Culture and Arts in Post Revolutionary Nicaragua:
The Chamorro Years (1990-1996)

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the role of culture in post-revolutionary Nicaragua during the administration of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996). In particular, this research analyzes the negotiation and redefinition of culture between Nicaragua’s revolutionary past and its neoliberal present. In order to expose what aspects of the cultural project survived and what new manifestations appear, this thesis examines the followings elements: 1) the cultural policy and institutional apparatus created by the government of President Chamorro; 2) the effects and consequences that this cultural policy produced in the country through the battle between revolutionary and post-revolutionary cultural symbols in Managua as a urban space; and 3), the role and evolution of Managua’s mayor and future president Arnoldo Alemán as an important actor redefining culture in the 1990s. After the Sandinista revolution, Nicaraguan culture was remade not only by its political leaders such as Ortega, Chamorro and Alemán, but also by the economic development and cultural values brought by neoliberalism.

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Writing a thesis about Nicaragua has been a challenging experience but rewarding rediscovery of culture and arts in my own country. The impact of the end of the Sandinismo and the beginning of the transition years in the 1990s were fragmented pieces in my memory but my thesis has helped me to join the puzzle pieces together. This thesis could not have been accomplished without the support of several individuals whose contributions I gratefully acknowledge.

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poet, my road was a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery.
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INTRODUCTION

Culture and arts during the Nicaraguan revolution (1979-1990) were at the center of international debate. Few nations with the size and economic situation of Nicaragua have ever captured the world’s attention and popular imagination. During those years, the Sandinista revolution’s cultural project was an area of interest for a multitude of academics who became part of this revolutionary project as activists. Important intellectuals and writers such as Noam Chomsky, Salman Rushdie, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez wrote about this cultural project characterized by the involvement of the masses in both the creation and production of art. Books such as On Power and Ideology: the Managua Lectures by Chomsky, Rushdie’s The Jaguar Smile: a Nicaraguan Journey, Apocalypse at Solentiname by Cortázar, or García Márquez’s Viva Sandino, present a portrait of Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution. People knew about Nicaragua because the Sandinistas used culture for political purposes, promoting their revolutionary project internationally through the worldwide dissemination of Nicaraguan poetry, novels, paintings and films.

Nevertheless, after the election of President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in 1990, Nicaragua and its culture no longer seemed to generate global attention and interest as it did in the 1980s. During Chamorro’s administration, (1990-1996) Nicaragua was reincorporated into the international economic system and the U.S. sphere of influence, and the social and cultural innovations of the decade of the revolution began to be reduced. President Chamorro was able to put an end to years of war and economic embargo, but the stabilization measures and the cutting back of the state sector to give
priority to the development of the market, created enormous social impacts on the Nicaraguan population. During these transition years, the idea of culture also experienced significant changes and it played an important role for Nicaraguans in redefining and negotiating their revolutionary past and their neoliberal present.

This research examines what happened in Nicaraguan culture after the Revolution; especially what aspects of the Sandinista project survived the market-driven neoliberal decades and what new cultural manifestations appeared in the 1990s. This thesis proposes answers to these questions by analyzing the role of culture in post-revolutionary Nicaragua during the Chamorro years. This research also explores the cultural policy and apparatus created during these years as well as its consequences on Nicaraguan society. As many critics have mentioned, culture is a battlefield upon which antagonistic forces will try to dominate and impose their notion of culture, and Nicaragua is not an exception. Therefore, another important element in this analysis of culture is the political struggles between the revolutionary and the new neoliberal Nicaraguan culture. Symbols from the past scattered throughout the city played an important role as cultural indicators determinated the survival or substitution of the Sandinista legacy. In addition to the role of Chamorro and the Sandinistas, Managua’s mayor Arnoldo Alemán was a significant actor who defined the culture in these transitional years as well as in his presidency in the mid-nineties.

This thesis is organized in four chapters. The first chapter provides an historical background of culture during the Somoza and Sandinista periods. For the Somoza years, I will present the cultural politics of this dynasty characterized by the increasing
penetration of Nicaragua into the commercial culture of the United States. The Sandinista
section concentrates on the revolutionary cultural project, from its genesis, core ideas,
and artistic expressions until its end with the elections of 1990 and the loss of the
Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). This chapter helps to understand the
historical and political environment and how it was affected by culture. Chapter two
focuses on Nicaragua in the 1990s, its political, economic and social framework in a
period of “Transition and Democratization.” Despite this historical setting, the focus of
this chapter is the cultural framework created by the Chamorristas; the cultural
institutions, the governmental discourses and strategies such as the promotion of a culture
of peace, the reconstruction of the National Palace of Culture and the first organization of
a cultural legislative corpus in the country. The third chapter analyzes the aforementioned
struggle for the prevalence of cultural symbols from the Sandinistas and Chamorristas.
The urban “cleanup” of many murals and martyr monuments made by Managua’s mayor
and former president, Arnoldo Alemán, is also included in this chapter. The final chapter
explores Alemán’s cultural vision and political persona by creating an analogy between
this politician and the negative stereotype of El Güegüense.

The literature regarding the study of culture in Nicaragua has been focused almost
entirely on the 1980s. Culture in Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution is a well-
researched subject but studies focusing on cultural transformations in the 1990s are still
rare. In general, scholars have analyzed the changes during the Chamorro administration
from a political, economic, agrarian, structural, and social perspective. Some scholars
such as Thomas Walker and David Close present valuable insights on these and related
topics, especially the regime transition and structural adjustment to a post-revolutionary Nicaragua. One substantial study related to post-revolutionary culture in Nicaragua is Florence Babb’s research on how political and economic transitions impact gender and classes in the urban context. Even though the main focus of her research is how capitalist development in Managua affected low-income women workers, Babb presents impressive insights of new cultural markers in Nicaragua that this thesis takes into consideration.

This thesis intends to contribute to a chronological link between the preceding existing corpus of literature related to the arts and culture in the 1980s and the lack of studies concerning culture and arts in the following years. Therefore, the starting point of this research is the existing bibliography related to the revolution as historical background. Nevertheless, this study will contribute to the organization of fragmented governmental resources from the Chamorro administration, written materials which have not been categorized and will provide an institutional panorama of culture in this period. Overall, the rapid and drastic cultural changes the country has gone through while trying to make or erase connections to its Sandinista past are fascinating and show why Nicaragua deserves continued attention. Nicaraguan culture was never close to extinction, even after the Sandinista revolution; therefore, it is important to present what happened within the culture after the 1980s.
CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON NICARAGUAN CULTURE: FROM THE SOMOZA DICTATORSHIP TO THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

Culture in Nicaraguan History

Cultural development in Nicaragua has been historically influenced by foreign countries. From the colonial period until Central American independence in 1821, Spain transferred its cultural systems and worldview to Nicaragua as well as to the rest of the Latin American countries. In the nineteenth century, during a prolonged period of internal contention, the American filibuster William Walker controlled the country and declared himself president of Nicaragua from 1856-1857. In the first half of the twentieth century, Nicaragua experienced two U.S. Marine interventions from 1912-1925 and 1926-1933. Nevertheless, a contemporary case of Nicaraguan cultural devaluation was the more than four decades of Somoza Dictatorship (1933-1979). This oppressive dynasty was overthrown by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) in 1979. During this revolutionary government (1970-1990), the FSLN’s cultural and social programs were at the center of international debate. Through the Revolution, this small Central American nation (See Figures 1 and 2), land of poet Rubén Darío and known as “the land of lakes and volcanoes,” captured the world’s attention.  

In the 1990s, the Revolution and its cultural project ended. Therefore, in order to understand culture after the revolutionary era, it is essential to discuss the chronology of two important periods in

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1 Rubén Darío (1867-1916) was a prodigious Nicaraguan poet who made major changes in poetic language tradition; he is considered for some critics as the father of Modernism. His early poetry in works such as Azul (1888) was characterized by the influence of different international currents such as: the harmony and musicality of French symbolists and the selections of exotic and classical subjects from the French Parnassians. Nevertheless, his late works such as Cantos de vida y esperanza (1905) presented his concerns for Latin American culture.
Nicaragua. This chapter presents the panorama of culture during the Somoza dynasty and the FSLN Revolution.

Figure 1: Nicaragua in 1857
Source: Francisco Javier Aguirre Sacasa. *Un atlas histórico de Nicaragua*

Figure 2: Political Map of Nicaragua
Source: Perry-Castañeda Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin
The Somoza Dictatorship

In 1946 the Argentinean president Juan Perón announced, “The state has to concern itself with the culture of the people, because nations that lack a culture of their own are highly vulnerable to becoming semi-colonial countries.”\(^2\) This statement was certainly true in Nicaragua during the forty-two years of the Somoza Dictatorship (1937-1979). Anastasio Somoza García “Tacho” (father and founder of the dynasty) and his two sons (Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle) created an autocratic state unconcerned with forging an elaborate cultural project committed to Nicaraguan interests. As T.M.Scruggs indicates, the Somoza Dynasty characterized Nicaraguan identity based on the regime’s emulation of Europe and America.\(^3\) Cultural policy during the first Somoza Era (1936-1956) was a reflection of Somoza García’s political interests, defined by a manipulation of culture for political purposes. Whisnant, in his study on the politics of culture in Nicaragua, mentioned alliances with different sectors —both local elites and working-class—as a main element in the Somoza agenda to promote culture. Another important aspect was the neglect and stigmatization of “national culture” in favor of foreign cultural forms and production, particularly U.S. culture.\(^4\)

In *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956*, Knut Walter portrays the Somoza García administration as a dynasty, which based its power on the ability of the


leader to create political alliances. Consequently, one must conclude that Somoza’s alliance with various social and cultural groups was also pivotal to his consolidation of power. His association with the working class was based on his awareness of the political value of supporting “the masses” and giving them concessions. Somoza built a populist image characterized by “an appeal to the people; popular mobilization; dynamic (charismatic) leadership; a reformist rather than revolutionary programme.” As Whisnant explains, in the cultural sphere Somoza García courted the working class and rural culture, particularly the indigenous communities; he used a discourse of culturally sensitive rhetoric full of romanticized characterizations of indigenous culture. This position was contradictory in regards to his regime’s denigration of the working class and peasantry. Some examples were the creation of Nicaragua’s Instituto Indigenista Nacional in 1941, aimed at socializing indigenous people back into primary relationships with their own culture, which in reality was intended to “incorporate indigenous into civilization” and acculturate them. Likewise, the donation of lands and the sponsorship of labor unions by Somoza García—after years of repressing the labor movement—was his strategy between 1937 and 1944 as he sought to regain popularity and search for new

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6 For example, Jeffrey Gould, in his book *To Lead as Equals*, presented a study of development of political action among workers and peasants in the department of Chinandega in Nicaragua. He argued that Anastasio Somoza García , in his relations with these workers, created a populist image, for example, by creating labor organization which was according to the author “an integral component of Somoza García’s strategy to politically debilitate the landed oligarchy, neutralize the opposition, and establish hegemonic control over the Nicaraguan polity” (48). Jeffrey Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990), 46-48; and Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places*, 117.
9 Ibid.
allies in a period characterized by the development of an élite-led oppositional movement.\textsuperscript{10}

In a comparative historical context, Nicaragua’s experience with Somocista populism was one part of the emergence of populist governments in Latin America in the twentieth century. Populist leaders such as Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) in Brazil, Juan Velasco in Perú (1968-1975) and Juan Perón in Argentina (1946-1952, 1952-1955 and 1973-1974) sought to develop and expand domestic industry and popular political support. Somoza policies followed this same model, particularly in regard to the organization and mobilization of labor and the popular sectors and the role of the state in economic development.\textsuperscript{11} But contrary to presidents such as Vargas, who promoted Brazilian culture and nationalism through governmental cultural initiatives, or Velasco, who created in Peru a cultural program with a national involvement among indigenous people in the 1970s, Somoza did not promote Nicaraguan culture or create initiatives involving the State with the cultural sphere.\textsuperscript{12} According to Scruggs, the most active participants in cultural projects during the Somoza regime were individual members of Nicaragua’s small middle class who searched for symbolism in being Nicaraguan, influenced by the \textit{costumbrista} and \textit{Vanguardia} literary and intellectual movements.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Gould, \textit{To Lead as Equal}, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{11} Walter, \textit{The Regime of Anastasio Somoza}, 65.
\textsuperscript{12} Turino pointed out Brazilian cultural nationalist initiatives such as the creation of the program \textit{Hora do Brasil}, the promotion of popular music to praise Vargas and his government, and the creation of samba schools. In the Peruvian case, Velasco executed agrarian reform among the indigenous peasants; he made the indigenous language Quechua official, sponsored folkloric festivals and required by law all radio stations to dedicate hours to folkloric Peruvian music. Turino “Nationalism and Latin American Music,” 182-192.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Costumbrismo} offered the description of ordinary life in a particular milieu, especially in provincial, regional or rural life in a language peppered with localisms. \textit{The Nicaraguan Vanguard Movement} (1931-1940), known as \textit{Vanguardia}, was a literary movement characterized by the creation of modern literary
\end{flushright}
To comprehend U.S. cultural influences during the Somoza years, one must first approach the historical context of Nicaraguan policy toward the United States. During his administration, Somoza García and the United States developed a close relationship; Somoza’s dynasty received the support of eight consecutive U.S. presidents. Thomas Walker states that Nicaragua was for many years the reflection of U.S. decisions. For example, during the Second World War, Nicaragua supported the U.S. position against the German-Italian-Japanese Axis; Nicaragua declared war only two days after the United States did. Within a matter of years, Somoza passed from an open admirer of Mussolini Italian fascism (mid-1930s) to a loyal supporter of the antifascist Roosevelt bloc. The official invitation to visit President Roosevelt at the White House in 1939 was very significant for the Nicaraguan leader. “Tacho [nickname] returned to Nicaragua from Washington with the renewed aura of being the American’s chosen man.” After this official visit he named Managua’s Central Avenue “Avenida Roosevelt,” which,
following Ángel Rama’s theory, could be seen as a symbolic and physical reproduction of U.S. political power in this Nicaraguan urban space.¹⁹

When U.S. interests moved against communism, Somoza’s rhetoric became tinged with an anticommunist tone. As an example, the Eisenhower administration strived to eliminate communists in the hemisphere and was involved in overthrowing Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Subsequently, Somoza, with his chameleon-like talent, helped the U.S. overthrow Arbenz. ²⁰ These political links between Somoza and the U.S. government were reflected in the cultural life of Nicaragua. More specifically, this period was marked by the increased penetration of U.S. consumer culture in Nicaragua through print and broadcast media. U.S. consumer culture was evident in Nicaraguan daily life with North American products, styles, and values. This influence continued to accelerate for four decades primarily because U.S. corporations and government actively promoted it; by 1940 60% of Nicaragua’s imports came from the United States.²¹ Print and broadcast media illustrated other ways that American culture spread in Nicaragua. In the media, the U.S. influence was demonstrated by three significant facts: 1) the first radio network was built by the U.S. Marine Corps and National Guard, 2) 95% of Nicaraguan television programs were mainly of U.S. origin,

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¹⁹ Ángel Rama highlighted the role of cities representing symbolic power. He said that the city is a sign, a plan, a physical structure that represents the symbolic power of colonial order (Church, Army and Administration). Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (CityHanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1984), 8.
²¹ Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places*, 121-123.
and 3) in the film industry 73%, of the films shown during the 1950s were from the United States.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite Somoza García’s assassination by Rigoberto López Pérez in 1956, the Somoza dynasty continued.\textsuperscript{23} The dictatorship prevailed because his sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, took over the governance of the country. In the following two decades, U.S. political support and cultural influence remained and the budget for cultural programs was not a priority for the ruling family. Perhaps the most significant cultural projects during this period were led by Anastasio’s wife, Hope Portocarrero. Her contribution can be summarized in the creation of cultural infrastructure: a Centros Cultural that included new buildings for the National Library and the National Museum and the construction of the Rubén Darío National Theater in 1969.\textsuperscript{24}

The Sandinista Revolution

Widespread opposition and discontent toward the Somoza regime led to its downfall and the rise of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) on July 19, 1979. The Sandinista Revolution became engaged in the creation of a new cultural initiative characterized by a process of cultural empowerment and artistic self-realization.

