

“I HAVE MY MIND!” U.S.-SANDINISTA SOLIDARITIES,
REVOLUTIONARY ROMANTICISM, AND THE IMAGINED NICARAGUA,
1979-1990

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines activists in the United States that supported the socialist Nicaraguan government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front and opposed efforts by the Reagan Administration to militarily undermine Nicaragua's new government during the 1980s. Such scholarship examines the rise of a leftist political coalition organized around supporting Nicaragua's government and this solidarity movement's eventual demise after the Sandinistas lost their country's 1990 Presidential election. The work ultimately asks how did U.S. leftists and progressives of the late 1970s and 1980s perceive Nicaragua's new government and how did these perceptions affect the ways in which these activists rallied to support the Sandinistas in the face of the Contra War? In answering this question, this paper consults a variety of primary sources including articles from socialist newspapers, the meeting minutes and notes of solidarity organizations, and oral histories with former activists. "I Have My Mind!" also consults cultural sources such as the protest and art benefit flyers and the lyrics to punk rock songs of the period to make its claims. This Masters Thesis argues that U.S. Americans' solidarity with the Sandinistas relied upon a romanticization of Nicaraguan revolutionary reforms representative of movement participants' own political aspirations.

For My Classmate Andy Poznick,
Whose critiques helped to shape
This paper in its early stages.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1979 San Francisco art-punk band Pink Section recorded the song, “Jane Blank.” With a narrative that shifts back and forth between news reports of crime incidents and the character Jane Blank’s internal monologue, the song details a suburban housewife driven to crime by a monotonous and unjust world.¹ “She’s a housewife!/ Pissed off!/ Flipped out ‘cos the world’s messed up!”, screamed singer Judy Gittelsohn during the song’s chorus. The song eventually drifts back to reports detailing Jane Blank’s criminal record outside of her court hearing: “She’s been linked to the Red Brigades and other subversive communist groups. Jane Blank is also accused of protecting gun-runs to Nicaraguan revolutionaries. When they asked her why she did it, Jane replied, ‘I have my mind!’”²

While Pink Section’s “Jane Blank” described a fictional scenario, the song represented a prominent impulse among U.S. leftists and progressives during the late 1970s and 1980s. Thousands in the United States responded enthusiastically to the Sandinista National Liberation Front’s (FSLN) July 1979 overthrow of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle.³ U.S. leftists and progressives remained hopeful that the Sandinista’s expansive social programs and mixed, privately and state-owned economic system would bring prosperity to the Central American country and serve as a model for other people around the world seeking to establish a more egalitarian society.

¹ Sam Lefebvre, “Pink Section’s Matt Heckert Details the Margins of Early San Francisco Punk”, *East Bay Express*, February 25th, 2015.

² Pink Section, *Jane Blank*, *Pink Section* (Oakland, CA: Superior Viaduct Records, 2015).

³ The Sandinistas took their name from Augusto César Sandino, the 1930s Nicaraguan peasant guerrilla leader that led an insurrection against the U.S. Marines during the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua. Sandino became a symbol for the party’s anti-imperialist politics and socialist political programs.

Yet, the U.S. government saw the political situation in this Central American country differently. Conservative politicians viewed Nicaragua as a potential Soviet ally in the western hemisphere and another third-world battleground for the continuing Cold War. Soon after Ronald Reagan assumed the office of Presidency in 1981, his administration approved of a secret \$19 million, CIA-led initiative to train and arm a counterrevolutionary group primarily comprised of former Somoza National Guardsmen. Through the implementation of this program, the Reagan administration hoped to militarily undermine the Sandinistas' political progress.⁴ This guerrilla army, known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, repeatedly murdered civilians and destroyed Sandinista-run schools and health clinics in rural northern Nicaragua. Yet, Reagan referred to the army, more commonly known as the Contras, as "freedom fighters" and compared them to the heroes of the French and American revolutions.⁵ Despite the existence of a 1982 resolution passed by the Senate known as the Boland Amendment that officially forbade monetary efforts at overthrowing the Sandinista government, Reagan's administration and the CIA continued to support Contra rebels stationed in neighboring Honduras. In 1983, Reagan's support for the Contras became public when a Soviet tanker ship struck a CIA-planted mine off Nicaragua's coast.⁶ Witnessing their own government attack these foreign leftist politics with which they identified, pro-Sandinista activists responded to Reagan's agenda in Nicaragua with great fervor.

⁴ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 166.

⁵ Clare Weber, *Visions of Solidarity: U.S. Peace Activists in Nicaragua From War to Women's Activism and Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 35.

⁶ Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, 166-7.

Throughout the 1980s, U.S. activists of varied political backgrounds voiced their support for the Sandinista-led government and fought back against the U.S.-funded Contra War. Within the United States, activists presented a romanticized image of the new Nicaragua and voiced their support for the Sandinistas in union meetings, published their own newsletters centered on Sandinista solidarity, and planned demonstrations and benefits. Furthermore, throughout the 1980s, nearly two thousand U.S. citizens travelled to Nicaragua to help harvest coffee and cotton on state-run and cooperative farms, rebuild infrastructure destroyed by Contra forces, and occasionally assist in public art initiatives.⁷ This paper examines these activists' efforts and argues that U.S. Americans' solidarity with the Sandinistas relied upon a romanticization of Nicaraguan revolutionary reforms representative of movement participants' own political aspirations.⁸ The Nicaragua presented by U.S. leftists and progressives in the late 1970s and 1980s had more to do with the United States than Central America.

During the years immediately following the revolution, the Sandinista-led government instituted massive reforms. Through education and literacy programs, Nicaragua's school enrollment went up fifty percent and adult illiteracy dropped from fifty percent in 1980 to thirteen percent by 1982.⁹ The Sandinistas also established mass organizations that represented different social groups and interests. These groups

⁷ Jeff Jones, *Brigadista: Eyewitness Accounts of North American Volunteers Working in Nicaragua* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986) ; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central American Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118.

⁸ In this paper, I use the term "U.S. American" to refer to those living within the United States. I refrain from using the term "American" to communicate the United States' position as a part of the larger Americas that includes Central, South, other nations of North America, and the Caribbean. U.S.-Sandinista solidarity activists of the 1980s frequently referred to themselves as "North American" to address this linguistic inaccuracy. Yet, this term is similarly unspecific considering the United States' position as one of three nations in North America. It is my view that solely referring to U.S. residents as "American" in a discussion of U.S. and Nicaraguan politics disregards Nicaraguans' mutual status as Americans.

⁹ Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and The Revolution* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988), 14.

included rural workers, industrial workers, feminist organizations, among others.¹⁰ Party leadership also included many writers and artists who put an unprecedented effort on public art initiatives through the government's own Ministry of Culture. Finally, by 1983, the Sandinistas had distributed formerly Somoza-owned arable land to groups of peasant families to form agricultural cooperatives. The Sandinistas also used much of this land as sites for state-run farms that assisted in the country's nationalized agricultural industries.¹¹

From the perspective of the Sandinistas' U.S. supporters, the party's political agenda embodied a type of political romanticism. U.S. activists looked upon Nicaragua fondly as a society striving to create a new type of political system that truly represented and provided for its most vulnerable citizens. "We were looking for a different kind of left, you know, an anti-Stalinist, much more horizontal, outside the traditional Communist Party perspective...And, Nicaragua represented, initially, a third way," said Committee for Health Rights in Central America member Sheila Tully.¹² "It was very thrilling," activist Irving Wolfe told *The Journal-News* of the Sandinistas' reforms in 1986. "They organized literacy campaigns and sent kids into the mountains, taught others under lanterns to read and write. It was very inspiring."¹³ During the Sandinistas' governmental reign, U.S. leftists and progressives came to view the party's socialist politics as representative of their own set of hopes for a more egalitarian form of governance.

¹⁰ Vanden and Prevost, *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua*, 51-53.

¹¹ Gilbert, *Sandinistas*, 92.

¹² Sheila Tully, Interview by Author, San Francisco State University, 12 June 2015.

¹³ Alan Sneel, "Activist Irving Wolfe Heads for Nicaragua Again," *The Journal-News*, April 7, 1986, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Box 2, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives.

While few scholars have examined the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement, even fewer have examined the ways that U.S. activists understood the ensuing conflict through the lens of the progressive and leftist politics of the late 1970s and 1980s. More commonly, works like Christian Smith's 1996 book *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* and Sharon Erickson Nepstad's 2004 study *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* have mainly focused on the Christian influences of the movement. Such scholarship examined religious-based organizations such as Witness for Peace and others. While religious-based organizations undoubtedly played a role in the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement, viewing their moral-based politics as representative of the movement as a whole strips it of the political idealism from which activists' efforts originated. Activists opposed the Contra War not solely because they resisted Reagan's Cold War intervention, but because they actively supported the Sandinistas' politics as well. These works view Central American solidarity activists as motivated by guilt over the fact that the U.S. government used tax dollars to fund military groups that harmed Central American civilians. This analysis ultimately limited Nicaraguans to the status of victims.¹⁴ Furthermore, these religious-centric studies examine activists' orientation towards the 1980s Central American civil wars as monolithic. While those who supported the FSLN surely sided with leftist guerrilla forces in El Salvador and Guatemala as well, the Nicaraguan left seized governmental power in 1979 and implemented myriad political reforms soon thereafter unlike neighboring countries whose struggles against dictatorship continued throughout the decade. Nicaragua's ensuing Contra War of the 1980s remained

¹⁴ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 72 ; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

of a different nature than those in other Central American countries, and activists engaged with it accordingly.

