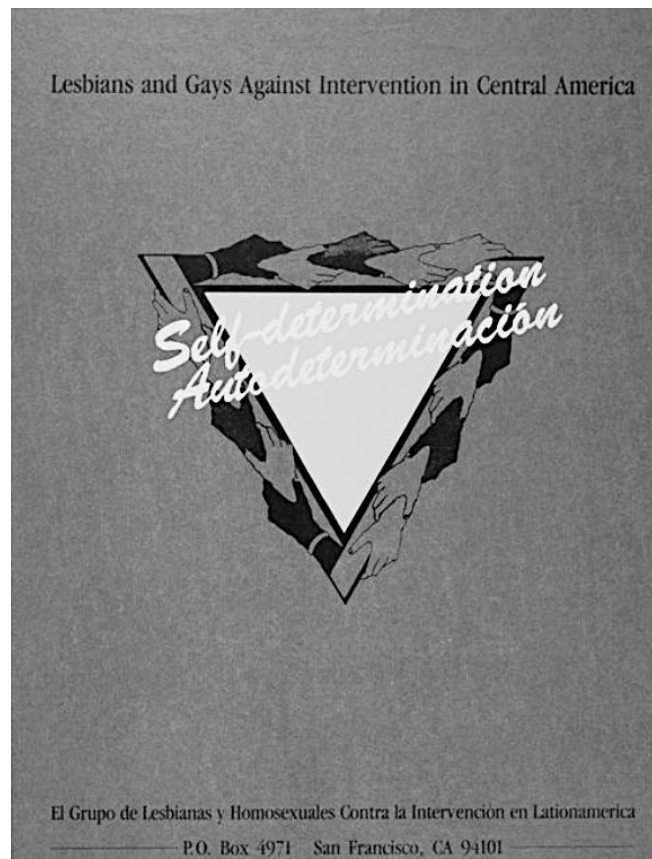


En Solidaridad:

Nicaraguan Solidarity and Reagan-Era Radical HIV/AIDS Activism



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Author's Note

When I was 16 years old, the legislature in my home state of Oklahoma considered a law to permanently ban the teaching of Advanced Placement U.S. History in public schools. As I sat in history class, the bill passed the State House Committee on Education almost unanimously. The reason to ban the course: it was “un-American” and presented a “radically revisionist view of American history.” In this case, to be revisionist meant to dare to find truth in places where previous generations had not—in stories of freed slaves, Civil Rights activists, indigenous people, and anti-war activists—places that might be construed as tarnishing the image of “America,” when in reality they were clarifying it. Although I did not realize it at the time, it was in this moment that can trace the beginning of my desire to study American history.

Writing a thesis during a global pandemic is a feat, and this project would not have been possible without the support of the history department at Columbia. I would like to thank everyone who helped me develop ideas, research, and organize this thesis, starting with my peers in Professor Piccato’s seminar who read countless drafts while working on their own brilliant projects. I am obliged to Professor Piccato as my section leader for his critical help organizing, grounding, and developing my project to its fullest potential. A big thank you also goes out to Professor Chazkel for being willing to take on an undergraduate thesis student despite the circumstances this semester and sharing her expertise in Latin American and radical history. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Professor Chauncey for being the first person to introduce me to the field of U.S. queer history and helping direct my research. I would additionally like to thank Professor Nara Milanich at Barnard for exposing me to Central American history and guiding me my research about gender and family in the region.

Introduction

In the heart of Managua's Revolution Park, where Sandinista military leaders regularly hosted raucous political rallies, Ivan stood under a street lamp powdering his face and delicately rubbing crème blush onto his cheeks to complement already severe eyeliner. On this drizzling Friday night in December 1988, Ivan and his group of gay friends (his *muchachas* or "girls") were getting ready with condoms on hand for a long night of cruising in the park—but not in the sense of finding hookups. Quite the contrary, under his carefully painted face, Ivan wore a t-shirt adorned with the revolutionary insignia of the Sandinista Party (FSLN), indicating his affiliation with the HIV/AIDS popular education brigade sanctioned under the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health. Joined by a gay American AIDS activist named Amy Bank, Ivan and his friends were set to canvass the park distributing condoms, safe-sex fliers, and information about free HIV testing at the city hospital. The appeal of the group's information campaign was not just limited to gay men who had come to the park looking for a quick fling. In fact, the rainy night culminated with the group drawing a crowd of 45 people that included several heterosexual men and two curious Sandinista soldiers. These men watched closely as a female activist vigorously thrust her fingers into a condom to demonstrate how to properly wear one without risking rupture.¹

Ivan's night in Revolution Park may be striking to those unfamiliar with the history of revolution in Nicaragua or the radical solidarities of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States. His visibility as a queer² person distributing condoms and talking openly about sex in a

¹ Reese Erlich, "Sandinistas Enlist Gays to Fight Spread of AIDS," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, (December 1988), 1.

² In this paper, the term "queer" is used as a synonym for gay and lesbian or LGBTQ, not as the political term that emerged in the 1990s that signified a specifically political sexual identity.

public space seem to contradict the hetero-patriarchal politics Nicaragua was known for in the United States under the Sandinista regime.³ Additionally, the government sanction of Ivan's AIDS activism (as evidenced by his FSLN t-shirt and the attendance of uniformed soldiers off-duty) would be unimaginable in the United States during the same time period. The presence of an American AIDS activist is equally as perplexing. In 1988, the United States was dealing with an AIDS epidemic of massive proportions while Nicaragua had only recorded 27 HIV-positive tests and had two known cases of AIDS. It seems like a committed American HIV/AIDS activist like Amy Bank would be more inclined to work domestically than try to prevent an outbreak that had not yet happened on a large scale in the capital city of a foreign country.⁴

Bank's AIDS education advocacy in Nicaragua was not a historical anomaly—it was an extension of a long history of international solidarity work in the American gay and lesbian movement that informed the goals, alliances, and imaginations of American activists for a generation. Beginning with the 1969 Stonewall Riots in which a group of primarily working-class queer people of color violently resisted police raids on bars in New York City, the gay movement shifted its focus from cultural education and assimilation to a liberation ideology that advocated for the transformation of systems of power and policing that oppress gay, working-class, and non-white people alike. The politics of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s embraced radicalism, defined as anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial politics that drew connections among the aforementioned global structures of power and among the people

³ Lorraine De Volo, "The Dynamics of Emotion and Activism: Grief, Gender, and Collective Identity in Revolutionary Nicaragua," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*. Vol. 11, no. 4, (2006), 465.

⁴ Ibid, 467.

oppressed by them.⁵ Radical politics were not solely interested in the destruction of unjust systems but focused on positively conceptualizing and pursuing new worlds free from structural violence and homophobia. Because their politics identified global power arrangements between world leaders and pursued alliances among marginalized groups, radicals in the 1960s and 70s used transnational solidarity work as part of both an ideological commitment and a practical strategy—gay radicals were no exception. Solidarity as a concept to gay liberation activists during this period described a day-to-day habit of activism: the work of showing up at protests, joining campaigns, and building a culture of political camaraderie. In other words, gay liberation was the theory behind the activism and solidarity was the practice.⁶ American queer radicals sought to embody these transnational solidarities in their work throughout the 1960s and 1970s, closely aligning themselves with anti-capitalist revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua that challenged American hegemony in the region and whose ideals represented the potential for building a society founded on social justice and equal access to opportunity and material resources.

Historians of queer organizing in the United States, like David Deitcher, have taken for granted that transnational solidarities in the American gay movement lost relevance after the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.⁷ With the decline of the Soviet Union's influence on the global stage and the inward shift of queer activists towards pressing domestic concerns

⁵ Tede Matthews, "Coming Out for Peace: Lesbians and Gays Play Major Role in Protests," *San Francisco Sentinel*, (April 8, 1988), 8.

⁶ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 165.

⁷ David Deitcher, *The Question of Equality: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America since Stonewall*. (New York: Scribner, 1995), 26.

like the AIDS crisis, civil rights ordinances, and domestic partnership advocacy, he believes the radical solidarity of the 1960s and 70s was overshadowed.⁸ However, the conditions of the 1980s were in fact prime for a resurgence of transnational solidarity in the American gay movement.⁹ In the 1980s, gay and lesbian activists faced a crisis on two fronts: the rise of the New Right (a socially conservative religious and political movement in the U.S. vehemently opposed to homosexuality) and an AIDS epidemic that claimed the lives of nearly 90,000 people during the 1980s, with little to no government attention.¹⁰ To many queer activists, the Reagan administration's non-response to the AIDS crisis exemplified the hostility they felt the American political establishment had for their lives.¹¹ Especially for veteran queer radicals now working in the AIDS movement who had spent the last two decades identifying links between groups in power, anything or anyone associated with the Reagan administration was equally an enemy to the cause of AIDS prevention and treatment in America. If Reagan supported a policy or a foreign intervention that did not actively further the interests of marginalized people, they opposed it on principle.¹²

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰ Aggleton, Peter, Peter M. Davies, and Graham Hart, eds. *AIDS: Activism and alliances*. Taylor & Francis, 1997.

¹¹ Hobson, Emily K. "'Si Nicaragua Venció': Lesbian and gay solidarity with the Revolution." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4.2, (2012), 14.