\textsuperscript{22} In mid-1927 the National Guard, as the sole armed forces in the country, was created, trained and organized by the U.S. Marines Corps to substitute when the United States cut back its occupation forces. Somoza García was the first Nicaraguan director-in-chief of the Guard, and with this position he ordered the assassination of Sandino in 1934. Additionally, the relation developed by Somoza and the National Guard was paternalistic; it was a competent and corrupt extension of his personal will. The National Guard was not only Nicaragua’s army and police forces: it granted business licenses, controlled the trade in arms, explosives, liquor, tobacco and prostitution. Booth, \textit{The End and the Beginning}, \textit{The Nicaraguan Revolution}, 43; Crawley, \textit{Dictators Never Die}, 96; Walker, \textit{Living in the Shadow of the Eagle}, 109; and Whisnant, \textit{Rascally Signs in Sacred Places}, 130.

\textsuperscript{23} Rigoberto López Pérez was a poet and a university student. He was known mostly for his assassination of Anastasio Somoza García. During the Revolution the government of Nicaragua declared him a National Hero.

\textsuperscript{24} Whisnant, \textit{Rascally Signs in Sacred Places}, 144-145.
Prior to analyzing this cultural initiative, it is important to mention the different ideologies that influenced core ideas of the Sandinista cultural project: 1) the historical-cultural example of Augusto C. Sandino (cultural nationalism as analogous to national liberation; 2) a pride in mestizaje; 3) an awareness of the cultural dialectic between north and south in the Americas; 4) the Vanguardia (recovering and revaluing indigenous culture, and an anti-bourgeois orientation); 5) Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, and of culture as a primary arena of political struggle; 6) the student resistance movement of the 1960s (anti-imperialism); 7) Marxist cultural theory; and, lastly, 8) Ernesto Cardenal’s cultural views. Therefore, when the Sandinista leaders came to power they went to great lengths to execute that Cultural Revolution.

The Nicaraguan Revolution’s cultural initiatives can be analyzed not only through the construction of a new cultural identity, but also by the institutionalization of infrastructures which led to the promotion of a cultural praxis and the creation of revolutionary artistic production in poetry, music, television, art-painting, film and cultural journals. The Sandinistas were engaged in the recuperation of a cultural identity and therefore the creation of a new culture; however, these goals presented two theoretical problems. Should cultural change consist of elevating the cultural level of the masses by creating conditions which facilitate the cultural appropriation that they did not have access to before? Or, should cultural transformation include an alteration of cultural

25 Ernesto Cardenal (b.1925) is a priest and well-known poet, founder of the primitivist art community in the Solentiname Islands, famous liberation theologian of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. From 1979 to 1987 he served as Nicaragua's first cultural minister.
content which opposes the vision of culture created by the previous administration? 27 Intellectuals such as Giulio Girardi, Sergio Ramírez and Cardenal agreed that the cultural project of the Revolution presumed a new concept of culture opposed to that of the previous dominant group. Cardenal presented his definition of culture as a dialectic process which not only denies the previous culture but surpasses it. 28 Sergio Ramírez, in his speech Los intelectuales y el futuro revolucionario (Intellectuals and Revolutionary Future), described this new culture as an authentic culture aloof from foreign U.S. cultural patterns, immersed in the political revolutionary process, and with a popular content which presents national reality. 29

The creation, preservation and strengthening of a new culture as a cultural project in the revolutionary process included the creation of new cultural institutions. Thus, the Ministry of Culture, the Centros Populares de Cultura (Popular Centers of Cultures CPC) and the Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores Culturales (Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers-ASTC) played important roles as cultural infrastructures. The Ministry of Culture was established the day after the Sandinistas entered Managua in July, 1979; it was “housed ironically, in one of the deposed dictator’s former residences.” 30 Ernesto Cardenal was appointed the first Minister of Culture after the Somozas were overthrown. The Ministry did not have an institutional document to reflect the cultural policies of the Sandinista government. The Sandinista leaders stated that the

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task of formulating a cultural policy was up to the cultural workers.\textsuperscript{31} The only report that embraced objectives of the cultural project was edited by the Ministry of Culture in 1982. It was a collection of Sandinista leaders’ statements on culture entitled \textit{Hacia una política cultural} (Towards a Cultural Policy). In this document, Cardenal listed four indicators of culture: it had to be popular, national, democratic and anti-imperialist.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the lack of a specific corpus of cultural policy, Cardenal’s role in organizing a cultural plan is undeniable, as many scholars have indicated. As Minister of Culture he contributed to the development of a revolutionary cultural project focused on the “democratization of culture.”\textsuperscript{33} The goal of this cultural praxis was to distribute the means of cultural production more equitably, giving priority to the productive aspect of culture by emphasizing that working Nicaraguans could also produce culture as amateur art. That changed the relationship between the creators and the consumers of culture. Perhaps the best-known means of democratizing culture was under the Sandinistas’ nation-wide network of primitivist schools of painting, the \textit{Talleres de Poesía} (poetry workshops), and the revival of public mural art to the extent that Nicaragua became the “world capital” of muralism in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{34}

The history of the primitivist schools of painting began with Cardenal in 1966. On the islands of Solentiname in the Lake of Nicaragua, he created a religious community

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{32}] Cardenal, \textit{Hacia una política cultural}, 179.
\item[\textsuperscript{33}] In Nicaragua, the term “democratization of culture” meant destroying the elitist character of culture (before the Revolution, an elite group produced their art for a small well-educated public), making culture accessible to everyone, and stimulating cultural creativity among the masses. Klass S. Wellenga, \textit{Entre la poesía y la pared: política cultural sandinista 1979-1990} (Amsterdam : Universiteit Utrecht, 1994), 71.
\item[\textsuperscript{34}] David Craven, \textit{Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 118.
\end{itemize}
called comunidad de base, organized around the study of liberation theology. The beliefs of this school of theology were to bring justice to the poor and oppressed with political activism. Through the study of these beliefs, Cardenal analyzed the unequal participation of the population in the means of productions and, consequently, made art production accessible to peasants. Therefore, in 1968, Cardenal, with the help of Roger Peréz de la Rocha—a member of Praxis, an avant-garde painting group—developed a style of “naïve” painting and trained the people of the islands in this oil painting method. After the Revolution, this artistic painting movement was no longer limited to Solentiname and artists emerged from all parts of Nicaragua.

In the 1980s Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano stated that one of the most important new contributions to Latin-American literature was the creation of poetry workshops in Nicaragua. The idea of these workshops as a popular phenomenon also emerged in Solentiname in 1977, when Mayra Jiménez, a Costa Rican poet, decided to teach peasants of the island how to write poetry. Poetry plays an important part in Nicaraguan cultural traditions as the country has a prolific and distinguished poetry tradition. Important figures and literary movements—such as Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan Vanguard Movement and its members (José Coronel Urtecho, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Joaquín Pasos, etc), and Cardenal himself (with the creation of a poetic theory called Exteriorismo)—had significantly contributed in the innovation of the Latin

36 Ibid.
38 Cardenal, Hacia una política cultural, 230.
39 Wellinga, Entre la poesía y la pared, 165.
American literary tradition. As a poet, Coronel Urtecho once said, “Every Nicaraguan is a poet until proven otherwise.” The active involvement of the poorest and formerly illiterate groups of the population in the poetry workshops allowed them to interpret Nicaraguan culture and develop a consciousness of their political realities. During the Sandinista Revolution poets also played a politically committed role in the government. Numerous leaders of the Revolutionary government wrote prose or poetry, like the Interior Minister Tomás Borges and Vice President Sergio Ramírez.

Regarding the cultural space in Nicaragua during the 1980s, by analyzing Ángel Rama's Lettered City, Silvia Spitta indicates that in urban spaces there exist symbolic and lettered signs created by the elite. If this theory is applied to the Sandinista era, it could confirm that with democratization of culture the Sandinistas did not use elite symbols but popular signs— understandable to everyone—to cover the country. The epitome of these urban and popular signs was Nicaraguan Muralism. In The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992, David Kunzle studied the Muralist Revolutionary Movement in the country, which he characterized by its prolific nature, there were nearly 300 murals throughout Nicaragua of which 126 were painted in Managua. According to Kunzle murals were a narrative memory of Sandinismo and they reflected and promoted the aims and achievements of the Revolution by the multiplicity of social themes they addressed.

40 Exteriorismo is an objective poetry created with images of the exterior world, the world we see and sense; narrative and anecdote, made with elements of real life and with concrete things, with proper names and precise details and exact data, statistics, facts, and quotations. Reginald Gibbons, “Political Poetry and the Example of Ernesto,” Critical Inquiry 13, no.3 (1987): 654.


These themes included iconography related to the representation of the revolutionary insurrection; the portrait of ordinary people taking power into their own hands; the evocation of Sandinistas’ social programs and a future vision of economic growth and happiness. In 1982 the Nicaraguan government worked with Italy to create a Mural Art School with the intention of reviving mural art. Sergio Michilini, one of the Italian artists who participated in this project, considers this initiative as a great achievement because “mural technique has only been studied as an additional subject in the art academy, but never as a school in and of itself.”

Besides the cultural projects, the Ministry of Culture also established the national system of Centros Populares de Cultura (CPC), whose aim was to articulate cultural practices in Nicaraguan regions. The CPC, of which the workshops were a part, were the most important branch of the Ministry and received the majority of the limited Ministry budget. The functions of the CPC were “the establishment of libraries, reading rooms, and free public classes in the areas of music, theater, literature and plastic arts.” They trained artists, not instructors of art. Over 36 CPC centers were created, 22 of which were financed by the Ministry; the other 14 were supported by the communities where they were located. Some of the activities carried out by CPC offices were recreational and educational, advising in the organization of traditional celebrations, for example by creating programs such as children’s theater and puppets workshops. The CPC was founded on promoting culture in the regions, and developing a tendency toward

44 Ibid.
45 Craven, Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990, 158
46 “Revolution on the Walls,” Barricada International, March 21, 1985, 15
47 Craven, “Art in Contemporary Nicaragua”: 55.
48 Wellinga, Entre la poesía y la pared, 73.
decentralization especially in the cultural sphere of everyday life. The following is a Diagram of the Network of Programs under the Ministry of Culture (1979-1988) (See Figure 3):

Figure 3: Diagram of the Network of Programs under the Ministry of Culture (1979-1988)
Source: David Craven. Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990, 139
Another cultural apparatus was the *Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores Culturales*, founded in 1980, which joined the unions of writers, plastic artists, musicians, theatre workers, photographers, and circus performers.\(^4^9\) It was the most important organization involved in the development and production of cultural activities for the Revolution. The ASTC consisted of the Union of Nicaraguan Writers (UNEN), the Union of Plastic Artists (UNAP), the Union of Nicaraguan Musicians (UMN), the Union of Theatre-Workers, and the Union of Photographers.\(^5^0\)

During the Nicaraguan Revolution, there were different forms of cultural production that determined national and popular culture in the country. The most significant, besides poetry and painting, were cultural journals (*Ventana, la Prensa Literaria, Poesía Libre* and *Nicaráuac*), film (the establishment the *Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine – INCINE*), television (the creation of the *Sistema Sandinista de Televisión - SSTV*) and music. Musically, Nicaragua enjoyed the fruits of the New Song (Nueva Canción), a movement of protest music (heavily folkloric). Originating in Chile around 1970 with Violeta Parra incorporating traditional music and progressive lyrics, it later spread worldwide. In Nicaragua, the Mejía Godoy brothers adapted this type of music to fit the Nicaraguan revolutionary needs.\(^5^1\)

These cultural apparatus and the artistic production of the Sandinista Revolution established a new cultural dynamic to which not only the government but also the people were fully committed to promoting cultural initiatives such as: the creation of an artistic


\(^{50}\) Cardenal, *Hacia una política cultural*, 285-286.

\(^{51}\) Wellinga, *Entre la poesía y la pared*, 96-108.
dialogue between the Nicaraguan state and its people; the eradication of the idea that culture was just for an elite public; the involvement of people in both the creation and production of art; and the world-wide dissemination of Nicaraguan poetry, novels, paintings and films related to the Sandinista Revolution. Scholars have noted that the most important achievement in the cultural field was the empowerment of the people through arts and culture. In this line of thought, Selbin believes that empowerment, as a component of consolidation in the Revolutionary process, is related to increasing the capacity of people to influence this political process with their actions. One way to do this is through “people’s involvement in mass organization and political parties.”

