Chapter 6

The Mission in Nicaragua: San Francisco Poets Go to War

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

In the late 1970s, a community of poet-activists rechristened their usual gathering spot, the plaza above the BART station at 24th and Mission Streets, as Plaza Sandino. Their literary seizure of the land in the name of Nicaraguan peasant hero Augusto Sandino (1893–1934) signaled the ways this public space in San Francisco had become a meaningful place to express solidarity with the leftist struggles in Nicaragua and elsewhere.

Landmarks like Plaza Sandino and the broader Latinizing of urban space whittled away any sense of difference across the Americas. In *The Medicine of Memory* poet-activist Alejandro Murguía described how the neighborhood zeitgeist transformed his identity. In 1971, after reading Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he stated, "Suddenly we reinterpreted our existence, we were no longer exiled in the cold north, in the pale United States. We transposed our Latino roots from Central America, land of volcanoes and revolutions; from the Caribbean, land of palm trees and salsa music, and from Aztlán, land of lowriders and *vatos locos,* and fused these tropicalized visions to our barrio and made the concrete sidewalks, the asphalt streets, and the sterile buildings sway to a Latin beat."[1]

Poet Roberto Vargas described the mood of the barrio as follows: "The Mission is now aware of itself as a body of many people, all tribes aware of themselves. . . . There is a collective feeling of compassion for each other Nicas Blacks Chicanos Chilenos oppressed Indios. The sense of collective survival, histories full of Somozas Wounded Knees written on the walls: Muera Somoza Free Angela."[2] Vargas poetically united diverse groups and struggles. His words brought together the war to overthrow the Somoza family dictatorship in Nicaragua with the battles at Wounded Knee and the fight to free U.S. activist Angela Davis. His words echoed the internationalist spirit of community organizing in the 1970s Mission District.[3]

Drawing on revolutionary struggles around the globe became a key means for cultural workers to advocate for revolutionary change at home. Nina Serrano's poem "I Saw It Myself on the Corner of Mission and Twenty-Fourth Streets" illustrates the ways that protests at Plaza Sandino collapsed transnational struggles into a single vision for change. Marking the ceremonial nature of the protests, she wrote:

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

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

I saw it myself on the corner
Of Mission and Twenty-Fourth streets[4]

According to the poem, "Pinochet, Romero, y Somoza Son La Misma Cosa" (are the same thing). For Serrano and many others, the dictatorial heads of Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Augusto Pinochet, Carlos Humberto

Romero, and Anastasio Somoza Debayle) presented a single oppressive entity. The brutality of these U.S.-sponsored, right-wing regimes generated a global solidarity movement critical of U.S. politics and supportive of left-leaning guerrilla mobilizations.[5] Simultaneously, Serrano's poem celebrated the presence of Augusto Sandino ("*Sandino esta presente*"/ [Sandino Is Present]), the heroic antithesis of these regimes, the soldier for the underdog, whose magical presence in the rain suggests an almost saintly ability to end drought and dictatorship. In the poem, Sandino symbolized hope for another way of life not just in Nicaragua, but everywhere, and perhaps especially in the Mission.

In the 1970s, the evolving politics of Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua played a pivotal role in the construction of Latino art and activism in San Francisco. While political struggles in these countries diverged in important ways, key concerns about sovereignty, the distribution of wealth, and respect for human rights led cultural workers like Nina Serrano to see the situations as "*la misma cosa*." For example, the devastating impact of the 1973 U.S.-sponsored right-wing military coup in Chile dramatically illustrated what was at stake in Nicaragua and El Salvador.[6] The repressive regime in Chile mobilized Bay Area activists into more passionate support for the guerrilla struggles in Nicaragua. Similarly, San Francisco political actions in support of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua propelled a wave of parallel actions in support of the FMLN in El Salvador. This understanding of each of these situations as part of the same struggle profoundly shaped local Latino cultural production, from filmmaking, to poetry, to the visual arts. Artists and activists found themselves supporting political causes that changed how they saw the world and how they defined themselves. To say cultural workers viewed these struggles as exactly the same is too simplistic. However, recognizing their interrelationship is relevant to understanding the development of a Latino arts movement in San Francisco, and how that movement reverberated nationally and transnationally. The shared sense of struggle and the transnational cross-pollination of ideas contributed to a Latino and leftist cultural front rooted in San Francisco's Mission District.

In many ways Nicaragua came to represent a place where the problems of the Mission could be solved. Especially from 1972 to 1979, San Francisco cultural workers mobilized to support Nicaragua's Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) as part and parcel of local community organizing. Pro-Sandinista sentiment flourished in San Francisco, not simply out of sympathy for Nicaraguans, but because cultural workers saw the situation abroad as part of the struggles defining life in the Mission. If the Sandinistas succeeded, Nicaragua promised to become a new and better Cuba, an amends for the loss of Chile in the 1973 coup, and a model for freedom and equality around the world, including within the United States. The activism of the Sandinistas articulated

the Marxist ideals of San Francisco cultural workers and expressed their dissatisfaction with U.S. capitalism from a front of their own, the Latino barrio of San Francisco. The parallels were ready-made, and the struggle was the same.

Presenting these strong ties between San Francisco and Nicaragua provides ample evidence of the cosmopolitanism of at least one barrio community. As Gina Pérez, Frank Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr. argue, "While racism, segregation, uneven development, and urban policy help to create barrios, the residents within them often develop and sustain important place-based networks that also transcend local and national boundaries."[7] The socially accepted disenfranchisement of barrio communities can naturalize representations of these spaces as insular and disconnected, but the transnational demographics of residents suggests otherwise.

Many San Francisco residents drew inspiration from the communist and socialist politics of Cuba and Chile. Transnational travel and communication networks emerged to disseminate these ideals, inspiring local residents to go abroad and encouraging influential cultural workers from abroad to come to the Mission. Residents traveled to Mexico to study mural-making and theater, visited Cuba as part of the Venceremos Brigade, campaigned in Chile for Salvador Allende, and attempted to rebuild Nicaragua after the 1972 earthquake. Simultaneously, cultural workers invited visits from prestigious international leaders, including Roque Dalton, Enrique Buenaventura, Ernesto Cardenal, and a host of others. At a time when, as Murguía complained, "the typical Anglo American couldn't find Nicaragua or Colombia on a map, even if it bit them in the ass," cultural workers in the Mission established an intimate and often romanticized relationship with Nicaragua.[8] The imagined Nicaragua circulated in San Francisco poetry, murals, and literature and sparked a leftist idealism. While many have heard of the Nuyorican poetry movement of the 1970s, few know that there was a similarly rich, transnational poetry movement evolving in San Francisco's Mission District.[9]

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

Notably, only one of the three—Vargas—is Nicaraguan. Murguía identifies as Chicano, originally from Los Angeles, and Serrano is a Colombian

American originally from New York. In various ways, the cultural workers of San Francisco drew attention to a struggle that encompassed both Nicaragua and the Mission in a much larger quest for revolutionary change.

