

Whose Nicaragua?
Popular Communications Across Eras, Regions and
Generations

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POPULAR COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS ERAS, REGIONS AND GENERATIONS

Deborah Barndt & Christine McKenzie

IN THE SUMMER OF 2001, WE FIND OURSELVES WORKING TOGETHER TO design and facilitate a popular communications workshop in Pearl Lagoon on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. At the time, Christine is a graduate student and Deborah is a teacher in the Faculty of Environmental Studies; the workshop is part of a York University project supported by the International Development Research Council.

Deborah is returning twenty years after organizing similar workshops for the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, focused on the Pacific region, during the period of the Sandinista revolution. Christine is embarking on six months of fieldwork, facilitating the production of community radio and a newsletter with a natural resource management project in the Pearl Lagoon basin.

Our shared experience sparks a dialogue about the distinct contexts that shaped the work in two different moments in history, two different regions of the country and across our two distinct generational experiences and perspectives.

CONTEXT IS CRITICAL

Deborah (1980s): Imagine, Christine, my first experience in Nicaragua was shortly after the birth of the revolution, when you were nine years old. I found myself with a solidarity delegation of Canadians in the Plaza of the Revolution in Managua, celebrating, along with 200,000 others, the "victory over ignorance," barely one year after the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN or Sandinistas) led a triumphant insurrection against the forty-year-old Somoza dynasty. Large murals on commercial-free billboards offered public-art homages to the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade, the first major political and pedagogical project of the new revolutionary government. "La Crusada" gathered the energies of the entire population for five months to teach 400,000 peasants to read and write. The 100,000 young teachers, or brigadistas as they were called, were primarily students from urban areas, who were also "taught" about the hard realities of the countryside by living and working by day with the peasant families they taught by night. The literacy campaign had multiple objectives: to lower the illiteracy rate (it dropped from 52 percent to 13 percent), to prepare historically marginalized people to contribute to building a new economy, to build links between peasants and urban dwellers, and to construct participatory democracy and an active citizenry. It was probably one of the most massive and successful educational events in history.

In the 1980s, the battle was clearly an ideological struggle, as Nicaraguans sought the support of ordinary North Americans. They attempted to counter the negative U.S.-dominated media coverage by inviting delegations to see for themselves the bold initiatives of land reform, health campaigns, peasant and workers organizations, neighbourhood defence and a peoples' army, as well as the showcase its adult education program. Yet they were constantly constrained by the pressures of an ongoing contra (counter-revolutionary) war and deepening poverty.

Nonetheless, popular culture was honoured through oral histories, poetry workshops, mural projects and grassroots theatre. Art was for everyone, central to a cultural (as well as economic) democracy. Canadians went south and Nicaraguans came north through exchanges of educators, musicians, poets, writers and popular theatre practitioners that have influenced many educational and arts projects in Canada today.

Poster from 1982 Canadian Testimonios tour in solidarity with Nicaragua.

[illegible]

Christine (2002): When I went to Nicaragua in 2001, there were not as many other internationalists around as there were during the revolutionary era, but still the experience was profound. Certain disorienting moments, once percolated for their significance, bring greater clarity. After the initial popular communications workshop with you, Deborah, I invited community members together to conceptualize kick-starting our collective radio and newsletter production. This meeting was rich with connotation.



Christine (right) with Bernice Kozack in Pearl Lagoon, Nicaragua.
Hawley,

Meetings about community issues were familiar, but I was not. The project began in 1994, through the Atlantic Coast Documentation Centre (CIDCA) as a means to learn about and advocate for community-based resource management. It was an initiative where “professional” and “community” researchers together investigated what natural resources existed and determined how they could be best used to ensure self-sufficiency.

I gave an overview of why I had been invited to facilitate the popular communications process, with community people creating messages to generate dialogue about and work towards solving the issues that they face.

I talked about how as a student I wanted to do participatory research and was not an expert, but that we would work together, based on their needs and interests. We began to explore issues of importance. Overall, it was going fairly well.