Therefore, by giving opportunities to write poetry or paint to formerly marginalized groups, like peasants and poor people, the Sandinista Revolution gave them a sense of power to contribute to the forging of a new Nicaraguan cultural identity. The Sandinistas involved mass organizations in the development and production of cultural activities.

However, the Sandinista cultural program encountered numerous difficulties both internally and internationally. Domestic divergences resulted between “official” and amateur artists, and between the Ministry of Culture and the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers (ASTC). Regarding conflicts between artists, Wellinga states that the importance given to the productive side of the “democratization of culture” created a sense that “official” artists were denied access to cultural opportunities.

Likewise, artistic production stimulated by ministerial initiatives in the poetry and painting workshops was criticized not only for the exclusion of well-known artists but also for its

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53 Wellinga, *Entre la poesía y la pared*, 74.
lack of diversity. The disagreement between the Ministry of Culture and the ASTC arose because this association was headed by Nicaraguan first lady Rosario Murillo and was transformed into a sort of second Ministry of Culture.

On a deeper level, the crisis in the Revolutionary culture was a reflection of the country’s international environment. During the mid 1980s, Nicaragua suffered a state of war created by the United States’ determination to destroy the Revolution. As Walker indicates, Reagan’s policies in Nicaragua were characterized by a massive surrogate invasion, direct CIA sabotage, and economic strangulation. In relation to the United States strategy of low intensity warfare, the CIA sponsored paramilitary operations creating, recruiting, and arming the contras. Some U.S. programs of economic strangulation were: the blocking of approval of Nicaraguan loan requests before International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank; the curtailing of the Nicaraguan quota for exporting products; and the commercial embargo against Nicaragua in 1985.

In order to bear the enormous costs of the economic crisis and the Contra War, the Nicaraguan government cut back social services, including cultural programs, in order to put emphasis on the military security. For example, the Sandinista Army

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 The term “contra” comes from the Spanish la contra, short for la contrarrevolución. The contras were members of a counterrevolutionary movement which was being organized by former Somoza National Guard and was joined by a growing number of peasants. From 1981 to 1986, the Reagan administration officially transferred $100 million to fund their insurgency activities. This huge amount of money and the training provided by the U.S. transformed the contras into a force capable of waging war against the Sandinistas. This was known as the Contra war, a battle that lasted for almost nine years, during which Nicaragua suffered enormous human losses and extensive damage to its economy. Hazel Plunkett, In Focus Nicaragua: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture (New York: Interlink Books, 1999), 21-22; and Walker, Living in the Shadow of the Eagle, 49.
57 Ibid.
expanded from a small army of 15,000-18,000 soldiers to one of 24,000 persons. Therefore, as Selbin states, the economy during this period was a complete disaster: urban wages fell drastically, basic commodities were scarce, unemployment was common, government services were reduced, and the currency was constantly losing value. This economic situation indicated that if the economy declined it had a parallel effect on cultural activities. Due to the austere program of reducing the Nicaraguan budget, the Ministry of Culture closed in 1988 and was replaced by an Institute of Culture in 1989. Also, cultural productions such as film and television—that used high investment levels—were victims of the economic crisis, and many members of groups of amateur artists in theater, dance, crafts, poetry and painting stopped their artistic work as they went to war. Working in culture or arts during those difficult years was far from the government’s main concern or the Nicaraguan populace’s top priority.

The loss of the democratic elections of 1990 by the FSLN and the victory of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro brought political, economic and social changes: Nicaraguan culture and its artistic expressions were influenced by and reflected these new social and political circumstances. Likewise, this period created conflicting opinions among academics because some considered the Chamorro years as a “transition to democracy” while others saw them as a backward movement in the empowerment of Nicaragua’s citizens, a move toward the defeat of democracy in Nicaragua. This thesis examines the

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impact of culture and arts on Nicaragua from the revolutionary historical background to this new political and cultural context, characterized by the switch of the mixed economy and revolutionary politics of the Sandinistas to the neoliberal free-trade model of political economy.
CHAPTER 2: THE NEW CULTURAL ORDER IN THE CHAMORRO YEARS
(1990-1996)

Historical Background of the New Political System in the Chamorro Era

“We must substitute our culture of confrontation with one of tolerance and a love for peace. Our society of warriors we must domesticate and turn into judicious men of letters,” stated Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the newly elected president of Nicaragua in her speech for her presidential inauguration on April 25, 1990. 62 Her strong declaration identified what she saw as the people’s greatest psychological need for peace and national reconciliation, and indicated the end of the revolutionary era in Nicaragua. On February 25, 1990 president Chamorro, running as the candidate for the National Opposition Union (Union Nacional Opositora-UNO),63 defeated Daniel Ortega’s (FSLN) in a clean and observed election with 55 percent of the popular votes.64 “Doña Violeta,” as she was known, became the first woman president elected in Latin America. With no political experience, she faced a great challenge as chief of state in a country where the echoes of the Contra war divided Nicaraguan society.

The political persona of Chamorro was created by her association with her husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. He was editor of “La Prensa,” the only significant opposition newspaper to the long reign of the Somoza family, and the strongest opponent

63 The UNO was a wide-range cartel of opposition parties formed to contest the Sandinistas, there were fourteen parties. Of the UNO coalition’s fourteen political parties four were considered conservative, seven could be characterized as centrist parties, and three - including Nicaragua’s Communists - had traditionally been on the far left of the political spectrum.
of the Somoza dictatorship.  

He was murdered in 1978 by unknown gunmen. In the 1980s, Doña Violeta worked as a member of the Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (Junta de Reconstrucción Nacional-JRN), a provisional government that officially ruled Nicaragua from July, 1979 to January, 1985. She resigned after less than a year and worked in the family newspaper as an opposing voice to Sandinismo. As President, Chamorro recognized her brief political training and accepted that her son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, operated as the de facto head of government and performed most of the executive functions for the president. As Doña Violeta indicated in her autobiography *Dreams of the Heart*:

Like any executive, I have delegated to Antonio [Lacayo] and my cabinet the details of government. All of them without exception are excellent professionals who came from successful careers in the private sector. I picked them because they are smart, because they have demonstrated a sense of organization, and for their efficiency. I see myself as the person responsible for setting the agenda…I provide the leadership and the inspiration. I sit in on all the big meetings, then turn to my advisors, get the consensus, and if it agrees with my views and principles, I tell them to proceed…I simply say, “Work it out.” They tell me what measures we need to implement and I say, “Okay, if you’ve studied all the

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66 The JRN was composed of five members: a member of the FSLN directorate, Daniel Ortega; two left-wing activists, Sergio Ramírez and Moisés Hassan; and two right-wing representatives, Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.
alternatives and you think this is the way to go, let’s do it.” This is the way we work.69  

Despite the aforementioned lack of political experience, she was considered a peacemaker in the political context. She contributed to healing a divided society (some people even considered a motherly figure) which was an essential prerequisite to prevent further bloodshed and lay the foundations of democratic consolidation.70 In this line of thought, the Chamorro administration agreed with the Sandinistas to a peaceful transfer of power by signing a transition protocol on March 27, 1990. In this agreement the new government promised to respect the institutional integrity of the Sandinista People’s Army—Ejército Popular Sandinista—in return for which the FSLN would accept its role as a second party (an opposition role) within the framework of the 1987 Constitution.71 Therefore, the elected government allowed Humberto Ortega—Daniel Ortega’s brother—to remain as commander of the army, which guaranteed that the FSLN shared power with the UNO.72 In addition, the Sandinistas proceeded to demobilize and reduce the armed forces from 96,660 soldiers—which was the largest army in Central America—to 15,200 troops.73 This process also included the professionalization of a bellicose revolutionary army into one that could peacefully cohabitate Nicaragua with civil society. This example illustrates how President Chamorro, instead of creating violent measures of “de-Sandinization,” promoted by the

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U.S. and UNO’s more orthodox members, used a policy of reconciliation and negotiation which allowed the FSLN to have a legitimate space in the new political system.\textsuperscript{74} Economically, the Chamorro administration was characterized by the embracing of the neoliberal model in an effort to stabilize the economy inherited from the Sandinistas. Nevertheless, these neoliberal adjustment and stabilization programs, as Arana stated, actually started late in the 1980s when the Sandinista government introduced them for inflation reduction purposes.\textsuperscript{75} Some scholars agree that these measures intensified during Doña Violeta’s government because of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank demands. Although these policies reduced inflation and stimulated growth during this time, they also created a worse climate for the most poor and vulnerable social groups in Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{76} Babb mentions that some key components of the neoliberal program and its effects on the country, are the following: reducing government spending (cutting back state sector employment and eliminating government subsidies of food, public utilities, and transportation), increasing the sales tax (affecting the poor population since they spend their income on goods that are taxed), devaluing the currency, increasing interest rates and reducing access to credit (affecting the small and medium-sized producers who found themselves unable to obtain credit), privatizing state enterprises, promoting assembly plants in the Zona Franca (largely textiles) and

\textsuperscript{74} Walker, \textit{Nicaragua without Illusions}, 298.
eliminating import tariffs (allowing cheaper imported products that negatively affected national production).\textsuperscript{77}

Cultural Policies in the Nicaraguan Transitional Government

The political, economic and social background of Nicaragua in the 1990s as a historical setting went hand in hand with the new cultural framework created by the Chamorristas. In this new market-driven neoliberal decade, in a country which had suffered war and an economic embargo, governmental cultural discourses focused on culture as a means to achieve economic development and peace using an apolitical—or an anti-Sandinista—and sometimes even elitist rhetoric. During Doña Violeta’s government, culture became more conservative and less radically innovative.\textsuperscript{78} Likewise, for Whisnant, culture in the 1990s was influenced by the U.S., a result of the return of wealthy Nicaraguan anti-Sandinistas from Miami after the fall of the Sandinista government.\textsuperscript{79} Therefore, the UNO’s cultural discourse should be analyzed by looking at democratization of culture, the culture of peace, culture and economic development, and U.S. cultural influence reflected in Managua.

Theater actress Gladys Ramírez, founder of experimental theater in Nicaragua in 1961, was appointed Director of the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture (NIC) during Violeta Barrios de Chamorro’s government. During her administration of NIC, Ramírez officially described the cultural policies in the 1990s using the term “democratization of culture,” as Ernesto Cardenal did back in the revolutionary years. Cardenal’s representation of the

\textsuperscript{77} Babb, After Revolution, 113.
\textsuperscript{78} Craven, Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990, 174.
\textsuperscript{79} Whisnant, Rascally signs in sacred places, 447-448.
Sandinista cultural project had an inherent political component—to eliminate the elitist character of culture and stimulate cultural creativity among the masses in activities related to the Revolution. Ramírez, however, used the term “democratization” in a different sense. She stated: “we pleaded to create a policy of democratization of culture which meant a decentralized, non-ideological and apolitical cultural policy, in a general policy framework of Nicaraguan family reconciliation....”80 Thus the NIC created a cultural policy that proclaimed accessibility of culture for everyone—without ideological purposes—but praised, at the same time, the high character of culture. For example, the NIC established as core principles of the institution to abolish “provincialism” and cultural isolation in the country and to preserve the memory and heritage of the Nicaraguan “classists.”81 This statement confirms the categorical distinction between low and high culture, in the sense that it devalued cultural practices of provincial life and gave priority to the readings of the Nicaraguan literary cannon aimed towards an urban well-educated public. In the words of Pedro Xavier Solís, former NIC advisor, the cultural focus of the new government was “to promote the concept of cultural heterogeneity, by establishing a radical breaking off with the so-called culture for the masses.” 82

After years of armed conflict, violence, and war, Chamorro’s administration also promoted the idea of peace linked to culture under the concept “Culture of Peace.” As a

82 This means, as Wellinga indicated, that the Chamorro government was not interested in any Sandinista organization that worked with the masses, such as the poetry workshops and the Cultural Centers of Culture. This also meant that after the end of the Revolution, the government carried out massive layoffs of cultural officers and the closure of cultural houses. Wellinga, Entre la poesía y la pared, 155.
precedent to this idea, the term was discussed internationally as a general objective for societies seeking reconciliation and sustainable human development; specifically, the United Nations’ emphasis on peace, Human Rights, and development created an initiative known as “Culture of Peace.”\(^{83}\) The former Minister of Education, Carlos Tünnerman, indicated that the general objective was to promote humanistic ideals within a critical framework of analysis that would facilitate the transition into the twenty-first century in Nicaragua and Central America.\(^{84}\) Thus, Chamorro’s government upheld an idea of culture which eliminated violence and promoted tolerance in a divided society. For example, the administration developed symbols to promote peace and non-violence nationally and internationally, such as the creation of the Peace Park in Managua — el Parque de la Paz —, on September 14\(^{th}\), 1990, an amphitheater containing approximately 15 thousands weapons —machine guns, pistols, even a tank —encased in concrete, and founded in commemoration of the disarmament and the end of war in the 1980s.\(^{85}\)

Likewise, in 1995, president Chamorro declared it the year for a culture of peace, and during her administration she transformed the “rifle” from a war symbol to one of peace, and used it to demonstrate that Nicaragua overcame war, and that the country was passing through a new political period. Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was characterized by giving artistically modified rifles as gifts to visiting dignitaries during official visits by foreign delegations.\(^{86}\)

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\(^{84}\) Ibid.

\(^{85}\) Adelayde Rivas, “De la paz al abandono,” *La prensa*. May 9 2006.

In the neoliberal Nicaragua of the 1990s, this concept of culture was also associated with development and the economic structure of the free market, even described by the director of NIC as an economic good, moved by the invisible forces of supply and demand. Ramírez stated during a speech entitled “Cultura de paz para América Central,” “...culture and democracy as culture could only come true on a peace framework. Starting from the agreement between citizens, the reconciliation between brothers after a long war, the economic compromise between country and city worker...businessmen by boosting the free sector and market, and by consensus among political forces besides their differences, culture emerges; it is produced and consumed.” In the context of what Florence Babb termed as “culture of neoliberalism,” the Chamorro government realized the role that modernization and privatization played for cultural work. In this sense, the cultural authorities even expressed that supporting culture was a duty shared by all of Nicaraguan society, in which the private sector companies should assume their responsibilities.