The Nicaraguan City

Demographics helped forge the city's strong solidarity movement with the Sandinistas. The city's large Nicaraguan-American population grew in tandem with Pacific Coast trade routes established in the late 1800s, particularly owing to the coffee industry. In addition, a large influx of Nicaraguans came to the city just prior to, or in the wake of, the 1934 assassination of revolutionary leader Augusto Sandino. Most were sympathetic or active supporters of Sandino. The ensuing rise to power of right-wing dictator Somoza prohibited a return to their home country for the next forty years. This was the case for poet Roberto Vargas, whose family "came in the human wave fleeing the brutality of the Somoza regime."[10] These earlier communities helped establish strong neighborhood migration networks, such that revolutionary priest Ernesto Cardenal later nicknamed San Francisco "la ciudad de los nicaragüenses" (the Nicaraguan city).[11]

The passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and growing political turbulence increased migrations over the course of the 1970s. As Brian Godfrey pointed out, by 1988, "San Francisco [had] come to be a major center of Central Americans in the United States."[12] Gradually, increasing migrations from Central America over the last half of the twentieth century challenged Mexican and Mexican American majorities in the West and Southwest and Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican majorities in the Southeast and New England, forging an often unrecognized redefinition of Latinos in the United States. As Arturo Arias discussed, "Central American-Americans are a group doubly marginalized in 'our' overall understanding, if not imagined space, of what Latinos and Latinoness constitute in the United States."[13] The narrative of Nicaraguan solidarity in San Francisco provides a valuable lens for viewing this shift in Latinoness across the nation.

Ties between San Francisco and Nicaragua solidified when a devastating earthquake tore Managua apart on December 23, 1972. The disaster took the lives of up to 20,000 people and destroyed more than three-quarters of the city's housing and businesses.[14] San Francisco cultural workers sought to make a difference through fundraising—for instance, Vargas and a handful of activist Nicaraguan exiles started the Comité Cívico Latinoamericano Pro-Liberación de Nicaragua to send aid. Murguía described the membership of El Comité Cívico as the convergence of older anti-Somoza exiles with younger Nicaraguans born in the United States.[15] Once established, El Comité Cívico organized rallies, po-

etry readings, lectures, and even produced radio and television shows.[16] Rapidly, the group became a powerful organizing force in the Mission and in Nicaragua.

Significantly, the earthquake also revealed the scale of Somoza corruption to the world, since most of the international aid never left government coffers. Stuart Kallen reported that "although Nicaragua received more than $100 million in international aid for earthquake relief, very little went to the suffering of the poor."[17] The 1972 earthquake proved a turning point, or as Thomas Walker noted, "the beginning of the end" for the Somoza regime. By the mid-1970s, Walker added, "Somoza stood out as one of the worst human rights violators in the Western hemisphere."[18] Matilde Zimmerman argued that the earthquake is overestimated as a turning point, but did acknowledge that "the aftermath of the earthquake did exacerbate real economic and political conflicts between the Somoza family and other sections of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie."[19] For Zimmerman, focusing only on the disaster obscured the earlier history of Sandinista organizing.

The guerrilla Sandinista Front promised a radical social revolution. While the FSLN struggled with internal divisions, its ideology promised social justice for the masses. According to Carlos Fonseca, who later earned the title "Supreme Commander" of the Nicaraguan revolution, "The question is not only to bring about a change of the man in power, but to transform the system, to overthrow the exploiting classes and achieve the victory of the exploited."[20] In 1978, the FSLN published a list of twenty-five objectives that clearly established its revolutionary ambitions: to redistribute land, create an agrarian revolution, enhance labor conditions, control prices, enhance public transportation, provide utilities to rural areas, develop decent housing, provide free medical assistance and education to all in need, politically incorporate indigenous communities, protect natural resources, eliminate torture and political assassinations, encourage free speech, and end discrimination against women.[21] Such social reform perfectly intersected with the ideals of community organizers in San Francisco.

In the late 1960s, San Francisco's activism encompassed intersecting issues, from the Native American takeover at Alcatraz and the controversial trial of Los Siete de la Raza to the Third World Strike at San Francisco State University and the Black Panther breakfast programs. Significantly, protests against the war in Vietnam had produced a community suspicious of U.S. Cold War interventions and anticommunist propaganda. Of course, many of the student protest movements of the late 1960s grew out of a longer history of radical and leftist politics in the Bay Area.[22] Wilma Mankiller, a former resident of the Mission and subsequent chief of the Cherokee nation, writes that, "by the time the 1960s were underway, any self-respecting radical, nonconformist, or renegade knew the place to be was San Francisco."[23] Not surprisingly, art and politics went hand in

hand; the city produced a multitude of posters, murals, and artistic interventions in support of these issues. As such, support for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua indicated a more expansive cultural milieu.

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

> *Como los puertorriqueños en Nueva York, los cubanos en Miami, y los mexicanos en Los Ángeles, eran los nicaragüenses en San Francisco. La calle Mission era la calle de los nicas; allí estaban los restaurantes y bares nicaragüenses, se vendía* La Prensa de Managua*, se bebía cerveza nicaragüense. Y allí había una oficina del Frente Sandinista: con la bandera rojinegra, retrato de Sandino, pósters revolucionarios; bajo la vigilancia y amenaza del FBI y de la CIA.*
>
> Like the Puerto Ricans in New York, the Cubans in Miami, and the Mexicans in Los Angeles, it was the Nicaraguans in San Francisco. Mission Street was the street of the Nicaraguans; there were Nicaraguan restaurants and bars, they sold Managua's newspaper *La Prensa*, they drank Nicaraguan beer. And there was even an office of the Sandinista Front: with the red and black flag, portrait of Sandino, revolutionary posters; under the threat and surveillance of the FBI and CIA.[24]

Nicaraguan restaurants, merchants, and community spaces, including a base for the FSLN, altered the Mission landscape and culture. As Serrano recalled, at the urging of her friend Vargas, "I went down to the Sandinista headquarters . . . right off Valencia Street . . . and met all the *compañeros*, who barely, almost all exiles, barely spoke English. . . . They wanted me to help them with organizing a group to speak to the American people about Nicaragua, and to stop U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. And as a result, I helped to form NIN—Non-Intervention in Nicaragua." Serrano added that her recruitment efforts largely consisted of organizing "the only people I knew, which were all the poets."[25] As Serrano's story illustrates, the physical presence of Sandinista organizations had a radicalizing effect on the neighborhood.

