# Chapter 6

Th e Mission in Nicaragua:

San Francisco Poets Go to War

Th is 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”

—N ina 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 Ameri c as. In *Th e Medicine of Memory* poet- activist Alejandro Murguía described how the neighborhood zeitgeist transformed his identity. In 1971, a ft er reading Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he stated, “Suddenly we reinterpreted our existence, we w ere no longer exiled in the cold north, in the pale United States. We transposed our Latino roots from Central Ameri c a, land of volcanoes and revolutions; from the Ca rib bean, 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: “Th e Mission is now aware of itself as a body of many people, all tribes aware of themselves. . . . Th ere is a collective feeling of compassion for each other Nicas Blacks Chicanos Chilenos oppressed Indios. Th e 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 strug gles 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 streets4

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. Th e 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 import ant 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 Th e repressive regime in Chile mobilized Bay Area activists into more passionate support for the guerrilla struggles in Nicaragua. Similarly, San Francisco po liti cal actions in support of the San dinistas in Nicaragua propelled a wave of parallel actions in support of the FMLN in El Salvador. Th is 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. Th e shared sense of struggle and the transnational cross- pollination of ideas contributed to a Latino and left ist 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 organi zing. Pro-S andinista sentiment flourished in San Francisco, not simply out of sympathy for Nicaraguans, but because cultural workers saw the situation abroad as part of the strugg les defi ning life in the Mission. If the Sand in ist as 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. Th e 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. Th e parallels w ere ready-m ade, and the strugg le 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 oft en develop and sustain import ant place-b ased networks that also transcend local and national bounda ries.”7 Th e socially accepted disenfranchisement of barrio communities can naturalize repre sen ta tions of t hese spaces as insular and disconnected, but the transnational demographics of residents suggests other wise.

Many San Francisco residents drew inspiration from the communist and socialist politics of Cuba and Chile. Transnational travel and communication networks emerged to disseminate t hese ideals, inspiring local residents to go abroad and encouraging infl uential cultural workers from abroad to come to the Mission. Residents traveled to Mexico to study mural-m aking and theater, visited Cuba as part of the Venceremos Brigade, campaigned in Chile for Salvador Allende, and attempted to rebuild Nicaragua a ft er the 1972 earthquake. Sim ult an eously, cultural workers invited visits from prestigious international leaders, including Roque Dalton, Enrique Buenaventura, Ernesto Cardenal, and a host of o thers. At a time when, as Murguía complained, “the typical Anglo American couldn’t fi nd Nicaragua or Colombia on a map, even if it bit them in the ass,” cultural workers in the Mission established an intimate and oft en romanticized relationship with Nicaragua.8 Th e i magined Nicaragua circulated in San Francisco poetry, murals, and lite ra t ure and sparked a left ist 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. Th eir 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 or ga nized 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 strug gle.

Notably, only one of the three— Vargas—is Nicaraguan. Murguía identifi es 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. Th e 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. Th e ensuing rise to power of right-wing dictator Somoza prohibited a return to their home country for the next forty years. Th is was the case for poet Roberto Vargas, whose f amily “came in the human wave fleeing the brutality of the Somoza regime.”10 Th ese 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

Th e passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and growing po liti cal 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 Ameri c a over the last half of the twentieth c entury challenged Mexican and Mexican American majorities in the West and Southwest and Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican majorities in the Southeast and New E ngland, forging an oft en unrecognized redefi nition of Latinos in the United States. As Arturo Arias discussed, “Central American-A mericans are a group doubly marginalized in ‘our’ overall understanding, if not i magined space, of what Latinos and Latinoness constitute in the United States.”13 Th e narrative of Nicaraguan solidarity in San Francisco provides a valuable lens for viewing this shift in Latino- ness across the nation.