In addition, neoliberalism and globalization brought cultural changes reflected not only in official discourse but also in Nicaraguan society and the physical structure of the capital, Managua. Nicaraguan culture became an emulation of U.S. cultural life, especially through the return of the so-called "Miami boys." These wealthy anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans had been living in Miami and introduced an American style of life and culture into Managua by opening new restaurants, exclusive clubs, designer

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87 INC, Memorias 1990-1996, 111.
clothing, neon-lit bars, and crowding the capital streets with four wheel-drive vehicles. Therefore, Managua became a city symbolic of consumerism adopting a night life and a new dynamic of leisure for its population. In the 1980s, night life in the capital was almost nonexistent due to dangers associated with the Contra war, such as curfew or kidnapping young people to fight in the war front. Another phenomenon of Managua’s "modernization" was the creation of well-stocked supermarkets and shopping malls, which have a significant sociological reading of space and power. Shopping malls create "a decrease (but not the disappearance) of the distinctive in favor of the deterritorialized and the dehistoricized," and they also played an important role in the urbanizing image of the capital. In Managua, there were two violent earthquakes (1931 and 1972) which destroyed the original city core. Since then, there hasn’t been a “new center of town,” consequently; the shopping malls have become the new downtown, central reference points of symbolic power. For example, the shopping mall “Metrocentro,” a commercial complex, lies close to many institutions of power such as the church (Managua’s new cathedral), the government (City Central Police Station) and education (the universities area). Therefore, this shopping center represents an epitome of the new culture of consumerism created in the country, a new space reserved for only those who had purchasing power. David Kunzle critically described this influence of American culture during Chamorro’s administration as the following:

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91 Much of the original downtown was left in rubble. Consequently, people began to re-build outside the original city center, leaving this area desolate only now under re-construction.
How does the UNO government imagine the visual environment of a Nicaragua “rescued” from Sandinista “tyranny”? What new artistic policy is now being offered? A dismally familiar and aesthetically degraded commercial one. Miami is now the model, the true cultural capital of Nicaragua. All the old revolutionary and public-service billboards are gone, swallowed by a forest of commercial advertisement sprouting up everywhere in Managua—even obscuring famous viewpoints—as a veneer of petty enterprise fueled from the United States spreads over generalized and deepening poverty. ⁹²

In spite of the general association of culture with peace and development that Chamorro’s administration tried to promote in the country, the government did not create through the NIC any cultural policy that deals with socio-cultural development. The NIC was not following its own policies of being “the [official] administrative institution in charge of carrying out state’s principles and functions related to culture.”⁹³ Therefore, the creation of a cultural infrastructure in Managua was the main priority for the NIC. This was even more important than developing cultural policies. Consequently, the cultural actions of the government focused on the creation of a strong physical infrastructure by reconstructing “the National Palace”—as headquarters for the NIC and regrouping cultural entities in this same space—and promoting and organizing a national cultural legislation.

In 1990, according to NIC Director Gladys Ramírez, there existed poor cultural institutions and infrastructure located mainly in the capital. The NIC as an institution had

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⁹³ INC, Memorias 1990-1996, 9
not had a physical headquarters and the cultural authorities alleged that the lack of appropriate archives, galleries and stores caused the country to be on the brink of losing its documented memory and bibliography, and its artistic and historical patrimony.\textsuperscript{94} This critical situation happened before Chamorro, because a significant part of the previous cultural infrastructure was privatized by the Sandinistas, leaving the new government with almost nothing.\textsuperscript{95} Therefore, the NIC gave importance to building a new cultural apparatus by first studying the conditions of cultural structure inherited from the Sandinista administration, and later focusing on the cultural institutionalization with laws.\textsuperscript{96} For this purpose, the Nicaraguan Government received support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for a program of technical assistance. This cooperative program consisted of a diagnostic study regarding the cultural situation in Nicaragua, the drawing-up of a document containing concerns and demands to improve the cultural sector, and preliminary technical studies related to the old National Palace of Nicaragua for future restoration purposes.\textsuperscript{97} The cultural analysis of Nicaragua in 1990, financed by UNDP, concluded the need for the following elements related to culture: a proper infrastructure to house different cultural institutions; economic resources to preserve historic patrimony and to prepare a defined policy in favor of promoting

\textsuperscript{94} INC, Memorias 1990-1996, 103.
\textsuperscript{95} One example of a cultural institution privatized by the Sandinistas was the Museum of Modern Art. As poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra mentioned “this museum fell into the hands of the Sandinistas as a private museum named Julio Cortázar and the new government had not done anything to recover it. This was a 10 year effort of the Sandinistas to get paintings as gifts to Nicaragua from famous Latin-American artists. Now many of these paintings are hanging in private houses.” Wellinga, Entre la poesía y la pared, 157.
\textsuperscript{96} Instituto Nicaragüense de Cultura (INC), Guía Instituto Nicaragüense de Cultura, 1990-1993, 1.
\textsuperscript{97} INC, Memorias 1990-1996, 102.
national culture; technology to automate the national patrimony; and cultural legislation.\textsuperscript{98}

The results of the concern for improving cultural buildings in 1992, gave the NIC the creation of the project “National Palace of Culture,” implemented from 1994 to 1996. This plan, financed by UNDP and Japan, aimed to rehabilitate and equip the National Palace as NIC headquarters and to house the National Museum, the Newspaper library, the Archives, the Cultural Patrimony and the “Rubén Darío” National Library.\textsuperscript{99} This neoclassic building, built in 1935, had housed the Chamber of Deputies and Senators, the Ministry of Finance, the Revenue Collection Office (Dirección General de Ingresos-DGI) and Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic (Contraloría General de la República-CGR).\textsuperscript{100} Before 1979, this infrastructure was the legislative palace of the Somoza administration and was the location of a spectacular FSLN operation. In August 22, 1978, the FSLN performed “Operation Pigpen”; 25 of its guerilla members seized the palace dressed as “elite guards of Somoza’s son” and held more than 1,500 legislators hostage for forty-eight hours, a time in which the FSLN received many successful concessions, such as $500,000 in ransom and the safe passage out of the country of political prisoners and guerillas.\textsuperscript{101} This historical palace, named “the Palace of the Revolution” during the 1980s, housing the DGI and CGR, was officially inaugurated as Palace of Culture in 1996. According to NIC authorities, the idea was to integrate all of the cultural branches of the Institute into the same building aimed to preserve cultural

\textsuperscript{98} INC. Memorias 1990-1996, 103-104.
\textsuperscript{99} Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD), Palacio Nacional de la Cultura: Reconstrucción e historia (México: PNUD,1996), 10.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.,9.
\textsuperscript{101} Walker, Nicaragua, Living in the Shadow, 36-37.
memory and create “a greater urban and institutional presence of culture.” This affirmation confirms the idea of positioning culture exclusively for small numbers of urban elite. For example, the “Rubén Darío” National Library, before being located at the Palace, was placed in the “Eduardo Contreras” Complex at Roberto Huembes Market, a popular commercial place accessible for low-income people during the Revolution. Internally, the NIC headquarters also had organizational changes (See figure 4). One of its significant structural transformations was the creation of the Superior Council of Culture which consisted of seven members in charge of advising the NIC General Direction regarding cultural policies and monitoring its actions. By its duties, the council was superior in authority to the NIC; as it was an office for advising, consulting, and coordination. Likewise, another important change was the eradication of the Popular Centers of Culture (CPC) of the 1980s. In order to promote decentralization of culture, the NIC coordinated through its Division of Public Relations the creation of cultural regional offices which worked as NIC subsidiaries. These branches sometimes worked through national museums and were aimed, according to NIC general functions, at promoting access to culture for the general population, which included their enjoyment of different cultural, artistic, and intellectual expressions, maintaining and promoting the popular artistic manifestation of culture.

103 Ibid. 10.
104 Ibid., 11.
Figure 4: Organization Chart of the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture-INSC (1990-1996).
In addition, the creation of a Managua cultural center and the program of Culture at the Park (Cultura en el parque) were two important projects framed in these urban cultural initiatives promoted by the Chamorro administration in the capital. The cultural center is located in the old heart of the city, in the ruins of the Gran Hotel in the former Roosevelt Avenue, destroyed by the 1972 earthquake.\(^{105}\) This center was the result of a US$ 1.4 million project financed by Scandinavian artists who worked for five years to raise the money, and was also supported by the Norwegian and Danish International development agencies.\(^{106}\) The aim of this center was to create a cultural space for artists who wanted to participate in all artistic expressions and achieve significant self-management.\(^{107}\) Therefore, it was equipped with 29 offices established mostly to be rented to artists. According to NIC authorities, the center was “a place for trade with cultural profile.”\(^{108}\) This building also includes some NIC administration offices, which created conflicts between artists and the cultural center’s administration. The artists demanded a greater role in the center, saying that they did not feel the center was theirs, but rather an enormous bureaucratic entity.\(^{109}\) Concerning the program of Culture at the Park, the cultural authorities used parks, squares and open spaces during the weekends to perform cultural activities such as dances, symphonic orchestra, theatrical plays and ventriloquist shows for poor children and youth who lived on the outskirts of the capital.\(^{110}\) Later on this program was extended to some areas of the country such as the Pacific area (Rivas, \(^{105}\) “Managua’s Cultural Center,” Barricada Internacional, April, 1994, 15.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.

\(^{107}\) INC, Guía Instituto Nicaragüense de Cultura, 1990-1993, 4-5

\(^{108}\) Ibid.

\(^{109}\) “Managua’s Cultural Center,” 15.

León, Chinandega, Masaya, Carazo, and Granada) and some cities in northern Nicaragua (Matagalpa, Estelí and Madriz). The NIC objectives were to bring healthy recreation and amusement to children and to elevate cultural levels of artistic appreciation.  

Nevertheless, even though the park program offered momentary relief through culture from the country’s grim everyday realities to the poorest sectors, it was necessary that these activities be linked to other initiatives which related culture to topics such as education, health, and environment needed to solve social problems.

In relation to the institutional actions promoted by the NIC, this cultural institution developed the first organization of a cultural legislative corpus in the country. This study, titled *Legislación cultural de Nicaragua, ordenamiento normativo*, was made by a specialist in Latin American cultural policies, Dr. Edwin R. Harvey, from 1992 to 1994. The objective of the project was to analyze, replace, and compile the current cultural legislation in Nicaragua for its future improvement.  

This research examined: 1) the legislative institutional evolution of cultural public administration, from the Ministry of Culture to the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture, which includes 1990s administrative changes; 2) the normative areas of culture sector, which contains laws covering the role of cultural NGO’s, artistic promotion of music and theater, books and publications, libraries, museums and archives; 3) the legal regime of Cultural Patrimony and the media; and 4) an extended and well organized collection of Nicaraguan cultural legislation. This was an important legal contribution to the systematization of knowledge.

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111 Ibid.
of Nicaraguan cultural policies and the creation of good legislative foundation for the free exercise of cultural rights.\textsuperscript{113}

Artistic expressions in Post Revolutionary Nicaragua: literature as a demystification of a revolutionary past

A great polemic was created among artists in regards to the relationships of the Chamorro government with the arts. On the one hand, many artists condemned the new administrative role as a less messianic one, even declaring that they did not receive any support and felt that they were orphaned without the support of the state. In this sense, one important issue was the elimination of subsidies— called “professionalization”— for artists created during the 1980s by the Sandinistas in which all artists affiliated with the Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores Culturales (ASTC) received a salary from the State.\textsuperscript{114} For example, since the 1990s the well-known Nicaraguan painter Leoncio Sáenz barely survived selling his paintings to friends and acquaintances and did not receive support from any government even in his last days of life. During the Chamorro administration, a sector of artists associated with Sandinismo felt there was no promotion of their arts, and cultural authorities were indifferent to them because of their political inclinations.\textsuperscript{115} On the other hand, for other artists the end of the “professionalization” also meant the end of the convenience, in which they learned how to become self-sufficient from the State and they started “commercializing” their arts in the new private


\textsuperscript{114} Wellinga, \textit{Entre la poesía y la pared}, 154-155.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
cultural spaces created in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{116} For example, many cultural private centers opened or reopened as an alternative option to promote art such as “the Praxis Gallery” (Galería Praxis), “el coro de ángeles”, “el Ateneo” and “Dispar-Arte” among others. One general point of view shared by many intellectuals, was that freedom for artistic creation, in a context where the state is not longer active in controlling writing and painting, was the most important aspect of art during the 1990s.\textsuperscript{117} Particularly, as Mary K. Addis indicates this post-revolutionary period affected literary output significantly; all the debates about democratization of culture, and the revolutionary thematic in poetry and prose were over.\textsuperscript{118} This transitional period created a process of “utopian exhaustion,”\textsuperscript{119} an evaporation of the revolutionary myth through the questioning and frustration (disillusionment) of the revolution, or sometimes through a political apathy, as a generalized ethos, which led to a more personal narrative and poetry.