One reporter later stated, "There is a quasi-joke among certain sectors here that half the Nicaraguan revolution was planned in back rooms around Mission Street."[26] It was hardly a joke. According to Cardenal, "*La célula sandinista de San Francisco era la más importante de los Estados Unidos*" (The Sandinista cell in San Francisco was the most important in the United States).[27] Obviously,

organizing for the Sandinistas was safer in San Francisco than it was in Nicaragua. Former soldier Walter Ferreti stated that "the FSLN could operate in the U.S., could make demonstrations, and could publicly expose the cruelties of the Somoza dictatorship. We had an office and made propaganda against the regime."[28] Protections of free speech and free assembly facilitated San Francisco support for the Nicaraguan revolution. The Mission subsequently served as a second home to various high-profile revolutionaries, including Ferreti, Casimiro Sotelo, Raúl Venerio, Lygia Venerio, and Bérman Zúniga.[29] The cultivation of this relationship between San Francisco and the Sandinistas resulted in a sometimes covert and reciprocal intimacy.

FBI infiltration and surveillance intruded on this relationship. Ferreti reported, "Of course, the office was vandalized, the printing press was broken, and the files stolen. To this day we don't know if this was done by Somoza's agents or by the FBI. And of course, those of us who worked there were stopped in the streets or in our cars by the police. They would ask us where we were going and what we were doing. They would call us 'communists' and tell us to go back to Nicaragua."[30] Regardless of official U.S. or Nicaraguan interventions, San Francisco proved a key location from which to support a revolution.

"Stoned on Liberation and Love at the Risk of Seeming Ridiculous"

The sense of being part of the same struggle, "*la misma cosa,*" profoundly shaped local Latino cultural production. Cultural workers like Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, and Alejandro Murgía supported the revolution in Nicaragua as part of a larger internationalist vision of liberation. In 1975, Vargas called on his fellow residents to support the Sandinistas in *El Tecolote*: "Being in the belly of the U.S. monster, we can help bring about a real change in Nicaragua. . . . From San Francisco, we can provide moral and material support to Nicaraguans struggling against U.S. imperialism." His phrase "being in the belly of the U.S. monster" was a subtle way for Vargas to connect his efforts to the work of Cuban revolutionary José Martí (1853–1895), who described his life of exile in New York as existing "*en las entrañas del monstruo*" (inside the monster).[31] The reference enabled Vargas to unite the revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua and Cuba. He also invoked Martí's call for a unified Latin America in response to U.S. empire building. In a widely circulated 1891 article "Our America," Martí urged Latin Americans to "form ranks lest the seven-league giant stride on! It is the hour of retribution, of the united march, and we must go forward in close formation, like silver in the roots of the Andes."[32] Vargas echoed Martí, declaring that "every Latino has the responsibility to work toward the liberation of

our people. There is no neutral or middle ground, and we must join the struggle."[33] There was perhaps a small but important difference between the two, since instead of calling for the joining of Latin American nations, Vargas called for the joining of all Latinos, especially those living in the United States and most particularly those in San Francisco.

That this pan-Latino perspective pervaded the neighborhood is evident in the newspapers, the poetry, and the culture. For instance, *El Tecolote* amplified Vargas's call for action with an accompanying three-page "special report" on "Nicaragua: Its People, History, Politics, and Economy." The article provided a brief summary of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, describing past and current U.S. interventions, U.S. investments ("$34.2 million in AID loans"), and Nicaraguan poverty. The article highlighted the lack of education ("only 5% reach the sixth grade") and poor life expectancy ("50% of the deaths occur in children under the age of 14"). In a sidebar editorial, *El Tecolote* staff declared firm agreement with Vargas, stating, "In doing research for this article, two themes have come up consistently: U.S. intervention, whether direct or indirect, which clearly has been used to the detriment of the Nicaraguan people, and their courageous and continuous struggle for control over their own lives and country. As Latinos we are part of this same struggle. It is important to show our solidarity with the progressive struggles of all people and to support them in any way we can."[34] Alongside these articles appeared a photograph of anti-Somoza graffiti in the Mission, labeled "Wall-writing in the Mission," along with a graphic of protestors carrying a banner declaring, "*basta ya de Somosas!*" In depicting the "*Muera Somoza*" (Die Somoza) graffiti, *El Tecolote* showed the outrage and solidarity of the neighborhood and affirmed its political convictions as part of the neighborhood's struggle.

The ideology of transnational liberation shaped the neighborhood's cultural production, defined what it meant to be Latino, and contributed to the ways that action abroad and at home merged. Vargas, born in Nicaragua but raised in San Francisco, dedicated himself to bringing revolution to both places. Vargas writes in a "prefatory poem" to his book *Nicaragua: Yo Te Canto Besos Balas y Sueños de Libertad:*

> I am mounted on a procestoro
> called revolución on 2 planes (Mission)
> (Managua) expressions multiplied/complicated . . . [35]
>
> I sing you
> BESOS BALAS Y SUEÑOS (Kisses Bullets and Dreams)

DESDE ACA!	(From here)
GLORIA ETERNA A	(Eternal glory to)
TODOS NUESTROS HEROES Y MARTIRES	(All our heroes and martyrs)
VIVA NICARAGUA LIBRE!	(Long live free Nicaragua)
VIVA EL FRENTE SANDINISTA	(Long live the Sandinista Front)
DE LIBERACION NACIONAL	
PATRIA LIBRE O MORIR[36]	(Free Nicaragua or death)

As this poem suggests, Vargas saw his fight for the Mission and for Nicaragua as two fronts of the same war. For Vargas, "Nicamerica" poetically expressed the ideological linkage of these two places so far apart, so different, and yet not.