Then a woman breezed into the meeting late, and attention turned to her. It was clear that others saw her as a leader. She said directly that if we wanted community media that we needed infrastructure equipment — a CD player and so on. Now people got *really* animated. They started listing off equipment they could use for the project. Just as straightforwardly, the woman instructed me to buy this equipment for them. I explained that there was no budget for this and that I personally did not have this kind of money. My disclaimer was met by looks of disbelief.

Most of this group were youth, born on the periphery, in the final moments of the Sandinista project. Based in a history of colonization, Atlantic Coast Miskitos, Creole, Garifuna, Sumo and Rama ethnic communities have a history of exploitation both internationally as well as internally by the Spanish-descent mestizos from the Pacific region.

The popular education materials of the Literacy Crusade did not escape this paradigm. Originating from the Pacific and depicting culturally inappropriate mestizo themes and images,¹ these materials met with limited success in raising critical consciousness and political support for the Sandinista vision in Atlantic Coast communities. Not only was the revolutionary spirit not inspiring for everyone in these communities, many fought in the contra war *against* the Sandinistas, and many lost family members in that struggle.

The political moment had shifted since the early 1980s, and this project was embedded with the contradictions of interventions by the Moravian Church and foreign companies,² as well as by the inequitable costs and benefits inherent in neo-liberalism and tied aid.

POPULAR COMMUNICATIONS: IN OUR OWN WORDS AND VOICES

Deborah (1980s): Yes, I was working in a different moment when Nicaraguan popular education and communications inspired movements worldwide. For example, we brought Nicaragua's vice-minister of adult education to a popular education conference in Toronto in 1981. Intrigued by the photo-stories we produced with immigrant workers in ESL classes, he

invited me to Nicaragua to train new literacy teachers in popular or grass-roots photojournalism. In both 1981 and 1983, I worked for the Ministry of Education, supported by the International Council for Adult Education and financed by the Canadian International Development Agency. I saw these projects as opportunities to contribute to solidarity efforts in a moment when the Nicaraguan revolution was being fiercely discredited by Washington-influenced Western media.

The training of popular photojournalists had a specific goal of producing a magazine for new literates, especially rural workers migrating from one harvest to another. The magazine, *Caminemos* (or *Keep on Walking*), was to keep them learning by reading photo-stories based on their own lives. A team of seven teachers took photos and gathered stories (historical and contemporary) that were both practical and political. That year the coffee harvest arrived six weeks early, so the ministry pushed us to get the magazine out immediately to 150,000 migrating farmworkers. Working feverishly, we edited, printed and distributed it in a record two weeks. Only a revolutionary state could generate such a response.



Deborah (left) with Nicaraguan photographers-in-training.

In 1983, I co-ordinated regional training workshops in the areas most affected by war. Working with a team of Nicaraguans, we introduced popular communications as a practice that challenges hegemonic media; draws its content from the daily lives of the marginalized majority; engages literacy students in participatory research of their issues and collective production of their learning materials; and develops their skills in interviewing, drawing, photography, theatre, mask-making and silk-screen production.

The popular art tools created in the midst of war and poverty challenged dominant art and media, as the process also developed the participants' confidence in producing their own communications and learning materials. This participatory production of literacy texts, however, never really moved beyond the three pilot sites (in the Pacific region) to become a widespread practice and, not surprisingly, didn't reach the Atlantic region. So your work in participatory production represented quite a new practice, no?

Christine (2002): Well, it was new in some ways. Many remembered the Literacy Crusade's unsuccessful presence on the coast. Popular communications fit well within the community-based resource management project that had been ongoing for several years, while still being a related process. Community members met weekly as a committee for reflecting, sharing of news/gossip, planning production and raucous socializing. The process of identifying, analyzing and questioning themes related to natural resources, such as shrimp farming and encroachment on agricultural lands, took place at these meetings and beyond. Exploration of these themes was expressed in many forms, from poems to puzzles, to discussions, dramatizations and drawings, with local community members sometimes sending contributions from a distance. The content for the weekly radio program and the quarterly newsletter informed each other, emerging from multiple voices in the communities. In this way, the radio audience became a transmitter as well as a receiver of information, a tool for dialogue.