In poetry, a group of poets emerged with a fierce, skeptical, personal poetry, which deals with topics such the urban related with memory (Managua), political disappointment, and more traditional poetic topics such as love and death. This post-Sandinista poetry moved further away from poetry as a national project, looking for a poetic voice, which universalized individual circumstances, breaking the linguistic utilitarianism used in the revolutionary years.\textsuperscript{120} In the 1990s, poets such as Martha Leonor González, Juan Sobalvarro, and Blanca Castellón, among others, collaborated in a

\textsuperscript{116} Wellinga, \textit{Entre la poesía y la pared}, 156.
\textsuperscript{118} Leonel Delgado, \textit{Márgenes Recorridos: Apuntes sobre procesos culturales y literatura nicaragüense del siglo XX} (Managua: Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica- IHNCA, 2002), 41.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{120} Carlos Tünnermann, \textit{Valores de la Cultura Nicaragüense} (Managua: Centro Nicaragüense de Escritores-CNE), 2007.
magazine called, *400 Elefantes*, founded for the first two aforementioned poets in 1995. This magazine, with an underground style, was a space open to all poets, regardless of politics, economics, ideology or sexuality which epitomized the general spirit of poetic freedom of this time, far away from the propagandistic and didactic poetry widely circulated by the government in the 1980s. Juan Sobalvarro, is an example of a post-Sandinista poet who was on the war front and whose poems opened the psyche of a soldier from the inside disillusioned by the falsity of the Revolution. An illustration of some ugly and hypocritical aspects of the revolutionary period appears in his poem “A la ciudad”:

The decomposed corpses arrive in the cities, in sealed boxes that weave the mystery, some people support the weight of the caskets-stones!, they say. Others tally wounds, incidents of torture, AWOL’s or deformities that would prove treason or desertion in combat. It’s all excessively morbid. Politicians who profit in dollars off mothers with orphaned hearts, rewarded with the carats of death. And others who throw their flag over the coffins to expropriate the pain. This is war: there’s no respect. I saw a man who had a bullet penetrate through his mouth, his bones no longer interested me.\(^{122}\)

Contrary to Sobalvarro’s poetry, many other poets such as Carola Brantome or Blanca Catellón presented a non-political poetry and they focused more on the introspection of the poet’s life with the self, space, time and love. This poetry stylistically


\(^{122}\) Translated by Marco Morelli in *Rubén’s Orphan*, 99.
presented more brevity and word precision than the Cardenal’s exteriorism which was a more descriptive poetry.\textsuperscript{123}  

In narrative, post-revolutionary novels tended to deal with a concern for and re-evaluation of the revolutionary process and new future projects for the nation.\textsuperscript{124} In this sense, poetry and its themes were more personal and sometimes apolitical than narrative because they reflected the intimacy of the poet with his/her own worlds. Some examples of novels that presented a frustration or decadency for the political past are: \textit{Sábado de Gloria} (1990) by Orlando Núñez, \textit{Waslala: Memorial del futuro} (1996) by Gioconda Belli, and \textit{Un sol sobre Managua} (1998) by Erick Blandón. Contrary to this general narrative tendency in Nicaragua, from the early to mid 1990s, Sergio Ramírez as a political writer and persona did not write novels related to this thematic inclination. Ramírez’s novel \textit{Un baile de máscaras} (1995) is an autobiographic story of his family and everyday life in his hometown of “Masatepe” which plays with elements of the magic realism tradition.\textsuperscript{125}

Belli and Blandón’s novels, in contrast, presented the disillusionment of the Sandinista revolution through their books. Belli’s \textit{Waslala} is the story of the search for

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{123} Pedro Xavier Solís,“Percepciones de las últimas tendencias poéticas,” in \textit{Encuentro de la poesía actual en Nicaragua} (Managua: Fundación Rubén Dario, 1994), 65.
\item\textsuperscript{124} Delgado, \textit{Márgenes Recorridos}, 41.
\item\textsuperscript{125} The term ”magic realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even ”normal” setting. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, ”an amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or ”magic” Indian mentality, which exists in conjunction with European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is ”an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America.”
\end{itemize}
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utopia. Her protagonist, Melissandra, searches for the ideal geographic place with the same name as a real region in Nicaragua. The protagonist found the utopian Waslala, but the construction of an ideal society in this place failed. This is similar to the idea of Sandinismo which tried to construct an “ideal society,” but its project, like the Soviet Union, fell apart. In contrast, Blandón’s Un sol sobre Managua, focuses on the centralized fixation on the capital as owner of the Nicaraguan memory. The protagonist, Carlos Vargas, is a journalist who goes with his friends on a bohemian journey to different bars in the capital and their conversations are a mix of narrative voices, political events and natural disasters that the city suffered. This novel is the representation of a chaotic city which is the result of the decadency of a political and cultural project in Nicaragua. As Delgado pointed out, Un sol sobre Managua is the awakening of a city as center of the country which causes the eradication of other regions and realities. Thus, the urban is the only reality of the post-revolutionary citizen in Nicaragua.

In conclusion, narrative and poetry in post-revolutionary Nicaragua was characterized by a perpetual questioning either personal (apolitical) or political (disappointment for the revolution). In both cases, poets were witnesses to the historical and political changes in the 1990s and they captured them in their writing. Poet Tania Montenegro wrote in her poem titled “Here by the water” an example of the vision of some poets about the new cultural changes in Nicaragua, she said:

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126 Delgado, Márgenes Recorridos, 64.
127 Delgado, Márgenes Recorridos, 81.
…the sandinista leaders are businesspeople, all of them. They traded their olive green fatigues and Masaya guayaberas for Dockers pants and Polo shirts...The anglicisms are dizzying: if we were already speaking “Nahuañol” (that mixture of Náhual and Old Spanish), the Babel is even worse with the Spanglish of the exiles who returned and are still touching down in the country (they are nicknamed “Miamiboys”-be they men or women and whether or not they come from Miami)...\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{128} Translated by Marco Morelli in Rubén’s Orphan, 199.
CHAPTER 3: NEW REGIME VS. OLD REGIME: CULTURAL REALITIES OF THE SANDINISTAS AND CHAMORRO GOVERNMENTS

Was Sandinista Culture eroded in Neoliberal Nicaragua?

In the struggles and clashes between the revolutionary past and the new neoliberal Nicaragua, one wonders whether or not the Sandinista culture was eroded during the transition in Nicaragua or if multiple cultural aspects would remain. A first hypothesis would address the idea of a cultural vacuum, owing to the type of official engagement of the Chamorro government with a cultural project and the priorities of a neoliberal system, which benefits exclusively capitalist values and consumerism. A second premise would affirm the existence of cultural aspects of the revolution co-existing as forces that encompass both teams: Sandinistas and right-wing government. This means that Sandinista culture could continue but adapt to different political and economic contexts. One could argue that between the 1980s and 1990s Nicaraguan culture had suffered both processes through the substitution, continuity and hybridity of some aspects of the revolutionary legacy during the Chamorro administration. In this line of thought, the mobilization and empowerment of cultural sectors through arts and the recycling of cultural icons, such as Rubén Darío, could affirm the continuity of Sandinista elements in Nicaragua. In addition, Managua city as a cultural space could confirm not only the eradication of revolutionary symbols but also the emergence of a hybrid city in which revolutionary, and neoliberal signs coexist and transcend times.
The Survival of Revolutionary Nicaragua: Empowerment of Cultural Sectors and Recycling Darío

Some legacies of the Revolution are permanent marks on the Nicaraguan society of the 1990s. This continuum appears in the people’s empowerment in different social sectors, including the scope of culture and through the appropriation of Rubén Darío iconography as a recycle symbol used by the different governments. Regarding the people’s attitude towards empowerment, in “Dual transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Popular and Electoral Democracy in Nicaragua,” Phillip Williams indicates that the process of democracy did not begin with the 1990 elections. On the contrary, he traces its origin to the Sandinista Revolution indicating that Nicaragua during the 1980s was a unique case of “popular revolutionary democracy.”129 In this sense, Williams argues that the Sandinista Revolution created a process of democratization by expanding the space for social organization and mobilization in which marginalized groups in society were able to organize and collectively express their interests.130 According to this study, the Sandinistas gave great importance to the mass movement by increasing popular participation in the country’s political, economic and cultural affairs, which contrasted with the role of the elite-dominated democracy of Chamorro government.131 Consequently, the ten-year Sandinista transformation of power relations through grassroots organization, as Williams indicates, could not be reversed and this characteristic

130 Ibid.
131 Williams,“Dual transitions from Authoritarian Rule,”180.
remained in Nicaraguan society in the 1990s. Walker expresses this point of view by indicating that with the Sandinista Revolution, people became “politically literate,” which allowed them to work collectively to defend and promote their respective interests.\(^{132}\)

In the cultural arena, this empowerment of social subjects, despite the lack of government support to the arts, created largely self-sufficient cultural groups that emerged or continued preserving the social consciousness they gained in the 1980s.\(^{133}\) Some examples of these groups were: the Justo Rufino Garay group in theater, Alan Bolt’s Nixtayolero, Guachipilín, and the Danza Contemporánea, Mecate in the popular arts; and Artefacto and the Union of Painters and Artisans of Solentiname in the visual arts.\(^{134}\) Besides the neglect of the Chamorro government, the FSLN also abandoned the support of the cultural sector after 1990.\(^{135}\) Due to the Sandinista defeat, art was no longer a political instrument to reinforce the revolutionary project; FSLN priority in the 1990s was to consolidate itself as the strongest oppositional force in the country. In spite of this situation, many artists through their social awareness were able to work together and adapt to the new situation, principally the government emphasis on private arts as a reflection of the economic demands of Neoliberalism. One successful example is the aforementioned Union of Painters and Artisans of Solentiname. This artistic community organization has been able to create partnerships with other organizations, promote and sell nationally and internationally their primitivistic art. In addition, they use the profits of their paintings not only to become self-sufficient but also to support sustainable

\(^{133}\) Raúl Quintanilla foreword to *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua* by David Kunzle (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), xvi.
\(^{134}\) Ibid.
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
community-based projects. Finally, the autonomy of these cultural sectors that survived and co-adapted also meant in many cases a new independence from the FSLN leadership. As Williams reveals, during the transition the Sandinista leaders, in their discussions with the Chamorro government, did not consult with the Sandinista-affiliated mass organization. After the 1990 elections, the FSLN’s relationship with them became more problematic.\footnote{Williams. “Dual transitions from Authoritarian Rule,” 181-182.}

The aforementioned idea of empowerment of the people during the Revolution is also associated with Eric Selbin’s idea of consolidation and institutionalization. In *Modern Latin American Revolutions*, Selbin explains that institutionalization refers fundamentally to political structures —the reestablishment of state power, based in executive, coercive, and administrative organs— and consolidation about the degree to which the population embraces the core of the social revolutionary project.\footnote{Selbin, *Modern Latin American Revolutions*, 111.} One important aspect of consolidation mentioned by Selbin is that a successful consolidation is characterized by the willingness of the population to defend the benefits gained through the social revolutionary process.\footnote{Selbin, *Modern Latin American Revolutions*, 122-123.} In this sense, the author declares that revolutionary Nicaragua presented some degree of consolidation in which people understood that the gains of the Revolution were based on them, and not tied to one organization, one program, or one person.\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore, similar to Williams’ position, Selbin believes that the tools of how to mobilize and organize presented by the Sandinistas allowed the Nicaraguan people to use these values in the 1990s. The
difference between both authors is that Selbin explains this popular attitude of using empowerment framed in this very subjective concept of consolidation. This process of consolidation could be seen in the arts not only through the involvement of artists in independent cultural groups, but also through their critical position for government actions and even for FSLN’s cultural position in the 1980s. As Raúl Quintanilla indicated, “In these [cultural] groups, we have started to analyze our predicament. We have openly assessed the cultural policies, good and bad, of the Revolution, the virtual abandonment since 1990 of the cultural sector by the FSLN which is itself undergoing a major (and very necessary) identity crisis; and we are coming to terms with the virtual disappearance of international solidarity in the cultural arena.”

Selbin’s concept of institutionalization could be seen through Chamorro’s retention of some of the FSLN administrative system. Some examples are the persistence of some laws of the Constitution of 1987 (though amended in 1995); the survival of the aforementioned Sandinista People’s Army (including Humberto Ortega as head of these armed forces), though reduced and reorganized, and the existence of the Supreme Electoral Council which survived the change in regime. Not only did some artistic groups adapt to this new context but so did the Sandinista party. In this line of thought, the Sandinistas, led by Daniel Ortega, became the second most important political party in the country and ironically a Chamorro supporter. As David Close explains,

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141 Walker, *Nicaragua without Illusions*, 303
142 Many of the members of the Sandinista National Directorate of the 1980s moved out of active politics: For example, former Interior Minister Tomás Borge went to work as Director of the Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*; former Agrarian Reform Minister Jaime Wheelok went to Harvard; and Humberto Ortega, left the party to work as head of the army. This situation gave Ortega the opportunity to become the logical
Ortega’s opposition program shifted from opposition to cooperative and back again. The UNO coalition experienced an internal crisis from the start and these groups led by Vice President Godoy against Chamorro controlled the majority of UNO’s National Assembly seats. Therefore, Chamorro’s need for votes in the National Assembly made negotiations with the Sandinistas possible, and Ortega sought benefits through legislation. In addition to UNO’s division, the FSLN also suffered a split in 1993 as former Vice President Sergio Ramírez and other FSLN moderate-leftists created the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) in opposition to Ortega’s inflexibility to renovate Sandinismo and control the party. Despite the split in the FSLN, the party continued to be an important political actor, which made the political system work in Nicaragua.

Another aspect of the survival of the revolutionary past is the appropriation of national icons such as Rubén Darío by different Nicaraguan governments to legitimize their cultural or political discourses. David Whisnant suggests that Nicaragua has been a place of permanent ideological content. For example, conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives, between the Somozas and their oppositions, between the orthodox Catholic Church and liberation theology after the early 1960s have all taken place there. This contentious element was also evident in culture, in which Nicaraguans have

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143 Ibid., 74.
144 Selbin, Modern Latin American Revolutions, 123.
145 Close, Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years, 74.
146 “First Renew, then Choose the Candidates,” Barricada Internacional, April, 1994, 19.
147 Whisnant, Rascally Signs in Sacred Places, 444; and Babb, After Revolution, 251.
148 Whisnant, Rascally Signs in Sacred Places, 443
experienced cultural confrontations and negotiations as a permanent feature of their history. In these negotiations, the figure of this Nicaraguan poet has victoriously survived different periods because its meaning has been altered according to the context in which it is presented. As Griswold expresses, “the meaning attributed to any cultural object are fabrications, woven from the symbolic capacities of the object itself and from the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object.”

Marco Morelli, in his book *Ruben’s Orphans: Anthology of Contemporary Nicaraguan Poetry*, mentions this cultural appropriation of Darío by Nicaraguans saying that “Darío is everywhere [in Nicaragua]. There are streets, theaters, bookshops, schools, parks and a city named after him. His picture is on money, his image adorns the walls of cafés and government buildings; and…practically every week there is a new treatment of him in one of the newspaper’s cultural supplements.”

During the Revolution, for the Sandinistas Darío represented the cultural hero that embraced their political project and defended national independence. As Cardenal said when he was Minister of Culture “This Revolution was a dream of Darío… who was a revolutionary.”