¹² Ibid., 15

Perhaps no ongoing political movement in the Americas during the 1980s had more potential to send a signal against the Reagan administration than the struggle over Nicaragua. In 1979, after nearly a decade of guerilla warfare, revolutionaries overthrew the American-backed government of the Nicaraguan president-turned-dictator, Anastasio Somoza, and established a new government. The Nicaraguan revolutionaries called themselves Sandinistas, after Augusto Sandino, a 1930s anti-colonial military leader who opposed both Spanish colonialism and American militarism in Central America. The Sandinistas were inspired by Marxist movements to create a society where working people would have access to healthcare, education, and jobs.¹³ However, the Sandinista government was met with resistance. From December 1981 until 1984 the Reagan administration's Central Intelligence Agency illegally funded and covertly advised the Contras, a right-wing rebel group that attempted to overthrow the new government and eradicate the spread of communist ideology in Nicaragua. Subsequently, in 1985, President Reagan imposed a crippling economic embargo on Nicaragua that caused economic decline and widespread food insecurity. The embargo, which was enforced with the United States placing landmines in Nicaraguan waters to detonate commercial ships, lasted until 1989, despite the International Court of Justice ruling in 1986 that the Reagan administration violated international law and was obligated to pay reparations to the Nicaraguan government.¹⁴ The lengths to which the United States went to undermine the Sandinista government underscore the conflict's importance to the Reagan administration.

¹³ Cary Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 152-155.

¹⁴ "US Policy: Economic Embargo: The War Goes On." *Revista Envío*. (April 1989), 2.

As both a geopolitical and ideological conflict, the Nicaraguan revolution created a space of possibilities where queer groups around the world could imagine an anti-capitalist and self-determined future where gender relations and sexual potentials were in flux.¹⁵ Numerous gay and lesbian Nicaraguans held visible roles during the Revolution which gave the impression to American activists that there was genuine potential for the creation of a new inclusive society in the Americas, or one that was at least tolerant of gay people.¹⁶ Additionally, many gay Americans lived in cities with sizeable Nicaraguan refugee populations, exposing gay activists to Nicaraguan politics. Despite the Sandinistas' commitment to queer inclusion being more symbolic than based in tangible policy (which I will discuss in Section III), the revolution drew the attention of American gay activists who formed brigades to support the revolution throughout the early 1980s, building houses and providing social services for Nicaraguans under the new government.¹⁷ The connections American gay and lesbian activists forged in Nicaragua during this period coincided with the first cases of AIDS detected in the United States in 1981. Consequently, when the Reagan administration was unresponsive to the needs of Americans living with AIDS, radical activists turned to Nicaragua to practice new models of patient-focused healthcare actively sanctioned by the Sandinistas, continue developing their commitment to eradicating homophobia, and highlight a political contrast with the American government.

¹⁵ Babb, Florence E. "Out in Nicaragua: Local and Transnational Desires after the Revolution," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (2003): 306-307.

¹⁶ Ibid., 310.

¹⁷ Ruth Grabowski, "Int'l Lesbian/Gay Brigade to Nicaragua," *Coming Up!* (September 1984), 9.

The radical queer solidarities between Nicaraguan and American AIDS activists during the 1980s challenge narratives in the historiography of the AIDS crisis that depict American activism as insular and clearly focused in the United States and other Western countries.¹⁸ The most prominent accounts of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, like Randy Shilt's *And the Band Played On*, position the crisis as one primarily between gay Activists and non-responsive government officials in the United States and researchers in Western Europe.¹⁹ Yet, as American solidarity with Nicaragua during the AIDS crisis reveals, the story of AIDS activism is not one merely of domestic communities organizing around themselves, but also of people finding hope, success, and motivation in communities internationally that helped them remember that, somewhere, their humanity was valued.

Studying these transnational solidarities also complicates the history of radical queer politics in the United States by extending the timeline of the politics much further than the 1970s—into the 1980s, 1990s, and arguably, the present. The fact that these solidarities persisted and were strategically employed during a public health crisis has profound implications for understanding dynamics between transnational activist groups over decades. It also is crucial to studying whether international solidarities can be the basis not only for organizing against systems of power but preparing for natural crises like epidemics or global environmental catastrophes when the American government ignores them.

¹⁹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played on: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), 24.

Synthesizing newspaper articles, oral histories, activist correspondence, political documents, and independent films, this paper will explore the origins and ramifications of transnational solidarities between radical AIDS activists in the United States and Nicaragua during the 1980s and early 90s. The thesis will proceed with an investigation into each of three key areas: first, the nature and strength of US-Nicaragua gay solidarities during the 1979 revolution; second, the strategies used by American and Nicaraguan activists alike to build solidarity during the AIDS crisis; and third, the lingering impacts of solidarities on queer and HIV/AIDS activism after the end of the Reagan administration and the fall of the Sandinista Party in 1990. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that US-Nicaragua HIV/AIDS activists of the 1980s were able to use solidarities to not only identify activist strategies to address their respective AIDS epidemics, but to control narratives about their own governments' attitudes towards queer activism. While American activists used solidarities to draw inspiration and develop an ideological critique of the Reagan administration's approach to the epidemic, Nicaraguan activists appeared to take a more transactional approach to solidarity: they accepted advice and resources from Americans while hiding the true extent of the homophobia they experienced from the Sandinista regime in order to receive continued support from both American activists and the Nicaraguan government.

I. *Nicaragua Debe Sobrevivir*: Roots of Radical Queer Solidarity with Nicaragua

In the spring of 1988, thousands of gay and lesbian activists inundated the streets of San Francisco, marching, stopping traffic, and waving banners in hopes of garnering the attention of local councilmembers and national politicians. However, the event's purpose was not to support anti-discrimination protections, civil partnership legislation, or to criticize the city government's response to the AIDS crisis as one might expect from such a crowd of gay protestors. Rather, the thousands of participants at the demonstration had gathered to protest the Reagan administration's decision to deploy an additional 3,000 troops to Nicaragua, after falsely claiming the socialist nation had trespassed into neighboring Honduras.²⁰ This anti-interventionist protest in San Francisco for the small Central American country was not an isolated event in the gay community during the 1980s. Lesbians and gay men were deeply involved in organizing Nicaraguan anti-intervention demonstrations across the United States in 1988, including two exclusively gay protests in San Francisco that drew crowds of 2,000 and 3,000 people, respectively.²¹ Clearly, activists in the queer community had a special affinity for Nicaragua beyond the scope of the AIDS epidemic, focusing their international solidarities on the small, war-ravaged, and culturally dissimilar country. This affinity was in fact the product of solidarities that predated the AIDS crisis of the 1980s among radical queer organizers.

²⁰ Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: the U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

Queer activism in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution and Sandinista government did not arise out of detached sympathy. Instead, activists believed the successes of the Sandinistas directly affected their lives as lesbians and gay men living in the socially conservative Reagan administration aligned with a network of right-wing regimes that extended to Central America. This sentiment of mutual benefit through resistance to capitalism and American interventionism influenced queer radicals to turn to Nicaragua to conceptualize an idealized future for gay people and deliver a blow to President Reagan's hegemony in Central America. As the rallying slogan of the queer solidarity movement with Nicaragua concisely expressed, "*Si Nicaragua Venció, Nosotros Venceremos* [If Nicaragua Won, We Will Win]!"²² In other words, with both their language and actions, American activists positioned themselves in what they believed was a symbiotic relationship with Nicaragua—the successes of the Sandinistas were representative of a defeat of the Reagan administration and created the potential for a growing gay rights movement in the Americas.²³

But, the question remains: Why were queer activists so invested in the politics of a small country of only two million people in Central America? And, how did they manage to build such intimate connections to where gay activists were personally raising funds for the revolution and traveling freely to the country as openly lesbian and gay people? This section will explore the demographic, political, and social reasons why Nicaragua became a focal point for American gay and lesbian activists pursuing international solidarities during the Reagan administration and emerging AIDS crisis. Ultimately, the historical and material conditions of the 1970s and 1980s

²² "Lesbians & Gay Men: Stand for Nicaragua, Support the Revolution – Anti-Gay Leaders Support Somoza," *Gay People for Nicaragua*, 1979, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

were crucial to the development of solidarities—mutually-beneficial relationships that would lay the groundwork for robust interactions between American and Nicaraguan AIDS activists during the AIDS crisis 1980s. However, while the solidarity may have felt genuine by American activists, it was not entirely based in factual reality. Rather, American activists were led to believe Nicaragua held the potential for a socialist utopia by Nicaraguan activists who masked the true extent of homophobia, economic decline, and Sandinista state violence they experienced to continue receiving support from Americans

U.S. lesbian and gay radicals supported the Sandinistas for many of the reasons straight radicals did, but their commitments to the movement were also uniquely queer. Lesbian and gay solidarity activists at marches claimed, “The FSLN [Sandinistas] . . . are an inspiration to all oppressed peoples that we CAN win,” thus linking the oppression of gay Americans under Reagan to the oppression of Nicaraguans under the Reagan-backed government of Anastasio Somoza and the campaigns of the Contras.²⁴ Furthermore, they suggested the Nicaraguan Revolution might create the political space to enable lesbian and gay rights in Nicaragua that would spill over across the Americas. As activist Rebecca Gordon explained at one of the 1988 San Francisco protests, “As a lesbian, I’m not involved out of altruism. I’m in it for my own good.”²⁵

Gordon’s claim echoed the radical sexual politics of the 1970s and 1980s gay liberation movement. Gay and lesbian radicals identified homophobia as a capitalist and imperialist tool that was used in right-wing regimes across the globe and queer communities as the targets of the

²⁴ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, 26.

²⁵ Tede Matthews, “Coming Out for Peace,” 9.

global right.²⁶ Consequently, American activists worked to support a number of simultaneously anti-capitalist and gay rights-affirming policies, protesting gentrification, organizing gay and lesbian caucuses in local unions, and defeating municipal initiatives that barred openly gay and lesbian school teachers being employed in public schools. In short, to challenge capitalism was to challenge a system that left gay people without secure housing, healthcare, and employment in the face of discrimination.