Ties between San Francisco and Nicaragua solidifi ed when a devastating earthquake tore Managua apart on December 23, 1972. Th e disaster took the lives of up to 20,000 p eople and destroyed more than three-q uarters 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 or ga nized rallies, poetry readings, lectures, and even produced radio and tele vi sion shows.16 Rapidly, the group became a powerf ul organi zing 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 coff ers. Stuart Kallen reported that “although Nicaragua received more than $100 million in international aid for earthquake relief, very l ittle went to the suff ering of the poor.”17 Th e 1972 earthquake proved a turning point, or as Th omas 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 h uman rights violators in the Western hemi sphere.”18 Matilde Zimmerman argued that the earthquake is overestimated as a turning point, but did acknowledge that “the aft ermath of the earthquake did exacerbate real economic and po liti cal confl icts between the Somoza f amily and other sections of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie.”19 For Zimmerman, focusing only on the disaster obscured the earlier history of Sandinista organ izing.

Th e guerrilla Sandinista Front promised a radical social revolution. While the FSLN strugg led 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, “Th e 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- fi ve 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, pol itic ally incorporate indigenous communities, protect natur al resources, eliminate torture and pol itic al 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 Th ird World Strike at San Francisco State University and the Black Panther breakfast programs. Signifi cantly, 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 left ist 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 w ere 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 t hese issues. As such, support for the Sand in ist as in Nicaragua indicated a more expansive cultural milieu.

San Francisco support for the Sand in ist as 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 ofi cina 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; t here w ere Nicaraguan restaurants and bars, they sold Managua’s newspaper *La Prensa*, they drank Nicaraguan beer. And t here was even an offi ce of the Sandinista Front: with the red and black fl ag, 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 . . . a nd met all the *compañeros*, who barely, almost all exiles, barely spoke Eng lish. . . . Th ey wanted me to help them with organi zing 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 eff orts 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 organi zations had a radicalizing eff ect on the neighborhood.

One reporter later stated, “Th ere is a quasi-j oke among certain sectors h ere 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*” (Th e Sandinista cell in San Francisco was the most import ant 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 offi ce and made propaganda against the regime.”28 Protections of free speech and free assembly facilitated San Francisco support for the Nicaraguan revolution. Th e Mission subsequently served as a second home to vari ous high- profi le revolutionaries, including Ferreti, Casimiro Sotelo, Raúl Venerio, Lygia Venerio, and Bérman Zúniga.29 Th e cultivation of this relationship between San Francisco and the Sand in ist as resulted in a sometimes covert and reciprocal intimacy.

FBI infiltration and surveillance intruded on this relationship. Ferreti reported, “Of course, the offi ce was vandalized, the printing press was broken, and the fi les stolen. To this day we d on’t know if this was done by Somoza’s agents or by the FBI. And of course, t hose of us who worked t here w ere stopped in the streets or in our cars by the police. Th ey would ask us where we were going and what we were doing. Th ey would call us ‘communists’ and tell us to go back to Nicaragua.”30 Regardless of offi cial 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”

Th e 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 San di nis tas 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 eff orts 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 Th e reference enabled Vargas to unite the revolutionary strug gles in Nicaragua and Cuba. He also invoked Martí’s call for a unifi ed Latin Ameri c a in response to U.S. empire building. In a widely circulated 1891 article “Our Amer i ca,” Martí urged Latin Americans to “form ranks lest the seven-l eague g iant 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 “e very Latino has the responsibility to work toward the liberation of our people. Th ere is no neutral or middle ground, and we must join the struggle.”33 Th ere was perhaps a small but impor tant diff erence between the two, since instead of calling for the joining of Latin American nations, Vargas called for the joining of all Latinos, especially t hose living in the United States and most particularly those in San Francisco.