In the 1980s the Sandinistas faced two tasks related to Darío iconography. On the one hand, they wanted to reconstruct Darío’s image considered deformed by Somoza’s appropriation during the dictatorship — Sandinista believed that Somoza presented the poet as Somocista liberal, nationalist and elitist. On the other hand, they wanted to defend Darío against a left literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s which considered him an elitist. Therefore, the FSLN

reinterpreted Darío by analyzing his life, politics and published writings. They gave critical attention to social and political themes in Darío’s poetry. For example, the Sandinistas praised Darío’s political poems such as “Oda a Roosevelt” (Ode to Roosevelt). As Louis Lewis Hanke and Jane M. Rausch indicate this ode was an outspoken political denunciation of Theodore Roosevelt’s “Big Stick” policy when he ordered the invasion of Panama in 1903. The poem condemned the U.S. government by expressing a despicable personification of the country:

You are the United States,
future invader of our naïve America,
with its Indian blood, an America
that still prays to Christ and still speaking Spanish…
You think that lives is a fire,
that progress is an irruption,
that the future is wherever
your bullets strikes.
No…

The publication of collections of political poems was one of the actions aimed to incorporate Darío into the revolutionary project. Therefore, books such as Nuestro Rubén and Rubén Darío: textos sociopolíticos by Jorge Arellano, and Carlos Tünnerman

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153 Whisnant. *Rascally signs in sacred places*, 330
Bernheim’s *Rubén Darío y su tiempo*, were all issued in the 1980s.\(^{156}\) They did not include the poem “Saluting the Eagle” (Salutación a la águila), a pro-U.S. poem calling for hemispheric solidarity that the poet dedicated to the Pan-American Congress meeting in Rio de Janeiro.\(^{157}\) This action meant that the poetic figure of Darío was manipulated by the FSLN to present an anti-American position according to its revolutionary values. On the contrary, “Saluting the Eagle” praised the U.S. symbolized in the figure of the eagle:

Welcome, magical Eagle! With strong and enormous wings
you cast your great continental shadow throughout the South.
In your talons, ringed in the most brilliant of reds,
you bring a palm of glory, the color of limitless hope.
In your break is the olive branch of a vast and fertile peace…\(^{158}\)

Whisnant indicates that historian Jorge Arellano played an important role in reconstructing Darío in the 1980s by affirming that the Revolution “has recovered… [and] revealed the progressive, revolutionary Darío” and considering him as an open “precursor of modern social thought, including the dialectical materialism.”\(^{159}\) Ironically, in the 1990s Arellano abandoned his own argumentation by despising “the literary sociologists of sacred Marxism” who he considered to limit Darío’s universalist cultural project to a political ideology.\(^{160}\) The new cultural discourse that Arellano presented of Darío agreed with the government which can be described as a Eurocentric discourse of

\(^{160}\) Ibid.
knowledge, cataloguing Darío as pro-European and forgetting his mestizo heritage. In this sense, Arellano expresses that Darío has a “titanic and limitless desire to appropriate the totality of European culture,” principally French culture with Paris as its intellectual home. Arellano worked with Doña Violeta administration as the Director of the Library, Newspaper Library and National Archives, and in an article titled “Nicaragua: hacia una cultura en paz y democracia,” characterized the Sandinista culture opposing the Chamorro culture as follows:

This necrophiliac culture [Sandinista] is an answer to the warlike vocation of its leaders… a culture that administratively and militarily regionalized the country and conceived the individual as a gregarious and military being. This is a strange culture detached from the ideals of our civil hero Rubén Darío, who described a model of the fatherland as Athenian or Toltecan, but never Spartan nor Aztec.

This example confirms that the symbolic power of Darío, as a political and literary icon, is constantly changing. During the 1980s, Darío was an anti-imperialist and a political figure that supported the proletarian and validated the political project of the Revolution. In the 1990s, Darío was characterized as an apolitical figure, universalist, and cosmopolitan (a world citizen) who reflected the global forces to which the Nicaraguan nation had been exposed. Despite this contested discourse between the Sandinistas and Chamorro regarding the true nature of Darío, its importance lies in the confirmation that, like Darío, certain cultural symbols in Nicaragua never died. They survive time and are

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161 Ibid., 444.
162 Ibid., 445.
inherited from one government to the other. In the end, multiple interpretations of Darío create a vast understanding of different dimensions that encompass his writings and persona.

Erasing and Transforming Revolutionary Symbols: the Cultural “Cleaning of the City” and the Cultural Hybridization of Managua

During the early 1990s, Managua was a reflection of the process of cultural and aesthetic transformations in the country. These changes not only included the creation of new symbols associated with neoliberalism in the capital — such as its mallification and its Miami influence as a cultural ideal — but also the destruction of revolutionary iconography. Consequently, murals, heroes’ monuments, portraits, and signs, which were hallmarks of the Sandinista Revolution (1979-1990), were erased by Arnoldo Alemán, Managua’s mayor and later president, as part of the so-called “cultural crusade of operation cleaning.” These iconoclastic actions aimed to dominate and express power by not only eliminating ideas or symbols related to the Sandinista government, but also by imposing authority from some UNO leaders over the Chamorro administration. In this sense, Alemán is cited as one of the triumvirate — with National Assembly President Alfredo César and Vice President Virgilio Godoy — of more conservative leaders seeking to overthrow Chamorro and replace her with an orthodox right-winged government. The destruction of Sandinista symbols by Alemán could be approached in light of Harry

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164 Arnoldo Alemán, as Mayor of Managua (1990-1996) during the Chamorro administration, led an urban “cleanup” of the capital, where under his orders city workers participated in a campaign against the popular symbolism of the revolution.

165 Kunzle, The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 15.
Pross’ theory on the exercise of power, where power is not based exclusively on violence, but rather on the use of symbolic violence through the domination of public signs.\textsuperscript{166}

The epitomes of these public signs used by the Sandinista were the Nicaraguan Murals, as seen in chapter 2. This movement was characterized by its prolific representations. Therefore, in the 1980s the city became, in David Craven’s word, “the world capital of mural painting.”\textsuperscript{167} Nevertheless, in November 1990 the mayor systematically ordered countless public murals to be painted over by his city workers, erasing valuable works of Nicaraguan art by Alejandro Canales, Leonel Cerrato, Manuel García, Julie Aguirre, Hilda Vogl, Miranda Bergman, Marilyn Lindstron, and César Caracas among others.\textsuperscript{168} This so-called “muralicide”\textsuperscript{169} represented the eradication of symbolic revolutionary power because it metaphorically and literally meant the whitewashing of people’s memories of the Sandinista aims and achievements. Clemente Guido, Director of Culture at the Mayor’s office during the Chamorro administration and later the Director of NIC, confirmed the anti-Sandinista sentiments of the municipality by expressing:

The strange and alienated Sandinista culture had subjugated its society with violence. The red and black party graffiti, the death messages, the population threatened, the propaganda from international Communism and the vulgar insults to morality, were too much for the brave, Nicaraguan people. The people from

\textsuperscript{167} Craven, David. \textit{Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990}, 158.
\textsuperscript{169} The defenders of these murals coined the term “muralicide” (muralicidio) to define and denounce their systematic elimination, and compared Alemán’s misdeeds to those of Conquistadores, Huns and Nazis. Dario Gamboni, \textit{The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 113.
Managua lived in a very dirty city and the first thing to do was to clean it. Garbage was everywhere and the capital city’s surroundings seemed like those of a fictional city, or a city emerged from a nuclear apocalypse. Similar to the painter’s paintbrush, the Municipality’s brush soaked with white and blue started making a change. It gave back happiness to Managua’s citizen’s faces. It took off the backwardness and obscurantism cloth.\textsuperscript{170}

One of the most symbolic and beautiful murals from the revolutionary period destroyed by Alemán was Alejandro Canales’ mural “Homenaje a la mujer” (\textit{Homage to Woman}) (Figure 5-6). This mural was a celebration of the 1980 literacy campaign and the role of women in that project (the majority of \textit{brigadistas} were women).\textsuperscript{171} The work by Canales was located on the service building in the Luis Alfonso Velásquez Park, and after his death earlier in 1990 his only mural that survived; it is located ironically in Germany.\textsuperscript{172} This work of art seems unerasable, since it was painted in this European country (Figure 7). On the other hand, the aforementioned mural, \textit{Homage to Woman}, was destroyed in the full gaze of organized artists from the National Union of Plastic Artist (UNAP) protesting against this action.\textsuperscript{173}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[171] Young literacy volunteers in the 1980 Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade were called \textit{brigadistas} (brigade members) and formed part of the People’s Literacy Army (EPA). Each belonged to a squadron of around 30 students, in the majority of cases they were from the same school or institution, and were of the same sex. They left the cities for places throughout the nation to teach reading and writing to the illiterate population. Skyla O’Shea, “The Brigadista Experience in the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade 1980,”\textit{Journal of Historical and European Studies} 2 (2009): 85.
\item[172] Kunzle, \textit{The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua}, 17-19
\item[173] Ibid., 15.
\end{footnotes}
Figure 5: Canales Mural *Homage to Woman*
Source: *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990* by David Craven

Figure 6: Destruction of Canales’ Mural *Homage to woman*
Source: *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990* by David Craven
This group of artists and the press pressured Alemán who then called a meeting to apologize and express that these actions were an error of miscommunication from the city workers. According to the mayor, he ordered the elimination of political pintas (electoral graffiti) and not pinturas (murals).\textsuperscript{174} He offered compensation, but when artists came with a $50,000 budget to restore the murals, he rejected it and continued the policy of painting over revolutionary works of art.\textsuperscript{175} With these actions Arnoldo Alemán violated the Nicaraguan Constitution—chapter IV, articles 126, 127 and 128 related to the protection of Nicaraguan culture and Law 90, respecting the preservation of historic

\textsuperscript{174} Kunzle, David. \textit{The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua}, 16
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
patrimony. Legally the destroyed murals were declared historic patrimony under the Sandinista government and, therefore, untouchable.\textsuperscript{176} The articles indicate:

\textbf{Art. 126} \hspace{1em} It is the duty of the state to promote the recovery, development and strengthening of national culture, sustained by creative popular participation. The state shall support national culture in all of its diversity, whether collective or individual.

\textbf{Art. 127} \hspace{1em} Artistic and cultural creation is completely unrestricted. Cultural workers have full freedom to choose their forms and styles of expression...

\textbf{Art. 128.} \hspace{1em} The state protects the archeological, historical, linguistic, cultural and artistic patrimony of the nation.\textsuperscript{177}

Public opinion from the artistic community, the Sandinista newspapers \textit{Barricada} and \textit{Nuevo Amancer Cultural}, the cultural supplement of the \textit{El Nuevo Diario}, were very negative against the Mayor’s actions. Protests and negative reactions from the press ensued as Alemán’s actions were defined as “satanic medieval crimes,” “crimes against universal culture,” and “fascist actions,” and his persona was described as worse than “Hitler,” reminiscent of “Nero the pyromaniac” and “Torquemada, the torturer and inquisitor.”\textsuperscript{178} President Violeta Chamorro kept her distance, not assuming any responsibility for Alemán’s policy. The only official response of the government came

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 13-17.
\textsuperscript{178} In one article of Barricada under the headline “Alemán [“German in Spanish”] in the steps of Hitler” (Alemán tras los pasos de Hitler), the major is presented worse than Hitler, because he preferred to steal rather than to destroy art. Kunzle, \textit{The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua}, 17-19.
through NIC director Gladys Ramírez. The *Nuevo Amanecer Cultural*, issued on November 3, 1990 and entitled “Crónica de una muerte anunciada: la del arte en Nicaragua” presented an official denouncement of director Ramírez. She pronounced her administration incapable of stopping Alemán by indicating “the Mayor’s office is autonomous and my jurisdiction does not allow me to impose anything on it.”

In conclusion, the NIC director considered these actions as “an irresponsible and reprehensible act … [by saying] I agree that all political billboards need to be cleaned up, from any political party because they get the city dirty. Nevertheless, this does not include murals or any other works of art…. none of these works of art should be destroyed.”

Besides the obliteration of murals, Alemán destroyed other revolutionary symbols located in the capital’s public space. For example, the huge stone letters “FSLN,” which were set on a hillside and visible from the city, were changed to FIN (or “end” of Sandinismo), and then destroyed. In addition, the mausoleum and tomb commemorating FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca located in the Plaza de la Revolución —one of the country’s most revered monuments— was bombed. Even though this incident only did minor damage to the tomb, it sparked an outbreak of violence in a number of cities. Sandinista supporters quickly took to the streets blaming Alemán for the attack. For example, in Granada, the southeast of the capital, a bomb was detonated in the court building; in Matagalpa, the northern birthplace of Carlos Fonseca, a group of

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180 Wellinga, *Entre la poesía y la pared*, 156.
Sandinistas destroyed “Radio Darío,” a pro-government radio; and in Managua, many angry Sandinistas attacked the offices of Mayor Alemán by setting his offices on fire and burning State vehicles.\(^{183}\) After the Fonseca tomb explosion, an eternal light bulb encased in a flame-shaped cover replaced an eternal flame that was part of this monument. The FSLN designated people to stand guard over the tomb to prevent future attacks.\(^{184}\)

On the other hand, one particular feature in Nicaraguan spaces is that streets do not carry numbers or names, but instead are identified by their relationship to features of the landscape or building names from past periods.\(^{185}\) Even though a landscape could change and buildings or monuments physically do not exist anymore, it is common for Nicaraguans to give directions where these landmarks have been; for example: “a block and a half to the south of where the statue was” or “two blocks from the arbolito.”\(^{186}\) During the Sandinista administration many places, streets and buildings were named after revolutionary events, political figures or martyrs, but the Chamorro government renamed them, creating great confusion with the names and places of the city. Despite the change of revolutionary names, some people continued to use the original names when describing locations.\(^{187}\) Some critics, such as Florence Babb, believe that these actions represented resistance on the part of the Nicaraguan people to erase the memory of the revolutionary decade.\(^{188}\) One could not exclude the possibility that, besides political

\(^{183}\) Ibid.
\(^{186}\) “El arbolito” is an address in Managua in which a small tree was literally planted in the middle of a highway, later on this tree was cut down, but people still use this tree as a place of reference to give directions.
\(^{188}\) Ibid.
preferences, this phenomenon is a custom deeply rooted in Nicaraguan cultural and political geography. A significant example of the renaming of a public space during the Chamorro administration was the removal of Sandino’s name from what was known as Augusto Sandino International Airport changed to Managua International Airport.