Gay and lesbian activists also critiqued capitalism from an ideological standpoint: the capitalist economic structure enabled homophobia. As cultural sociologist and historian Lisa Duggan explains, capitalism forced the nuclear family to serve as the social and economic center of life for the vast majority of individuals because property was privately owned and no one was entitled to it by virtue of being a citizen.²⁷ Thus, individuals were reliant on their nuclear families as their primary economic safety nets. This reality was problematic for gay and lesbian people who often risked rupturing their family relationships by coming out (and consequently their primary safety nets)—many people simply could not be gay in capitalist system without being vulnerable economically. Additionally, the types of kinship networks formed by many queer people were not centered around the nuclear family, marriage, or procreation, so although capital could be pooled together among friends or partners, it was not intergenerational or protected through inheritance laws, marriage benefits, or child tax credits.²⁸ Communism and other

²⁶ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, 27.

²⁷ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 56-72.

²⁸ Ibid, 59.

economic structures that rejected capitalism theoretically de-centered the family by making everyone entitled to government benefits as a safety net rather than having to rely on the family. In the eyes of queer radicals, this simple fact gave individuals the potential to live openly and in social networks of their choosing.

With the Soviet Union and other communist governments in economic and political decline across the globe, Central America emerged as one of the last surviving ideological battlegrounds for Marxist and anti-imperialist politics in the 1970s and 80s. Radical activists seized upon the conflict in Nicaragua to send a signal about global capitalism and show support for a country that they believed was creating the conditions for a better society. In June 1978, Bay Area Gay Liberation termed Nicaragua's Somoza "[a] fascist . . . the last gasp of empire. . . A COMMON ENEMY."²⁹ Similarly, in the 1980s, activists argued that spending on the Contra war led to cuts in social services, making it harder for working-class gay women to live apart from men and inhibiting funding to fight AIDS. Other gay activists in the United States saw the Sandinistas as literally creating a utopian society that Americans could immigrate to, proclaiming "I want to go down there and find a home, find the fulfillment of my own dreams. Instead of doing the much harder work of trying to figure out what to do to create a society in the U.S. that will meet my needs."³⁰ The escapist sentiments reveal two truths about gay solidarity with Nicaragua: the Sandinistas were always juxtaposed to the American government and the revolution contained a sort of romantic symbolism to American queer activists. Therefore, U.S.

²⁹ BAGL Newsletter, (June 1978), Ephemera – Organizations, GLBT Historical Society.

³⁰ Kamel, Rachael. *Interview: Lesbian/Gay Brigade Visits Nicaragua*. Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, Inc., April 30, 1986, 3-4.

activists were invested in Nicaragua insofar as they were led to believe a society better than their own was being created—any overtly glaring failures might shatter their imagination.

Solidarity with Nicaragua was also strongly influenced by migration to the United States by Nicaraguans who became involved with Latinx politics in major cities and within the gay community. Central Americans (many of them temporary exiles, as well as others who would soon become citizens) initiated Central American solidarity in the United States. Central Americans founded the first solidarity organizations in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, using leadership to define the movement and to form the relationships that maintained it.³¹ Each of these cities had sizable Nicaraguan refugee and immigrant populations, suggesting Nicaraguan solidarity originated in immigrant communities before gaining the attention of American-born gay activists.³² However, there is one noticeable exception to this trend in the historical archive: Miami, Florida. Next to San Francisco, Miami had one of the largest Nicaraguan refugee populations in the United States, yet there is little evidence of Sandinista solidarity in the queer historiography of the city during either the 1970s or 1980s—perhaps because the city became a hub for Latin Americans refugees fleeing communist regimes (especially Cuba) to settle in the United States, creating hostility towards Latin American-style socialism. This demographic distinction between cities like Miami and San Francisco underscores the importance of migration to international solidarity movements towards Central America during this period. Many white radicals took part in the Central American

³² Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," *Latin American Research Review* 26, no. 1 (1991): 76.

solidarity as other Central Americans migrated after US immigration laws loosened in 1965 and as regional conflicts spread. By the 1970s as many as 50,000 Nicaraguans lived in the Bay Area, mainly in the Mission District.³³ While Somocistas (supporters of Somoza) built a base with Cuban-American anti-communists in Miami, opponents of Somoza were more likely to move to San Francisco, where they created networks with other Latinx radicals and communities of color. Indeed, there seems to have been a large base of support for the Sandinistas among Nicaraguans living in the United States—after the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza’s government in 1979, nearly 200,000 Nicaraguans living in the United States decided to return to Nicaragua.³⁴

Demographic coincidences also exposed many people in the gay community to the politics of Nicaragua for the first time. As one of the centers of American queer life in the twentieth century, San Francisco and the thousands of gay people that lived there had plenty of opportunities to be exposed to information about Nicaragua and become active in the movement for solidarity.³⁵ Within a week of the Nicaraguan earthquake in 1972, a Latino news show on the San Francisco Bay radio station KPFA publicized a charity concert in the Mission District and offered listeners the names of Bay Area churches where they could donate aid.³⁶ By 1973,

³³ Alejandro Murguía, “Poetry and Solidarity in the Mission District,” *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco 1968–1978*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 61–65.

³⁴ M. Navarro, “After Years in Exile in South Florida, Nicaraguans Feel the Tug of 2 Homes,” *New York Times*, (March 21, 1995), 14.

³⁵ Michelle Cochrane, *When AIDS Began: San Francisco and the Making of an Epidemic* Routledge, (August 2, 2004), 22.

³⁶ “Reflecciones de la Raza,” December 30, 1972, *KPFA/Pacifica Radio*, Freedom Archives, San Francisco.

activists were plastering “Wanted” posters of Somoza around the Mission District and beginning to form pro-Sandinista groups. The fact that the city with one of the largest gay populations in the United States (San Francisco) was also the city with the largest Nicaraguan-American population led to the confluence of these two movements.

Gay radicals were also drawn to solidarity with Nicaragua because of the perceived socialist track record of the regime and its self-expressed support of working people. After taking power, the Sandinistas instituted a program that brought very temporary gains in workers’ and women’s rights and the nationalization and redistribution of land. Their health and literacy brigades were believed to have improved the lives of everyday Nicaraguans and won international acclaim that was broadcasted to activists in the United States.³⁷ For example, the administration's public health campaign won the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's prize for exceptional health progress which created the perception of success, despite a later report from the *New England Journal of Medicine* calling healthcare before and immediately after the revolution equally “abysmal.”³⁸

Gay radicals were attracted to the positive potential of the Sandinistas to restructure society, as one of the defining qualities of radicalism was not just the destruction of unjust systems but the creation of new society with political and economic equality. Much like queer radicals involved in the Cuban Revolution, the radicals in solidarity with Nicaragua saw

³⁷ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 34.

³⁸ David C. Halperin and Richard Garfield, “Developments in Health Care in Nicaragua,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, no. 6 (1982): 390-392.



Figure 1.1

Photo of Ernesto “Che” Guevara on the cover of the December 1971 *Ink Magazine*³⁹

something uniquely queer about the Sandinista regime—it held the possibility for a society free from homophobia and the economic and housing insecurity that followed. As the cover of the December 1971 issue of the London-based queer magazine *Ink* illustrated with an edited photo of Cuban Revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara with lipstick and eyeshadow, queer radicals globally saw themselves in socialist revolutions in Latin America regardless of the statements of actual leaders (**Figure 1.1**).⁴⁰ While the Cuban Revolution eventually excluded queer activists, American activists were not deterred from imagining a queer-inclusive future during the

³⁹ “Che Guevara,” *Ink Magazine*, (December 3, 1971), 1.

⁴⁰ Unlike the Sandinistas, the Castro Regime often rejected openly gay solidarities.

Nicaraguan Revolution—because, as one Nicaraguan activist explained to American solidarity activists, “too many Sandinistas were gay.”⁴¹

Yet, Nicaragua faced violent attacks on the very institutions that had been newly constructed—schools, hospitals, villages, and other targets—by counterrevolutionary forces, or Contras, whom the United States funded and trained in collaboration with the CIA. CIA and Contra opposition began immediately after the Sandinistas took power in 1979 and accelerated after President Reagan’s inauguration in January 1981. Upon inauguration, President Ronald Reagan gave his approval for covert U.S. support of the Contras. This support continued for most of the Reagan administration, until disapproval from the American public and reports of Contra abuses pushed Congress to cut off funding.⁴² By 1983 the United States was invading Nicaraguan harbors and guiding air bombings of Managua, even as U.S. public opinion polls through the 1980s showed consistent and clear opposition to military intervention.⁴³ U.S. intervention in Nicaragua ran alongside American backing of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments in their wars against communists and native people. Although Congress limited Contra funding and training in 1982 and 1984, it approved \$100 million in aid in 1986, and outside of public view, the Reagan administration funded the Contras through covert weapons

⁴¹ Judy MacLean, “YOUNG GAY PEOPLE SEEK LEGITIMATE ROLE IN SANDINISTA GOVERNMENT,” *The Advocate*, Apr 29, 1986. 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴³ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, 56.

sales to Iran and alliances with cocaine smugglers.⁴⁴ The Sandinistas agreed to peace treaties in 1983 and 1987, and they met an important international request by holding popular elections. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega won the presidency in a vote closely examined by outside observers, who found it free and fair. But U.S. economic sanctions caused acute hunger and inflation, and threatened to unravel any progress in people's lives promised by the Sandinista government.