Continuing with the trend of mainly focusing on Christian-based solidarity groups like Witness for Peace, Clare Weber built on these sociological studies of the Central American Solidarity Movement in her 2006 book *Visions of Solidarity: U.S. Peace Activists in Nicaragua From War to Women's Activism and Globalization* to examine how white privilege functioned in such activism. Weber also examined how many solidarity organizations transformed into NGOs designed to combat neoliberal policies in the post-Sandinista Nicaragua of the 1990s. This work's examination of how solidarity groups transitioned and reevaluated their strategies in the post-Sandinista period remains important. However, by focusing on two political groups, Witness for Peace and the Wisconsin Coordination Council on Nicaragua, the book fails to represent the full range of U.S. support for the Sandinistas. Furthermore, this examination provides little analysis of the domestic political climate of the United States.¹⁵

Hector Perla Jr. in his 2009 article "Heirs of Sandino: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the U.S.-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement" examined the effects that solidarity groups had upon preventing a U.S. invasion in Nicaragua.¹⁶ Yet, this argument focused on groups' strategies without examining the motivations behind them and similarly paid little attention to the domestic environment within which activists operated.

In recent years, some scholars have begun to examine the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement within the context of the domestic politics of the United States.

¹⁵ Clare Weber, *Visions of Solidarity: U.S. Peace Activists in Nicaragua From War to Women's Activism and Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

¹⁶ Hector Perla Jr., "Heirs of Sandino: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the U.S.-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement." *Latin American Perspectives* 36 (2009): 80.

Cary Cordova's 2010 article "The Mission in Nicaragua: San Francisco Poets Go to War," for instance, focused on how the Nicaraguan revolution simultaneously helped to transform communities within the United States through its political example of a struggle for a more egalitarian community.¹⁷ This argument demonstrated how the example of the Sandinistas' radical politics mobilized and energized the U.S. left. Unfortunately, Cordova's analysis ends with the overthrow of Somoza in 1979 and does not examine how the political example of the Sandinistas continued to inspire activists during the 1980s Contra War. Most recently, Emily Hobson's 2012 article "'Si Nicaragua Vencio:' Lesbian and Gay Solidarity with the Revolution" examined gay and lesbian involvement in the U.S.-Sandinista solidarity movement. Hobson argues that homoerotic desire for Nicaraguan revolutionaries helped to shape the queer left's Sandinista solidarity and aided in mobilizing queers, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area, against the Contra War.¹⁸ This scholarship recognizes the way that U.S. activists linked their own domestic and personal politics to that of the Sandinistas. This is the starting point, then, for my own work. But I will expand upon the Bay Area queer community to reveal the extensive nature of this political imagining and personal identification within the Solidarity Movement. The Nicaraguan Revolution ultimately took on different forms when romanticized by activists of disparate political backgrounds.

¹⁷ Cary Cordova, "The Mission in Nicaragua: San Francisco Poets Go to War," in *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America*, ed. Gina M. Perez et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 228.

¹⁸ Emily K. Hobson, "'Si Nicaragua Vencio:' Lesbian and Gay Solidarity with the Revolution." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4 (2012).

This paper's body is organized into four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the Nicaraguan Revolution's early years and the U.S. left's reactions to such events. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, U.S. leftists and progressives gazed upon Nicaragua with a sense of hopefulness in the midst of a collapsing New Deal coalition and a United States drifting further towards the right. These early Sandinista supporters praised Nicaragua's social reforms in a manner that embodied collective dissatisfactions and insecurities regarding their own country's changing political climate.

The second chapter examines U.S. leftists and progressives of the mid-1980s' efforts to apply the romanticism of earlier years to activism opposing the Contra War. Pro-Sandinista music and art benefits, political demonstrations, and print media presented myriad seemingly disparate political causes as intimately linked to celebrated Nicaraguan reforms. By emphasizing the ability of potential activists to oppose the Contra War without ideologically straying from their political interests, activists created a coalition that brought persons of diverse politically left backgrounds together to support the Sandinistas.

The paper's third chapter discusses how these coalition-building strategies affected activists' orientation towards solidarity work brigades that travelled to Nicaragua in support of the Sandinista government. Participants joined groups whose initiatives for Sandinista solidarity corresponded with their favored strain of progressive politics. Activists ultimately joined solidarity brigades with certain sets of expectations. These assumptions reflected the strategies that created the activist coalition around U.S.-Sandinista solidarity. Participants' involvement in solidarity work brigades depended

upon the fulfillment of expectations stipulating that activists could preserve the Nicaraguan socialism that they romanticized using their own set of skills and interests.

The fourth chapter examines the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement's decline. The Sandinistas' attempts at politically reforming their small, Central American country, and by extension U.S. activists' support for these initiatives, proved to be short lived. Plagued by the disastrous effects of the Contra War, the Party cut many of the social programs and rights that the Revolution previously guaranteed. The FSLN also remained unable to curtail the effects of a rapidly rising inflation rate.¹⁹ As a response to the deteriorating nature of their society, Nicaraguan citizens voted the FSLN's President Daniel Ortega out of office and elected Violeta Barrio de Chamorro of the conservative, neoliberal policy-favoring United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) Party. As the Sandinistas curtailed their romanticized social programs and suffered under the weight of the Contra War, activists found supporting Nicaragua according to their own political interests more difficult. During the late-1980s, in light of the struggling Nicaraguan state, solidarity work became more organized around gathering monetary and material aid rather than the numerous accommodating forms its efforts took in earlier years. In an era lacking the romantic revolutionary reforms and activist strategies of earlier years, the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement failed to sustain itself. Many activists simply lost interest after Chamorro's 1990 election.²⁰ As a movement reliant on the romanticism of a foreign place, the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement faded from prominence once Nicaragua's domestic climate failed to meet the expectations of the U.S. leftist and progressive imagination. Like the activist movements of years past, the romantic

¹⁹ Weber, *Visions of Solidarity*, 70.

²⁰ Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*, 138.

beginnings of the Nicaraguan Revolution with which U.S. American activists identified
fell victim to the realities of U.S. hegemony in the western hemisphere.

CHAPTER 2: “I’VE GROWN TIRED OF LIVING NIXON’S MESS:”²¹

SOLIDARITY IN THE CONTEXT OF NEOCONSERVATISM

In July 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front took over the Nicaraguan capital of Managua, seizing governmental power and ending the Somoza dictatorship that had ruled the Central American country since 1936. Nicaraguans celebrated the end of three decades of bloody civil war with street celebrations. As they danced, they hoped that their small Central American country would see better days.²² Some U.S. Americans also greeted the Sandinista victory with cheers and demonstrations. After Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s flight to Miami on July 17th, nearly three thousand protesters in Los Angeles, including many Nicaraguan immigrants, paraded around the city. Later that week, pro-Sandinista activists in Los Angeles would occupy two commercial fishing boats owned by a Somoza company in the San Pedro Port, as well as the city’s Nicaraguan consulate.²³ In the streets of Washington, DC, 2,500 protesters celebrated the Sandinistas’ revolutionary victory and called for U.S. aid to the Central American country now ravished by the devastation of civil war.²⁴ Similar demonstrations occurred in New York City, San Francisco, and Boston. Solidarity protests like these communicated the hopes that the Nicaraguan Revolution represented to U.S. American activists around the country.²⁵ “It was this sense that justice was prevailing. It felt like a victory for humanity,” said Alan Firestone, a visual artist based in Santa Cruz, California

²¹ Meat Puppets, *Lost on the Highway, II* (Long Beach, CA: SST Records, 1984).

²² David Close and Salvador Martí i Puig, “The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979,” in *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979*, ed. David Close et al. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2012), 199-201.

²³ Al Twiss, “L.A. Protesters Occupy Somoza Ship,” *The Militant*, August 3rd, 1979.

²⁴ Barry Fatland and John Connolly, “D.C. Demonstrators Demand Aid for Nicaragua,” *The Militant*, August 3rd, 1979.

²⁵ Activists Back New Nicaragua Junta,” *The Militant*, September 21st, 1979.

who lost a large Rotary Club Artist Grant after publicly declaring his support for the Sandinistas.²⁶

With its emphasis on state-run social programs and cross-class unity, the idealism of the Nicaraguan Revolution's early years stood in stark contrast to the contentious, individualistic economic malaise of the 1970s United States. Dashing activists' hopes for a more racially harmonious society, Irish Catholics in South Boston clashed with African-Americans over court-mandated school desegregation.²⁷ In 1970, responding to the perceived class privilege and lack of respect for working-class servicemen of the anti-Vietnam War Movement, New York City construction workers battled antiwar protesters after attempting to raise a half-mast flag in remembrance of the Kent State shooting victims.²⁸ As numerous historians have argued, this working-class white backlash against the activist movements of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in former Democrats who had supported the social programs of the New Deal siding with the New Right, helping to elect Richard Nixon in 1972 and later Ronald Reagan in 1980 to the presidency in landslide victories.²⁹ "They have bought so much divisionary shit, so much obfuscation: white skin privilege, national chauvinism, anti-communism," said pro-Sandinista activist Sheryl Hirshon on the white working-class' shift towards the right.³⁰ As the FSLN worked towards overthrowing a dictatorship in Nicaragua, U.S. leftists and progressive witnessed efforts at achieving egalitarianism in their own country unraveling. This

²⁶ Alan Firestone, Interview by Author, Montara, California, 1 January 2016.

²⁷ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner Publishers, 2008).

²⁸ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 135-6.