It is important to mention that the eradication of murals and political symbols, which evoked the Revolution, were not isolated actions exclusively in Alemán’s municipality. They were part of a larger ideological battle led by other orthodox sectors of Chamorro’s government. For example, the UNO Minister of Education Humberto Belli had encouraged teachers to “exorcise” the revolutionary teachings. Some of his actions included burning Sandinista textbooks and replacing them with books with anti-Sandinista content. In this new educational and cultural policy, the contents of history textbooks were very biased in their historic version of events. For example, they thought that U.S. intervention in Nicaragua intended to bring peace and stability; the Contra war was characterized as a civil war from a peasant insurrection; and national heroes such as Sandino and Carlos Fonseca were not mentioned at all in these books.  

Mirroring Belli’s burning of school textbooks, in 1990 the director of the municipal library in León — one of the most important libraries in Nicaragua—made a bonfire of books authored by Sandinistas. Such actions were part of the aforementioned campaign

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190 Ironically, in the 1980s the Sandinista education curriculum presented an ideological orientation so that school textbooks were nationalist and pro-revolutionary in tone, giving ample coverage only to Sandinista heroes.
to eradicate the Nicaraguan revolutionary symbols located in public spaces and their influence on future generations.

The replacement of revolutionary symbols with religious imagery was an attempt by the Chamorro administration to establish new symbols that represented a restoration of a pre-revolutionary status quo. One example of this was the construction of a giant monolithic statue of the Virgin Mary with outstretched arms similar to the statue “Christ the redeemer” in Rio de Janeiro. Mayor Alemán was involved in this $5 million project which upset some people who believed that the money would be better spent helping the poorest people. Another of Alemán’s projects was the construction of a new cathedral with a $3 million contribution from U.S. citizen Tom Monaghan, the owner of the multimillionaire chain of Domino’s Pizza. Alemán hired the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta to design and create this new cathedral. As a religious project, the cathedral caused much controversy, especially because of its architectural style and the financing for its construction (See Figure 8).

194 It is important to point out that Marian imagery has been used elsewhere in Latin America in the construction of national unity. For example, in Peru former president Fujimori identified himself with three statues of the Virgin Mary that were said to cry and cure disease. The emergence of the three crying Marys in the midst of an economic crisis and a series of national strikes was not a coincidence. Further, a military document was said to describe the strategy of a campaign based upon Christian imagery in order to take advantage of what was considered the “excessive credulity of the Peruvian people.” Linkogle, *Gender, Practice and Faith in Nicaragua*, 224.
195 Ibid.
This catholic temple, which architecturally resembles to a mosque, symbolized the strong relationship between the Catholic Church’s hierarchy and the Chamorro government, specifically the links between Cardinal Miguel Obando and Managua’s mayor, Alemán. In addition, it is significant that this new cathedral, an emblem of power, was donated by the owner of a multinational company, an action that symbolically gave authority and influence to multinational corporations as new actors in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. Besides the Christian iconography that took place in the city, the political discourse of the Chamorro government was full of religious elements. For example, during the violent disturbances over the bombing of Carlos Fonseca’s tomb in the Mayor’s office, President Chamorro, after “reflecting before God and the Virgin Mary,” read a conciliatory speech which was broadcast on television. She scolded those who
“absurdly profaned the memory of those who should be left to rest in peace” and those who “destroyed property at the service of the people.”

This religious discourse was also evident in the conservative ideology of the government concerning traditional Christian family values. As Whisnant points out, the Chamorro government brought policies into agreement with the Catholic Church’s position on abortion, contraception (birth control) and premarital sex. This point of view was also evident in education; Minister Belli installed a new series of textbooks based upon Christian values. For example; the civics textbook opens with the Ten Commandments and calls divorce a “disgrace.” Belli also eliminated sex education in the schools. This vision also transformed gender relations in the family starting with the representation of women by President Chamorro, as a wife firmly committed to family; a maternal figure. Doña Violeta defended her traditional position as a woman by expressing: “I am not a feminist nor do I want to be one. I am dedicated to my home as Pedro taught me.” Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this viewpoint did not match the ideal for many Nicaraguan women. Staying at home with a family was not ideal, especially after being involved in social mobilization and feminist movements during the Sandinista revolution.

During the 1990s Managua went through much physical transformations. These metamorphoses were a reflection of the cultural changes produced in Nicaraguan society.

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198 Whisnant, Rascally Signs in Sacred Places, 446.
199 Kunzle, The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 13
200 Babb, After Revolution, 59-60.
201 Whisnant, Rascally Signs in Sacred Places, 446.
202 Babb, After Revolution, 60.
The murals and political images of the Revolution were political symbols destroyed or covered—like a palimpsest—as a result of the space domination by the Chamorro administration. The municipality was the main actor in the “operation cleaning” campaign to eradicate the Nicaraguan revolutionary past. In addition, this right-wing government included a plethora of religious imageries in the physical space of the city, which were a reflection of the Catholic values used in its policies. Some physical and symbolic changes between the Sandinista and the Chamorro administrations can be summarize in the following chart (See Figure 9):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FSLN Administration</th>
<th>UNO Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revolution: A standardized country in which art and behaviors were adjusted and standardized to revolutionary ideology.</td>
<td>Transitional Government: A traditional and catholic country inspired by Miami culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Ortega: A virile “macho man” promising “all will be better.”</td>
<td>Violeta Barrios de Chamorro: A maternal figure, the “Mother of all Nicaraguans.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managua: Painted walls with political works of art and political slogans</td>
<td>Managua: The whitewashing of political works of art and FSLN slogans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monument: The tomb of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca with “an eternal flame.”</td>
<td>Monument: Carlos Fonseca’s tomb bombed, the flame was put out and replaced by an eternal light bulb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Monument to the Popular Combatant. (belligerence)</td>
<td>Monolithic statue of the Virgin Mary (conservatism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public spaces named for revolutionary events, political figures or martyrs.</td>
<td>The political names of public spaces were removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: Barrio: “Christian Pérez” (named for a Sandinista martyr)</td>
<td>Example: Barrio: “La Salvadorita” (renamed with its prerevolutionary name after the dictator Anastasio Somoza’s mother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colors: red and black (revolutionary colors)</td>
<td>Colors: white (associated with peace/whitewashing of revolutionary memory)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 9**: Chart with Physical and Symbolic Changes between the Sandinista and the Chamorro Administrations

Sources: Some materials from *After the Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua* (Babb) and from *Gender, Practice and Faith in Nicaragua* (Linkogle).

Contrary to the aforementioned eradication of revolutionary symbols in Managua—or the creation of new signs—one could say that urban symbols, like a representation of the ruling order, are neither totalized nor homogenous. They could also co-exist with preceding orders, which are resistant and adapted to current demands. This idea refers to Néstor García Canclini’s concept of cultural hybridization. In *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies*...
for Entering and Leaving Modernity, García Canclini analyses the cultural phenomenon named “cultural hybridization.” According to this author, this term means “sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects and practices.”

The author indicates in his study that the cultural hybridization concept carries different names such as mestizaje (radical or ethnic fusion) and syncretism (beliefs) which serve as antecedents or equivalents to hybridization. However, he prefers this term because it seems more ductile for naming not only the racial mixing or the fusion of religious beliefs but the integration of advance technologies and modern social processes. In this sense, García Canclini argues that Modernity /Modernization produce an interaction of different symbolic and material orders and an articulation between economic relations with cultural practices belonging to different representations. Therefore, the author rejects the idea that what is traditional is going to disappear with modernization. To the contrary, he argues that it adjusts and transforms in a process in which the modern appropriates the traditional and vice versa.

By adapting this concept of hibridity to Managua, a city in which the government tried to eliminate the revolutionary symbols and impose others, one could say that it is a recycled city in which interstices allow a harmonious articulation of revolutionary and neoliberal signs. One example of these recycled symbols is a towering statue of Sandino,

203 Néstor García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxv.
204 García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures, xxxiii-xxxiv.
206 Ibid.
a silhouette of the national hero, located on the top of Tiscapa Hill. This figure was
designed by Ernesto Cardenal and was not destroyed during “operation cleaning” led by
Alemán. As Babb mentions, it was politically impossible for Alemán to remove the 59
foot tall statue that dominates the Managua skyline.\textsuperscript{207} The statue’s façade as a
representation of revolutionary power has been renewed because it coexists in the
landscape with commercial buildings as contrasting icons from different political periods.
The place where the monument was constructed historically was one of Somoza’s family
residences and a prison during the dictatorship (a place for torture). Nevertheless, later on
this place became a national park, incorporating it into the economic system. Another
monument that survived neoliberal Nicaragua is the imposing 9 meters tall metal statue
named “\textit{El Guerrillero sin Nombre}” (Nameless Guerrilla Soldier). The statue depicts a
man holding a pick-ax in his right hand and an AK-47 in his left. The monument is a
tribute to the Sandinista fighters of the Revolution. As Berman and Wood mention, this
statue is an important city landmark and a symbol of the revolutionary project, inscribed
with one of Sandino’s most treasured quotations: “Only the laborers and farmers will
endure.”\textsuperscript{208}

In conclusion, the transition from the Sandinista to the Chamorro government
reflected radical cultural change. This transformation oscillated between the struggle to
eradicate revolutionary traces or the renegotiation and recycling of its adapted cultural
values to the new context. The obliteration of Sandinista cultural values could be seen in
the urban landscape of Managua. Murals and the iconography of martyrs and Sandinista

\textsuperscript{207} Babb, \textit{Mapping Gender}, 54.
\textsuperscript{208} Joshua Berman and Randall Wood, \textit{Moon Handbooks: Nicaragua} (Berkeley, Carlifornia: Avalon Travel
heroes were destroyed and new symbols emerged, which evoked either the culture of consumption or conservative religious traditions. Nevertheless, certain cultural aspects of Sandinismo lived in Neoliberal Nicaragua. One important inherited legacy was the people’s empowerment which was reflected in culture through the autonomy and independence gained by cultural groups. Regarding the Nicaraguan capital as a cultural space, an intermediate Managua emerges in the midst of the Revolutionary and Neoliberal Managua. This hybrid capital cohabitated in the historical memory of the streets and could be seen through the lonely figure of Sandino the statue.
CHAPTER 4: ALEMÁN AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NICARAGUAN CULTURE

The Elections of 1996

On October 20, 1996, the national elections ended the Chamorro government. The former mayor of Managua, Arnoldo Alemán from the Liberal Alliance Party, was competing as a presidential candidate against Daniel Ortega from the FSLN. As part of the Sandinista campaign, the party dropped its revolutionary anthem which contained the line, “We fight the Yankee, enemy of humanity,” and replaced it with Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."Ironically, the FSLN tried to change the party warlike image by using this song that represents the universal ideal of human brotherhood in which "All human beings become brothers." In this line of thought, during the electoral campaign Ortega tried to tone down his image as a guerrilla leader, instead becoming a caring family man who was always accompanied by his wife and children. These actions demonstrated that the FSLN wanted to promote an image of peace and portray war as a thing of the past to attract votes from mainstream society. Unfortunately for the Sandinistas, these tactics were not enough. On November 8, Alemán was declared president with 51 percent of the vote, followed by Daniel Ortega with 37.7 percent. Nineteen other political parties received the remaining 11.3 percent. The 1996 elections resulted in the second consecutive defeat for the Sandinista party.

210 Ibid.
211 Walker, *Nicaragua without Illusions*, 305.
Arnoldo Alemán: the Roguish “Güegüense” inside each Nicaraguan?

*El Güeguense* is a Nicaraguan play written in Spanish and Nahuatl by an anonymous playwright, and has been considered a cultural treasure of Nicaragua since it was written in the 17th century—making it the oldest preserved theatrical text in Latin America.\(^{212}\) The title character is an old mestizo traveling merchant —more indigenous than Spanish— brought before the colonial governor on various minor charges.\(^{213}\) In a series of comic exchanges, el Guegüense, who deals in contraband items, pretends to mishear what the governor says to him and twists his words around to insult him. Eventually, the old man fools the authorities into thinking he's rich and arranges for one of his sons to marry the governor's daughter, the Lady Suche-Malinche.\(^{214}\) Meanwhile, a number of masked mules—perhaps representing the Native population oppressed by colonial rule—dance but never speak (See Figure 10).\(^{215}\)

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\(^{213}\) His name derived from huehue, the Nahuatl word for "elder."

\(^{214}\) The name Suche-Malinche derives from the Nahuatl term *suche* “flower,” and *Malinche* refers to the famous indigenous woman who played an important role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, acting as interpreter for Hernán Cortés. Malinche was also a mistress to Cortés. With this historic figure is baptized the term *Malinchismo* which refers to the preference for foreigners over native Mexicans. As Daniel Brinton points out, in *El Güegüense* Suche-Malinche appears as the governor's daughter and not his mistress. Her name in the play could be interpreted in political terms by saying that the author used the pejorative meaning of her figure to negatively associate it with authority. In this sense, Pablo Antonio Cuadra argues that *suche* means in Nicaragua “pimping” and affirms that “it is not the first time in our history that pimping is the authority’s daughter.” Tony Reichhardt, “El Gueguense: Nicaragua’s Irreverent Trickster,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, (2007): 26-31.

\(^{215}\) Ibid.
The figure of *El Güegüense* is the subject of constant debate as a symbol for Nicaraguan national identity. There are two principal interpretations: the Güegüense as a symbol of the Nicaraguan people's humor, resistance and sense of justice in the face of despotic authority (colonial power, imperialism, etc), or as an irresponsible and cunning liar who confuses in order to benefit from the lie.\(^\text{216}\) This association of *El Güegüense* as a parable for Nicaraguan identity is potentially dangerous as the main character’s actions help to foster Nicaraguan stereotypes while presenting a Manichean interpretation of the Nicaraguan people (either the bad shameless scoundrel or the good anarchistic hero).

