972 and the Third World Poetry Series at San Francisco State in 1974.³³ As a writer, as an editor, and as an organizer, Murguía had a hand in bringing various projects to publication, including *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World* (1975) and a series of chapbooks that included the work of Jose Montoya, Roberto Vargas, Raul Salinas, and Nina Serrano.³⁴ As Murguía's repertoire expanded, he also became an editor for *Gaceta Sandinista* and the official Bay Area FSLN representative. Not coincidentally, Editorial Pocho-Che became part of the publishing arm for *Gaceta Sandinista*.³⁵ The rise of all these Third World publishing ventures is indicative of the internationalist spirit driving local support for the FSLN.

Relatively quickly, the revolution in Nicaragua became a pivotal part of Murguía's political and literary activism in the Mission. He first learned about Nicaragua through Vargas, who introduced him to the writings of Ernesto Cardenal in 1972.³⁶ It did not take much for Murguía to see Nicaragua as part of a larger struggle. As he writes in 1981, "Nicaragua was a classic confrontation: a puppet regime installed and supported by the United States, challenged by a National Liberation Front. Vietnam in the western hemisphere."³⁷ Angered by the disaster of U.S. policy in Vietnam, Murguía saw it as imperative to be engaged in the struggle in Nicaragua.

In his memoir, Murguía recalls his first demonstration for the FSLN in 1975: "We carried these beautiful black-and-red posters of Sandino silk-screened by La Raza Silk Screen Center, and we waved them at passing traffic and stood outside El Tico-Nica bar exchanging insults with Somoza sympathizers."³⁸

The moment, captured in an *El Tecolote* photograph, shows a cheerful Murguía and Vargas leading a crowd of protesters down Mission Street with their signs of support for the Sandinistas. The image is also indicative of the way that events in Nicaragua were literally changing the face of the Mission, as artist Alfonso Maciel's posters became part of the Mission District land-



10.1 Roberto Vargas and Alejandro Murguía marching down Mission Street in support of the Sandinistas in 1976. Photograph by Alejandro Stuart. Image courtesy of *El Tecolote* Photograph Archive.

scape. And while Murguía's recollection indicates that Somoza sympathizers did exist in the Mission, the thrust of community organizing was decidedly in favor of the Sandinistas.

Remarkably, even the 1977 inauguration of the Mission Cultural Center, the result of a decade-long battle between cultural workers and city hall for neighborhood arts centers, was framed around the Sandinista cause. San Francisco's seemingly bottomless investments in high-art institutions like the symphony, opera house, and performing arts center spurred public demand for some sort of equivalent investment in low-income communities. After considerable protest, the city finally agreed to fund neighborhood arts programs and to invest in neighborhood cultural centers.³⁹ Murguía, as the first director of the Mission Cultural Center, and Vargas and Serrano in their roles as community organizers, contributed substantially to the new institution's political and artistic orientation.⁴⁰ Together, they were determined to create a place where residents could congregate, where art could be taught and shared, and where ideas could revolutionize the future of the barrio.

To mark the opening of the Mission Cultural Center, Vargas, Murguía, and Serrano wanted to create an event that would reflect the ideological future of the institution. They invited the Sandinista poet Ernesto Cardenal to speak at the opening. Cardenal not only served as the inaugural speaker, but, according to the Mission District's literary journal *Tin Tan*, he also "baptized a group of children, in a very moving ceremony in which he called on the spirits of greed, capitalism, egoism and Somoza, to keep out of these children."⁴¹ Thus Ernesto Cardenal, the yet-to-be Minister of Culture of post-revolution Nicaragua, inaugurated the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco. His presence symbolized the hope for social change that cultural workers sought to imprint on the community.

Taking Up Arms: Poets in the Revolution

By 1978, support for the Sandinista movement had become more widespread in the Bay Area, particularly as the Somoza regime seemed more likely to topple. In October 1978, the Mission Cultural Center sponsored a "Week of Solidarity with the People of Nicaragua." The events consisted of films, music, and poetry, featuring an impressive listing of poets, including Victor Hernandez Cruz, Diane di Prima, Jack Hirschman, Michael McClure, David Meltzer, Ricardo Mendoza, Janice Mirikitani, Ishmael Reed, and Alma Villanueva.⁴² The diversity of the poets is reflective of the widespread support the Sandinistas had achieved in the Bay Area, and that was growing in the international arena. Of course, the ways that support should take form became an issue of debate, from different attitudes toward violent and non-violent tactics to different approaches toward art.