Vargas turned to poetry as a meaningful tool of self-expression, as an aid to combat colonizing histories and pedagogies, and as a voice to organize and redefine communities. His 1971 book of poems, *Primeros Cantos*, assembled a series of socially conscious poems critical of capitalism. Poems such as "Elegy Pa Esso," "They Blamed It on Reds," and "Elegy *Pa Gringolandia*" ridiculed American love for the dollar. In "Elegy *Pa Gringolandia*," Vargas fantasizes about the death of capitalism:

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

It seems . . . just the other day
A new world . . . began . . . again
Chepito in Nicaraguan natural
Sticking life to drumskin
Splashing Tim-Timbale voodoo

On Santana's Mayan/pocho/Afro
Sinfonia (Jingo-Jingova)
And today the new children
Are STONED on Liberation
And love. . . . (At the risk of
of seeming
Ridiculous . . .)

For Vargas, the death of "Amerikka" birthed true liberation, a world returning to a mestizo culture of pounding drums and natural incantations of love. His dramatic reading of the poem, very much akin to the spoken-word style of Beat and Nuyorican poets, sounded emphatically musical, playing with tempo and singing certain phrases ("o say can you see" and "jingo jingova").[37] The poem captured Vargas's idyllic hopes. "Amerikka" might practice egregious financial activities ("in the belly of the Stock-Exchange"), but people have another choice: fight for liberation and love.

Readers versed in revolutionary literature will recognize Vargas's ideological inspirations. For instance, he used the line "stoned on liberation and love at the risk of seeming ridiculous" as a call to risk being passionate about the world. Like love, liberation induces a drug-like high, a sense of purpose, and a willingness to sacrifice one's self for the sake of something more profound. But the line also referred to the writings of Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who famously stated, "Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality."[38] As his poetry evinced, Vargas sought to be an authentic revolutionary, especially by drawing inspiration from the writings of Guevara and Martí. Vargas was not alone in this regard. As George Mariscal pointed out, "By the time of the first Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in March of 1969, the image of Che had become a staple at most Movimiento gatherings."[39] Guevara's writings also proved inspirational for the Black Panthers.[40] In embracing this phrase from Guevara, Vargas aligned himself with a larger sphere of resistance.

More practically, Vargas sought to turn his writing into action. Thus, as Murguía noted, "Roberto took the concept of organizer and expanded it to mean everything: organizer of poetry readings, writing workshops, film and theater projects, community dances, and eventually even political marches and rallies for Nicaragua."[41] Vargas's many activities can be read as "*la misma cosa*," all endeavoring to radicalize the neighborhood and beyond, in hopes of creating a world of liberation and love. In 1974, Vargas cofounded the *Gaceta Sandinista*, a San Francisco Spanish-language newspaper dedicated to covering the strug-

gle in Nicaragua. The fact that San Francisco became the home of the only newspaper in the United States devoted to the Sandinista cause is illustrative of the Bay Area culture.[42]

The newspaper's editorial staff reads like a list of Sandinista soldiers, including Vargas, Ferreti, Sotelo, and Venerio Jr., all in San Francisco, while another set of "reporters" served in Los Angeles.[43] Nina Serrano reported that Ferreti, an exiled member of the Nicaraguan student movement whose uncle had fought with Sandino, found work as a cook and waiter in local high-end hotels, but otherwise spent his energies directing and distributing *Gaceta Sandinista*. In fact, all the reporters contributed a portion of their salaries toward maintaining an office on Bartlett Street between 22nd and Mission streets, which served as an all-around base of operations for the community.[44]

The newspaper provided information in a way that would have been impossible within Nicaragua without serious repercussions from the government. Much of the reportage focused on the conditions of political prisoners, the government's repressive violence and corruption, and successful FSLN actions. The newspaper was one facet of increasingly powerful community organizing in the Mission.

In fact, *Gaceta Sandinista* signaled a dramatic expansion of independent publishing in the city. Alejandro Murguía's experience conveys the close ties that existed between *Gaceta Sandinista* and the various Third World publishing collectives that had mobilized throughout the city. After moving to San Francisco from Los Angeles in 1971, Murguía joined Editorial Pocho-Che, an organization first started in 1968 to serve the publishing needs of Latino writers and artists.[45] He also cofounded Third World Communications in 1972 and the Third World Poetry Series at San Francisco State in 1974.[46] As a writer, editor, and organizer, Murguía had a hand in bringing various projects to publication, including *Time to Greez!: Incantations from the Third World* (1975) and a series of chapbooks that included the work of José Montoya, Roberto Vargas, Raúl Salinas, and Nina Serrano.[47] As Murguía's repertoire expanded, he also became an editor for *Gaceta Sandinista* and the official Bay Area FSLN representative. Not coincidentally, Editorial Pocho-Che became part of the publishing arm for *Gaceta Sandinista*.[48] The rise of these Third World publishing ventures reveals the internationalist spirit driving local support for the FSLN.

Relatively quickly, the revolution in Nicaragua stimulated Murguía's political and literary activism in the Mission. He first learned about Nicaragua through Vargas, who introduced him to the writings of Ernesto Cardenal in 1972.[49] He also remembered the rapid popularization of a mock "wanted" poster in the Mission featuring Anastasio Somoza Debayle with the line "*se busca*" (wanted) for murder, extortion, and robberies committed against the Nicaraguan people. Murguía later discovered that Casimiro Sotelo, a Nicaraguan

exile living in Burlingame as an architect and a member of el Comité Cívico, was responsible for circulating the poster.[50] Sotelo and other like-minded Nicaraguan exiles gave urgency and relevance to the political situation in faraway Nicaragua. As Murguía recalled in a 1981 article, "My own involvement started around 1974 when I had the privilege of meeting several patriotic Nicaraguans who told me of this tyrant Somoza who had ruled their country for 45 years and of their national hero who had fought the U.S. Marines back in the 1920s, Augusto Sandino."[51] It did not take much for Murguía to see Nicaragua as part of a larger struggle. As he wrote in the same article, "Nicaragua was a classic confrontation: a puppet regime installed and supported by the United States, challenged by a National Liberation Front. Vietnam in the western hemisphere."[52] Angered by the disaster of U.S. policy in Vietnam, Murguía saw it as imperative to engage with the struggle in Nicaragua.