²⁹ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 161.

³⁰ Sheryl Hirshon, "This is My Revolution, Too," in *Yankee Sandinistas: Interviews with North Americans Living and Working in the New Nicaragua*, ed. Ron Ridenour. (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1986), 50.

rightward shift in U.S. American politics served to propel many leftists and progressives to look abroad for political solutions that corresponded with their own interests, fixing their gaze on Nicaragua.

When the Sandinistas' overthrew Somoza in 1979, the United States possessed a 12% inflation rate and a 6% unemployment rate. Such conditions caused motorists to riot in the working-class suburb of Levittown, Pennsylvania over the rising cost of diesel.³¹ Furthermore, California had recently passed Proposition 13, an initiative that drastically cut property taxes for homeowners. This depleting of tax funds served to deprive low-income areas of money for public schools and many social services.³² Amidst the political conflict and conservative initiatives of the late 1970s, Nicaragua offered an example of, in the words of the U.S. socialist newspaper *The Militant*, "a new society that puts human needs ahead of all else."³³

As activist Sheila Tully explained:

There was a real backlash in the United States. You know, those of us who had witnessed the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. The reaction in the United States was so profound that we knew we were entering a really bleak period. Nicaragua really represented hope and vision, and an opportunity for Americans to put their money where their mouth was.³⁴

Like Tully expressed, many U.S. American Sandinista supporters of the late 1970s sought to mobilize this revolutionary romanticism in the form of monetary and material aid to Nicaragua. While President Jimmy Carter imposed U.S. sanctions upon Somoza-run Nicaragua, his administration did little to help Nicaragua's revolutionary government

³¹ Ibid, 303-4.

³² Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 320-1.

³³ Janice Lynn, "Why U.S. Workers Need to Aid Nicaraguan People," *The Militant*, November 23, 1979.

³⁴ Tully, Interview.

apart from sending emergency food and medical supplies.³⁵ Shortly after the revolution, Los Angeles' National Reconstruction Committee of Nicaragua collected donations to fund a ship sailing from California to Nicaragua with over 100 tons of medicine and food.³⁶ Similar organizations in cities like Denver, Albuquerque, Miami, Houston, and others planned informational forums in order to raise awareness and funding for the new Nicaragua.³⁷ Washington D.C.'s newly formed D.C.-Nicaragua Solidarity Coalition even asked the federal government for help. The D.C. based group demanded that Carter follow through on his plans to aid Nicaragua's fledgling new government.³⁸ However, such demands gained little ground. After the Sandinistas' received military aid from Cuba and voiced their support for Salvadoran leftist guerrillas, Carter's pleas to Congress for \$75 million to economically aid Nicaragua remained unheeded.³⁹

While Congress may not have supported the Sandinistas' new socialist state, those vulnerable to the conservative policies and economic restructuring of the period did. In fact, many of those active in the burgeoning U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement possessed membership in progressive unions. As historian Jefferson Cowie argues, the late 1970s and early 1980s marked a period in which elite policy makers portrayed workers' rights and union power as a key factor in contemporary economic troubles.⁴⁰ In addition to these prevalent anti-union attitudes, the process of deindustrialization consistently devastated many U.S. cities. This economic process deprived the working class of employment and broke apart unions. During the late 1970s and 1980s,

³⁵ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 103.

³⁶ Margarita Suarez, "Solidarity Actions Demand Aid for Nicaragua," *The Militant*, August 31, 1979.

³⁷ "Forums on Nicaragua," *The Militant*, September 14, 1979.

³⁸ Suarez, "Solidarity Actions Demand Aid for Nicaragua."

³⁹ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 103.

⁴⁰ Cowie, *Staying Alive*, 224.

corporations decentralized plants, relocated to the ‘right to work’ states of the United States’ Sunbelt region, and sought cheap labor in the countries of the Global South.⁴¹

These attacks on labor in the United States influenced some unionists to seek solutions abroad. In September 1979, the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks Lodge 1906 issued a formal statement declaring their solidarity with the new Nicaragua.⁴² Members of the United Auto Workers in Toledo, Ohio also led discussion forums regarding the Sandinistas’ policies, publicly voicing their support for such initiatives.⁴³ During a period in the United States when pro-business Republicans demonized organized labor, the Sandinistas’ actively encouraged Nicaraguans to join unions. In their Bill of Rights, the Sandinistas guaranteed the right to form trade unions and gave representative positions to union-like organizations in the National Directorate.⁴⁴ Sandinista-led mass organizations like the Sandinista Workers Association possessed three Directorate seats, while other more traditional bourgeois political parties had significantly less representation. In theory, this enabled Sandinista-led unions to have direct influence over policy making.⁴⁵ It is questionable whether these groups functioned as more than merely vanguardist organizations. However, from the perspective of U.S. Sandinista supporters, these reforms appeared as important steps towards establishing a government that truly represented the needs of its people.

⁴¹ Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (New York: Verso Press, 1988), 99-101.

⁴² Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks Lodge 1906, “D.C. Labor Council Demands Aid for Nicaragua,” *The Militant*, October 1979.

⁴³ “Forums on Nicaragua,” *The Militant*, August 31, 1979.

⁴⁴ Lynn, “Why U.S. Workers Need to Aid Nicaraguan People.”

⁴⁵ Vanden and Prevost, *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua*, 51-53.

Such an imagining not only included their romanticization of a union-supporting state, but their ability to keep their jobs at home. Nicaragua represented a nation of the Global South that stood for worker's rights in its opposition to foreign capital interests. "If the Nicaraguan people succeed in driving through their revolution to the end, it would be a big blow to the power of the giant U.S. corporations, the same enemies we face here every day," wrote *Militant* contributor Janice Lynn. This sentiment construed the struggles of Nicaraguan and U.S. American workers as one, united by their mutual exploitation by capitalist companies.⁴⁶ In this sense, unionists and other Sandinista supporters viewed the Nicaraguan revolution as a victory not only for their neighbors in Central America, but as one for themselves as well.

During the years that union members and other Sandinista supporters rallied and raised money for Nicaragua, the federal government mounted an attack against union interests. In 1981, shortly after approving covert funding to the Contra rebels, newly elected President Ronald Reagan took an unprecedented step in dismantling unions when he dissolved the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization.⁴⁷ In response to an illegal strike, President Reagan discharged over 11,000 federal employees belonging to the striking PATCO union and revoked the union's status entirely.⁴⁸ After the strike, the federal government blacklisted former PATCO workers. Reagan's efforts denied former PATCO members relief money and limited their access to future federal employment.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Lynn, "Why U.S. Workers Need to Aid Nicaraguan People."

⁴⁷ Joseph McCartin, "Collision Course: How Reagan Broke PATCO to Create the 'Brotherhood of the Downwardly Mobile.'" *Social Policy* 41 (2011): 21; Also See: Joseph McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ Herbert R. Northup, "The Rise and Demise of PATCO." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 37 (1984): 177.

⁴⁹ McCartin, "Collision Course," 17.

The President's response to the PATCO strike set an ugly precedent for union organizing during the 1980s and made the example of a nation like Nicaragua that championed workers' rights even more powerful.

The hopefulness represented in activist portrayals of Nicaragua immediately following the Revolution would prove to be short lived. Just as Reagan dismantled PATCO, his administration would seek to dissolve the new Nicaragua for its failure to align with their geopolitical Cold War strategies. However, for the Sandinistas' U.S. supporters, the initial hope and vision that Nicaragua represented during a period of political fracture and increased Conservatism would endure in activists' 1980s mobilization against the Contra War. The small country's social reforms and quest for self-determination undoubtedly resonated with many U.S. residents politically alienated and displaced by the New Right. In Nicaragua, Sandinista supporters found a country whose politics drastically contrasted with those of their own government and resembled that of their ideal. In the minds of these activists, Nicaragua's new government encapsulated their own political and economic interests. This environment of political imagination enabled union members and others to latch onto the romance of the Sandinistas' politics and set a precedent for future activists to follow.

A few months prior to Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, British punk rock group The Clash would release their sprawling triple LP *Sandinista!* The album's most politically charged song, "Washington Bullets," retold the story of U.S. imperialism in Latin America with a steel drum and guitar upstroke strumming sound more reminiscent of calypso than the crunchy power-chords of earlier records. While the song's first three

verses detail the violence and injustices of the West's Cold War policies, the fourth verse bares an air of hope.

For the first time ever / When they had a revolution in Nicaragua / There was no interference from America / Human rights in America / Well, the people fought the leader / And, up he flew / With no Washington Bullets / What else could he do? / Sandinista!⁵⁰

The Clash's glorification of Nicaragua's recent revolution corresponded with activists' sense of admiration for the Sandinistas and their attempts to construct a society that addressed the needs of its people. Yet, placed up against depictions of the 1973 Chilean coup and the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, "Washington Bullets" offers a more foreboding message. Viewed through this lens, the Clash's reminder of the United States' past dealings with leftist governments communicates a call for activists to protect the gains of the Revolution against the imperialism of the recent past. The song's subtle call to action did not fall on deaf ears. Yet, as the solidarity actions of the mid-1980s would show, the response often depended on the listener themselves.

⁵⁰ The Clash, *Washington Bullets, Sandinista!* (New York: Epic Records, 1980).