In the Mission, as in Latin America, poets became not just figurative, but literal revolutionaries. Over the course of the 1970s, Murguía's and Vargas's activism reflected increasing personal risk, gradually shifting from publishing and protesting to taking over the Nicaraguan consulate. Fellow cultural worker Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz recalls, "I happened to be working that day in the Treaty Council office in the Flood Building at Powell and Market, which was on the floor below the Nicaraguan consulate. When I heard the racket, I walked upstairs and saw the small band wearing black-and-red scarves over their faces. Even so, I recognized Roberto and Alejandro." Amazingly, they were not arrested because the authorities could not determine who had jurisdiction.⁴³

As a Sandinista victory appeared increasingly imminent, Vargas and Murguía made the decision to join the fighting on the southern front. In fact, a

team of sympathizers began training in the Bay Area hills in order to ready to serve as soldiers in Nicaragua. Murguía states, "During the period between October 1978 and June 1979, I devoted full time to organizing solidarity committees across the United States in support of the Nicaraguan people, as well as editing the journal, *Gaceta Sandinista*. In June of 1979, along with the compañeros 'Armando' and 'Danilo,' I left for Costa Rica to join in the Final Offensive." Murguía subsequently documented the fighting in two books, *The Southern Front* and *The Medicine of Memory*.⁴⁴

While the decision to go to war undoubtedly expressed Murguía's and Vargas' passion for the politics, others found themselves more ambivalent about taking up arms. For example, Nina Serrano found herself caught between her activism and her pacifism. A Colombian American originally from New York, she moved to San Francisco in 1961 with hopes of joining the Beat counterculture. Her love of theatre and politics led her to become a writer for the San Francisco Mime Troupe. She also established her filmmaking career when she and her then husband, Saul Landau, produced *Que Hacer? What Is to Be Done?*, a film supportive of the Allende government in Chile, which they released at the same time as the 1973 coup. Still, she wrestled with turning to violence as a means to an end.

Serrano originally learned about the Nicaraguan struggle in 1969, while working on a play with the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton in Cuba, and it was his dangerous life that caused Serrano to meditate on the role of violence in the pursuit of liberation. While she supported the struggle intellectually, her preference for nonviolence caused her enormous internal conflict. Serrano's poem "To Roque Dalton Before Leaving to Fight in El Salvador (Havana, 1969)" is indicative of her ambivalence, both loving this revolutionary figure, who was already larger than life in the minds of many, but also sensing that his life would end tragically. Her poem spins on the contradictory romance of revolution, as she finds herself caught between her values as an activist and as a humanist: "My love of man in conflict / with my love for this man." In the poem, Dalton jokes about his impending death, making light of something that is pinned on "revolutionary slogans." The ambivalence of the poem reflects how Serrano's appreciation for a people's revolution was tempered by her pacifism.

In 1979, Serrano and Lourdes Portillo grappled with the gendered roles of revolution in *Después del Terremoto*, a short film depicting the experiences of a woman who migrated from Nicaragua to the Mission "after the earthquake."⁴⁵ The film drew inspiration from its Mission District setting, using familiar places and local residents to act the parts (including a cameo by

Serrano). The two protagonists, Irene and Julio, are both Nicaraguan exiles, but their different politics create an irresolvable tension in their relationship. Early in the film, Irene learns that her former fiancé is in San Francisco after suffering three years of torture by the Somoza regime. The two try to reconnect, but their divergent experiences have undone the intimacy they once shared.

The film is a testament to the ways that cultural workers sought to radicalize the Mission, and the ways in which their efforts were also filtered by the everyday concerns of working people in the barrio. Julio, a passionate revolutionary, is more in tune with the politics of the filmmakers, but his rabid approach alienates the people he tries to reach. At a birthday party, Julio initiates a slide show to recruit assistance for the revolution, arguably much like the various slide shows organized by the Mission's Comité Civico. Julio talks over the images of poverty: "This shack is a school in our beautiful country—a country with thirty percent illiteracy. . . . This is a child dying of malnutrition. Yet, millions of dollars in U.S. aid are used by this corrupt dictator to buy arms and continue to keep our people under submission. This is an abuse of power. This is oppression." His audience is resistant. One woman responds, "For this stupidity the Immigration Department can deport us!" while another states, "We know all this, but we are not there, we are here." The responses echo popular sentiments in the neighborhood. The filmmakers, like Julio, are invested in transnational action, but they also empathize with the fears and concerns of new migrants and low-income residents.⁴⁶