Gay activists were drawn to Nicaragua because of the potential to create a new order of gender equality and queer freedom. The Sandinistas sought to reorder Nicaraguan gender politics through the idea of the "New Man," a concept created by Che Guevara in the Cuban Revolution. In contrast to the goals of lesbian and gay solidarity, the New Man defined political commitment through an "ascetic, not hedonistic" masculinity.⁴⁵ Many voices in the Latin American anti-capitalist movement described the New Man's love for the "people" through both heterosexual and homosocial boldness, linking "woman" to the mass or base.⁴⁶ Guevara envisioned the New Man as a more truly "human creature, once the chains of alienation are broken."⁴⁷ The "revolutionary subjectivity" of the New Man characterized race, ethnicity, and even class as individual concerns to overcome; Nicaragua's Black and indigenous communities, as well as

⁴⁴ Robert Parry, "How John Kerry Exposed the Contra-Cocaine Scandal," Salon, October 25, 2004.

⁴⁵ Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁶ Lancaster, Roger, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 243.

⁴⁷ Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, 3.

landless farmers, were largely excluded from the FSLN's political vision.⁴⁸ Thus, in Nicaragua, homosexuals were able to organize under the common cause of being Nicaraguan men, relegating their sexualities to personal concerns irrelevant to their commitment to the nation.

Meanwhile, women were incorporated into the Nicaraguan Revolution through a different gendered role: the militant mother. This was portrayed by a famous photograph of a smiling young woman with an AK-47 on her shoulder and an infant at her breast. The image of a female soldier, mothering the nation in the battlefield rather than at a distance from the fight, disseminated across Nicaragua and internationally in an AMNLAE (Sandinista women's organization) poster entitled "Nicaragua debe sobrevivir [Nicaragua must survive]."⁴⁹ As these images that disrupted gender stereotypes circulated among American activists, so did ideas that Nicaragua was moving towards true gender equality—an ideal appealing to many in the queer community, especially lesbians.

⁴⁸ Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination; Mirna Cunningham in Randall, Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 68.

⁴⁹ "Nicaragua Debe Sobrevivir," Center for the Study of Political Graphics.



Figure 1.2 “*Nicaragua Debe Sobrevivir*,” AMNLAE Poster⁵⁰

Lesbian and gay Sandinistas navigated both within dominant gendered frameworks to approach the Revolution as a vehicle for sexual liberation. Though networks of homosocial culture had existed under Somoza, especially among men, lesbian and gay activism first arose in the 1980s and carried a distinctly communist influence. According to one gay Sandinista, many “cochónes were very active in the Sandinista movement from the very beginning,” because “naturally we identified with the vanguard of the oppressed.” (Cochón is a derogatory term in Nicaraguan Spanish indicating the receptive partner in anal sex and effeminacy).⁵¹ Many lesbians also participated or came out in the Revolution. Historian of Central American lesbian history

⁵⁰ “Nicaragua Must Survive,” Oakland Museum of California.

⁵¹ Roger N Lancaster, “Subject Honor and Object Shame: The Construction of Male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua,” *Ethnology* 27, no. 2 (1988), 11.

Millie Thayer argues that same-sex environments in the army and volunteer brigades encouraged new sexual possibilities for young women in the ranks.⁵² While the Revolution's anti-gay practices remained little known, conservative opponents publicly blamed the Nicaraguan Revolution for unsettling gender and family norms, and several women who rose to FSLN leadership "were rumored to be 'cochonas.'"⁵³ Historian Cymene Howe argues that all these forms of visibility encouraged the growth and radical approach of Nicaraguan lesbian and gay activism in the revolutionary era by identifying them as both active Sandinista militants and potential scapegoats for critics of the regime.⁵⁴

Internationally, the feminist and queer potential of the Revolution became particularly clear through Margaret Randall's popular book, *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*. Published in 1981, it featured interviews and photographs with women involved in the Revolution (many of them queer). Randall describes the Revolution's changes for women as a "dramatic shift away from the traditional mother-daughter relationship," with the younger generation creating newly public roles. One woman, Dora María Tellez, is highlighted by hinting at possibilities beyond heteronormativity. Tellez was one of the most prominent female leaders of the Revolution and had long been colloquially referred to as "la cochona."

Randall's book photographed Tellez in dark, slumped in a chair, holding a lit cigarette in

⁵² Millie Thayer, "Identity, Revolution, and Democracy: Lesbian Movements in Central America," *Social Problems* 44, no. 3 (1997): 386-402.

⁵³ Feminine form of cochón. A disparaging term for lesbian in Nicaraguan Spanish

⁵⁴ Cymene Howe, *Intimate Activism: The Struggle for Sexual Rights in Postrevolutionary Nicaragua* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 34.



Figure 1.2 Dora Maria Téllez in *Sandino's Daughters*⁵⁵

her hand. She appears quiet, focused, and gazing slightly dreamingly. The romantic image is accompanied by Téllez's letter to her mother, in which she describes her childbirth and describes the Revolution as her surrogate child. The portrait and narrative exemplify Téllez's womanhood yet allow her to break gender norms about women that made her both a political and romantic icon for American lesbians in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Two years prior to the publication of *Sandino's Daughters*, Gays for the Nicaraguan Revolution (GNR), a San Francisco-based queer group in solidarity with the Sandinistas, presented a similar portrait. The cover of GNR's 1979 brochure depicts a female soldier standing

⁵⁵ Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 275.

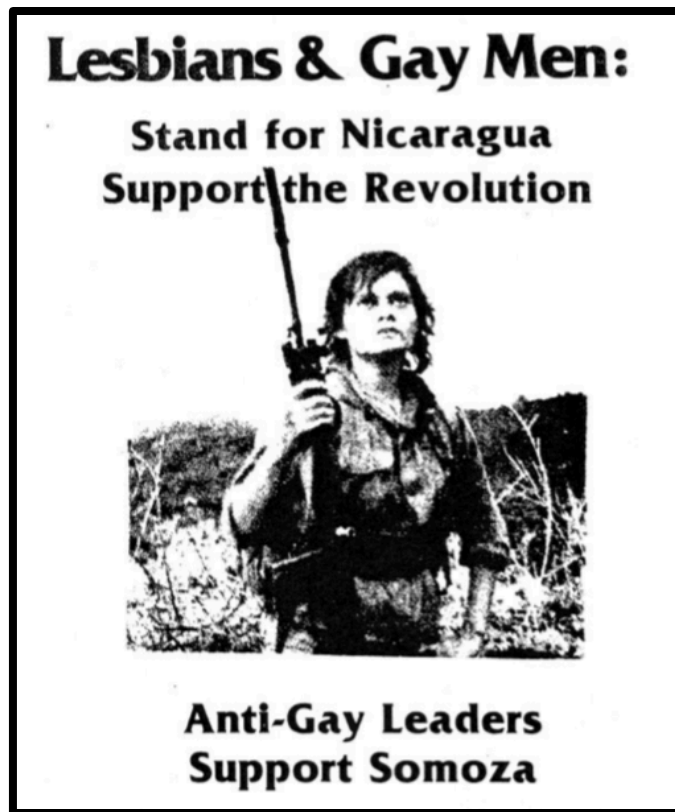


Figure 1.3 *Gays for the Nicaraguan Revolution brochure cover published in 1979*⁵⁶

against mountain brush (see Figure 2.2). Masculine and with a wavy bob hairstyle, she carries a stern and focused countenance. Dressed in uniform and holding a rifle, she is framed by the words “Lesbians & Gay Men: Stand for Nicaragua; Support the Revolution; Anti-Gay Leaders Support Somoza,” calling on readers to identify with the soldier on the basis of sexual identity. Inside the brochure, text explains the need to connect gay politics to a “worldwide struggle” for socialist change, and declares that the FSLN consulate has extended GNR “full support.”

GNR was the country’s first gay and lesbian solidarity group with Nicaragua. Founded in 1979, it was headed by gay Central Americans in San Francisco’s Mission District. Throughout

⁵⁶ Gays for the Nicaraguan Revolution, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

its work, GNR used images of women. One such pamphlet showed a picture of women in a Sandinista literacy brigade, smiling and with arms around one another, showcasing the importance of images in conveying perceptions of gender equality to Americans in solidarity. This queer excitement fed a number of lesbian and gay solidarity groups in the Bay Area. In 1984, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the Proposition N campaign, which divested the city of San Francisco from business with El Salvador, morphed into Lesbians and Gays Against Intervention (LAGAI).⁵⁷ That network then helped to create the first entirely lesbian and gay brigade to Nicaragua, the Victoria Mercado Brigade. This group traveled to Managua in the summer of 1985 with 13 participants, a majority people of color and women.⁵⁸ The Mercado Brigade drew its support from the Bay Area's women of color feminist political scene, raising \$17,000 during a salsa dance event. When in Managua, participants built a neighborhood center and held informal meetings with Nicaraguan lesbians and gay men.

While theoretically representing their Nicaraguan allies, solidarity activists identified themselves as uniquely American—as women of color, lesbians, and gay men. At times, activists showed concern about the politically charged images they used. As some lesbian activists explained, “romanticizing Third World women with guns . . . only serves to sever these women from historical context.”⁵⁹ However, the group believed that solidarity had an “objective” basis—that it went beyond “moralism” because intervention justified cuts to domestic U.S. spending,

⁵⁷ Cymene Howe, “Undressing the Universal Queer Subject: Nicaraguan activism and transnational identity,” *City & Society* 14, no. 2 (2002): 254.

⁵⁸ Tede Matthews, “Coming Out for Peace,” 2.