CHAPTER 3: “THE NICARAGUAN STRUGGLE IS OUR STRUGGLE:”⁵¹

SANDINISTA-CENTRIC ACTIVISM AND COALITION BUILDING

On November 11th, 1983, the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers (ASTC), a state-sponsored mass organization representing Nicaraguan artists and writers, issued a statement appealing to foreign artists and intellectuals for help in combatting intensifying Contra attacks.⁵² In addition to authorizing the CIA’s funding of counterrevolutionary forces, President Reagan cut all economic aid to Nicaragua soon after taking office in 1981. By 1982, the United States had succeeded in influencing the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to cut its supply of multilateral loans to Nicaragua.⁵³ The Sandinistas recognized the Reagan Administration’s opposition to their government. However, remembering protest movements to end imperialist intervention in Vietnam years earlier, the FSLN considered U.S. citizens potential allies.⁵⁴ “This is the time when we artists and intellectuals of Nicaragua, imbued with our patriotic responsibility, appeal to the artists and intellectuals of the world so that we may come together immediately, and raise the banner of peace,” read the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers’ 1983 statement.⁵⁵ During the mid-1980s, U.S.-Sandinista solidarity activists responded to this plea and others like it, framing the Sandinistas’ romanticized efforts in a manner that aligned with numerous strains of

⁵¹ Unknown Author, *Don’t Stop Now! Keep Nicaragua Free! Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1989), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Box 5, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York, NY.

⁵² Artists and Intellectuals of Nicaragua to Artists and Intellectuals of the World, 11 November 1983, Ventana Records Box 3, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York, NY.

⁵³ Thomas W. Walker, “Introduction,” *Reagan versus The Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 6.

⁵⁴ Artists and Intellectuals of Nicaragua to Artists and Intellectuals of the World, 11 November 1983, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

progressive political issues and interests. By presenting the politics and issues facing Nicaragua as linked to the progressive issues of the United States, solidarity activists fostered an activist coalition.

Artists around the United States and Canada responded to the call of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers in 1984 by orchestrating art shows in twenty-five major cities. These shows entitled “Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America” aimed to create awareness around the U.S.-funded wars being waged against the Sandinistas and leftists in El Salvador within urban art scenes. Not only did these shows feature works by North American artists, but pieces by members of the Institute for the Arts and Letters of El Salvador and the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. This inclusion directly aligned the show with the Latin American leftist struggles that it supported. In New York City, art showings would be held at over thirty-one galleries and public spaces in places like Washington Square Park and the Lower East Side punk squat ABC No Rio. New York’s show even featured works by prominent artists like Andy Warhol. Organizers funneled funds earned from the shows into humanitarian projects that supported Central American struggles for self-determination.⁵⁶

These art shows, in their showcasing of works representative of and representing Central American leftism, enabled artists who donated their work and attendees who purchased works to align themselves with the Sandinistas’ politics through a form of protest reflective of their interest in the urban art scene. Furthermore, New York show organizers framed their quest to increase awareness around President Reagan’s interventionism using the rhetoric of revolutionary Nicaragua. According to an article in

⁵⁶ “Artists Calling Artists,” *East Village Eye*, August 1984, Ventana Records Box 1, TAM.

the New York City alt-magazine *East Village Eye*, Lucy Lippara, an organizer of the New York-based committee, referred to the show as a “literacy campaign for artists and public alike.”⁵⁷ In its display of inter-class unity and camaraderie, the image of Nicaraguan middle-class urbanites and college students teaching rural campesinos to read remained thoroughly romanticized and celebrated by the U.S. left. Thus, Lippara’s quote represented an attempt to evoke this romanticism and allow activists to attach their own artistic and political efforts to this idealized image of Sandinista nobility.

Efforts like the “Artists Call” show remained important in terms of informing the U.S. public of issues that the mainstream press neglected to report. During this period, the Reagan administration limited media coverage of Nicaragua to White House story leaks and press conferences. For example, Secretary of State Alexander Haig leaked a story to CBS News in November 1984 that claimed the Soviet freighter *Bakuriani* supplied Nicaragua with Soviet MIG-21 fighter planes, a claim later revealed to be false.⁵⁸ 1984 also demonstrated the Nicaraguan public’s approval of Sandinistas reforms and evidence of the country’s democratic nature. After western-style elections that encouraged opposition parties to participate, the FSLN Party won the popular vote in Nicaragua’s first non-fraudulent election in decades. Yet, the mainstream press mainly focused on Reagan’s disapproval of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega’s election, rather than the event itself.⁵⁹

In a manner similar to the public awareness that the “Artists Call” shows of 1984 sought to provoke, activists sensed the need for media outlets that dispersed information

⁵⁷ “Artists Calling Artists,” Ventana Records Box 1, TAM.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 253.

⁵⁹ Jack Spence, “The U.S. Media: Covering (Over) Nicaragua,” in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 197-198.

that both celebrated Sandinista achievements outside of the dominion of the Reagan administration and encouraged similarly minded individuals to join their cause. News sources like *New York NicaNews* and others showcased a Nicaragua that appealed to a diverse leftist audience and enabled activists to utilize their own political interests and desires in aiding the Sandinistas.

In 1985, shortly after the United States implemented an economically devastating trade embargo with Nicaragua, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York began to publish *New York NicaNews*. While the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the Xeroxed and typewritten *New York NicaNews* appeared modest, it set out to accomplish the large task of disproving White House propaganda.⁶⁰ *New York NicaNews* reported on press events that failed to align with the image of Nicaragua presented to the public by the Reagan administration. This strategy ultimately aided in preserving a romanticized image of Nicaragua. In 1986, the paper covered the meeting of Nicaraguan Miskito Indian activist Tawan Innika and prominent Oglala Lakota and American Indian Movement co-founder Bill Means, presenting the Sandinista government as furthering indigenous peoples' regional autonomy. *New York NicaNews*' depiction sought to dispel Reagan's charge of the Sandinistas violating Miskito rights, but also frame the issue in such a way that catered to the U.S. American left's understanding of indigenous peoples movements by presenting a prominent Lakota activist's approval of the Sandinistas' policies towards Nicaragua's native peoples.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Judith Rew to Friends, 26 October 1985, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁶¹ "Autonomy Process Called 'Good News' for Nicaragua's Indigenous Peoples," *New York NicaNews*, December 1986, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

In actuality, the Sandinistas' treatment of the Miskito peoples of the Atlantic Coast represented some of the most outrageous policies of the Party's political career. Populated by indigenous peoples and English-speaking black creoles, the Atlantic Coast remained isolated from the Spanish-speaking political culture and resisted government efforts to integrate the region politically.⁶² Responding to rumors that the Contras sought to occupy the Atlantic Coast region in 1982, the Sandinista army forcibly evacuated over 8,000 Miskitos and black creoles from the region. As a result of this inhumane treatment, many Miskitos would join Contra forces and seek to violently undermine Sandinista successes.⁶³ The U.S. mainstream press widely covered these abuses along the Atlantic Coast in their attempt to discredit the new government. Yet, *New York NicaNews* declined to mention such events in their coverage of indigenous peoples' autonomy in Nicaragua.⁶⁴ In fact, as the article reports, Bill Means repeatedly contrasted the Miskitos' situation to that of the Navajos and Hopis being forced off their land by U.S. companies seeking uranium deposits. However, the Sandinistas' treatment of Nicaraguan indigenous groups and black creoles shared more commonalities with these events than U.S. solidarity activists cared to admit.⁶⁵ By having prominent American Indian and Miskito activists laud Nicaragua's treatment of indigenous peoples, *New York NicaNews'* reporting enabled solidarity activists and potential recruits to ignore Sandinista initiatives that may have clashed with their own politics and romantic interpretations of a foreign place.

⁶² Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinema and the Sandinistas: Filmmaking in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 38.

⁶³ Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*, 37.

⁶⁴ "Autonomy Process," Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

While solidarity newsletters like *New York NicaNews* may have turned the blind eye to the Sandinistas' political blunders, they reported on incidents of Contra atrocities absent from most news sources. U.S. activists that journeyed to Nicaragua and wrote reports for the paper served as journalists who told *New York NicaNews*' readership of the food shortages, destruction of agricultural cooperatives, and the astounding resilience of the Nicaraguan people.⁶⁶ These reports also served as enlistment tools, for the end of each paper featured numerous solidarity organization contacts throughout the country. *New York NicaNews* contact lists featured the information of myriad groups seeking to cultivate diversity of the Solidarity Movement. The varying strands of the movement allowed activists to get involved with groups that spoke to their own political interests. These directories and contact lists featured activist groups that framed Nicaragua in terms of environmental devastation, LGBT rights, and other issues. *New York NicaNews* also included event listings of documentary screenings and poetry readings in New York City, all centered around supporting the Sandinistas.⁶⁷

Sandinista-centric benefits and social events also followed a similar framework of presenting Contra War opposition in a manner that spoke to a broad-based imagining of Nicaragua. The Nicaragua Support Project's 1985 "Benefit for Nicaragua" event in Manhattan's East Village reveals the development of such a coalition. The event featured a photo presentation on the Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE), the Sandinista-led feminist mass organization. By showcasing the strides that the Sandinistas had made towards women's rights, activists hoped to appeal to New York feminists for support and illuminate the transnational nature of the women's

⁶⁶ "Report from Managua," *New York NicaNews*, September 1986, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁶⁷ "Directory," *New York NicaNews*, January 17, 1986, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

movement. Fittingly, the photographers entitled the presentation “Todos Somos AMNLAE,” or “We are all AMNLAE” in English. This attempt to draw on participation from peoples of varying interests also applied to the benefit’s artistic line-up, which included musical performances of salsa, merengue, cumbia, and, most notably, hardcore punk.⁶⁸

Prominent Queens-based punks Reagan Youth also performed at the event, drawing young, angsty punk rockers existing within the mostly apolitical New York hardcore scene that may not have otherwise been exposed to the activist milieu of Sandinista solidarity. Reagan Youth’s music featured cynical, dystopian lyrics that compared the Reagan-era United States to Nazi Germany and advocated the political philosophy of anarchism as a solution. Their presence at the Sandinista benefit signaled an invitation to punk rockers and those of the far-left that subscribed to the band’s anarchist message to oppose the Contra War on their own terms.⁶⁹

Flyers for other pro-Sandinista benefits made similar pleas for broad-based support. One such flyer depicted cartoon images of activists at a political demonstration holding signs that read “US Hands Off Nicaragua”, “Defend Abortion Rights”, and “Apartheid Must Go.” By placing protest signs of these seemingly disparate causes alongside each other, this flyer illustrated these issues as connected. Through this cartoon rendering of political protest, the flyer conveyed the Contra War as another atrocious cause supported by the Reagan administration. By supporting other causes that the

⁶⁸ The Nicaragua Support Project, *Benefit for Nicaragua at Charas Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1985), George Harrison Papers Box 5, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives.