The filmmakers' treatment of Irene is complex, both appreciative of the dreams of a hard-working, underpaid woman, but also critical of someone who has turned away from the politics of her homeland. Irene is more interested in buying a television than in securing freedom in Nicaragua. Simultaneously, however, her experience as a working woman in the United States has generated a feminist consciousness. She has found more sexual freedom and independence in San Francisco than she ever knew in Nicaragua, as the filmmakers indicate in the first shot of her handling a book titled *Vida Sexual: Prematrimonial*. For her, the purchase of a television is emblematic of her freedom as a woman. Irene tells Julio, "I think that a woman must be independent, as I am becoming. To show you, I've just bought a TV." Both her friend and Julio tell her she is misguided in her purchase. Her friend says, "Nobody needs a color TV, especially you. You work six days a week, twelve hours a day! What are you going to do, put it in your pocket and watch it while you clean?" Irene responds, "You don't understand. I didn't

have a TV."⁴⁷ The film is sympathetic toward Irene, but it also suggests the ways that new migrants are co-opted by the glamour of American capitalism. The film illustrates the ways that cultural workers pushed for radicalizing a community, and yet everyday life in the barrio often subsumed any interest in such large-scale issues.

Unexpectedly, Portillo and Serrano encountered criticism from their peers for making a fictional film. According to Portillo, "When I did that, it was a struggle against them [the Sandinista movement in the United States] and they disowned us in the process. . . . there was a break with them because they wanted us to do a documentary that they had been used to seeing—very factual, very political, very one-sided."⁴⁸ Portillo adds that some did not find the film radical enough. Criticized by those who might be most sympathetic, the film encountered even stronger disapproval in the industry, as it was unable to secure distribution in the United States, more than likely for the picture it painted of U.S. foreign policy.⁴⁹ The censorship is suggestive of the ways that political sympathies in San Francisco did not reflect the U.S. mainstream.

Después del Terremoto reflects a particular moment in the Mission, in the years after the earthquake and before the revolution, at a time when organizing for the Sandinistas was growing rapidly. Poets, activists, cultural workers, and soldiers came together in San Francisco and around the world to participate in the struggle. Nicaragua beckoned as a place that could overthrow a repressive government and form a utopian community. In 1979, the year that *Después del Terremoto* was released, the dreams of the FSLN and of San Francisco cultural workers came to fruition. After weeks of military advances, the FSLN took over the capital city of Managua on July 17, 1979. President Somoza fled to the United States, then Paraguay, while the Sandinista government declared the revolution's success. The dramatic change in leadership promulgated a pervasive hopefulness for the Left. Alejandro Murguía writes:

During May, June, and July of 1979, thousands and thousands of Nicaraguans, Latin Americans, Chicanos, Indigenous peoples, and North American progressives stormed out into the streets of cities in the United States, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Tucson, New York, and Washington, D.C., in support of the final offensive that brought Nicaragua its long awaited liberation.⁵⁰

The promise of Nicaragua spoke to the dreams of thousands of people in the United States.