In December 1974 a spectacular hostage event gave worldwide visibility to the Sandinista cause. Nine Sandinista soldiers raided an elite party in the home of the former minister of agriculture in honor of departing U.S. ambassador Turner Shelton (who had left by the time of the raid). The Sandinistas killed four and threatened to kill the remaining thirteen hostages if their demands were not met. Somoza consented to several demands, including a million-dollar ransom, an eighty-minute radio broadcast, the printing of a political manifesto in *La Prensa*, and the release of fourteen Sandinista prisoners, including Daniel Ortega Saavedra (later president of Nicaragua). Stephen Kinzer wrote that "the assault stunned and humiliated the Somoza dictatorship and gave the Sandinistas a reputation for audacity that attracted many new militants."[53]

The seizure of hostages also spurred a dramatic counterresponse. Zimmerman noted that "the government immediately declared a state of siege and launched a wave of repression that resulted in an estimated three thousand deaths . . . dropping bombs and napalm on settlements, burning peasant homes and fields, and disappearances, rapes, and incarceration in concentration camps."[54] Government repression escalated dramatically. News of the widespread human rights abuses and violence not only kindled more worldwide support for a new regime in Nicaragua but also spurred an exodus of Nicaraguans. Many exiles found a new home in the Mission, thereby adding to a diasporic community committed to eliminating Somoza from power.

In his memoir, Murguía recalled his first demonstration for the FSLN, likely in early January of 1975: "We carried these beautiful black-and-red posters of Sandino silk-screened by La Raza Silk Screen Center, and we waved them at passing traffic and stood outside El Tico-Nica bar exchanging insults with Somoza sympathizers"[55] (Fig. 6.1). The moment was captured in an *El Tecolote* photograph printed in June 1975, which showed a cheerful Murguía and Vargas

Figure 6.1. Roberto Vargas and Alejandro Murguía marching down Mission Street in support of the Sandinistas in 1975. Photograph by Alejandro Stuart. Image courtesy of Alejandro Murguía.

leading a crowd of protesters down Mission Street with their signs of support for the Sandinistas. The image also conveys how the posters from La Raza Silkscreen Center contributed to the visible solidarity of the movement. And while Murguía's recollection indicates that Somoza sympathizers did exist in the Mission, the thrust of community organizing was decidedly in favor of the Sandinistas.

Similarly, an *El Tecolote* photograph (Fig. 6.2) of a 1975 press conference in support of the FSLN is striking in its diverse representation: The image featured Black Panther member Angela Davis, FSLN soldier Casimiro Sotelo, poet-activist Roberto Vargas, and the charismatic Glide Church's Reverend Cecil Williams, a tireless advocate for one of San Francisco's most disenfranchised neighborhoods, the Tenderloin. By featuring Davis and Williams as key members of El Comité Cívico, the press conference visibly and emphatically showed that the fight for Nicaragua held relevance not just for Latinos, but also for African Americans and other struggling communities. By 1975, El Comité

Figure 6.2. A press conference of members of El Comité Civico Pro-Liberación de Nicaragua on September 10, 1975. From left to right are Angela Davis, Casimiro Sotelo, Roberto Vargas, and Reverend Cecil Williams, 1975. The image appeared in the October, 1975 issues of *El Tecolote* and *Gaceta Sandinista*. Both Sotelo and Vargas became Nicaraguan ambassadors to the United States after the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979. Image courtesy of Acción Latina / *El Tecolote* archive.

Cívico already had positioned itself as one piece of a much larger set of struggles in the Bay Area, the nation, and abroad.

Local support for the Sandinista movement came to a head with the opening of the Mission Cultural Center in 1977. The building was the result of a decade-long battle between cultural workers and City Hall for neighborhood arts centers. As Nina Serrano stated, "*Esto, que parecía ser un regalo era una concesión para silenciar la creciente protesta de la comunidad por el costoso 'Davies Hall' que se construiría pronto para beneficio de los gustos artísticos de los sectores ricos y suburbanos*" (Though this building may have appeared like a gift, it was really a concession to silence the growing community protest over the cost of Davies Hall [Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall], which would be under construction shortly to benefit the artistic tastes of wealthy suburbanites).[56] San Francisco's investments in high-art institutions like the symphony, opera house, and performing arts center spurred public calls for equivalent investment in low-income communities. After considerable protest, the city finally agreed to fund neighborhood arts programs and cultural centers.[57]

Murguía, as the first director of the Mission Cultural Center, and Vargas and Serrano in their roles as community organizers, contributed to its political and artistic orientation.[58] That all three were calling for revolution in Nicaragua while calling for a cultural center in the Mission demonstrated the kind of ideological overlap between these seemingly disparate needs. Together, they were determined to create a place where residents could congregate, where art could be taught and shared, and where ideas could revolutionize the future of the barrio. Finding a good physical home for the center was critical to their agenda. With the help of the community, they transformed a long-neglected former furniture store on Mission Street into a cultural center. Their insistence on purchasing the building, as opposed to renting, contributed to the center's survival in an area where property values later increased astronomically.

To mark the opening of the Mission Cultural Center, Vargas, Murguía, and Serrano created an event that would reflect the institution's ideological future. They invited Sandinista poet Ernesto Cardenal to speak at the opening. Such an invitation clearly placed the Mission Cultural Center in solidarity with the Sandinistas and other like-minded struggles around the world. However, according to Serrano, not everyone was pleased: Another group threatened to block Cardenal's visit by interfering with a community election to support his visit, revealing a pivotal disagreement between cultural workers who sought to implement an internationalist perspective and others who demanded that the Mission Cultural Center reflect a strictly community-based focus.[59] These differences played out in the center's first election.

Those who disapproved of a Sandinista presence had city hall support. As Serrano recalled, "They had, with all of their funding, poverty pimps; they had youth on their payroll who they could give stipends to come to the meeting. And so they were going to pack the meeting with all these kids . . . who would vote."[60] News of the potential conflict spread, including to the office of *Gaceta Sandinista*. According to Serrano, "Just before it was time to vote, in walked the Sandinistas . . . seven of them. . . . Seven small men in military formation. And they marched in and they formed a military line and stood in silence. And the whole place went silent. And then we made our proposal, and we voted and no one knew if they were armed or not, and we voted and we won the election."[61] What is most remarkable about this story is imagining that the Sandinista soldiers served as electoral observers for their comrades/fellow residents in the United States.

Cardenal not only gave the inaugural address but, according to the Mission District's literary journal *Tin Tan*, also "baptized a group of children, in a very moving ceremony in which he called on the spirits of greed, capitalism, egoism and Somoza, to keep out of these children."[62] The event drew approximately

two thousand attendees.[63] His presence symbolized the hope for social change that cultural workers sought for the community.