Th at this pan-L atino perspective pervaded the neighborhood is evident in the newspapers, the poetry, and the culture. For instance, *El Tecolote* amplifi ed Vargas’s call for action with an accompanying three- page “special report” on “Nicaragua: Its P eople, History, Politics, and Economy.” Th e article provided a brief summary of U.S.-N icaraguan relations, describing past and current U.S. interventions, U.S. investments (“$34.2 million in AID loans”), and Nicaraguan poverty. Th e 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 fi rm agreement with Vargas, stating, “In d oing research for this article, two themes have come up consistently: U.S. intervention, w hether direct or indirect, which clearly has been used to the detriment of the Nicaraguan p eople, and their courageous and continuous strug gle for control over their own lives and country. As Latinos we are part of this same strugg le. It is import ant to show our solidarity with the progressive strug gles of all people and to support them in any way we can.”34 Alongside these articles appeared a photo graph of anti- Somoza graffi ti in the Mission, labeled “Wall-w riting in the Mission,” along with a graphic of protestors carryi ng a banner declaring, “*basta ya de Somosas!*” In depicting the “*Muera Somoza*” (Die Somoza) graffi ti, *El Tecolote* showed the outrage and solidarity of the neighborhood and affi rmed its pol itic al convictions as part of the neighborhood’s strug gle.

Th e ideology of transnational liberation shaped the neighborhood’s cultural production, defi ned 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 MORIR36 ( Free Nicaragua or death)

As this poem suggests, Vargas saw his fi ght for the Mission and for Nicaragua as two fronts of the same war. For Vargas, “Nicamerica” poetically expressed the ideological linkage of t hese two places so far apart, so diff ere nt, 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 org an ize and redefi ne communities. His 1971 book of poems, *Primeros Cantos*, assembled a series of socially conscious poems critical of capitalism. Poems such as “Elegy Pa Esso,” “Th ey 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 . . . j ust the other day

Th e *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 . . . j ust the other day

A new world . . . began . . . again

Chepito in Nicaraguan natu ral

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

Ridicul ous . . . )

For Vargas, the death of “Amerikka” birthed true liberation, a world returning to a mestizo culture of pounding drums and natu ral 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 Th e poem captured Vargas’s idyllic hopes. “Amerikka” might practice egregious fi nancial activities (“in the belly of the Stock-E xchange”), but p eople have another choice: fi ght for liberation and love.

Readers versed in revolutionary lite ra t ure w ill recognize Vargas’s ideological inspirations. For instance, he used the line “stoned on liberation and love at the risk of seeming ridicul ous” as a call to risk being passionate about the world. Like love, liberation induces a drug-l ike high, a sense of purpose, and a willingness to sacrifi ce 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 aut hent ic revolutionary without this quality.”38 As his poetry evinced, Vargas sought to be an au then tic 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 fi rst 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 re sis tance.

More practically, Vargas sought to turn his writing into action. Th us, as Murguía noted, “Roberto took the concept of org an izer and expanded it to mean every thing: or ga nizer of poetry readings, writing workshops, fi lm and theater proj ects, community dances, and eventually even po liti cal 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-l anguage newspaper dedicated to covering the struggle in Nicaragua. Th e 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

Th e 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 u ncle had fought with Sandino, found work as a cook and waiter in local high-e nd h otels, but otherw ise spent his energies directing and distributing *Gaceta Sandinista*. In fact, all the reporters contributed a portion of their salaries t oward maintaining an offi ce on Bartlett Street between 22nd and Mission streets, which served as an all- around base of operations for the community.44

Th e 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 po liti cal prisoners, the government’s repressive viol ence and corruption, and successful FSLN actions. Th e newspaper was one facet of increasingly powerf ul community organi zing in the Mission.

In fact, *Gaceta Sandinista* signaled a dramatic expansion of in de pen dent publishing in the city. Alejandro Murguía’s experience conveys the close ties that existed between *Gaceta Sandinista* and the vari ous Th ird World publishing collectives that had mobilized throughout the city. Aft er moving to San Francisco from Los Angeles in 1971, Murguía joined Editorial Pocho- Che, an organ ization fi rst started in 1968 to serve the publishing needs of Latino writers and artists.45 He also cofounded Th ird World Communications in 1972 and the Th ird World Poetry Series at San Francisco State in 1974.46 As a writer, editor, and org an izer, Murguía had a hand in bringing vario us proje cts to publication, including *Time to Greez!: Incantations from the Th ird 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 offi cial Bay Area FSLN representative. Not coincidentally, Editorial Pocho- Che became part of the publishing arm for *Gaceta Sandinista*.48 Th e rise of these Th ird World publishing ventures reveals the internationalist spirit driving local support for the FSLN.