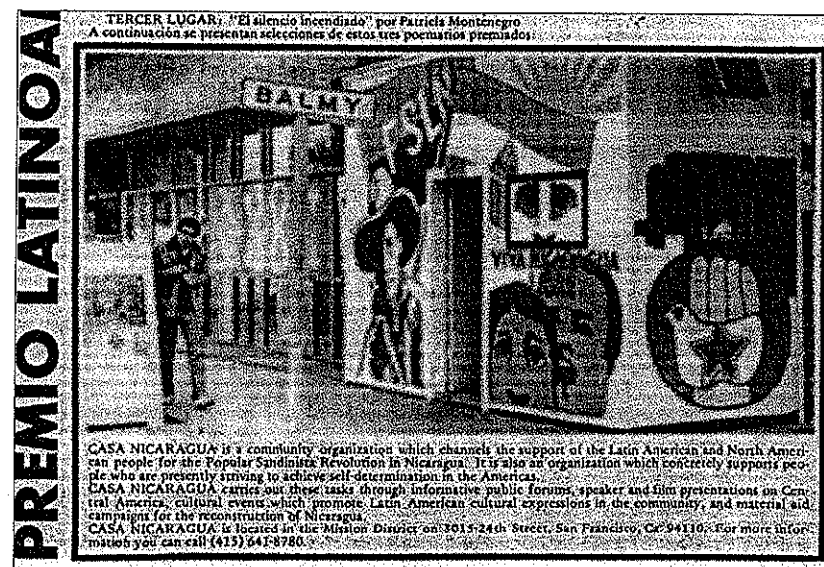
After the Revolution

The victory of the Sandinistas was marked into the Mission District landscape. Casa Nicaragua, or Casa Sandino, as it was also known, was located at Twenty-fourth Street and Balmy Alley, a location that opened onto a growing collection of neighborhood murals. The building served as a gathering place, gallery, and information source for the Nicaraguan leftist community in San Francisco. The exterior of Casa Nicaragua illustrates how closely connected Bay Area cultural workers viewed the struggles in Chile and Nicaragua. A mural covered the building and featured "Chilean and Nicaraguan symbols beneath a handshake of support between the two countries."⁵¹

The linkage reflected the political concerns of the four mostly Chilean artists, known collectively as the Brigada Orlando Letelier, in honor of the Chilean diplomat assassinated in Washington DC in 1976. Letelier's two sons, Francisco and Jose, painted the mural with René Castro, another exiled Chilean artist, and Beyhan Cagri. The mural is similar to the "flat style" of murals that decorated Chile during the Salvador Allende government, which the Pinochet government subsequently sought to eradicate. The artists were completing the mural in the summer of 1979, just as the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza government, so the mural also served as a celebration.⁵²

After the revolution, rather than tapering off, the cultural exchange between San Francisco cultural workers and the Sandinistas continued to flourish. Murals, with their high visibility, proved a popular import into the new Nicaragua, particularly with the leadership of Nicaraguan Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal. As David Kunzle notes, "In the decade of Sandinista rule following the Triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, close to three hundred murals were created in a tiny, poor country of three million or so inhabitants."⁵³ Among the Bay Area muralists to travel to Nicaragua were the Orlando Letelier Brigade, Miranda Bergman, Juana Alicia, and Susan Greene. Greene later remarked, "There is a part of me that would have liked to have stayed there, but we need all the people we can get for the struggle in the United States. ¡Sandino Vive!"⁵⁴

The 1979 triumph of the Sandinistas prompted a shift in the direction of migration, as the new Nicaraguan government invited its U.S. supporters to participate in the revolution. Roberto Vargas and Casimiro Sotelo, both from the Mission, became Nicaraguan ambassadors. Nina Serrano's intimate connections with the country led her to translate Nicaraguan poetry and cofound Friends of Nicaraguan Culture. Both of Serrano's children left the Bay Area to live in Nicaragua for extended periods of time. As she states,



10.2 The building interchangeably referred to as Casa Nicaragua or Casa Sandino, with murals by the Brigada Orlando Letelier. Above, image from *El Tecolote*, March 1981. Image courtesy of *El Tecolote* Photograph Archive.

"For the next many years, many, many years, we produced international cultural exchanges, including music, art, theatre, and interchanges of travel—interchange between American artists and Nicaraguan artists."⁵⁵

Of course, this story does not end in the way that the cultural workers hoped. The Sandinistas were unable to deliver the idealized, utopian vision that had attracted supporters. This, combined with President Ronald Reagan's and President George Bush's desire to unseat the Sandinistas, legally or otherwise, led to the fall of the Sandinista regime in the 1990 election. As Gary Prevost and Harry Vanden state, Reagan's Contra war "took 30,000 Nicaraguan lives, cost more than \$12 billion in damages and bankrupted the Nicaraguan treasury."⁵⁶ The magnitude of U.S. military and diplomatic force ensured the election of a presidential candidate who would protect U.S. interests. For Serrano, "I was totally disheartened when they lost the election. It just was very, very painful."⁵⁷ Murguía still feels angry. He states, "After ten-plus years of a democratic-capitalist' government . . . Nicaragua is now the poorest country of Latin America, and in the Western Hemisphere is second only to Haiti in lowest per capita income. This is the great benefit of the Contra War sponsored by the United States."⁵⁸ For many, the hope of the

1970s was destroyed by the traumatic violence of U.S. intervention in Central America over the course of the 1980s.