Within a very short amount of time, the Mission Cultural Center became a hub of publishing, home to *Tin Tan*, *El Tecolote*, *El Pulgarcito*, and *La Gaceta Sandinista*. As poet Juan Felipe Herrera argues, the Mission District experienced a literary renaissance under the unobservant noses of San Francisco's major literary circles, who saw the neighborhood "as dangerous, noisy, and devoid of literary power and writing culture."[64] Indeed, the turmoil in Central America stirred a wave of creative energy in San Francisco's barrio, with poetry and politics spilling into the streets.

Taking Up Arms: Poets in the Revolution

By 1978, the Sandinista movement had widespread support in the Bay Area and throughout the United States, particularly as the Somoza regime seemed likely to topple. One publication pointed out the strength of this support in the presence of over twenty pro-Sandinista committees in just Washington, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.[65] Emily K. Hobson has pointed out how gay and lesbian activists in San Francisco turned to this struggle as part of an anti-imperialist mobilization for social justice. According to Hobson, "Lesbian and gay leftists looked to Nicaragua as the site of a revolution they must defend, as an inspirational model for their own struggles, and as a vehicle for sexual liberation whose meaning could be glimpsed in women seizing arms."[66] In San Francisco, solidarity with the Sandinista struggle filtered into many aspects of life in the city, appearing regularly in the culture and the landscape. The Mission Cultural Center sponsored a "Week of Solidarity with the People of Nicaragua," consisting of films, music, and poetry. Events featured an impressive list of poets, including Victor Hernández Cruz, Diane di Prima, Jack Hirschman, Michael McClure, David Meltzer, Ricardo Mendoza, Janice Mirikitani, Ishmael Reed, and Alma Villanueva.[67] San Francisco's 24th Street BART station, or Plaza Sandino, saw nightly vigils and weekend rallies to call for the removal of Somoza.[68] As popular support for the Sandinistas increased, disapproval of U.S. policies in Central America grew.

Murguía's and Vargas's activism reflected increasing personal risk, from publishing and protesting to taking over the Nicaraguan consulate. Murguía recalled, "[We] took over the office, and expelled the consul and his staff. We held the office for a whole day before finally agreeing to withdraw."[69] Fellow cultural worker Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz remembered the day: "I happened to be working that day in the Treaty Council office in the Flood Building at Powell and Market, which was on the floor below the Nicaraguan consulate. When I

heard the racket, I walked upstairs and saw the small band wearing black-and-red scarves over their faces. Even so, I recognized Roberto and Alejandro." Amazingly, the authorities did not arrest anyone because they could not determine who had jurisdiction.[70] More than likely, Vargas and Murguía drew partial inspiration for their takeover from other media-savvy Sandinista political actions, such as the 1974 kidnappings.

In the Mission, as in Latin America, poets became not just figurative, but actual revolutionaries. As a Sandinista victory appeared increasingly imminent, Vargas and Murguía made the decision to join the fighting in the southern front. In fact, a team of sympathizers began training in the Bay Area hills. Murguía stated, "During the period between October 1978 and June 1979, I devoted full time to organizing solidarity committees across the United States in support of the Nicaraguan people, as well as editing the journal, *Gaceta Sandinista*. In June of 1979, along with the *compañeros* 'Armando' and 'Danilo,' I left for Costa Rica to join in the Final Offensive."[71] Murguía subsequently documented the fighting in two books: the fictional *The Southern Front* (1990) and the autobiographical *The Medicine of Memory* (2002).

In *The Southern Front*, Murguía drew together an amalgamation of his and others' experiences fighting for the Sandinistas through the trajectory of his central character, Ulises. Murguía's outlook on the war surfaces in the expressions of Ulises's thoughts, such as when he wrote, "He'd always believed that once in your life, without being drafted or impressed, you had to be willing to risk everything for what you believed was righteous, even beautiful, and you had to go to this battle with a pure heart and singing—and this was it for him, a clear-cut, well-defined little war."[72] The line purposefully evoked Che Guevara's call to be a true revolutionary, further emphasized by the fact that Ulises kept *El Diario del Che en Bolivia* in his pocket.[73] Ulises, and really, Murguía, followed in Guevara's footsteps in a battle that resembled the fight for Cuba. In an earlier version of *The Southern Front*, in a 1981 article published as "A Chicano Sandinista in Nicaragua," Murguía not only linked Ulises's commitment to the Sandinistas to a longer historical trajectory, placing it in parallel with the fight against Franco in 1930s Spain, he also critiqued the Chicano movement for insularity and apathy and urged a more transnational vision of activism. Murguía wrote:

> You know, if I had done the 1930s thing, I would have joined the International Brigade that fought against the fascist in Spain. But as it was, I grew up during the Chicano Movement, the Crusade in Denver, the Youth Conferences, Reies Lopes [*sic*] Tijerina, Chicano Moratorium, Brown Berets and so on. I've been through all that Aztlan stuff, La Raza,

> self determination, anti-imperialist, down with the gringos bullshit. So what better place to put up or shut up? I mean it's like really easy to be in your campus office with a Zapata poster on your wall and mouth rhetoric, but it's something else to take it to the trenches.[74]

Murguía showed little patience for empty rhetoric and suggested the true revolutionary "takes it to the trenches." The decision to go to war proved Murguía's and Vargas's commitment to their ideals in the tradition of Che Guevara. Others wrestled with this masculinist turn to military action.[75] The presence of widespread support for the Sandinistas in San Francisco did not mean there was agreement about the mode of revolution. Poet Nina Serrano's experience illustrates some of the complex gender dynamics and disharmonies that shaped the Nicaraguan solidarity movement in San Francisco.

The Pacifist Poet

As a pacifist, Serrano struggled with the militant rhetoric shaping activism for Nicaragua. A Colombian American originally from New York, she moved to San Francisco in 1961 with hopes of joining the Beat counterculture. Her love of theater and politics led her to become a writer for the San Francisco Mime Troupe. She also established her filmmaking career when she and her then husband, Saul Landau, produced *Que Hacer?* (*What Is to Be Done?*), a film supportive of the Allende government in Chile, which they released during the 1973 coup. Of the moment, Serrano recalled, "I made a pledge to devote myself to the cause of Chilean freedom and to try and use our film to help with that."[76] Still, she wrestled with turning to violence as a means to an end.