⁶⁹ Reagan Youth, *A Collection of Pop Classics* (San Francisco: New Red Archives Records, 1994).

Reagan administration opposed, one could simultaneously preserve Nicaragua's political reforms as well.⁷⁰

Political demonstrations, such as the "March on Washington" held in Washington, D.C. to oppose the Reagan administration's military spending, conveyed a similar message. The protest connected Reagan's excess funding of Contra forces with the inadequate resources allocated towards combatting domestic poverty. This allowed numerous other protesters unaffiliated with pro-Sandinista organizations to see their own political desires, such as more affordable housing in the United States for instance, as impacted by Reagan's spending in Nicaragua. "The injustices are piling up – from union busting to government sanctioned bombing of abortion clinics, to the glorification of anti-gay/lesbian bigots like Jerry Falwell and racist vigilante gunmen like Bernhard Goetz. It is time to say enough!," read the demonstration's flyer. This condemnation of the Reagan administration and its supporters represented an attempt to link the Contra War to the Neoconservatism that leftist and progressive activists of numerous political backgrounds similarly opposed.⁷¹

In January 1986, a *New York NicaNews* article stressed both "the importance of portraying an alternative, positive image of Nicaragua" and "the need to identify those whose work makes them our natural allies, and to develop ways to reach out to communities whose support is particularly important."⁷² As the Reagan administration amplified its covert war against the new Nicaraguan government in the 1980s, Sandinista

⁷⁰ Young Socialist Alliance, *Celebrate Youth in Struggle at Socialist Books Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1985), George Harrison Papers Box 5, TAM.

⁷¹ National Days of Protest April 19-22, *March on Washington Sat. April 20th Pamphlet* (Washington, DC: Self-Published, 1985), George Harrison Papers Box 5, TAM.

⁷² "Solidarity News," *New York NicaNews*, January 17, 1986, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

solidarity activists within the United States worked to foster a coalition of leftists and progressives normally involved in disparate political causes and projects. By involving the varied strands of the 1980s U.S. left, activists sought to maximize awareness of the Sandinistas' political achievements and Contra efforts to undermine these successes. Solidarity activists presented a romanticized Nicaragua through a variety of mediums. Each display respectively communicated disparate causes as intimately linked to the Sandinistas' political efforts. Pro-Sandinista newspapers, events, and demonstrations constructed an image of Nicaragua that enabled groups of activists to see their own political aspirations and interests represented through the Sandinistas, and thus compromised by Reagan's pro-Contra policies. "Our best strategy is to build a movement," the *New York NicaNews* argued.⁷³

The Nicaragua represented in these mediums did not represent the Sandinistas' policies in their most accurate form, but rather in a manner palatable to the ideals of the fragmented 1980s left. By presenting a Nicaragua whose politics aligned with a variety of pre-existing causes and movements within the United States, organizers brought activists of differing political stripes and spawned a coalition opposing the Contra War. "When you look in the mirror / Do you see yourself? / Do you see yourself on the TV screen? / Do you see yourself in the magazine?," asks Polly Styrene of the British punk band X-Ray Spex in their 1978 song "Identity."⁷⁴ In the spirit of X-Ray Spex's inquiries, strategies such as these ultimately presented a portrayal of the Sandinistas that attempted to connect with attendees' sense of themselves, catering to their needs as politicized individuals. Activists who traveled to Nicaragua to participate in work projects designed

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ X-Ray Spex, *Identity, Germfree Adolescents* (London: EMI Records, 1978).

to support the fledging Sandinista state would approach such trips abroad with these ideals in mind.

CHAPTER 4: “THIS IS MY REVOLUTION, TOO!”⁷⁵: SOLIDARITY WORK

BRIGADES AND ACTIVIST EXPECTATIONS

As the situation worsened in Nicaragua during the mid-1980s, many U.S. Americans felt that the best way of preserving Nicaraguan revolutionary reforms would be to physically travel to Nicaragua and engage in activities that would help sustain Sandinista politics. Thousands of U.S. solidarity activists helped to harvest key export crops such as coffee and cotton on state-run farms, built new infrastructure, and rebuilt war-destroyed infrastructure for use as state-run schools and hospitals. Other activists participated in public art and music projects. With these political projects, solidarity activists propped up a revolutionary government opposed by their own presidential administration through their own physical labor. Solidarity brigades represented a chance to experience the romanticism of Sandinista political reform that activists displayed in music and art benefits, print media, and political demonstrations. Furthermore, a product of the coalition building strategy of connecting the Sandinistas’ politics and the Contra War with numerous progressive causes, activists approached solidarity work brigades with certain sets of expectations. Those recently adopted into the milieu of U.S.-Sandinista solidarity expected to preserve Nicaragua’s romanticized revolutionary reforms through the use of their own skills and interests. Activists organized their participation in solidarity work brigades accordingly. In this sense, participants’ interest in travelling to Nicaragua to aid the country’s leftist government remained reliant on

⁷⁵ Sheryl Hirshon, “This is My Revolution, Too,” in *Yankee Sandinistas: Interviews with North Americans Living and Working in the New Nicaragua*, ed. Ron Ridenour. (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1986), 70.

activists' ability to experience a romanticized Sandinista state that aligned with their own politics.

Indicative of the movement's coalition building strategy, brigades organized themselves around varying activist projects. Those interested in environmental activism could participate in the Special Reforestation Brigades, an effort aimed to assist in the environmental reforms implemented by the state-run Nicaraguan Institute for Natural Resources and the Environment.⁷⁶ Groups like the Boston-based Arts for a New Nicaragua organized Cultural Brigades of visual artists and musicians. Opportunities like these enabled Bronx-based art teacher turned activist Rikki Asher to help the local Center for Popular Culture in Grenada, Nicaragua complete a mural for AMNLAE's organizing center.⁷⁷ Yet, the most prevalent forms of this international solidarity work remained Harvest and Construction Brigades.

Responding to a 1983 request from the Nicaraguan government to help assist in the harvesting of crops due to a wartime labor shortage and Contra forces' destruction of state-run farms and agricultural cooperatives, nearly 1,500 U.S. citizens traveled to Nicaragua from 1983 to 1987.⁷⁸ Crops like coffee and to a lesser extent cotton made up a significant percentage of Nicaragua's export economy. Thus, in order to destabilize the Sandinista economy, Contra forces destroyed agricultural harvests. U.S. American activists responded to the threats that the Sandinista government faced by travelling to Nicaragua and assisting in agricultural harvests.

⁷⁶ Special Nicaraguan Work Brigades, *Join Special Work Brigades to Nicaragua! Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1985), Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁷⁷ Rikki Asher, "U.S. Artists in Nicaragua." *The WREE-View of Women for Racial and Economic Equality* 10 (1985): 12.

⁷⁸ Jeff Jones, "Introduction," in *Brigadista Harvest and War in Nicaragua: Eyewitness Accounts of North American Volunteers Working in Nicaragua* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), xxvii. ; Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*, 118.

Other activists participated in Construction Brigades designed to build infrastructure used as schoolhouses and health care centers on agricultural cooperatives and state-run agricultural farms. These groups also rebuilt similar infrastructure destroyed in the civil war. Brigades often operated in the rural regions of northern Nicaragua near the Honduran border, an area both home to the most prominent examples of Sandinista reforms and Contra-led destruction. As blatant symbols of Sandinista socialism, Contra forces often destroyed the many agricultural cooperatives, health clinics, and schools established during the years immediately following the 1979 Revolution.⁷⁹ In response, activists established Construction Brigades to assist Nicaraguans in rebuilding cooperatives and other Sandinista reform-related infrastructure.⁸⁰ Most brigades only lasted two weeks to a month, making the trips accessible to working people and maximizing the amount of activists exposed to Contra atrocities.⁸¹ The groups also often varied in size, ranging from fifteen to occasionally as many as fifty members.⁸²

The experience of harvesting crops in Nicaragua and witnessing the devastation that the U.S.-funded Contras had wreaked upon the country would further cement activists' opposition to Reagan's Cold War policies in Central America. Yet, initially, participants approached solidarity work brigades as an opportunity to experience the romanticism of which U.S. leftist and progressive portrayals of the Nicaraguan revolution consisted. As activists' New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade application forms communicate, most activists knew little of Nicaraguan culture, but rather remained drawn

⁷⁹ Gilbert, *Sandinistas*, 98.

