The Güegüencista Experience:
Masquerade, Embodiment, and Decolonization in Early Twenty-First Century Western Nicaragua

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about exploring and theorizing about the contemporary meanings and (re)production of *El Güegüense*, a politically charged ancient Nicaraguan dance-drama. The ethnographic affair revolves around the researcher’s experiences learning the Güegüense tradition at the Nicaraguan Academy of Dance in Managua. Utilizing “the apprenticeship” as methodology, which has perhaps most effectively been teased out in Loïc Wacquant’s (2004) *Body and Soul*, the researcher fleshes out under what circumstances one becomes a practitioner of the Güegüense tradition, what it means to be a cultural performer, and whether this ancient physical tradition still demonstrates and embodies its anti-colonial themes. After conducting interviews with leading practitioners, the author utilizes the performance as a vector of knowledge and speaks not only to how the performance culturally manifests but also to how *contested* its meanings truly are, as well as the recent depoliticizing of the performance, which it is argued is a direct result of the state becoming involved with this ancient physical tradition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the encouragement, patience, intellectual contribution, and kindness of my supervisor Professor Samantha King. In this learning process, I also came to the realization that a project such as this would have been impossible without my partner, Cynthia. I thank you, not only for your patience, but also for your assistance with the Spanish language as well as your sharing of ideas with me. I also wish to thank Angelina, Fabricio and Victor, for opening up their home to me, for driving me wherever I needed to go, for ensuring that I remained light hearted during my time abroad, and so on. This project would have been impossible, too, without your undisputed love and support. Last but not least, I want to thank the practitioners interviewed as well as the people of Nicaragua: thank you for sharing with me, part of your cultural heritage.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Introducing the problem

In December 2006, while randomly chatting on the social networking site Hi5 from my Toronto apartment, I encountered a profile picture that I became increasingly interested in. After initiating an online conversation with the individual behind the profile, I came to learn that her name was Cynthia and that she was from Nicaragua (see Figure 1). At the time I knew very little about her country. In fact, the only thing that I knew for sure was that it was situated somewhere in Central America, that it was a relatively poor country, and that Dennis Martinez, a former Montreal Expos pitcher, was from there. Over the next six months, however, Cynthia and I grew closer and we continued to chat on MSN messenger, pretty much on a nightly basis, until it was decided that we were ready to meet in person. So, without telling anyone, because I was feeling a little embarrassed having “met” someone over the internet, I booked a flight to Nicaragua in July 2007. On this first visit, I stayed for five days. Little did I know at the time that I would not only succumb to the urge to return to Nicaragua the following month, but also that Cynthia and I would marry three years down the road.
On my second Nicaraguan encounter, Cynthia managed to convince me to attend a beauty pageant, the Miss Universidad 2007 competition, alongside her mother, Angelina, and her younger brother, Victor. As a former model and winner of the competition herself, Cynthia was in charge of coaching the women and girls who were taking part in the 2007 pageant; which is to say, she instructed them on proper etiquette, how to speak to the audience, how to work the runway, and so on. During one of the intermissions, I was treated to an elegant cultural performance. The ballet that I bore witness to that night featured at least eight colourfully costumed characters carrying maracas and wearing hand carved wood masks (see Figure 2). Half of the masks clearly represented human figures and were painted white. Having taken some Latin American history courses, I recognized that this particular performance had some colonial-era connotations and that the white masks were probably representative of the Spanish conquistadores.

Once the performance had finished, I asked curiously, “What was that?” to Cynthia’s mother and brother in Spanish.

“Esto es El Güegüense,” Angelina whispered to me in her motherly voice, as if she were telling me a secret. Though I had several other questions at the time, it was inappropriate for me to carry on the conversation as the pageant continued on. Plus, a language barrier would have prevented Cynthia’s family from shedding further light on what the performance was all about.

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1 Miss Universidad translates to Miss “University” in English.
2 Cynthia utilized her fashion industry connections to land this job.
Soon afterward I came to learn that *El Güegüense* was a satirical, anti-colonial dance-drama that has been performed by men in the departments of Masaya and Carazo (see Figure 1) since at least the early eighteenth century. But considering there was no dialogue in the representation that I observed, this left me wondering how the performance could be understood as anti-colonial and how its political messages were transmitted. Through the World Wide Web, I also came to learn that UNESCO had proclaimed *El Güegüense* a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in 2005 (UNESCO, 2011).³ From there a safeguarding strategy was established, which led to the Masterpiece officially being inscribed into UNESCO’s “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” three years later in 2008.