Serrano originally learned about the Nicaraguan struggle in 1969 while working on a play with Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton in Cuba, and it was his dangerous life that caused Serrano to meditate on the role of violence in pursuit of liberation. While she supported the struggle intellectually, her preference for nonviolence caused her enormous internal conflict. Serrano's poem, "To Roque Dalton Before Leaving to Fight in El Salvador (Havana, 1969)," indicated her ambivalence—loving this revolutionary figure who was already larger than life in the minds of many while sensing that his life would end tragically:

> "Don't die," I whispered, in person.
> Only the air and revolutionary slogans hung between us.
> "When I die I'll wear a big smile."
> And with his finger painted a clown's smile
> on his Indian face

"Don't die!" the whisper beneath the call to battle.
My love of man in conflict
with my love for this man.[77]

Serrano found herself trapped in a catch-22, as she simultaneously supported "the call to battle," but also could not help but whisper, "don't die." Her poem spun on the contradictory romance of revolution, as she found herself caught between her values as an activist and as a humanist: "My love of man in conflict/with my love for this man." In the poem, Dalton joked about his impending death, making light of something that is pinned on "revolutionary slogans." The ambivalence of the poem reflected how Serrano's pacifism tempered her appreciation for revolution.

As a woman, Serrano struggled with her responsibilities in this male-dominated culture of revolution. Her poem elicited the gendered lines of war:

Women die too.
They let go their tight grip on breath and sigh,
And sigh to die.
They say that Tania died before Che.
I saw her die in a Hollywood movie.
Her blood floated in the river.[78]

For Serrano, the implications were unclear. Women "die too," but they certainly did not attain the fame of their male counterparts. In the end of the poem, she weighed her fate:

I stand by a puddle in Havana
A woman full of blood
Not yet spilled.
Can I spill blood by my own volition?
Now it flows from me by a call of the moon.
The moon . . .
    A woman mopping her balcony
    Spills water from her bucket
    On my hair, my breast
    And into the puddle.
The question is answered.[79]

Contemplating her role as a revolutionary, she posed the question, "Can I spill blood by my own volition?" She used this question to change the direction

of the poem, moving suddenly from the blood of war, to the blood of life, using the metaphor of her menstrual cycle to affirm the giving of life over the taking of life. Her identification as a woman became a way of separating herself from the brutality of warfare. Significantly, her interest in the roles that men and women played in revolutionary struggles continued to shape her art.

In 1979, Serrano and Lourdes Portillo grappled with the gendered roles of revolution in *Después del Terremoto* (*After the Earthquake*), a short film depicting the experiences of a woman who migrated from Nicaragua to the Mission after the earthquake.[80] Portillo, who later directed multiple films, stated, "I was also involved in the Sandinista movement in the United States in the late seventies, in solidarity with them, Nina Serrano and I . . . we decided to make a film that would inform the people about the struggle."[81] The film drew inspiration from its Mission District setting, using familiar places and local residents to act the parts (including a cameo by Serrano). In their request for funding, they described the neighborhood as a place where "people walk, talk and 'visit' on the sidewalk," where "music can be heard emanating from car radios and transistors," and where "young people have painted street murals of history, culture and community problems."[82]

The film illustrates the ways that cultural workers pushed to radicalize the community and the ways that everyday life in the barrio often subsumed interest in such issues. Early in the film, Irene learns her former fiancé Julio is in San Francisco after suffering three years of torture by the Somoza regime. They meet again in the Mission, but they have become different people "after the earthquake" and are unable to reconnect romantically.

Irene works hard as a maid and dreams more about buying a television than about improving conditions in Nicaragua. However, her character is complex, since her experience as a working woman in the United States propels a feminist consciousness. She finds more sexual freedom and independence in San Francisco than she ever knew in Nicaragua, displayed by the first scene of Irene handling a book entitled *Vida Sexual: Prematrimonial* (*Premarital Sexual Life*). For Irene, the purchase of a television signifies her freedom as a woman. Irene tells Julio, "I think that a woman must be independent, as I am becoming. To show you, I've just bought a TV."[83] Portillo and Serrano represent Irene sympathetically, but also suggest the ways new migrants are co-opted by the glamour of American capitalism.

Julio, a passionate revolutionary, appears more in tune with the politics of the filmmakers, but his rabid approach alienates the people he tries to reach. At a birthday party, Julio initiates a slide show to recruit assistance for the revolution, not unlike slide shows organized by the Mission's Comité Cívico. Julio talks over the images of poverty: "This shack is a school in our beautiful country—a

country with thirty percent illiteracy. . . . This is a child dying of malnutrition. Yet, millions of dollars in U.S. aid are used by this corrupt dictator to buy arms and continue to keep our people under submission. This is an abuse of power. This is oppression." His audience is resistant. One woman responds, "For this stupidity the Immigration Department can deport us!" while another states, "We know all this, but we are not there, we are here." The responses echoed popular sentiments in the neighborhood. The filmmakers, like Julio, were invested in transnational action, but they also empathized with the fears and concerns of new migrants and low-income residents.[84]

According to Portillo, the decision to fictionalize the representation of Nicaraguan exiles in the Mission provoked a mixed response. Portillo recalled, "I didn't want to make a film that was a documentary—a straight, hard-hitting factual documentary. And I saw the richness of their life and I wanted to capture it. At the same time, when I did that, it was a struggle against them [the Sandinista movement in the United States] and they disowned us in the process. . . . They wanted us to do a documentary . . . very factual, very political, very one-sided."[85]

El Tecolote offered evidence of this preference for nonfiction in its 1979 review of the film *Patria Libre o Morir*, a documentary to support the FSLN, which played to "a standing room only crowd at the Mission Cultural Center."[86] Notably, the realism of the documentary style tended to favor a masculine orientation of the struggle, largely focusing on the fighting, which rendered women's lives and responses relatively invisible. Serrano's and Portillo's film presented an unusual focus on a female Nicaraguan exile, when so many of the expressions of solidarity embraced a Che Guevara vision of revolution.

Portillo added that some did not find the film radical enough. Criticized by those who might be most sympathetic, the film encountered even stronger disapproval in the industry, as it was unable to secure distribution in the United States, more than likely for the picture it painted of U.S. foreign policy.[87] The censorship underscores the ways that political sympathies in San Francisco did not reflect the U.S. mainstream.