⁵⁹ Emily K Hobson, “Si Nicaragua Venció”: lesbian and gay solidarity with the Revolution,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (2012), 22.

which in turn produced “racism, sexism, and gay-bashing, all of which disproportionately affect poor people and women and especially women of color.”⁶⁰ Somos Hermanas advocated analyzing the relationships between homophobia and racism and emphasized that gay and lesbian people included working class women of color. However, they ignored the transnational, racial, or class differences that shaped their desires for the Revolution and suggested that lesbian and gay politics remained U.S. concerns.

Despite the queer potential American gay radicals saw in the Nicaraguan Revolution through conversations with solidarity activists and visual materials, the regime’s relationship with the queer community was neither consistent nor entirely positive. In 1987, as Sandinista political power was declining due to the crippling economic effects of American economic sanctions and draining Contra violence, the government covertly cut ties with local queer groups. In what became known by activists as the “*quiebre*” (the break-up), the FSLN government silently detained Nicaraguan gay activists, interrogated them about their sex life, and ultimately sent subpoenas to queer groups in Managua to alert them that the State Security was carefully watching them.⁶¹ When first reported, the *quiebre* was circulated through an interview with Sandinista activist Rita Arauz in Margaret Randall’s *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*, a book that took a more critical look at gender and sexuality in the revolution than Randall’s earlier, more celebratory *Sandino’s Daughters*. Written in 1994, long after the fall of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the consequent decline in queer solidarity with the government, Randall’s book re-interviewed the hopeful women of the Revolution, many of whom divulged the broken

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24

⁶¹ Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 51-78.

Sandinista promises of gender equality. However, Nicaraguan activists strategically kept news of the *quiebre* silent from American activists on the other side. The goal of keeping the *quiebre* a secret was specifically to prevent an outcry from lesbian and gay participants in the Central American solidarity movement. Such a disturbance might have brought further repression from State Security, and it also might have undermined solidarity efforts by revealing the fact of repression to foreigners who wanted to believe such repression did not exist.⁶²

As evidenced by Randall's later interviews, the extent to which the Sandinista government accepted queer people was both exaggerated and sanitized by Nicaraguan activists trying to get the attention of Americans. Yet, in comparison to the Reagan administration's outright condemnation of homosexuals, the Sandinistas perceived embrace of queer figures felt hopeful to American activists. One Nicaraguan figure that inspired queer Americans was Guadeloupe Sequiera, a lesbian poet and political activist who traveled abroad to the United States and Europe, promoting the Sandinista regime and evidence of what she saw as advances in gay rights. Unashamedly masculine with both a large physical presence and personality, Sequiera was a fascinating figure who was publicly embraced by the Sandinista government before the *quiebre*—she even appeared on the Sandinista-run public radio station where she read her erotic lesbian poetry (**Figure 1.4**) and spoke at local universities for pride celebrations.⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 84

⁶³ Sarah Gorton, "Popular Education Faced by Political Change," *The Pink Paper*, (Jul 28, 1990), 1.

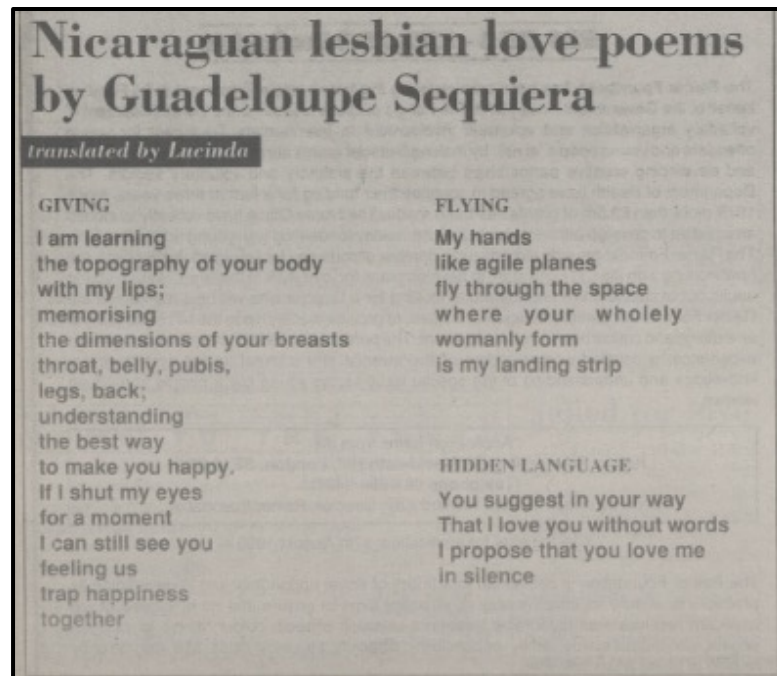


Figure 1.4 *Lesbian love poems read by Guadeloupe Sequiera* ⁶⁴

American activists perceived that the Sandinistas were pro-gay primarily because of symbolic embraces by the government and the absence of institutional discrimination against gay and lesbians by the government. Despite the visibility and embrace of figures like Sequiera by the Sandinista government, the daily lives of many gay people in Nicaragua were not utopian, or even open. A brigade of gay and lesbian activists from Philadelphia who visited Nicaragua to see the solidarity in action wrote detailed journal entries about their daily experiences. When they arrived in Managua, they were embraced by Nicaraguan gay activists who nonetheless told them not to identify themselves as gay or lesbian because it could be perceived as culturally insensitive. However, the same American activists did not get the impression that the Nicaraguan

⁶⁴ Arawn Eibhyln, "De Ambiente: Interviews with Members of the Nicaraguan Movement of Lesbian Feminists and Gay Men," *Breakthrough*, 1992, 17-23.

government was homophobic. As one activist wrote, “The gay people we met there didn't feel a need to march in the street with banners -they were confident that their government would not ignore them, which is something I'm not confident about here.”⁶⁵

Indeed, American activists seemed to distinguish between *societal homophobia* and *governmental homophobia*—they were primarily concerned with the latter in their trips to the country and evaluation of the regime.⁶⁶ From the information they were receiving from Nicaraguan activists, the Sandinistas seemed much more accepting than the Reagan administration, proving American activists’ preconceptions about the queer potential for Nicaragua true. It is important to contextualize these beliefs in both American and Nicaraguan gay history in order to understand them. While the Reagan administration was promoting homophobic laws like the so-called “Briggs initiative” which purged openly gay teachers from working in public schools, there was no publicly-expressed concern about gay members in the Sandinista government. Through these nuanced perceptions about gender, sexuality, and ideology that did not always match the reality in Nicaragua, American queer solidarity was born.

⁶⁵ Rachael, Kamel, *Interview: Lesbian/Gay Brigade Visits Nicaragua*. Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, Inc, (1986).

⁶⁶ Sarah Gorton, "Popular Education Faced by Political Change," *The Pink Paper*, 1.

II. *El SIDA Sí Da*: US-Nicaragua AIDS Solidarity

United States gay activists' idealized views about Nicaragua became reinforced in the spring of 1987 when they received promising news in the midst of the American AIDS crisis: the Sandinista Ministry of Health was developing an AIDS-prevention program, and groups in the United States were invited to raise money, resources, and materials to support it.⁶⁷ This opportunity was a consequential change in gay and lesbian activists' relationship to the Sandinista government, but it was a change that held competing meanings. For Nicaraguan gay activists, AIDS work offered a chance to reverse the slowly increasing government homophobia that would culminate in the *quiebre* later that year. For U.S. activists, unaware of the discrimination, the AIDS program was just one more revolutionary success to compare to the Reagan administration's indifference to the disease.

Nicaragua's response to AIDS was shaped by the revolution's ideological promise of popular education and health. After gaining power in 1979, the Sandinista government had carried out extensive vaccination brigades and won praise from the World Health Organization as a "model" for primary health care.⁶⁸ In Sandinista Nicaragua, healthcare was seen as a communal grassroots effort where the people impacted by the disease were given leadership roles in addressing healthcare crises. In this sense, healthcare activism in the country was patient-

⁶⁷ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, 393.

⁶⁸ Melissa Smith and Robert Drickey, "Education for Primary Health Care: A Report on the U.S.-Nicaragua Colloquia on Health," *Journal for Continuing Education Professionals in Health Sciences* (July 1985): 136.

oriented or patient-centered. For example, in the early 1980s, after an outbreak of polio in Nicaragua that primarily afflicted rural farmers in the Nicaraguan countryside, the government allowed farmers to spearhead a vaccination campaign that led to nearly 80% of the country's population being vaccinated against the disease. Interestingly, the government's grassroots patient-centered approach to healthcare activism predated the philosophy behind a later radical HIV/AIDS group in the United States: ACT UP.

Founded in New York City in the spring of 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was composed of a broad coalition of people affected by AIDS (the queer community, IV drug users, women, and people of color) that demanded government accountability and response to the AIDS crisis.⁶⁹ ACT UP was a radical departure in the history of American healthcare activism, because for one of the first times, the very people who were sick and dying of the disease were their own advocates due to their positions on the margins of society—gay people, IV drug users, and people of color. The activism in ACT UP and other loosely-affiliated radical HIV/AIDS groups was defined by a strategy known as direct action—militant, confrontational activism that sought to garner attention and receive immediate results because of the urgency of the crisis.⁷⁰ In one simultaneously shocking and symbolic protest, ACT UP activists broke into the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) building to try and steal the medicine that they needed to live and that the agency and Reagan administration refused to

⁶⁹ Aggleton, Peter, Peter M. Davies, and Graham Hart, *AIDS: Activism and alliances*. Taylor & Francis, (1997), 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

authorize.⁷¹ The patient-centered model of healthcare advocacy that ACT UP activists hoped for in the United States was the norm in Nicaragua, despite the poverty of the country. This contrast between the Nicaraguan and American approaches to healthcare along with the solidarity work in the early years of the Sandinistas, was likely one of the powerful impetus for why American AIDS activists found themselves drawn to helping Nicaragua.