Performing in colourful dress and hand-carved masks, the güegüencistas hypnotized me that night at the Miss University competition.⁴ I also came to learn that ever since the induction of *El Güegüense* into the international cultural hall of fame there has been increasing interest in the performance among North American scholars (Guevara, 2005, 2010; Westlake, 2009, 2010). But, with the exception of a recent study conducted by Guevara (2010), Güegüense practitioners have not to my knowledge been the central focus of scholarly inquiry. This thesis, therefore, investigates the following concerns: (1) how and why one becomes a contemporary güegüencista; (2) what it means to be a cultural performer; and (3) whether the practice of *El Güegüense* has maintained its satirical, anti-colonial nature four centuries following its colonial-era birth. By enrolling in Güegüense dance classes at the Academia Nicaragüense de la Danza, which is located in Managua, Managua, and by conducting complementary interviews in Nicaragua during the summer of 2010, I sought to shed light on these issues.⁵

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³ UNESCO is an abbreviation for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.  
⁴ Güegüencista(s) is pronounced “weh-when-si-sta(s)” in both English and Spanish.  
⁵ Translates to the “Nicaraguan Academy of Dance” in English.
As the first literary work of Nicaragua, there are different theories regarding the authorship and dates of composition of *El Güegüense o Macho Ratón*. Though it has become widely accepted that the original author will never be determined, most scholars agree that the manuscripts were composed at some point between the early seventeenth and early eighteenth century. One of the first, if not the first, set of manuscripts to be discovered was by Juan Eligio de la Rocha, a Nicaraguan lawyer and scholar, who came across them in the city of Masaya sometime after 1840. Afterward they underwent a series of cash transactions: from de la Rocha to Karl Berendt, a German linguist, who in turn gave them to a friend and colleague, Daniel G. Brinton. Brinton published the manuscripts for the first time his book, entitled *The Güegüence*. The ‘original’ manuscripts were written in a creole language which had arisen from the “jargon of low Spanish and corrupt Aztec (Nahuatl)” (Brinton, 1883, p. i).

In an extended introduction, Brinton provides an ethnological comparison between the Nahua and Mangue tribes of pre-contact western Nicaragua. This analysis remains one of the only scholarly treatments entirely focussed upon the ancestors of practitioners of the Güegüense tradition. Following this introduction, Brinton then provides what he calls a “loose paraphrase” of the play (p. i). This play, entitled “Baile Del Güegüence ó Macho Ratón,” (p. 4), which translates to “The Ballet of the Güegüence; or, The Macho Ratón” (p.5), is not just a ballet or a theatrical production, though. While some individuals have contemporarily interpreted it, and reproduced it, as a comedy-ballet or dance-drama, others have transformed it into a musical, while still others have made it into a piece of street or puppet theatre. Historically, *El Güegüense* has been performed everywhere from the streets of colonial-era towns—such as Diríamba, Carazo and Masaya, Masaya—to the stage of Managua’s prestigious Ruben Dario National
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Theatre. What *El Güegüense* was believed by Brinton to be is of little importance because he himself had never been to Nicaragua. Nor had he seen the play performed or practised. Because Brinton was forced to rely on authoritative historical accounts of Nicaragua, and because his translated version of the play is rarely performed today, the contemporary cultural manifestation of the Güegüense tradition invites scholarly investigation.

For the reasons stated above I will not dwell too long on Brinton’s so-called original storyline, but instead offer a brief narrative of my reading of the plot, which is based on an anti-colonial, feminist perspective that is shaped by my own social location and my educational training in cultural studies. The following analytical narrative has also been greatly informed by my interview with César Paz, who has acted in and directed more than 400 (re)presentations of *El Güegüense*, as well as a z\collection of notes (i.e. his summary of the structure of the narrative of the performance) which he later provided to me via email.