In 1979, the year that *Después del Terremoto* was released, the dreams of the FSLN and of San Francisco cultural workers came to fruition. After weeks of military advances, the FSLN took over the capital city of Managua on July 17, 1979. President Somoza fled to the United States, then Paraguay, while the Sandinista government declared the revolution a success. The dramatic change in leadership catalyzed a pervasive hopefulness for the left. Alejandro Murguía described the months leading up to that moment:

> *Durante los meses de mayo, junio y julio de 1979, miles y miles de nicaragüenses, latinoamericanos, chicanos, indígenas y norteamericanos*

progresistas se lanzaron a las calles de importantes ciudades de EUA tales como San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Tucson, Nueva York y Washington DC, en apoyo a la ofensiva final que traería a Nicaragua su largamente esperada liberación.

During May, June, and July of 1979, thousands and thousands of Nicaraguans, Latin Americans, Chicanos, indigenous peoples, and North American progressives stormed out into the streets of cities in the United States, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Tucson, New York, and Washington, D.C., in support of the final offensive that brought Nicaragua its long awaited liberation.[88]

The promise of Nicaragua spoke to the dreams of thousands of people in the United States. Artists marked the victory of the Sandinistas into the Mission District landscape with a mural on Casa Nicaragua (Fig. 6.3). Located at 24th Street and Balmy Alley, near a growing collection of neighborhood murals, the building served as a gathering place, gallery, and information source for the

Figure 6.3. Artists Francisco Letelier, Jose Letelier, René Castro, and Bethan Cagri worked together as the Brigada Orlando Letelier to paint this mural on Casa Nicaragua, at the corner of Balmy Alley and 24th Street. Juan Pablo Letelier, Cristian Letelier, and Jose Labarca also assisted in the project, making this the only mural worked on by all four children of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier, who was famously assassinated in Washington, D.C. This photograph appeared in the March, 1981 issue of *El Tecolote*. Image courtesy of Francisco Letelier and Acción Latina / *El Tecolote* archive.

Nicaraguan leftist community in San Francisco. The mural illustrated how Bay Area cultural workers viewed the struggles in Chile and Nicaragua as "*la misma cosa*." The art covered the building and featured "Chilean and Nicaraguan symbols beneath a handshake of support between the two countries."[89] The linkage reflected the political concerns of the four mostly Chilean artists, known collectively as the Brigada Orlando Letelier, in honor of the Chilean diplomat assassinated in Washington, D.C., in 1976. Letelier's two sons, Francisco and José, painted the mural with René Castro, another exiled Chilean artist, and Beyhan Cagri. The mural resembled the "flat style" of murals that decorated Chile during the Salvador Allende government, which the Pinochet government sought to eradicate. The artists were completing the mural in the summer of 1979, just as the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza government, so its creation also served as a visual celebration of the victory.[90]

After the Revolution

After the revolution, the cultural exchange between San Francisco cultural workers and the Sandinistas continued to flourish. Murals proved a popular import into the new Nicaragua, particularly with Ernesto Cardenal as minister of culture. As art historian David Kunzle noted, "In the decade of Sandinista rule following the Triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, close to three hundred murals were created in a tiny, poor country of three million or so inhabitants."[91] Among the Bay Area muralists to travel to Nicaragua were the Brigada Orlando Letelier, Miranda Bergman, Juana Alicia, and Susan Greene. The exchanges had a profound impact on the artists. Greene wrote of her experience, "I saw what underdevelopment in Central America looks and feels like; and I witnessed how hard the Nicaraguan people are working to change their country. For example, 400,000 adults have been taught to read since 1979. . . . Through the experience of living and working in Nicaragua, solidarity now has the faces and words of friends. . . . ¡*Sandino Vive*!"[92]

The 1979 triumph of the Sandinistas prompted a shift in the direction of migration, as the new Nicaraguan government invited its U.S. supporters to participate in the revolution. Roberto Vargas and Casimiro Sotelo, both from the Mission, became Nicaraguan ambassadors. Nina Serrano's intimate connections with the country led her to translate Nicaraguan poetry and cofound Friends of Nicaraguan Culture. Both of Serrano's children left the Bay Area to live in Nicaragua for extended periods of time. As she stated, "For the next many years, many, many years, we produced international cultural exchanges, including music, art, theater, and interchanges of travel—interchange between American artists and Nicaraguan artists."[93] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz described

the Nicaragua of 1981 this way: "Poetry was in the air and everywhere—workshops and literacy training just for the purpose of being able to write poetry. It was a national obsession, writing poetry. But the contents of the poems were brave, not confessional, meant to bolster weakened spirits. Bravado poems, I called them."[94] An expansive energy of cultural production reigned in Nicaragua immediately after the revolution. It was a brief but profoundly exciting cultural renaissance that celebrated a major victory in the war against "*la misma cosa*."

Of course, this story did not end in the way that cultural workers hoped. The Sandinistas could not deliver the utopian vision that had attracted supporters. This, combined with U.S. intervention, precipitated the fall of the Sandinista regime in the 1990 election. As Gary Prevost and Harry Vanden stated, Reagan's Contra war "took 30,000 Nicaraguan lives, cost more than $12 billion in damages and bankrupted the Nicaraguan treasury."[95] The magnitude of U.S. military and diplomatic forces ensured the election of a presidential candidate who would protect U.S. interests. Serrano "was totally disheartened when they lost the election. It just was very, very painful."[96] Murguía felt angry: "After ten-plus years of a democratic-capitalist government . . . Nicaragua is now the poorest country of Latin America, and in the Western Hemisphere is second only to Haiti in lowest per capita income. This is the great benefit of the Contra War sponsored by the United States."[97] For many, the hope of the 1970s was destroyed by the violence of U.S. intervention in Central America over the course of the 1980s.

Traditional assessments of the 1970s suggest the period was empty of hope. Historian David Farber characterized the 1970s as a period when "Americans too often felt that they faced nothing but bad choices." According to Farber, "Events lent themselves to a litany of despair: inflation up, employment down; oil prices out of control, American-made automobiles breaking down; factories closed, marriages over, homicide rates soaring; President Gerald Ford."[98] Indeed, economic stagflation, deindustrialization, and decreased public funding hit neighborhoods like the Mission District especially hard. Nevertheless, out of this barrio, a transnational social movement flourished with hope. The issues were not unrelated. The promise of Nicaragua in the 1970s embodied what cultural workers hoped to build in the Mission and around the world. In the context of 1960s civil rights social movements, anti-Vietnam protests, and San Francisco liberalism, the Mission District became center stage for Latino arts organizing with a decidedly leftist bent.

U.S. support of the Contra War is well documented, but the story of popular American support for the Sandinista revolution is hardly recognized or taught. Acknowledging the history of this political activism and cultural pro-

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