A powerful strand of solidarity developed around healthcare as American infectious disease professionals traveled to Nicaragua to both receive and provide training. The head of epidemiology for the Ministry of Health (MINSa), received American solidarity groups every week and met frequently with foreign public health experts.⁷² A number of lesbian and gay solidarity activists from the Bay Area both worked in health and became involved in AIDS solidarity. From medics, respiratory therapists, physician's assistants, and safe-sex advocates, the gay community in Nicaragua was confronted with queer Americans wanting to make an impact on the small, war-ravaged nation.

The healthcare workers who traveled to Nicaragua believed they could make a larger impact on public health because of the government's openness to working in tandem with activists and healthcare providers. The American healthcare workers and others were familiar with the Sandinista government's use of popular health education and community organizing and believed that the US government's reluctance to support such work reflected a corporate, profit-

⁷¹ Ibid., 142.

⁷² Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 394.

driven, and discriminatory health care system.⁷³ One American activist who was a trained nurse stated that Nicaragua's approach to healthcare made nursing more "valued" in contrast to the United States, where she feared she could offer only a "band-aid" solution.⁷⁴

Despite the country's small population, Nicaragua had the potential to be devastated by AIDS. Condoms were hard to find because of an economic blockade by the United States, and Nicaragua received an estimated 100,000 foreign visitors each year, primarily from countries with significant rates of HIV/AIDS.⁷⁵ The first cases of AIDS in Central America had appeared among sex workers in Honduras whose clients included U.S. soldiers, and Nicaragua's border with Honduras was relatively open, encouraging movement of people without knowledge of their HIV status.⁷⁶ Well before MINSA had the necessary materials to test for HIV, the Red Cross noted that cases of hepatitis B (linked to HIV epidemiologically) were rising, and together they could be a signal of rising HIV cases.⁷⁷

Knowing the potential for an American-style epidemic to spread to Nicaragua, Sandinista activists deliberately advertised their governments response to gay groups in the United States in order to gain solidarity through medical personnel and resources. Although President Reagan

⁷³ Nicaragua Faces AIDS: San Francisco Activists Advise the Sandinistas," San Francisco Sentinel (February 5, 1988), 3.

⁷⁴ Naomi Schapiro, "AIDS Brigade: Organizing Prevention," *AIDS: The Women*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1988), 211.

⁷⁵ "Health: Taking AIDS Seriously," *Envío*, no. 92 (March 1989), 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

was the primary political enemy of the Sandinistas, Nicaraguan activists believed they could turn to the United States because of the network of transnational gay solidarity during the revolution, highlighting the value of building this earlier solidarity for Nicaraguans. In San Francisco, Nicaraguan activists met people with AIDS, members of AIDS organizations, and lesbian and gay solidarity groups. They gave public interviews in which they urged safer sex and described the use of condoms “a beautiful way to express . . . solidarity,” particularly by HIV-positive visitors to Nicaragua.⁷⁸ They expressed relief that MINSA’s full-page poster about AIDS (which was printed in Nicaraguan newspapers and which discussed anal sex, oral sex, and homosexuality) had not provoked a backlash from Nicaragua’s conservative cardinal (**Figure 2.1 and 2.2**). Further, they advertised that gay and lesbian rights were consistent with the revolution and proclaimed that they anticipated franker discussions of sexuality inside Nicaragua, saying “People are always more ready than we think.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Leonel Argüello, public interview in San Francisco, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, July 1987.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

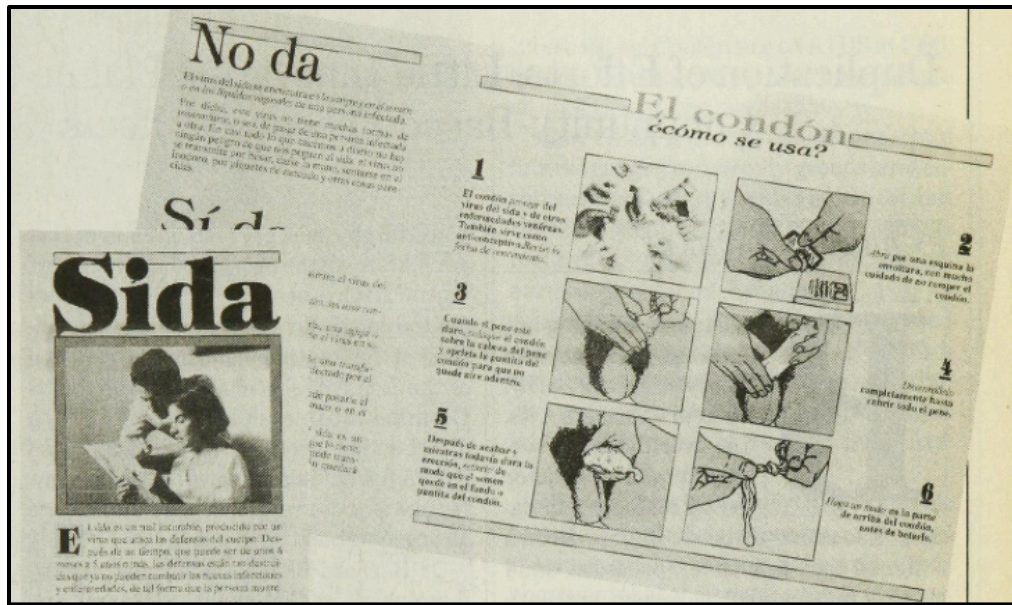


Figure 2.1 HIV-prevention poster published by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health⁸⁰



Figure 2.2 HIV-prevention pamphlet published by Nicaraguan Ministry of Health 1988
[AIDS threatens the health of humanity!]⁸¹

⁸⁰ "El condón. Cómo se usa?" Nicaraguan Ministry of Health, 1988.

⁸¹ Cathy Cockrell, "Nicaragua Faces AIDS," *San Francisco Sentinel*, February 18, 1988, 1-12.

The advertising succeeded, and queer radicals in the United States who had already been in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution, now were motivated to engage in AIDS activism on behalf of Nicaraguans. These activists traveled to Nicaragua, asked for and received formal letters from MINSA to carry as protection if approached by police, and signed up to work as AIDS educators who carried these letters in hand. Granted this protection, they helped establish the Colectivo de Educación Popular Contra el SIDA (CEP-SIDA, Popular Education Collective Against AIDS), a project supported and protected by MINSA.⁸² The Bay Area gay and lesbian press continued to praise Nicaraguan AIDS policy through the late 1980s. An article in *Coming Up!* contrasted Nicaraguan policy to both US and Cuban approaches, emphasizing that the Sandinista government had formed a national AIDS commission before the Reagan administration did, and characterizing Nicaragua's national safer sex information more explicit than what the US surgeon general had recently mailed to the nation's households.⁸³ By highlighting both the perceived and actual successes of the Nicaraguan response to AIDS, gay radicals further cemented a critique of the Reagan administration as intentionally ignoring the AIDS crisis. After all, if Nicaragua, a poor and politically unstable nation in Central America had a better strategy to combat AIDS, then the United States must have been acting with malevolent indifference towards the disease, despite its wealth.

While cases of Nicaraguans living with AIDS had earlier been mere speculation, soon, the first cases of HIV were recorded in the country. By July 1988 five Nicaraguans and twenty-

⁸² Kieran Rose, "Lesbians and Gay Men," *Nicaragua: An Unfinished Canvas*, Nicaraguan Book Collective (Dublin: Nicaraguan Book Collective, 1988), 84.

⁸³ Dan Belmm, "AIDS Education Nicaragua Style," *Coming Up!* (May 1988), 14–15.

one foreigners living in the country had tested positive.⁸⁴ As solidarity with American groups increased, so did the Sandinistas public support of gay Nicaraguans engaged in HIV/AIDS activism. These activists were believed to be protecting the well-being of the entire country through their education work and important connections with American queer and HIV/AIDS activists, and hindering their work could threaten to create an AIDS crisis of American proportions in Nicaragua.⁸⁵ Thus, the military and state police sanctioned the activism of gay Nicaraguans providing safe-sex education and resources in public spaces—national universities, parks, and public squares (**Figure 2.2**).

Because of its central location in the city of Managua and its reputation as a gay hook-up space at night, Revolution Park became a primary forum for HIV/AIDS education. With police officers casually sitting on their cars smoking cigarettes, gay activists would canvass the park distributing condoms and would host occasional informational film nights on the lawns.⁸⁶ The police occasionally harassed activists, but never in the presence of Americans as to not create a bad impression.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁵ Gorton, Sarah. "Popular Education Faced by Political Change." *The Pink Paper*, (Jul 28, 1990), 1.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2.