Traditional assessments of the 1970s lead one to believe that the period was devoid of hope. Historian David Farber characterizes the 1970s as a period when "Americans too often felt that they faced nothing but bad choices." According to Farber, "Events lent themselves to a litany of despair: inflation up, employment down; oil prices out of control, American-made automobiles breaking down; factories closed, marriages over, homicide rates soaring; President Gerald Ford."⁵⁹ Indeed, economic stagflation, deindustrialization, and decreased public funding hit neighborhoods like the Mission District especially hard. Nevertheless, out of the barrio, a transnational social movement flourished with hope. The issues are not unrelated. The promise of Nicaragua in the 1970s embodied what cultural workers hoped to build in the Mission District and around the world. The culture of the Mission was instrumental in determining the role San Francisco would play in the Sandinista campaign. In the context of 1960s civil rights social movements, anti-Vietnam protests, and San Francisco liberalism, the Mission District became center stage for Latino arts organizing with a decidedly leftist bent.

U.S. support of the Contra War is well documented, but the story of popular American support for the Sandinista revolution is hardly recognized or taught. Acknowledging the history of this political activism and cultural production is not only imperative to understanding the political and aesthetic development of Latino arts in the Bay Area and beyond, but it is central to thinking about diaspora, transnational solidarity, and conflicted patriotism. Upon reflection, perhaps one of the most salient points to consider here is how the actions of these poet-warriors might be interpreted today. The act of fighting for enemy forces, or serving as an accessory for a community at odds with U.S. diplomatic policy, is not well tolerated today. But deciding to take part in these actions emerged from an internationalist vision of the world, a vision built on hope and driven by the desire to eradicate oppressive social and economic policies in and beyond the barrio.

NOTES

1. Roberto Vargas, *Nicaragua: Yo Te Canto Besos, Balas, y Sueños de Libertad* (San Francisco: Editorial Pocho Che, 1980), 22.
2. Nina Serrano, *Heart Songs: The Collected Poems of Nina Serrano (1969–1979)* (San Francisco: Editorial Pocho-Che, 1980), 102–103.
3. María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3–8.

4. Marjorie Heins, *Strictly Ghetto Property: The Story of Los Siete de la Raza* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1972), 25–27.
5. Vargas, *Nicaragua*, 21.
6. Alejandro Murguía, *The Medicine of Memory: A Mexica Clan in California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 126–127.
7. Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 125.
8. Juan Felipe Herrera provides one of the few accounts of San Francisco's Raza literature in "Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers" in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 217–230.
9. Ernesto Cardenal referred to San Francisco as "the city of Nicaraguans" in *Las Ínsulas Extrañas: Memorias 2* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2002), 475.
10. Vargas, *Nicaragua*, 16; Carlos Cordova, interview by author, San Francisco, March 5, 2003; Raquel Rivera Pinderhughes, with Carlos Cordova and Jorge Del Pinal, "Our Multicultural Heritage: A Guide to America's Principal Ethnic Groups," http://bss.sfsu.edu/raquelrp/pub/heritage_pub.html, accessed October 7, 2006; Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
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12. Cary Cordova, "The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Identity in San Francisco" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2005).
13. George Black, *Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Press, 1985), 59.
14. "Bay Area Support Group Aids FSLN Cause," *El Tecolote*, June 27, 1975, 8.
15. Thomas Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, Fourth Edition (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 31.
16. *Ibid.*, 33.
17. Carlos Fonseca, quoted in Black, *Triumph of The People*, 90.
18. Daniel Ortega Saavedra, Victor M. Tirado López, and Humberto Ortega Saavedra, "Why the FSLN Struggles in Unity with the People," *Latin American Perspectives*, Winter 1979, 108–113. According to the publication, "This document was published both in English and the original Spanish by *Gaceta Sandinista*, III (July–August 1978), in San Francisco."
19. Cardenal, *Las Ínsulas Extrañas*, 475. Translation by author.
20. Nina Serrano, interview with the author, April 16, 2003. Murguía also describes the creation of NIN in *Medicine of Memory*, 135.
21. Cynthia Gorney, "San Francisco: When the Golden Gate Leads Home," *Washington Post*, March 25, 1984.
22. Cardenal, *Las Ínsulas Extrañas*, 476.
23. Walter Ferretty [sic], "From Guerrilla Commander to Top Cop," in Philip Zwerling and Connie Martin, *Nicaragua: A New Kind of Revolution* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1985), 5–6.
24. Francisco Flores, "Roberto Vargas: The Intersection of Personal Growth and Community Activism," *El Tecolote*, April 2001; Murguía describes the presence of some of these high-profile figures in *Medicine of Memory*, 130–146.