Relatively quickly, the revolution in Nicaragua stimulated Murguía’s politic al and literary activism in the Mission. He fi rst 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 p eople. Murguía l ater 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 strug gle. 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 hemi sphere.”52 Angered by the disaster of U.S. policy in Vietnam, Murguía saw it as imperative to engage with the strug gle 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). Th e Sand in ist as killed four and threatened to kill the remaining thirteen hostages if their demands w ere not met. Somoza consented to several demands, including a million- dollar ransom, an eighty-m inute radio broadcast, the printing of a pol itic al 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 Sand inis tas a reputation for audacity that attracted many new militants.”53

Th e 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 . . . d ropping bombs and napalm on settlements, burning peasant homes and fi elds, and disappearances, rapes, and incarceration in concentration camps.”54 Government repression escalated dramatically. News of the widespread human rights abuses and vio lence 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 fi rst demonstration for the FSLN, likely in early January of 1975: “We carried t hese beautiful black-a nd-r ed posters of Sandino silk- screened by La Raza Silk Screen Center, and we waved them at passing traffi c and stood outside El Tico- Nica bar exchanging insults with Somoza sympathizers”55 (Fig. 6.1). Th e moment was captured in an *El Tecolote* photo graph printed in June 1975, which showed a cheerful Murguía and Vargas leading a crowd of protesters down Mission Street with their signs of support for the San di nis tas. Th e image also conveys how the posters from La Raza Silkscreen Center contributed to the visi b le 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* photo graph (Fig. 6.2) of a 1975 press conference in support of the FSLN is striking in its diverse representation: Th e 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 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. Th e building was the result of a decade-l ong b attle 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 benefi cio de los gustos artísticos de los sectores ricos y suburbanos*” (Th ough 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 benefi t the artistic tastes of wealthy suburbanites).56 San Francisco’s investments in high-a rt institutions like the symphony, opera house, and performing arts center spurred public calls for equivalent investment in low-income communities. A ft er considerable protest, the city fi n ally

agreed to fund neighborhood arts programs and cultural centers.57

Murguía, as the fi rst director of the Mission Cultural Center, and Vargas and Serrano in their roles as community organizers, contributed to its pol itic al and artistic orientation.58 Th at all three w ere 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-n eglected former furniture store on Mission Street into a cultural center. Th eir 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 refl ect the institution’s ideological f uture. Th ey invited Sandinista poet Ernesto Cardenal to speak at the opening. Such an invitation clearly placed the Mission Cultural Center in solidarity with the Sand in ist as and other like-m inded strugg les around the world. However, according to Serrano, not every one 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 o thers who demanded that the Mission Cultural Center refl ect a strictly community-b ased focus.59 Th ese differences played out in the center’s fi rst election.

Th ose who disapproved of a Sandinista presence had city hall support. As Serrano recalled, “Th ey 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 w ere g oing to pack the meeting with all t hese kids . . . w ho would vote.” 60 News of the potential confl ict spread, including to the offi ce of *Gaceta Sandinista*. According to Serrano, “Just before it was time to vote, in walked the San di nis tas . . . 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 w hole place went s ilent. And then we made our proposal, and we voted and no one knew if they w ere 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 Th e 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 ren aiss ance u nder 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 Amer i ca 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-S andinista 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 strug gle as part of an anti- imperialist mobilization for social justice. According to Hobson, “Lesbian and gay left ists looked to Nicaragua as the site of a revolution they must defend, as an inspirational model for their own strugg les, and as a vehicle for sexual liberation whose meaning could be glimpsed in w omen seizing arms.” 66 In San Francisco, solidarity with the Sandinista strug gle fi ltered into many aspects of life in the city, appearing regularly in the culture and the landscape. Th e Mission Cultural Center sponsored a “Week of Solidarity with the People of Nicaragua,” consisting of fi lms, 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 popu lar support for the San di nis tas increased, disapproval of U.S. policies in Central Amer i ca grew.