Figure 2.3 *Banner at a university event reads “AIDS transmits / How will you avoid it?”*

Queer Nicaraguan activists involved in HIV/AIDS prevention during the Sandinistas and the American solidarity activists that joined them were aided by a familiar figure being appointed Minister of Health: Dora Maria Téllez, “La Cochona.”⁸⁸ Indeed, as circumstances would have it, the Nicaraguan revolutionary whose politics and photographs had won hearts among American lesbian activists during the revolution was the head of MINSA, the department responsible for addressing the AIDS crisis. As Minister of Health, Téllez coordinated and sanctioned AIDS activism spearheaded by the gay and lesbian community of which she was a member. It was an open secret among gay men and lesbians in Nicaragua that Téllez was queer and there is reason to believe that fact influenced the government’s embrace of gay activists during the AIDS crisis. Apart from facilitating gay activism in response to AIDS and directing her sub-ministers to

⁸⁸ Jim Merrett, “Nicaraguan Gays Fight New Conservatism,” *The Advocate*, Apr 21, 1992. 42.

maintain relations with American activists, Téllez took an active role in humanizing AIDS patients and reducing stigma. In a particularly moving gesture, Téllez visited AIDS patients at a local hospital and changed their sheets herself, sending the signal that people with AIDS deserve love and care and not irrational fear of contact.⁸⁹ At a time when allies of the Reagan administration were vilifying people who became ill with AIDS and suggesting they be quarantined from society, Téllez's gesture was, once again, nothing short of revolutionary and inspiring for American gays in solidarity with Nicaragua.⁹⁰

In July 1989, the Sandinista government invited CEP-SIDA to participate in celebrations of the revolution's tenth anniversary, and the group mobilized a parade rank. Some thirty-five gay and lesbian Nicaraguans marched in Managua's anniversary events, wearing black shirts with pink triangles—symbolism popularized by US-based activists but that also played on the Sandinista red and black.⁹¹ They chanted slogans that revolution was impossible without lesbian and gay participation. These shirts and slogans were direct visual evidence of the influence of American gay activism in Nicaragua and the collaborative effort of addressing the AIDS crisis in the country. While President Reagan refused to even say the word “AIDS” until four years into the crisis, the Sandinistas hosted a parade that included people wearing the *American* symbol of the gay community (the pink triangle). In a literal sense, the government of a foreign country,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁹¹ Jeffrey Gates, CEP-SIDA flier, 1989–1990.

Nicaragua, gave more public acknowledgement to the American gay community than the own government of the United States. The openness of the Sandinistas to the gay community was no longer purely imagined, it was visible and public to Americans watching, despite the *quiebre* and deep suspicion of queer groups privately within the government that would not be revealed until the mid-1990s.

III. *La Limpieza del Parque: Declining Solidarity*

As the necessity for Nicaragua's AIDS program became more apparent, both solidarity activism and the Sandinistas' hold on power were beginning to dwindle. American gay radicals were increasingly focused on their own experiences of AIDS at home, shifting effort and resources to confront U.S. policy on the epidemic and moving into periods of intense personal loss if they were not ill or dying themselves. As attention to CEP-SIDA diminished in San Francisco, activists planned to visit the United States and advertise CEP-SIDA but were denied visas, as activists had been earlier. This time, no Nicaraguan activists with power to challenge the Sandinista visa denial stepped in to ease perceptions.⁹² By 1989, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health sought to expand its testing and prevention efforts, but it and CEP-SIDA were hindered as the FSLN grappled with new peace negotiations, organized for upcoming elections, and confronted increasing public frustration at the war and economic embargo.⁹³ Internal conflicts also emerged in CEP-SIDA that withered U.S. activists' support.⁹⁴

One of the most significant controversies within the queer Nicaraguan solidarity movement was that of racism in its ranks. The conversations about the fetishizing of Central Americans in the lesbian part of the movement spilled into the larger gay solidarity movement. As one Latino activist complained, "I'm getting sick and tired of white gays, allured by Latinos, who spend time propping up their anticommunist positions... why not just be honest and admit

⁹² Amy Bank, letter to Amanda Newstetter (January 24, 1989), 2.

⁹³ Ibid., 2

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

that you're into the *ambiente latino*, and that the scene is hotter in Guatemala and Honduras.”⁹⁵

The Nicaraguan solidarity movement was indeed a multiracial coalition, and that meant that solidarity had a different meaning for gay Americans of various races. For certain Latino activists, solidarity with gay Nicaraguans was not only based on shared gay identity and politics but also on a shared racial background, making them suspicious of those in the solidarity movement who did not share a similar cultural background.⁹⁶

The Nicaraguan solidarity movement would not have existed had the Sandinista Revolution not moved queer activists worldwide, regardless of its failures in achieving many of its ideals. As evidenced by murals and memorials that exist around the city of Managua, Nicaraguans view the solidarity movement as a source of pride and proof of their nation’s global impact (**Figure 3.1**).⁹⁷ Similarly, Nicaraguan activists defined their queer activism both as extensions of the revolution and as ways in which they shaped international sexual politics. In making these claims, they advocated a Sandinismo that surpassed the FSLN as a party.⁹⁸ In 1995, Dora María Téllez founded the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS, or Sandinista Renovation Movement), a socialist political party that is closely tied to the feminist movement, is

⁹⁵ "Community Voices." *Gay Community News*, Apr 06, 1985, 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁷ Mauricio E. Ramírez, "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*, no. 1 (2019): 115.

⁹⁸ Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 275.

critical of the turn to neoliberal authoritarianism by the modern FSLN, and still serves as a hub for Nicaraguan queer organizing today.⁹⁹



Figure 3.1 *El Amanecer [The Dawn] in Parque de las Madres, Managua, Nicaragua. 1986*

As Rita Arauz stated in *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* after the Sandinistas' defeat, the Nicaraguan Revolution was “the seed, the source” of national lesbian and gay activism, and Nicaraguans sought “a gay and lesbian movement of the Left.”¹⁰⁰ Other activists insisted that homosexuality was “not imported from San Francisco, from England, from any other country,” and in statements at the time, she described sexual liberation as flowing from South to North rather than the inverse that might be expected by people in the West. Indeed, a mural was painted portraying lesbian and gay activism in Nicaragua through a pre-colonial “goddess of the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 284

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 231.

revolution”—a figure who could represent “all the people in the world who feel identified with us (**Figure 3.1**).”¹⁰¹ Nicaraguan lesbian and gay activists noted that their discussions with American activists helped them clarify their critiques of consumerism and individualism in sexual politics, so clearly, they did not admire everything about the American lesbian and gay movement. As one activist later explained in post-Sandinista interviews, “I’m not afraid to tell you that U.S. gay and lesbian organizing contributed to what was here; the exchange was powerful. . . I’m not afraid to tell you that there was influence, but there’s a difference between what the influence was and what we took from it.”¹⁰²

Nicaraguan activists used their relationships with American activists to form a relationship to the Sandinista government and to push forward their own goals within the revolution. American activists would test murky grounds with MINSA and other government officials, assessing the attitudes of those in authority and initiating contacts that Nicaraguan activists might pursue more deeply. Even if they generated hostile reactions, foreigners from the United States had no government jobs or party memberships to lose, and were too valued by the Sandinista state because of their aid and resources to be deported or detained in the same way that gay Nicaraguans were after the *quiebre*. Further, Nicaraguan lesbian and gay activists could control the flow information that visiting activists knew about and were able to repeat, allowing visitors to exhibit solidarity even if they did not know every detail.¹⁰³ Although U.S. activists

¹⁰¹ Barbara Lowe, *Human Rights for All? Global View of Lesbian and Gay Oppression and Liberation* (London: Reading International Support Center, 1992), 24.

¹⁰² Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 421.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 422.

who did not understand these dynamics might have operated with a heightened idea of their own importance, Nicaraguan activists were able to manipulate that narrative to their advantage. The history of lesbian, gay, and AIDS solidarity with Nicaragua is thus in part a history of the gaps of communication that shaped it. Both through these lapses and in the concrete details of ideas exchanged, Nicaraguans actively directed lesbian and gay solidarity and shaped a transnational radical gay politics.

The Sandinistas fall from power was the single most definitive factor in deteriorating American gay solidarity with the country. A year after agreeing to free elections, Nicaragua's Sandinista government lost at the polls, in a popular election. The elections brought an end to more than a decade of U.S. efforts to unseat the Sandinista government. The Sandinistas came to power when they overthrew long-time dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979, and from the beginning, U.S. officials opposed the new regime, claiming that it was Marxist in its orientation. In the face of this opposition, the Sandinistas turned to the communist bloc for economic and military assistance.¹⁰⁴ However, ultimately, the economic decline and general political instability caused by the American economic blockade and Contra warfare ended up turning the public against the Sandinista party.

In 1989, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega met with the presidents of El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala to write out a peace plan for his nation in a last attempt to save his government's political viability. In exchange for promises from the other nations to close down Contra bases within their borders, Ortega agreed to free elections within a year.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, 138.

These elections were held on February 26, 1990. Ortega and the Sandinistas suffered a severe defeat when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the widow of a newspaper editor assassinated during the Somoza years, received over 55 percent of the presidential vote.¹⁰⁵ The opposition also captured the National Assembly, effectively ending Sandinista influence in the government.¹⁰⁶ In the wake of the election, the administration of then President George H.W. Bush immediately announced an end to the U.S. embargo against Nicaragua and pledged new economic assistance.¹⁰⁷ Though rumors spread that the Sandinista-controlled army and security forces would not accept Chamorro, she was inaugurated without significant resistance.

Chamorro's election was a repudiation of over a decade of Sandinista governance, and the United States saw Chamorro's victory as validation of its long-time support of the Contras. Some analysts likened the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas to the crumbling of communist regimes in Eastern Europe during the same period. Critics of the U.S. policy toward Nicaragua retorted that negotiations among the Central American presidents had brought free elections to Nicaragua—which nearly 10 years of American support of armed conflict had been unable to accomplish. Frustrating for American activists, the Contra violence was an unnecessary and ineffective hindrance on the potential for the Sandinistas to achieve many of their revolutionary goals in terms healthcare, housing, and job access.