ROLE OF THE OUTSIDER: AN UNEASY COLLABORATION?

Deborah (1980s): One of the common tensions that we had to deal with emerged from our position as northern educators or researchers in a context shaped by centuries of unequal North-South relations. While most

Nicaraguans in the revolutionary years were able to distinguish between the individuals coming South and the governments they represented, there was often uneasiness about who we were and what we brought to the revolutionary experiment. Often identified with the funds desperately needed, our technical support was both welcomed and resented. I struggled with this contradiction, sometimes questioning my right to contribute to the building of a nation which was clearly not my own. Most often, it was I who was being transformed. How I perceived my role as an outsider and how others perceived it were constantly changing; such questioning, I believe, is a necessary and ongoing process.

As an ESL teacher in Toronto at the time, I was blown away by the commitment and creativity that mobilized the country around the task of literacy. Photographs I took of these creative projects became part of solidarity education in Canada, cross-country photo exhibits and books.³ The Nicaraguans saw my primary role in the 1980s as educating fellow Canadians about the revolutionary vision and practice.

By the 1990 elections, however, it was clear that Nicaraguans were tired of both war and poverty; over 50,000 young soldiers and civilians had been buried from the Contra war. Economic strangulation by U.S.-led boycotts made it hard for Nicaraguans to continually resign themselves to a life of "rice and beans." Even though the Sandinistas garnered 41 percent of the vote, the UNO — a coalition of liberal and right-wing parties — won the elections on a promise of economic relief in the form of aid from the U.S. Visiting Nicaragua a year later, I was deeply saddened to find the colourful revolutionary murals whitewashed and the literacy texts we had produced burned (USAID was producing new ones). The revolutionary period had been relegated to a paragraph in high school history texts.

Christine (2002): I see my Western-educated middle-class white woman standpoint as a problematic Rorschach test. This standpoint is the imperialist framework I have been taught by the world, with which I fill in the details of what I do not understand.

Expectations of my role in the community fluctuated between a desire for me to work alongside community members and for me to give directions. When we were unsure of what should happen next, extra weight was given to my words, despite my limited understanding of the context.

As a researcher from within an academic institution, I strove to be a specific intellectual,⁴ using my skills of knowledge production and organizing *for* the people, knowing I could not be *of* the people as an organic intellectual would.⁵ I saw my role as one to enable conditions where the organic intellectuals⁶ of the community would take the forefront.

I feel this met with varying degrees of success and reinforced for me what Escobar calls the "impasse of development," in which participatory development measures (for me characterized by the presence of outsiders, among other things) are ineffective in imagining an *alternative to* development, and instead continue to reproduce more "development alternatives" within the current paradigm of inequities.⁷

PROCESS/PRODUCT

Deborah (1980s): I don't think we can ever completely step outside of that paradigm in projects like CAMP-Lab, even as we critique it and imagine alternatives. But popular communications can challenge hegemonic practices of development and mainstream media with its emphasis on the process of building grass-roots power while producing products for specific local uses.

In the early 1980s, we encountered the classic tension between the process of developing consciousness and skills in local communities and the need to produce literacy materials that would help build a nation in the face of war and poverty. Aimed at cultural development and not mere cultural expression, the process engaged new literates and their communities in gathering stories, valuing their histories, representing struggles and strengths using their own forms of art and following their own rhythms. The transformation from passive to active citizens was as important as the transformation of stories into texts, posters and theatre. It was to contribute directly to the development of a participatory democracy after decades of dependency.

Christine (2002): As a team, we struggled to reconcile the dichotomy between showcasing professional products and privileging the mentorship and learning that happened in the process of developing the programs.