Murguía’s and Vargas’s activism refl ected increasing personal risk, from publishing and protesting to taking over the Nicaraguan consulate. Murguía recalled, “[We] took over the offi ce, and expelled the consul and his staff . We held the offi ce for a w hole day before fi n ally agreeing to withdraw.” 69 Fellow cultural worker Roxanne Dunbar- Ortiz remembered the day: “I happened to be working that day in the Treaty Council offi ce in the Flood Building at Powell and Market, which was on the fl oor below the Nicaraguan consulate. When I

heard the racket, I walked upstairs and saw the small band wearing black-a nd- red scarves over their f aces. Even so, I recognized Roberto and Alejandro.” Amazingly, the authorities did not arrest anyone b ecause they could not d etermine who had jurisdiction.70 More than likely, Vargas and Murguía drew partial inspiration for their takeover from other media-s avvy Sandinista pol itical actions, such as the 1974 kidnappings.

In the Mission, as in Latin Ameri c a, poets became not just fi gurative, but a ctual revolutionaries. As a Sandinista victory appeared increasingly imminent, Vargas and Murguía made the decision to join the fi ghting 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 organi zing solidarity committees across the United States in support of the Nicaraguan p eople, 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 Off ensive.”71 Murguía subsequently documented the fi ghting in two books: the fi ctional *Th e Southern Front* (1990) and the autobiographical *Th e Medicine of Memory* (2002).

In *Th e Southern Front*, Murguía drew together an amalgamation of his and others’ experiences fi ghting for the Sand in ist as 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 draft ed or impressed, you had to be willing to risk every thing for what you believed was righ teous, even beautiful, and you had to go to this b attle with a pure heart and singing—a nd this was it for him, a clear-c ut, well-d efi ned l ittle war.”72 Th e 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 r eally, Murguía, followed in Guevara’s footsteps in a b attle that resembled the fi ght for Cuba. In an earlier version of *Th e Southern Front*, in a 1981 article published as “A Chicano Sandinista in Nicaragua,” Murguía not only linked Ulises’s commitment to the San di nis tas to a longer historical trajectory, placing it in parallel with the fi ght 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,

This content downloaded from

128.83.214.15 on Sat, 16 Oct 2021 00:55:25 UTC UTC

self determination, anti-i mperialist, down with the gringos bullshit. So what better place to put up or shut up? I mean it’s like r eally easy to be in your campus offi ce with a Zapata poster on your wall and mouth rhetoric, but it’s something else to take it to the trenches.74

Murguía showed l ittle patience for empty rhet oric and suggested the true revolutionary “takes it to the trenches.” Th e 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 Th e presence of widespread support for the Sand in ist as in San Francisco did not mean t here was agreement about the mode of revolution. Poet Nina Serrano’s experience illustrates some of the complex gender dynamics and disharmonies that s haped the Nicaraguan solidarity movement in San Francisco.

## Th e Pacifi st Poet

As a pacifi st, Serrano strug gled with the militant rhe toric 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 fi lmmaking career when she and her then husband, Saul Landau, produced *Que Hacer?* (*What Is to Be Done?*), a fi lm 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 fi lm to help with that.”76 Still, she wrestled with turning to vio lence as a means to an end.

Serrano originally learned about the Nicaraguan strugg le 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 viol ence in pursuit of liberation. While she supported the strugg le intellectually, her preference for nonviolence caused her enormous internal confl ict. Serrano’s poem, “To Roque Dalton Before Leaving to Fight in El Salvador (Havana, 1969),” indicated her ambivalence—l oving this revolutionary fi gure 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 fi n ger painted a clown’s smile on his Indian face

“ Don’t die!” the whisper beneath the call to battle. My love of man in confl ict with my love for this man.77

Serrano found herself trapped in a catch-22, as she sim ult an eously supported “the call to b attle,” but also could not help but whisper, “d on’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 confl ict/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.” Th e ambivalence of the poem refl ected how Serrano’s pacifi sm tempered her appreciation for revolution.