Chamorro's success in the 1990 elections of Nicaragua also signaled an end to the queer-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 234.

inclusive potential of Nicaragua in the eyes of American activists and on the ground in Nicaragua, through the conceptual transformation of Revolution Park in Managua. One of the very first directives that President Violeta Chamorro ordered along with the newly conservative mayor of Managua, Arnaldo Alemán was a “cleanup”¹⁰⁸ of homosexual activity in Revolution Park and across the city of Managua, which had become associated with homosexuality and AIDS activism during the height of epidemic. Chamorro did not need to specify what was wrong with park, for Nicaraguan activists to foresee what she meant—open gay people were not welcome in the new Nicaragua.¹⁰⁹ Scott Sorrell, a Canadian activist who had been living in Managua for four years in 1992, reported that police would routinely arrest homosexuals in the park and demand proper identification of everyone they saw after a certain time in the evening. One young man who was arrested in the park that year, said the police asked him, “Where is your fucking husband?” and called him a cochón, highlighting the systematic persecution of homosexuals under the Chamorro and Alemán governments.¹¹⁰

Religious Catholic conservatism had been rising in Nicaragua during the period of Sandinistas. Poverty, unemployment, and disease in the country was blamed on the destruction of the family structure and traditional Nicaraguan gender roles under the Sandinistas rather than the economic blockade from the United States and constant warfare with the Contras.¹¹¹ Chamorro

¹⁰⁸ Jim Merrett, “Nicaraguan Gays Fight New Conservatism,” *The Advocate*, Apr 21, 1992. 42.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

and the conservative officials that swept the 1990 elections formally embodied this rising conservatism in terms of gender, sexuality, and family relations. While the Sandinistas never formally embraced gay rights as they are understood in the Western context of legal protections, their public nods and agency given to the gay community were significant considering where Nicaragua was moving culturally.¹¹² Thus, the crackdown on gay life in the Chamorro regime helps illuminate why the tepid acceptance of queer people under the Sandinistas was so inspiring for American solidarity activists.

In the United States, activists were increasingly preoccupied with issues affecting the gay community in the United States. The 1986 Supreme Court decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* allowing states to pass laws criminalizing homosexuality caused energy to begin being reverted to the legal fight for gay rights in the country.¹¹³ Two years after the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the conservative movement was temporarily stalled with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, whose administration was more embracing of the gay community and developed a more comprehensive plan to address the AIDS crisis.¹¹⁴ With queer Nicaraguans struggling under a conservative government and Americans entering a period of changing attitudes towards gay rights, there was no longer a need to treat Nicaragua as a foil to criticize the U.S. government. Thus, nearly a decade of passionate solidarity with Nicaragua in the U.S. gay movement subsided.

¹¹² Ibid., 42.

¹¹³ Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 493.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 498

Conclusion

On March 18, 1986, *The New York Times* published a column entitled “Critical Steps in Combatting the AIDS Epidemic” by prominent conservative commentator and close friend and adviser of President Reagan, William Buckley. In the editorial, Buckley outlined his strategy to combat the spread of AIDS in the United States. Although he saw AIDS as a “special curse on the homosexual,” he believed there was a “utilitarian imperative” to prevent spread to the general public. He argued the final and definitive step of an effective approach to the crisis was simple: mandatory private identification. In other words, people infected with AIDS had to be tattooed by the government. For the protection of common-needle users, in the upper forearm. And, for homosexuals, squarely across the “buttocks.”¹¹⁵

* * *

As historians, we become immersed in the logic, facts, and rationales that explain decisions and phenomena in the past—so much so, that we can lose sight of the power of the romantic, the imagined, the aspirational, and other intangible feelings that create comfort and reaffirm one’s humanity in times of dehumanizing public discourse and crushing despair. The story of queer solidarity with Nicaragua is one such story that goes beyond cause and effect, or clear facts and figures. It is a testament to the power of a collective sentiment, and evidence that

¹¹⁵ William Buckley, “Critical Steps in Combatting the AIDS Epidemic,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1986.

international solidarity as a concept is best understood by sifting facts through the personal lens of imagination.

On a material level, the Nicaraguan Revolution failed to achieve most of its goals in terms of improving the long-term living conditions of everyday Nicaraguans because of constant warfare with the Contras and crippling U.S. sanctions. However, in deciding to build solidarity, American activists seized upon the potential for transformative change in Nicaragua rather than meticulously investigating the successes of the movement. Apart from the few gay Americans that moved temporarily to Nicaragua during the Sandinista era, the majority of American gay activists did not expect to physically gain something by being in solidarity with Nicaragua, as the Sandinistas expected to gain resources from building solidarity with the United States. Instead, American solidarity can be seen primarily as a reprieve for gay activists involved from the mounting homophobia, social conservatism, and burgeoning AIDS crisis that threatened to further marginalize them in their own country and bring on an era of epic loss. In Nicaragua, through the idealized feedback of the successes of the Sandinistas they received from activists there, Americans felt hope for a better world and were able to indirectly participate in a political process where it seemed like, for once, the government cared about people's humanity, regardless of their sexualities—a break from reality.

Historians cannot understand American solidarity with Nicaragua as a reprieve from Reagan-era AIDS politics without noting that American activists never fully understood the extent to which homophobia existed in the Sandinista government. After all, Nicaraguan activists actively withheld the true extent of their private harassment and suspicion by state forces after the *quiebre* of 1987, highlighting the ways in which the police and military were supportive of

their HIV/AIDS education efforts, while refusing to mention individual anecdotes of detention or routine surveillance in reports to American gay activists. Indeed, from a historiographical perspective, this is a difficult question to resolve because omissions of homophobia in the accounts of Nicaraguan activists also entail absences in the historical archive of sources that detail accounts of homophobia. Because the majority of pamphlets, interviews, and articles are addressed to an American audience with the clear intent of encouraging support for the Sandinistas, the sources themselves purposely do not include instances that would make potential American supporters question the regime. While any anecdotal or societal homophobia experienced during the Sandinistas flies in the face of the routine, institutionalized, public, and explicit homophobia of the Chamorro government, progress for queer Nicaraguans under the Sandinistas was not entirely linear and positive.

Yet, if truths about one of the movements are withheld, are those two movements still in solidarity? Certainly, the activists involved in U.S.-Nicaragua AIDS activism labeled their relationship as one of mutual support and self-described “solidarity.” It was emblazoned on posters, pamphlets, and conference banners, and activists from either side traveled thousands of miles visiting each country in the name of solidarity. Insofar as solidarity describes political camaraderie between reciprocally-interested movements, perhaps omissions are not lies but strategic elements that strengthen the relationship between groups to better enable them to achieve their legitimate ends. Ultimately, the American-backed HIV/AIDS popular education brigade in Nicaragua was highly successful—it distributed contraceptives, raised awareness and funds, and brought brief yet public visibility and government support to the gay community in

Nicaragua. What some might call a lack of transparency could very well have saved the lives of thousands of young people in a poor, war-ravaged country.

Nicaraguan solidarity also helped American gay activists clarify a critique of their own government and its approach to the AIDS crisis by providing an alternative patient-centered model of healthcare activism to contrast with the Reagan administration's top-down politicized approach to medicine. Thus, the nature of gay Nicaraguan solidarity helps reframe international solidarity as a historical concept and activist strategy in itself. Solidarity does not always have to be about trading resources—it can also be about escapism and finding motivation in other movements to persevere in one's own and inspire new modes of governance and policy requests.

Nicaraguan solidarity during the AIDS crisis also extends the timeline of radical politics in the United States and particularly within the queer community past the 1970s and well into the 1980s and 1990s, challenging the assumption, articulated by historians like David Deitcher, that gay radicalism died with the rise of the New Right. Rather than declining as modern conservatism was rising during the 1980s, the type of radicalism that gay solidarity activists practiced in the 1980s was in fact fueled by the adverse political context of the Reagan era. Perhaps this phenomenon had to do with the fact that specifically queer and non-white groups dominated the radical movement during this period. While many heterosexual white men and women played active roles in anti-interventionism during the 1960s and 1970s in Vietnam, the fact that they were not targeted for their immutable personal identities during the Reagan era made them less likely to similarly protest intervention in Nicaragua because they were not being drafted and had no connection to the people of the country. In fact, gay solidarity activists with Nicaragua specifically identified with the people of Nicaragua because they believed they were

both oppressed by Reagan and similar global political alliances—normative white and heterosexual activists simply could not share that sentiment. Consequently, gay solidarity with Nicaragua during the AIDS crisis can be understood as evidence that radical politics in the United States extended into the 1980s and 90s—but, specifically in regards to gay activists associated with non-white and other marginalized groups. With this in mind, perhaps we should think of organizing work done by marginalized identity-based groups today as being directly part of the history of gay radicalism in the United States and not a separate historical force.

While gay solidarity with Nicaragua may not have changed the course of history in Central America or of the AIDS epidemic in the United States as a whole, it had profound impacts on the lives of people involved. The resources and training given to Nicaraguans during the AIDS crisis could very well have prevented an epidemic from emerging in the small, isolated nation, and the models of patient-centered healthcare activism learned by Americans created a convincing critique of the Reagan administration's for-profit approach to medicine. But, perhaps most importantly, the imagination inspired in gay activists gave them hope for an affirming world and escape from the derision and dehumanization of daily life during the AIDS epidemic in America. Through transnational solidarity, a new discourse was formed—one of hope and international community—that may have momentarily drowned out the vitriol of public political discourse on AIDS in the United States.

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