⁸⁰ Joyce Vanman, "Nicaragua: May the Powers of Construction be Stronger than the Powers of Destruction," *Unknown Source*, 1985, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁸¹ Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*, 118.

⁸² Biaggi, "Untitled Report Back from Nicaragua." ; Michael Baumann, "U.S. Volunteers Pick Coffee in Nicaragua", *The Militant*, January 27, 1984.

to this foreign society's revolutionary potential. One 1988 applicant answered the question "Why do you want to go to Nicaragua?" with this telling response: "To see first hand a revolution I've always believed in. And to experience an alternative to the capitalist system and hopefully assist them in building a new society."⁸³ "I want to glimpse what it feels like to be among a nation of people who believe in the future and who believed enough to fight for it," wrote another.⁸⁴ The idea of assisting in the preservation of socialism represented an opportunity to fulfill the romantic aspirations that participants expected from Nicaragua. Through these experiences, activists hoped to gain political insight and inspiration to share with unions, student organizations, and other activists groups in the United States.⁸⁵

Not only did brigades represent a chance to experience a revolutionary society and engage with anti-imperialist politics, these groups also presented opportunities for experimentation with collectivized organizational styles and group dynamics. Brigade groups like the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade emphasized the responsibility of the group in accomplishing chores and maintaining composure. In this sense, these group dynamics enabled participants to experience an organizational style similar to the collectivity and inclusiveness of the imagined Sandinista state.⁸⁶ Participants approached brigades with these ideals in mind. During the application process, activists emphasized

⁸³ Unnamed Applicant to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁸⁴ Sheryl Byfield to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

⁸⁵ Carol Jellett to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM. ; David Welters to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁸⁶ "Guidelines for Brigadistas," *New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade* (New York: Self-Published, 1987), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Box 2, TAM.

their expectations regarding the role of collective decision-making processes within brigades.

I believe that consensus is the best way to make group decisions. Individuals must place interests of the group above their personal interests. Leadership per se from a designated leader should be as low-key as possible. Everyone should be responsible and involved, not just following,

said twenty-three year old, Swarthmore College student James Seely.⁸⁷

With the Construction Brigades in particular, activists expected to orient their solidarity with Nicaragua as an extension of their own interests and past participation in other leftist movements. As a part of their 1986 coalition building effort, the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade recruited and set up training programs for activists engaged in renovating abandoned, city-owned buildings for use as housing cooperatives and other living spaces.⁸⁸ During the 1970s, New York City supported activists in renovating abandoned, blighted homes for eventual habitation through the establishment of city-run organizations such as the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board and the Housing Development Institute. In 1978, New York City established the Tenant Interim Lease Program, allowing tenants to initially manage blighted, city-owned tenement buildings and eventually own the buildings for use as low-income housing cooperatives.⁸⁹ The Sandinistas' land distribution and their 1985 constitutional guarantee of housing to all citizens resonated with these activists fighting for housing rights in New York City

⁸⁷ James Seely to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁸⁸ New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade to North Star Grant, Organization Grant Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

⁸⁹ Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 206-7.

and helped to situate their solidarity.⁹⁰ Homesteaders' experience with intense physical labor and identification towards Nicaragua's housing policies made them ideal candidates for Construction Brigades. In their New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade applications, housing activists emphasized the applicability of their construction skills and by extension their desire to use them in aiding Nicaragua.⁹¹ "2 Tenant Associations involved in homesteading buildings," listed one nameless applicant when asked of their past activist experience.⁹²

Those involved in the Lower East Side squatting scene participated in the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade for similar reasons. "I spent my weekends last summer clearing rubble from a building on 13th st. btwn [sic] A&B that was in the process of being squatted," Sheryl Byfield attested when asked of her experience with "hard, physical labor" by the Construction Brigade.⁹³ As scholar Hannah Dobbz illuminates, real estate interest in the Lower East Side increased during the 1980s, causing investors to buy up many city-owned derelict buildings. These property investments decreased the housing stock available for homesteading opportunities in a neighborhood previously plentiful with city-supported initiatives.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Mayor Ed Koch's 1980s tax abatement policies subsidized the renovation of low-income

⁹⁰ Sarah Ferguson, "'Casa De La Paz' is Constructed on New York's Lower East Side," *New York NicaNews*, April 1987, 1, Ventana Records Box 3, TAM.

⁹¹ Sheryl Byfield to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM; Sarah Ferguson to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM ; Unknown Applicant to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁹² Unknown Applicant to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM.

⁹³ Sheryl Byfield to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM

⁹⁴ Hannah Dobbz, *Nine-Tenths of the Law: Property and Resistance in the United States* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), 87.

housing, turning thousands of Single Resident Occupancy (SRO) hotel units into luxury housing and lofts.⁹⁵ These programs exacerbated homelessness in the city and many housing activists seized abandoned buildings without permission from homesteading organizations, offering shelter to the city's vulnerable.⁹⁶

In 1987, New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade members active in housing justice work sought to illustrate connections between these two movements by using the East Village squatter encampment Shantytown as the site of their sendoff celebration for a group headed for Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. The activists even built a structure identical to the one they would build in Nicaragua to house those living in the vacant lot of Shantytown.⁹⁷ "Nicaragua is a threat to the US not because of its military strength, but because it stands for the same principles that Shantytown stands for: decent housing for everyone," said one pro-Sandinista Shantytown squatter.⁹⁸ To those who approached the Construction Brigades from the standpoint of housing justice, the use of Lower East Side housing activism to support Nicaragua that Shantytown represented signaled a fulfillment of the U.S.-Sandinista solidarity movement's coalition building strategy's promises. The New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade's valued the qualifications of homesteaders and squatters and enabled them to use their skills and romanticization of the Sandinistas' housing policies in aiding Nicaragua.

For many women's rights activists, it remained essential that brigades possess certain strands of feminist politics. Beginning in 1986, the New York-Nicaragua

⁹⁵ Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 278.

⁹⁶ Dobbz, *Nine-Tenths of the Law*, 86.

⁹⁷ Sarah Ferguson, "'Casa De La Paz' is Constructed on New York's Lower East Side," 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

Construction Brigade started organizing an all-female construction brigade with other feminist activists from Boston and Northampton, Massachusetts known as Brigada Compañeras.⁹⁹ The Nicaraguan Revolution encompassed many strides towards gender equality that U.S. feminist activists romanticized. During the 1980s, women made up a quarter of the army and 40% of the country's National Assembly. Furthermore, the Sandinistas passed laws that guaranteed equal pay for women, paid maternity leave, and banned misogynist depictions in advertising.¹⁰⁰ Drawing upon this inspiration, feminists approached Brigada Compañeras as an opportunity to further gender equality domestically and abroad by specifically placing U.S. women in male-dominated construction positions and sharing these skills with Nicaraguan women.¹⁰¹ The specific goals of Brigada Compañeras enabled its members to examine and engage with the Nicaraguan Revolution in a distinctly feminist context that addressed their preferred formation of solidarity work.¹⁰² Activist Catherine Hughes' 1987 Brigada Compañeras application demonstrates this set of expectations: "As a white, middle-class lesbian from Canada, I feel there is a lot I can learn from Nicaraguans, particularly Nicaraguan women...I want to talk with lesbian/gay groups, women's groups, and artists about their views and participation in the revolution."¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ideas on a Self-Identifying Statement About the Group Notes, Brigada Compañeras, 22 August 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM ; New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade to North Star Grant, Organization Grant Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰⁰ Hobson, " 'Si Nicaragua Vencio'," 4.

¹⁰¹; Ideas on a Self-Identifying Statement About the Group Notes, Brigada Compañeras, 22 August 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM ; Minutes from the Three City Meeting in New York City, Brigada Compañeras, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰² Janet S. Raphaelson to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰³ Catherine Hughes to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

Being a woman, I am especially interested in how things have changed / are changing or have not changed / are not changing for women. Going with a women's brigade is something that I feel will encourage and support my explorations in this area,

twenty-six year old Janet S. Raphaelson similarly declared.¹⁰⁴

The feminist orientation of Brigada Compañeras enabled participants to do much more than view and engage with Sandinistas reforms through the lens of gender equality. Many participants viewed the brigade as an avenue to improve their political and personal lives at home.¹⁰⁵ "I want to go on a women's brigade because I think it's empowering for women to work together especially on something like construction which is so male dominated," said Catherine Hughes.¹⁰⁶ Hughes' sentiments represented a desire to use U.S.-Sandinista solidarity as a means of accomplishing the broader domestic goals of undermining prescribed gender roles in the United States. On a more personal level, some participants even hoped to use the experience that the organization offered towards improving a sense of self. "I want to go on a women's brigade because I feel it is important in developing my identity as a woman, and a stronger identity among the women of Nicaragua," offered Sarah Ferguson.¹⁰⁷ The organization's political goals ultimately catered to participants' romanticization of Nicaragua in a manner that privileged their own personal development and domestic political concerns.