25. Ferrety, "From Guerrilla Commander to Top Cop," 5-6.
26. "Bay Area Support Group," *El Tecolote*, 8.
27. "Nicaragua: Its People, History, Politics, and Economy," *El Tecolote*, June 27, 1975, 5-7.
28. Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 122.
29. Audio recordings of Vargas and other poets are housed at the Freedom Archives in San Francisco.
30. Flores, "Roberto Vargas"; Michelle María Boleyn, "Two Writers in the Mission," *North Mission News*, March 1987, 15.
31. Editorial box, *Gaceta Sandinista*, San Francisco, December 1975.
32. Herrera, *Reclaiming San Francisco*, 217-230; Roderick Anthony Hernandez, "Pocho-Che and the Tropicalization of American Poetics" (Ph.D. Diss., Stanford University, 2000).
33. Alejandro Murguía, curriculum vitae, collection of the author; Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 118-125.
34. Janice Mirikitani et al., eds., *Time to Greez! Incantations from the Third World* (San Francisco: Third World Communications, 1975); Pocho Che Editorial publications included: Jose Montoya, *El Sol y los de Abajo, and Other RCAF Poems* (San Francisco: Ediciones Pocho Che, 1972); Vargas, *Nicaragua*; Serrano, *Heart Songs*; Raul Salinas, *Un Trip Through the Mind Jail, y Otras Excursions* (San Francisco: Editorial Pocho-Che, 1980).
35. Herrera, *Reclaiming San Francisco*, 217-230; Hernandez, "Pocho-Che and the Tropicalization of American Poetics."
36. Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 130.
37. Alejandro Murguía, "A Chicano Sandinista in Nicaragua," *Uno Magazine*, December 1, 1981.
38. Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 134. While Murguía describes this event as the first rally ever held for Nicaragua in the Mission District, the local paper covering the demonstration suggests significant activism preceded this event. See "Bay Area Support Group," *El Tecolote*, 8.
39. See Nora Gallagher, Ken McEldowney, Michael Singer, and Henry Weinstein, "Art for Harold's Sake: How Big Business Manipulates the Arts in San Francisco," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 21, 1975; Ceci Brunazzi, "On the Performing Arts Center," *Arts Biweekly*, July 27, 1976, 3-4; and a series of oral history interviews collected by UC Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office, *The Arts and the Community Oral History Project: San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program*, 1978.
40. Murguía, curriculum vitae; Gilberto Osorio, "Fight for a Mission Cultural Center," *El Tecolote*, July 1976, 8; Paul Kagawa, "Mission Shaff-ted," *Arts Biweekly*, February 15, 1977, 3-4; Scott Riklin, "Galería Museo: Mirror of the Mission," *Arts Biweekly*, November-December 1977, 3-4.
41. "Ernesto Cardenal in the Barrio," *Tin Tan*, vol. 2, no. 5, June 1, 1977, 13.
42. Events cited in poster for the event, collection of Gilberto Osorio.
43. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War* (Boston: South End Press), 2005, 42; Gilberto Osorio, interview with author, July 10, 2006.
44. Alejandro Murguía, *Southern Front* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe), 1990, 7; Flores, "Roberto Vargas"; Murguía, "Chicano Sandinista."
45. *Después del Terremoto / After the Earthquake*, dirs. Lourdes Portillo and Nina Serrano, 1979.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Rosa Linda Fregoso, *Lourdes Portillo: The Devil Never Sleeps, and Other Films* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 50-51.
49. Ibid.
50. Alejandro Murguía, "El Movimiento de Solidaridad en San Francisco, 1974-1979," *Barricada Internacional*, July 8, 1989, 39. Translation by author.
51. Tim Drescher, "The Brigada Orlando Letelier," *Community Murals*, Fall 1981, 5.
52. Ibid.
53. David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 12.
54. Susan Greene, "Artists Brigade to Nicaragua," *Community Murals Magazine*, Fall 1984.
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56. Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden, *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 2.
57. Ibid., 2-3; Serrano, interview with author, April 16, 2003.
58. Murguía, *Medicine of Memory*, 146.
59. David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.