One of the highlights of the project was the weekly trip to the radio station in the next community. Members of the group would take turns acting as the host, some would do live interviews with community mem-

bers or be DJ, while others would come to cheer from the sidelines. Some weeks it was quite an entourage, nervously rehearsing on the way there and enveloped in an air of celebration as we made our way back.

It was a kind of spontaneous "audience survey" that took place from people's front porches. In the small communities everyone knew each other and were quick to speak their minds: "You talked good." "You should get people to explain more about why they are cutting trees for the cows ... was interesting." "You playing too much country music — that is for old people!" These were some of the comments shouted to us as we passed by.

Community people judged the surface appearance of our production, but the deepening of critical questioning, analysis and awareness behind the scenes was no less significant. Within the radio production community, the orientation was more towards high quality production than community capacity building. We constantly wrestled with the tension of where to put the emphasis — a professional radio documentary or one in which technically untrained community participants exercised their right to speak about issues important to their lives. At times, it was a struggle for everyone to feel proud of our own product and not to see it as "less than" those whose work followed the larger, dominant global communications trends.

It was a process of recognizing the ways in which we are colonized by what is seen as beautiful and artistic within these forms; we worked to reframe radio production in the local context, as part of our personal transformation and to offer an alternative example.

AN ONGOING DIALECTIC

Deborah (2005): A common thread of our experiences — across time, space and generation — is the notion that any alternative art or popular communications is both shaped by and can help shape the specific historical, geographic and political context within which it unfolds. The content, forms and use of the tools we were involved in producing reflected the geographic and cultural settings, the historical and political moments they were embedded in.

This work is always done within layers of contradictions and complex power relations. Take, for example, the broader context of Nicaragua negotiating the tension between self-determination and dependence in the face of U.S. neo-liberal hegemony; the colonial legacy of the Pacific region's

domination of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast; the differences within those regions (ethnic, class, gender); and, finally, the contradictions within our roles as outsiders purporting to promote democratic practice — if not in communities at least in the production of media and communications. Our identities, just as those of the people we engaged with, are multiple and shifting. The contradictions (North/South, Pacific/Atlantic, teacher/student, etc.) will not disappear, so we must learn to name them, hold them and engage them, both critically and creatively.

Christine (2005): Looking across time is necessary, yet it is equally important to analyze each conjunctural moment to try to understand what was happening and how that shapes what is currently possible. The revolution and the literacy crusade touched the whole country, and its messages resonated in different ways, depending on geographic location, identity, political affiliation and religion, among other factors. It is the complexities of these movements that reintegrate to shape another day and another story.

NOTES

Deborah dedicates this chapter to her parents, Bill and Laura Barndt, 91 and 90 years old respectively, for modelling intergenerational dialogue, and for sharing their own processes of being politicized by solidarity work with liberation struggles in the Philippines and Central America. Christine dedicates this chapter to friends and collaborators from Nicaragua's coast who shared their wisdom and inspiration.

1. Valerie Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).
2. Edmund Gordon, *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African-Nicaraguan Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).
3. Deborah Barndt, *To Change This House: Popular Education under the Sandinistas* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991).
4. Quintin Hoare and Geoffry Smith, trans./eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks by Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971). Gramsci refers to a specific intellectual as one who occupies a specific intellectual position in terms of his/her conditions of class position, life, as an academic researcher and in relation to

the politics of truth. The specific intellectual through his/her position takes on "not a battle on behalf of truth, but a battle about the status of truth, and the economic and political role it plays." In this way, the specific intellectual works from and with his/her location, while aligning with other struggles.

5. Pablo S. Bose, "Critics and Experts, Activists and Academics: Intellectuals in the Fight for Social and Ecological Justice in the Narmada Valley, India," *International Review of Social History* 49, S12 (December 2004), 133–157.
6. Hoare and Smith, *Selections from the Prison*, 132. Gramsci refers to an organic intellectual as one from within the community or within an oppressed group who plays a role in knowledge production for those interests.
7. Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).