\(^{216}\) Nitlápan-Envío team,“New Times? Güegüense Times”;and Reichhardt, “El Gueguense.” This position is shared by authors such as Les W.Field in his book *The Grimace of Macho Ratón: Artisan, Identity and Nation in Late-Twentieth Century Western Nicaragua* by focusing on the changing of identities of the artisans.
Nevertheless, the negative interpretation of *El Güegüense* has been used by critics to describe the duplicity and hypocrisy characterized by politicians and their actions. In this sense, in his book *Barroco descalzo*, Erick Blandón mentions that when Arnoldo Alemán won the presidency, his campaign was based on the theme of the construction of a unique Nicaraguan identity. He created his image with Güegüense’s traits including wittiness, rudeness, unscrupulousness and untruthfulness.\(^{217}\)

As Managua’s mayor and as president, Alemán presented himself as a rebellious figure who specialized in political trickery; as an elite politician with the mask of “man of the people;” and as a rude and radical politician opposed to different cultural identities. Demonstrating his disobedient nature, when Alemán was mayor of Managua, he challenged Chamorro’s authority and challenged her presidential powers by pursuing the aforementioned obliteration of public murals, signs and symbols from the revolution (even though representatives of Chamorro administration publically manifested against these actions). Nevertheless, Blandón points out that Alemán was not the typical scoundrel. Since he was not contesting “greedy or capricious rulers” like Güegüense did, when Alemán gained the presidency he became one of these politicians by exercising abusive authority with power.\(^{218}\) Walker characterizes Alemán’s administration as extremely polarized, incompetent, and typified by rampant corruption.\(^{219}\) Furthermore, Chávez mentioned the president’s nepotism by pointing out that when Alemán was installed as president he appointed of all his family —brother, daughter, and his eventual

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\(^{218}\) Ibid., 211.

father-in-law—to official posts in his government. At the end of the 1990s, the
Alemán’s administration was considered by many Nicaraguan citizens as “the most
corrupt government in Nicaragua’s history.” Some examples of corruption were the
“Narcojet scandal” in which traces of cocaine were found in a stolen jet which previously
served as presidential transportation, and the Comptroller office’s investigation of the
president’s personal wealth, which showed these assets had grown by 900 percent during
his six year term.

This corruption was also evident in the cultural sphere. Alemán’s director of the
Nicaraguan Institute of Culture (NIC) was Clemente Guido, former Director of Culture at
the Mayor’s office during the Chamorro administration. Guido was involved in a scandal
called “piñata cultural.” In this scandal, Guido was in charge of a private organization
called “Centro de Estudios y Manejo del Patrimonio Mundial de Nicaragua (CEPAM),”
which controlled World heritage sites—Nicaraguan archaeological and colonial sites
such as the Ruins of León Viejo, Inmaculada Concepcion Castle, and the Basilica of El
Viejo, among others. Guido bought many private properties close to these sites which
were financed by the government and whose owners were his relatives. As cultural
director Guido also created another autonomous institution, the Center of Educativa and

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221 Walker, Living in the Shadow of the Eagle, 67.
222 Walker, Living in the Shadow of the Eagle, 66.
223 The word “piñata” is very significant in Nicaraguan political culture because this noun was used in the
1990s to designate the appropriation made by some leaders of the FSLN before transferring the power to
225 Ibid.
Cultural Services (Centro de Servicios Educativos y Culturales) while he was in charge of touristic services through which he profited significantly.\textsuperscript{226}

Alemán can fairly be characterized as an elitist politician with the mask of a “man of the people.” Walker indicates Alemán successfully used a populist discourse thereby attracting poor sectors of the population. For example, Alemán interacted publically with the masses (drinking and eating in popular restaurants) he employed large numbers of poor people in public projects; and he expressed concern regarding the conditions of the disadvantaged.\textsuperscript{227} His role as Managua’s mayor was one of the decisive factors that contributed to his election to the presidency, having created a reputation by impressing his fellow citizens with the façade of the city’s modernization. Managua urban space was changed by Alemán through the construction of fountains, the reparation of roads, and the building of traffic circles around the capital.\textsuperscript{228} In addition, he placed in the city large propaganda signs proclaiming that “The Mayor Gets Things Done” and “Everthing Is Changing.”\textsuperscript{229} Nevertheless, Alemán was surrounded by the country’s elite, such as anti-Sandinista groups, Miami exiles and the Church hierarchy, and he defended their interests.

The use of Catholic symbols for political purposes was an important characteristic of Alemán’s government due to his strong ties to Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. One significant example of this image was the famous “parable of the viper,” in which only a few days prior to the presidential elections, Cardinal Obando held a mass to honor the

\textsuperscript{227} Walker, \textit{Nicaragua without Illusions}, 306.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Babb, \textit{After Revolution}, 54.
outgoing President Chamorro. In this mass the Cardinal read a “Biblical” passage in which “a traveler takes a cold and dying viper to his breast in order to save its life, when it revives the snake bites and kills its kind but foolish benefactor.” Ironically, this parable did not come from the Bible, but from a fable by famous Greek fabulist Aesop. This secular message was interpreted as electoral propaganda against the Sandinismo, which reflected a warning to not trust “the viper” as a Biblical symbol of evil, and then a demonization of FSLN candidate, Ortega. Roberto Sánchez Ramírez indicated that this parable was decisive during the elections because it was stated by a religious leader—in a Catholic country—and since it was incorrectly identified and presented as a Biblical message, it had a great impact.

The paradox of Alemán’s political character was also evident in his political alliance with Ortega’s FSLN. Even though Alemán presented negative rhetoric against the FSLN during his administration by proclaiming it the “the bitterest of enemies,” both politicians negotiated and were allied for the sake of their parties’ interests. For example, in 1997 both parties created an agreement on property law, and in 1999 they made a pact in which they shared power in the Supreme Court, the Office of the Comptroller General, and the Supreme Electoral Council. This agreement allowed Alemán to escape official scrutiny regarding corruption charges during his administration.

\footnotetext{230}{Walker, Nicaragua without Illusions, 307.}
\footnotetext{231}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{232}{Joaquín Tórrez, “El Cardenal citó a Esopo y no a Cristo,” El Nuevo Diario, October 29, 2000.}
\footnotetext{233}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{234}{Walker, Living in the Shadow of the Eagle, 67.}
\footnotetext{235}{Ibid.}
Alemán could also be considered rude, as portrayed by the negative stereotype presented of Güegüense. He was an orthodox and intransigent politician opposed not only to different political ideologies—he hated the Sandinista Revolution and its leaders— but also to different cultural and ethnic groups. In May 1983 shortly after assuming the presidency he ordered the lowering of the indigenous flag during a meeting of the Miskito Council of Elders from the Miskito communities. He declared that the country could not have a flag other than the white and blue Nicaraguan flag. People from the communities protested, but Alemán did not recognize their rights as ethnic minorities.

This action demonstrated that the true national culture was, to Alemán, the one related to homogeneity—a white and an elite culture—in which the indigenous and multi-cultural and ethnic features were not valued. Another social sector attacked by Alemán were non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially feminist groups. According to Karen Kampwirth, the president’s fight against feminist NGOs was mainly an ideological battle against their belief in reproductive rights. Many of these groups supported abortion and other topics that were against the Catholic church’s position.

236 Alemán’s intense hatred for the Sandinistas was based on his job loss in 1979 when the BANIC banking conglomerate for which he worked was nationalized by the Sandinistas, and then in 1989 (when his wife was dying of cancer) his properties were confiscated and he was put under house arrest. Walker, Nicaragua without Illusions, 305.

237 The Miskitos are the largest indigenous group on the Atlantic coast—in contrast to the Pacific coast, the Atlantic coast is characterized by the diversity of its ethnic groups and cultures—with an estimated population between 80,000 and 100,000. They are concentrated in the northeast of the country along the Rio Coco which marks the border between Nicaragua and Honduras and divides the Miskito community across national boundaries. There was no concept of private property for Miskitos and the land and natural resources of the region were used by the community as a whole. Politically a Council of Elders made up of the more senior members of the group advised on political and moral issues. Plunkett, In focus Nicaragua, 74-75.

238 Blandón, Erick. Barroco descalzo, 208

demonstration of the aforementioned political alliance between church leadership and Alemán. Ironically, this political alliance contributed to the appearance of new Evangelical related religious groups devoid of a traditional religiousness which created a religious diversification in Nicaraguan society.\textsuperscript{240} The Nicaraguan evangelical population has grown from 4 percent in the early 1990s to 28 percent nowadays. On the contrary, the Catholic population has decreased from 90 percent to 54.4 percent.\textsuperscript{241} The Catholic church is disadvantaged in its ability to attract followers due to its dedication to political actions at the expense of pastoral and social actions.

In the end the negative values associated with \textit{El Güegüense} could serve as an analogy to describe Alemán’s political persona. Certainly his administration was characterized by populism, verticalism, clientelism and corruption. He often served his own interests and strengthened his party and the executive branch at the expense of other state institutions and to the detriment of Nicaraguan citizens.\textsuperscript{242} The negation of the revolutionary cultural order and the imposition of an elite and cosmopolitan culture inspired by American values and neoliberal discourses, such as the efficiency and modern technology of security, was a priority for his government. Some authors such as Babb, Chávez and Deonandan mention that Alemán represented a caudillo with some echoes of Somocista discourse and imagery.\textsuperscript{243} Even though Alemán utilized a highly

confrontational and patriarchal style, was very authoritative, and often attempted to
devalue Nicaraguan culture, there are many ideals from revolutionary past and the
Chamorro administration that survived with the Nicaraguan people that positively
contributed to imagining and building their future.
CONCLUSIONS

U.S. culture greatly inspired Nicaragua, principally in Managua, during the six-year term of the Chamorro administration. The urban landscape of the capital changed with the construction of shopping malls, gas stations and fast-food outlets influenced by the Nicaraguan exiles, the so-called “Miami boys.” Many Nicaraguans criticized the influence of U.S. culture on the country. For example, former Vice President and writer Sergio Ramírez Mercado expressed that "Miami kitsch" was the Nicaraguan cultural ideal. In this line of thought, culture sometimes was trivialized by the Chamorro government. As an example, events such as the Miss Nicaragua beauty pageants were considered the most important cultural events of the year.

In addition, the government’s cultural policies during the Chamorro administration, implemented by NIC, were focused on the strengthening of an infrastructural apparatus with its symbolic power, instead of creating direct participatory artistic initiatives. It was a top-down approach to culture which did not differ drastically from the Sandinista cultural project in the sense that both were created by “the lettered class.” In the case of the Sandinistas, as John Beverly states, they substituted the idea of a socialist project strictly speaking ruled for and by “the underdogs” and instead used a

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244 Kitsch is often viewed as works that make claim to an artistic status to which they are not entitled. Some authors said that kitsch is an artistic impostor. For example, Gillo Dorfles says that kitsch is “something with the external characteristics of art, but which is in fact a falsification of arts.” Matei Calinescu maintains that “the whole concept of kitsch clearly centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception or self-deception.” Kulka, Tomas, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 44.


cultural dynamic made in the name of the masses but boosted by the technocracy and intellectuals.\textsuperscript{247}

After the 1980s, the loss of the state’s patronage in culture and the arts had conflicting results. On the one hand, many artists found themselves in desperate economic conditions because they were not able to adapt to the Chamorro government’s emphasis on private art, thus isolating them from the sense of the shared social experience of the 1980s (e.g. poetry workshops and murals vs. galleries).\textsuperscript{248} On the other hand, the Chamorro government notion that the state would not control or direct arts could also be seen as contributing to free artistic expression. In this sense, one of the major criticisms for the Sandinista cultural project was the shaping and standardizing of art to fit and serve a political agenda. For example, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, one of Nicaragua’s leading poets and a longtime associate of President Chamorro, indicates that the Sandinistas created a “Stalinization” of Nicaraguan culture.\textsuperscript{249} Art in the 1990s was not defined by the government but by itself; therefore, in the 1990s large cultural groups and artists were able to create new forms of artistic approaches and to adapt to this institutional detachment by becoming self-sufficient. In literature, this transitional period affected poetry and narrative because it created political apathy as a generalized ethos, which led to a more internal poetry and a narrative related to revolutionary disappointment.


These circumstances lead one to question whether the revolutionary culture was really obliterated in the 1990s. Despite the post-1990 crusade to erase all vestiges of the revolutionary past—many of the revolutionary symbols such as murals, books and monuments were eroded— not all legacies from the FSLN’s cultural project disappeared. The empowerment created in the 1980s was reflected in the aforementioned cultural groups who fought for their rights, positioning them in these new circumstances. Artists gained the tools to criticize not only the Chamorro government but also Sandinista politicians who supported them in the 1980s but forgot them in the 1990s. Some revolutionary symbols were recycled, hybridized or simply came to represent long-lasting emblems that survived times and governments like the figure of poet Rubén Darío. Perhaps Chamorro’s idea of culture was elite oriented and even commercialized, but she also promoted the reconciliation of a divided society which had suffered war. Her promotion of a culture of peace was a great achievement of her administration and her attempt for political and social reconciliation was demonstrated in her flexibility to cooperatively work with the FSLN. Peace was arguably the most important need for Nicaraguan society in the 1990s and it was successfully achieved during the Chamorro administration.
EPILOGUE

Thinking about Managua today, two decades after the Chamorro-Alemán administrations, one could say that the city, as a cultural space, has been through many changes and perhaps even a metamorphosis. Likewise, during the 1980s and 1990s, the capital could be seen as a good gauge of the cultural situation. In 2007, Sandinistas returned to power with the façade of populist discourse but did not diverge from the capitalist interests of past hegemonic groups. Managua is now decorated with beautiful murals but in pink and sky-blue colors everywhere as they are the official and esoteric colors of the government. The FSLN’s current influence on public space has cost Nicaraguan citizens millions because the city has a plethora of large expensive signs proclaiming Ortega’s popularity. These billboards announce his devotion to the Nicaraguan people and even to God: “Daniel, el pueblo presidente” or “Cumplirle al pueblo es cumplirle al Dios.” The traffic circles constructed by Alemán when he was Managua’s Mayor were recently used by Ortega as a place where he ordered poor and unemployed people to pray every day for reconciliation, peace and the elimination of hatred. The Catholic iconography used by past governments is also employed by the new government. Despite this urban circus created by Ortega and his FSLN in the city, an interstitial Managua also exists. It is a timeless city cohabiting the historical memory of the streets; it is a hybrid place between true revolutionary symbols and neoliberal icons. This Managua has survived Chamorro and Alemán’s administrations, and it can be seen through the lonely silhouette of Sandino living together with commercial and modern buildings.

250 These messages translate “Daniel, the people president” and “honoring, obeying and doing for the people is the same as honoring, obeying and doing for God.”
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