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

Women die too.

Th ey let go their tight grip on breath and sigh, And sigh to die.

Th ey say that Tania died before Che.

I saw her die in a Hollywood movie. Her blood fl oated in the river.78

For Serrano, the implications were unclear. Women “die too,” but they certainly did not attain the fame of their male counter parts. 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 fl ows from me by a call of the moon.

Th e moon . . .

A woman mopping her balcony

Spills water from her bucket On my hair, my breast And into the puddle.

Th e 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 metap hor of her menstrual cycle to affi rm the giving of life over the taking of life. Her identifi cation as a woman became a way of separating herself from the brutality of warfare. Signifi cantly, her interest in the roles that men and women played in revolutionary strug gles continued to shape her art.

In 1979, Serrano and Lourdes Portillo grappled with the gendered roles of revolution in *Después del Terremoto* (*A ft er the Earthquake*), a short fi lm depicting the experiences of a w oman who migrated from Nicaragua to the Mission aft er the earthquake.80 Portillo, who l ater directed multiple fi lms, 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 . . . w e decid ed to make a fi lm that would inform the p eople about the strugg le.”81 Th e fi lm 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 “m usic can be heard emanating from car radios and transistors,” and where “young p eople have painted street murals of history, culture and community prob lems.”82

Th e fi lm illustrates the ways that cultural workers pushed to radicalize the community and the ways that everyday life in the barrio oft en subsumed interest in such issues. Early in the fi lm, Irene learns her former fi ancé Julio is in San Francisco a ft er suff ering three years of torture by the Somoza regime. Th ey meet again in the Mission, but they have become diff er ent people “ aft er the earthquake” and are unable to reconnect romantically.

Irene works hard as a maid and dreams more about buying a telev is ion than about improving conditions in Nicaragua. However, her character is complex, since her experience as a working w oman in the United States propels a feminist consciousness. She fi nds more sexual freedom and in de pen dence in San Francisco than she ever knew in Nicaragua, displayed by the fi rst scene of Irene handling a book entitled *Vida Sexual: Prematrimonial* (*Premarital Sexual Life*). For Irene, the purchase of a tele vi sion signifi es her freedom as a woman. Irene tells Julio, “I think that a woman must be in de pen dent, 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 mi grants are co- opted by the glamour of American capitalism.

Julio, a passionate revolutionary, appears more in tune with the politics of the fi lmmakers, 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 org an ized by the Mission’s Comité Cívico. Julio talks over the images of poverty: “Th is shack is a school in our beautiful country— a

country with thirty percent illiteracy. . . . Th is is a child d ying of malnutrition. Yet, millions of dollars in U.S. aid are used by this corrupt dictator to buy arms and continue to keep our p eople u nder submission. Th is is an abuse of power. Th is 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 t here, we are h ere.” Th e responses echoed popul ar sentiments in the neighborhood. The filmmakers, like Julio, w ere invested in transnational action, but they also empathized with the fears and concerns of new mi grants and low- income residents.84

According to Portillo, the decision to fi ctionalize the repre sen ta tion of Nicaraguan exiles in the Mission provoked a mixed response. Portillo recalled, “I d idn’t want to make a fi lm that was a documentary—a straight, hard-h itting 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 strugg le against them [the Sandinista movement in the United States] and they disowned us in the proc ess. . . . Th ey wanted us to do a documentary . . . very factual, very po liti cal, very one- sided.”85

*El Tecolote* off ered evidence of this preference for nonfi ction in its 1979 review of the fi lm *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 f avor a masculine orientation of the strug gle, largely focusing on the fi ghting, which rendered women’s lives and responses relatively invisible. Serrano’s and Portillo’s fi lm 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 fi nd the fi lm radical enough. Criticized by those who might be most sympathetic, the fi lm 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 Th e censorship underscores the ways that pol itic al sympathies in San Francisco did not refl ect 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. A ft er weeks of military advances, the FSLN took over the capital city of Managua on July 17, 1979. President Somoza fl ed to the United States, then Paraguay, while the Sandinista government declared the revolution a success. Th e 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 fi nal que traería a Nicaragua su largamente esperada liberación*.