¹⁰⁴ Janet S. Raphaelson to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Ferguson to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM ; Catherine Hughes to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1987, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM ; Jacqueline Jeanette Jones to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰⁶ Jacqueline Jeanette Jones to Brigada Compañeras, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Ferguson, *Brigada Compañeras Application* (New York: Self-Published, 1987) Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

The solidarity work brigades of the mid and late 1980s remained a product of activists' coalition building strategy that encouraged participants to connect opposition to the Contra War with a variety of leftist and progressive political causes and interests. As a result of these strategies, activists expected solidarity work brigades to represent the romanticism and flexible interpretations of Nicaraguan socialism that encompassed Contra War protest. Travelling to Nicaragua represented an opportunity, not only to aid in the preservation of the Sandinista state, but also to experience the romanticism with which the left portrayed such a state. This romanticism emanated from different angles and sectors of the left and served different purposes for different groups. As the examples of the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade and Brigada Compañeras communicate, U.S.-Sandinista solidarity brigades represented an attempt at fulfilling the promises of coalition building strategies. These groups offered activists the chance to engage with the Nicaraguan socialist politics that they romanticized using political skills and interests gained in other movements. Furthermore, in the case of Brigada Compañeras and those involved in the Shantytown encampment, Sandinista solidarity also served as a means of furthering groups' political aims based in the United States. Thus, in aiming to preserve the Nicaraguan Revolution and ameliorate the harmful effects of the Contra War, solidarity activists continued to rally around the same causes that had initially drawn them towards the Sandinistas' politics. Perhaps it is somewhat ironic that the most seemingly transnational element of the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement remained firmly entrenched within the politics of the United States. Yet, enabling activists to latch onto the cause of Nicaraguan socialism from a personalized standpoint remained the means with which the movement sustained itself.

Amidst the organization of these solidarity work brigades, San Pedro punk band Minutemen released their Creedence Clearwater Revival swamp rock meets country-western take on Los Angeles hardcore, “Corona.” The song appears on the band’s 1984 *Double Nickels on the Dime* double LP. While “Corona’s” musicality bears a carefree, dancey feel, the lyrics present a darker reality. This Minutemen song ultimately functions as a poetic commentary on the global inequalities of the Americas and the U.S.’s role in perpetuating such wealth discrepancies. “Corona” speaks to the manner in which activists observed and internalized the developing situation in Nicaragua. As the rhythm section bounces along to guitarist and singer D. Boon’s treble guitar tone, Boon demonstrates his solidarity with third world struggles against U.S. intervention: “The people will survive / In their environment / The dirt, the scarcity, and the emptiness of our South.” While the song’s first verse aligns with the romanticism and glorification of the Sandinista’s struggle that prompted many to oppose the Contra War, the second verse is less optimistic. “The injustice of our greed / The practice we inherit / The dirt, the scarcity, and the emptiness of our South.”¹⁰⁸

Such lines demonstrate a growing sense of insecurity regarding the Sandinistas and other third world movements’ ability to stand up to the insurmountable powers of United States imperialism and capital interests. In both verses, the last stanza appears with the same message. No matter what perspective the narrator takes, the realities of lands to the south of the United States remain the same way, scarce and empty. Unlike The Clash’s earlier take on third world leftist struggles in “Washington Bullets,” Minutemen’s “Corona” offers no subtle call to arms, just the inevitability of loss and

¹⁰⁸ Minutemen, *Corona, Double Nickels on the Dime* (Long Beach, CA: SST Records, 1984).

defeat. During live performances of the song, singer D. Boon would often shout, perhaps working through his own disillusionment regarding an unrelenting Contra War: “What the hell is the United States doing in Central America?! I don’t fucking know!,” before launching into the song’s bridge.¹⁰⁹ Boon’s question remained rhetorical; yet, his angered inquiry bears implications for a Solidarity Movement whose romantic and open-ended strategies had yet to curtail the effects of Contra War. As Nicaragua’s political stability faltered during the late 1980s, U.S. activists implemented a new political strategy in aiding the Sandinistas closer resembling dashed hopes than a flexible romance.

¹⁰⁹ “Minutemen – Corona,” YouTube video, 2:19, from a performance at The Stone in San Francisco on March 1st, 1985, posted by Stotinkca, October 5, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_0CAPKdSPE.

CHAPTER 5: “LET NICARAGUA LIVE:”¹¹⁰ THE DECLINE OF THE SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT

During the late 1980s, the imagined Nicaragua projected by solidarity activists greatly differed from the inspirational revolutionary society of earlier years. Beaten back by years of U.S.-funded war, activists presented Nicaragua as a failing society on the brink of collapse. While the slogans of solidarity activists’ of the early and mid 1980s featured phrases imbued with a sense of hopefulness and romanticism like “Nicaragua Libre” and “New Nicaragua,” Nicaragua’s presentation in the eyes of activists became much less optimistic. The late 1980s solidarity campaigns featured phrases like “Let Nicaragua Live” and “Nicaragua Debe Sobrevivir,” roughly translating to “Nicaragua Must Survive.” Campaign titles like these presented an activism pleading with its supporters for a continued solidarity in a context lacking the romanticism of early years.¹¹¹ The solidarity activism of the late 1980s lacked the enthusiasm of earlier years not only in its phraseology, but in the nature of the campaigns themselves. By 1990, Nicaragua’s economy had shrunk 14% and the country’s inflation rate would climb to a rate of 35,500%, making it more difficult than ever to sustain its revolutionary initiatives.¹¹² Thus, solidarity activism of this period became more focused around providing direct material aid to Nicaragua in the forms of both monetary and food assistance. While such a tactic represented the most practical approach towards assisting the Sandinistas, the campaigns lacked the revolutionary enthusiasm and the ability for

¹¹⁰ Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

¹¹¹ Campaign 1989-91, Oats for Peace: A Project for Children’s Nutrition in Nicaragua Notes, Nicaragua Network, 1989, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM ; Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

¹¹² Weber, *Visions of Solidarity*, 70.

activists to appropriate their own interests onto that of Sandinista solidarity that earlier efforts had possessed. The imagined Nicaragua of the late 1980s became one absent of the romanticism that made the country's revolution appealing throughout the Solidarity Movement's duration. When Nicaragua's UNO party won the 1990 election, voting the Sandinistas out of office, solidarity organizations lost significant funding and membership. Many groups halted operations completely. When activists lacked the opportunity to use their own political interests and aspirations to support and identify with the Sandinistas, the Solidarity Movement could not sustain itself.

As Nicaragua's economic shrinkage and inflation rate communicate, the efforts of solidarity activists proved to be no match against the United States' funding of the Contras and the 1985 economic embargo. As the Reagan Administration hoped, the war ultimately undermined the Sandinistas' revolutionary platform. The Contra War forced the Sandinistas to reorient its budget towards defense and implement legislation such as a mandatory military draft and banning workers' right to strike that seemed contradictory in light of their political platform.¹¹³ While the conflict would formally end in April 1988 with the signing of a permanent ceasefire between the Contras and the Sandinistas, the stranglehold of the economic embargo continued to be felt by Nicaraguans. A 1988 drought nearly halted the country's grain production and the trade embargo severely limited Nicaragua's ability to receive food from other areas. These factors resulted in a

¹¹³ Doug Murray, "Pesticides, the Smell of Nicaragua" in *Yankee Sandinistas: Interviews with North Americans Living and Working in the New Nicaragua*, ed. Ron Ridenour. (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1986), 82 ; Paul Oquist, "The Sociopolitical Dynamics of the 1990 Nicaraguan Elections," in *The 1990 Elections in Nicaragua and their Aftermath*, ed. Vanessa Castro et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992), 9.

national food emergency in the Central American country.¹¹⁴ With a suffering population and revolutionary reforms taking a backseat, the conditions of Nicaragua did not possess the same romanticism and made campaigns that allowed activists to apply their own political interests to solidarity less effective. In these years, groups like the Nicaragua Solidarity Network focused on strategies like “Oats for Peace” and “Pledge for Peace and Friendship” that provided direct material aid.

In 1989, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York helped implement a material aid initiative known as Oats for Peace designed to collect monetary donations for Nicaragua to buy oats to send to feed Nicaraguan children on rural farms.¹¹⁵ Executing this project, the national Nicaragua Solidarity Network partnered with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, an organization of rural black farmers in southern states, to provide oats to the hungry of Nicaragua.¹¹⁶ Rather than raising awareness for the campaign through avenues that would align the Nicaraguan struggle with pre-existing U.S. political causes and interests such as organizing an art show or a union meeting, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York participated in this national campaign by simply collecting money from supporters. In order to raise funds for the purchase of oats, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York organized a walkathon in which participants would receive monetary pledges from spectators for

¹¹⁴ Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York to Oats Contributor, 1989, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM ; Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

walking a predetermined amount.¹¹⁷ While activists employed the strategy of material aid in the past, the Oats for Peace walkathon did not present Nicaragua as a revolutionary society with social programs in need of foreign support as had past efforts. Rather, the organization's "Hints for Signing Up Walkers" offered a pre-determined set of talking points for organizers, encouraging activists to present Nicaragua as a humanitarian crisis.

As the form emphasized:

Nicaragua suffered a severe drought last year. Coming in the midst of the U.S. directed Contra War and U.S. imposed trade embargo, the drought has already caused malnutrition in farm children. In most of the country 75% of the bean crop was lost."¹¹⁸

These techniques represented the most practical approaches towards ameliorating the crises of the Contra War. However, they lacked the same optimism and malleable interpretation of Nicaragua that attracted activists to the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity movement. While activists undoubtedly cared about Nicaraguan sovereignty, they simultaneously supported such a cause because solidarity work represented an activism that could be molded into a form that did not stray far from their political aspirations and pre-established interests. Material Aid ultimately involved representing Nicaragua through a pre-determined frame that emphasized suffering rather than romanticism. Moreover, this strategy mandated that activists engage with Nicaraguan solidarity in a manner that organizers deemed most practical: giving money. In this sense, material aid emphasized those with financial status rather than political commitment. While solidarity activists came from a wide variety of backgrounds, many, particularly those in urban areas, could not afford to participate in an activism that strayed from actions performed

¹¹⁷ Hints for Signing Up Walkers Notes, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, 1989, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

with one's body.¹¹⁹ Perhaps the Nicaragua represented by activists painted a more accurate portrayal than that of earlier years. Yet, the activism of the late 1980s ultimately compromised the exciting and accessible nature of solidarity work that participants expected.