During May, June, and July of 1979, thousands and thousands of Nicaraguans, Latin Americans, Chicanos, indigenous p eoples, 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 fi nal off ensive that brought Nicaragua its long awaited liberation.88

Th e promise of Nicaragua spoke to the dreams of thousands of p eople in the United States. Artists marked the victory of the San di nis tas 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 proj ect, making this the only mural worked on by all four children of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier, who was famously assassinated in Washington, D.C. Th is photo graph appeared in the March, 1981 issue of *El Tecolote*. Image courtesy of Francisco Letelier and Acción Latina / *El Tecolote* archive.

Nicaraguan left ist community in San Francisco. Th e mural illustrated how Bay Area cultural workers viewed the strugg les in Chile and Nicaragua as “*la misma cosa*.” Th e art covered the building and featured “Chilean and Nicaraguan symbols beneath a handshake of support between the two countries.”89 Th e linkage refl ected the po liti cal 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. Th e mural resembled the “fl at style” of murals that decorated Chile during the Salvador Allende government, which the Pinochet government sought to eradicate. Th e artists w ere completing the mural in the summer of 1979, just as the Sand in ist as overthrew the Somoza government, so its creation also served as a visual celeb ration of the victory.90

## Aft er the Revolution

Aft er the revolution, the cultural exchange between San Francisco cultural workers and the Sand in ist as continued to fl ourish. Murals proved a popul ar import into the new Nicaragua, particularly with Ernesto Cardenal as minister of culture. As art historian David Kunzle noted, “In the de cade 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. Th e exchanges had a profound impact on the artists. Greene wrote of her experience, “I saw what underdevelopment in Central Amer i ca 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. . . . Th rough the experience of living and working in Nicaragua, solidarity now has the f aces and words of friends. . . . ¡ *Sandino Vive*!”92

Th e 1979 triumph of the San di nis tas 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 c hildren 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 m usic, art, theater, and interchanges of travel—i nterchange 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 aft er the revolution. It was a brief but profoundly exciting cultural re nais sance 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. Th e Sand in ist as could not deliver the utopian vision that had attracted supporters. Th is, 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 trea sury.”95 Th e 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: “A ft er ten- plus years of a democratic-c apitalist government . . . N icaragua is now the poorest country of Latin Ameri c a, and in the Western Hemis phere is second only to Haiti in lowest per capita income. Th is is the great benefi t of the Contra War sponsored by the United States.”97 For many, the hope of the 1970s was destroyed by the viol ence of U.S. intervention in Central Ameri c a 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 oft en felt that they faced nothing but bad choices.” According to Farber, “Events lent themselves to a litany of despair: infl ation up, employment down; oil prices out of control, American-m ade automobiles breaking down; factories closed, marriages over, homi c ide rates soaring; President Gerald Ford.”98 Indeed, economic stagfl ation, deindustrialization, and decreased public funding hit neighborhoods like the Mission District especially hard. Nevertheless, out of this barrio, a transnational social movement fl ourished with hope. Th e issues were not unrelated. Th e 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-V ietnam protests, and San Francisco liberalism, the Mission District became center stage for Latino arts organ izing with a decidedly left ist 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 pol itic al activism and cultural pro-

duction is not only imperative to understanding the po liti cal and aesthetic development of Latino arts in the Bay Area and beyond, it is central to thinking about diaspora, transnational solidarity, and confl icted patriotism. Upon refl ection, perhaps one of the most salient points to consider here is how the actions of t hese poet warriors might be interpreted t oday. Th e act of fi ghting for e nemy 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.