The 1990 election of conservative UNO presidential candidate Violeta Chamorro represented a similar dashing of hopes embedded within earlier years. As the solidarity organization Nicaragua Network presented the election, UNO's electoral win entailed attempts to privatize the Nicaraguan economy and roll back the social programs that the Sandinistas had fought so hard to achieve.¹²⁰ While the Sandinistas continued to comprise the country's largest political party in the period after the election, Chamorro's proposed neoliberal economic restructuring represented a serious threat.¹²¹ Relying on substantial financial backing from the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy to help fund the party's campaign, UNO's politics presented a chance to halt the United States' economic antagonism and end the damaging trade embargo. In the eyes of many Nicaraguans, the Sandinistas became linked with the damaging Contra War.¹²² The Nicaragua Network determined that the best approach towards limiting Chamorro's attempts at undermining Sandinista gains would be to funnel massive material aid into surviving Sandinista mass organizations.¹²³ However, without a romanticized Sandinista

¹¹⁹ Sheyrl Byfield to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 2, TAM ; Sevda Poliz to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

¹²⁰ Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

¹²¹ Oquist, "Sociopolitical Dynamics," 7.

¹²² Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 356-7.

¹²³ Nicaragua Network, *The Nicaragua Network: Moving Forward Flyer* (New York: Self-Published, 1990), Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 5, TAM.

state behind these mass organizations, the Nicaragua Network's strategies became increasingly difficult to implement.

For over ten years, leftists and progressives in the United States had looked upon the Sandinistas' victories as closely intertwined with their own politics and aspirations for a free and just society. Thus, the end of Sandinista Party's governmental power served as both a literal and metaphorical loss for the Solidarity Movement. "The only thing I can compare it to is the day Kennedy was shot," Lynda Sharp of the Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York told the *New York Times*, evoking another moment in which unfortunate circumstances similarly dismantled the U.S. American political imagination.¹²⁴ Without a Sandinista state to support social programs and reforms, activists lacked the ability to attach their own political aspirations to that of foreign socialism. Like the material aid strategies of the late 1980s, electoral defeat ultimately deprived activists the opportunity to imagine Nicaragua on their own terms, making the cause of the Sandinistas unappealing.

Soon after the Sandinistas' electoral defeat, prominent groups like Witness for Peace lost nearly 50% of their membership.¹²⁵ Witness for Peace and other groups would change the orientation of their activism in Nicaragua during the 1990s, working with Nicaraguan NGOs that had morphed out of the Sandinista mass organizations to oppose Structural Adjustment Programs. Other groups adjusted to the newly neoliberal economic environment by supporting female workers' rights in the maquiladoras of Managua's Las Mercedes Free Trade Zone.¹²⁶ Yet, as U.S.-Sandinista solidarity lost its romance, many

¹²⁴ Chris Hedges, "Sandinistas U.S. Friends: Case of Dashed Ideals," *New York Times*, July 21st, 1990.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Weber, *Visions of Solidarity*, 110-118.

groups like the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade that had captured the imaginations of the New York left in earlier years folded.¹²⁷ Beginning with the emphasis on material aid programs that emphasized destitute rather than optimism in the late 1980s, the decline of the Solidarity Movement coincided with the decline of the political imagination created around Nicaragua by solidarity activists. The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas represented the Movement's death toll. Without a successful leftist state for activists to latch onto, the Solidarity Movement ceased to be.

¹²⁷ Hedges, "Sandinistas' U.S. Friends."

CHAPTER 6: ASSESSING THE IMAGINED NICARAGUA: A CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2015, former solidarity activist Sheila Tully reflected back on her 1980s activism from her office in the Anthropology Department at San Francisco State University: “Sadly, looking back at Nicaragua today, those years were just, like a tiny little window in a long history of violence and oppression, and corruption.”¹²⁸ As Tully alludes, the Sandinista party of the 1990s became plagued by scandal. Following their electoral defeat, rumors of foul play spread throughout party leadership and allegations of sexual abuse temporarily damaged former President Daniel Ortega’s reputation.¹²⁹ Ortega would later re-emerge as President of Nicaragua in 2006, yet his party platform now consisted more of reconciliation between the Sandinistas and conservative groups, rather than socialist critique. In an extremely controversial 2006 decision that many viewed as an attempt to win the Catholic vote, the Sandinistas supported the illegalization of abortion even under life-threatening circumstances.¹³⁰ Ravaged by the devastation that the Contra War wreaked upon the country’s economy and landscape, as of today, Nicaragua remains the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti.¹³¹ The Nicaragua of today remains a very different place from the country that U.S. leftists had imagined during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The period in which the Sandinistas emerged as political leaders in Nicaragua coincided with the rise of a heightened conservative politics in the United States. To many on the left, Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election represented the triumph of family

¹²⁸ Tully, Interview.

¹²⁹ Hector Perla Jr., “The FSLN and International Solidarity,” in *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979*, ed. David Close et al. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2012), 281.

¹³⁰ Karen Kampwirth, “The Feminist Movement,” in *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979*, ed. David Close et al. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2012), 199-201.

¹³¹ Cordova, “The Mission in Nicaragua,” 227.

values, free-market capitalism, and a rejection of past activist efforts at creating a more egalitarian society.¹³² In the context of Neoconservatism's rise, Nicaragua's efforts at reforming its political and economic system appeared in opposition to the changes occurring in U.S. leftists and progressives' own country. Romanticizing a nation in the western hemisphere whose politics seemed geared towards providing for its society's most vulnerable, U.S. leftists and progressives imagined Nicaragua as embodying an aspirational set of politics. The newly formed coalition of evangelical Christians, pro-business Republicans, white, working class voters alienated by the left's activism of earlier decades, and others that elected Reagan in their own country ultimately represented the antithesis of the political formations that activists had fought for in earlier years.¹³³ Lacking a political society with which they connected, U.S. leftists and progressives romanticized Nicaragua as reflective of their own political desires and aspirations.

As Reagan's distrusted political administration began to militarily undermine the Nicaraguan politics with which the left identified, activists used this romanticism as a means of forming their own coalition opposing the Contra War. Anti-Contra War activists glorified Nicaragua's revolutionary reforms and presented them as correlating with a varying array of leftist and progressive politics concurrently existing within the United States. Possessing an accurate understanding of an evolving political situation thousands of miles away remained difficult if not impossible. Thus, solidarity work

¹³² Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 367-9.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 368-9.

framed the Sandinistas in a manner that activists could understand and relate to, catering to numerous collective political desires.

Allowing activists to support the Sandinistas through the frame of their own political skills and interests enabled activists to expand their political base. However, this organizing technique also made Sandinista solidarity reliant on a series of unrealistic expectations stipulating that such a political cause and the activism that supported it contained certain romanticisms. In this sense, the tactics and ideologies that created the various forms of Sandinista solidarity also enabled their eventual demise. Surveying an increasingly devastating Contra War, activists realized that their imagined Nicaragua did not exist. After the Sandinistas lost the 1990 Nicaraguan elections, there existed no romanticism with which activists could situate their involvement. As the decline of the Solidarity Movement communicates, the political imagination proved to be no match for the forces of the U.S. government's domination in the western hemisphere.

Like many movements for social change before it, the U.S.-Sandinista Solidarity Movement ultimately rested on flimsy ground. While some participants would reorient their solidarity politics to align with the conditions of the post-Sandinista Nicaragua of the 1990s, many more deserted the bleak conditions of the movement and opted to involve themselves in struggles that possessed a similar urgency and romantic quality that Nicaragua had in earlier years. The United States' pro-Sandinista contingent drifted towards supporting a South Africa transitioning out of Apartheid rule or sided with the thousands of anti-war activists opposing President George H.W. Bush's Gulf War.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 358.

With this historical hindsight in mind, it is worth returning to applications of the New-York Nicaragua Construction Brigade. Two years before the organization would fold under the stress of declining participant interest, Sevda Poliz, an African-American New Yorker whose radical politics often caused her to clash with other more traditionally progressive members of the organization, filled out a 1988 application. The trip for which she applied would be one of the last trips to Central America that the New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade would make.¹³⁵ While many applicants would answer the question, “Why do you want to go to Nicaragua?,” with long answers that communicated their investment in the particulars of the Solidarity Movement, Poliz’s answer is succinct, although no less thought-provoking. “There is a revolution taking place in Nicaragua. It is where it is happening now.”¹³⁶ For Sevda Poliz, the particulars of Nicaraguan politics and the causes that it represented did not matter. As Poliz’s answer communicated, Nicaragua represented *the* opportunity of that particular historical moment to seize a sense of livelihood still apparent in a down-trodden world and use the hopefulness that this particular cause represented to change one’s surroundings and that of others around the world. As the romanticism surrounding the Sandinistas faded, perhaps Sevda Poliz looked for other Nicaraguas in her midst. After all, she did, like the fictional Jane Blank, “have her mind.”

¹³⁵ Unknown Writer to Interview Committee, “Subject: Role of Sevda P. in the 9th Brigade” Letter, 31 May 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Box 2, TAM.

¹³⁶ Sevda Poliz to New York-Nicaragua Construction Brigade, Application, 1988, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York Records Box 3, TAM.

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