In the story, a light-skinned merchant named Güegüence, the so-called “trickster,” is stopped by Governor Tastuanes and the local mayor, Alguacil, who ask him to produce a seller’s license, which he does not have (see *Table 1*). According to Paz, “They then decide to invent a tax, so that the merchant can sell.” Paz implies that because the local colonial authorities received such meagre pay, they had been given permission by the ruling conquistadores to supplement their income through theft. In other words, the Governor and his assistant stop the merchant because they themselves have very little—aside from their positions.6

In what is a creatively written dialogue, featuring numerous plays on words and several dances, Güegüence, along with his two sons, Don Forcico and Don Ambrosio, and some of their dancing mules (Macho-moto, Macho-viejo, Macho-mohino, and Macho-gujaqueño), manage to

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6Such an analysis has been reinforced by Irene Lopez’s (2003) (re)presentation, *El Gran Picaro*, which is a historical recreation of the original performance, whereby one woman in the performance shouts the following: “Güegüence is better dressed than the Governor!”
convince the two antagonists that his family is quite wealthy. While untrue, this is nevertheless represented by an abundance of wine that his favoured and eldest son, the quick-witted Don Forcico, has just stolen and is hence able to produce. This scenario sets the stage for what is to be a grand wedding; the Trickster dupes the Governor into agreeing to let Don Forcico marry his daughter, Xochimalinche, otherwise known as Lady Suche-Malinche, who is accompanied by two other women. These three women do not speak a word in the entire piece. Presumably, after the wedding, though Brinton’s book does not explicitly say it to be so, Güegüence and Don Forcico move up the social ladder through intermarriage. Both the father and the son marry into an elite family. In the final act, dialogue between the two seems to suggest that they are content having just received something for the price of nothing.

Overall, *El Güegüence* has been praised as a literary work because the protagonist manages to get into a powerful social position through several peaceful techniques, without having to deal with weapons. The proclaimed Masterpiece is not just simply character dialogue or a theatre piece, though: traditionally, it also included dancing as well as live music. The inclusion of dancing and music has to do with the structure of the performance. “Structurally,” Paz notes, “the inclusion of several dances is what allowed the performance to appear as though the different scenes and acts occur in an uninterrupted series of events.”

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<td><em>Dramatis Personae</em></td>
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<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Güegüence</td>
<td>A merchant; he is the central figure of the drama, and the personage from whom the title of the Masterpiece is derived. The root word of his name</td>
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means honoured elder. His lies and bawdy jokes seem to suggest otherwise.

**Governor Tastuanes**
He appears in Spanish costume, with a staff and sable. His name appears to originate from the Nahuatl language, though there are debates surrounding this character: as to whether he is rich or poor and whether he is a Spaniard or a Native, and so on.

**Alguacil (the Sheriff), the Secretary and the Registrar**
They too represent the crown and appear in full official dress with their staffs of office.

**Don Forsico and Don Ambrosio**
They are the two sons of Güegüence. The former is faithful to his father and endorses all of his trickery; the latter, for reasons unknown, opposes his father. He repeatedly fails to expose the old man’s literal puns and fallacies to representatives of the crown, though.

**Lady Suchi-Malinche and women/girls who accompany her**
She is the daughter of the governor and is traditionally accompanied by two or more women or girls. She enters clothed in a sort of tunic. Chains and other trinkets adorn her beautiful garments. All female characters remain silent throughout the entire piece.

**The Machos**
The machos (or mules) are usually twelve or more in number; and they are the personages from whom the second or alternative title (i.e. El Güegüense ó Macho Ratón) is derived. In the story, the machos, or “beasts of burden,” carry the load for Güegüence and his two sons. They dance at times, although they too traditionally remain silent throughout.

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<td><strong>Alguacil (the Sheriff), the Secretary and the Registrar</strong></td>
<td>They too represent the crown and appear in full official dress with their staffs of office.</td>
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Issues of Authenticity

Nowadays, widely interpreted among Nicaraguan scholars and cultural critics “as a parable for Nicaraguan national identity and its formation” (Field, 1999, xix), contemporary reenactments and popular understandings of El Güegüense have not only been condensed, but also have had its characters muted—literally; in other words, the vast majority of El Güegüense representations today feature characters who no longer speak, which suggests to me that the satirical nature of this comedy-dance-drama has been lost. When these performances, such as the ballet I bore witness to, are hypothetically compared to those of the colonial-era, it seems as though there is no longer any critiquing of society being enacted.

How do I interpret the changes that have occurred over the last three quarters of a century? When the government of a country changes hands, there are oftentimes attempts to either repress or appropriate popular culture. On the one hand, the Somoza military dictatorship, which lasted from 1937-1979, outlawed all folkloric forms in Nicaragua, with the exception of those that became associated with religious festivals. The Somozas denied the Nicaraguan people a national culture for over four decades. On the other hand, following the successful 1978-79 insurrection, the revolutionary Sandinistas interpreted it to be their duty to appropriate all indigenous and traditional (campesino) culture because their political party was representative of the masses. As one practitioner noted in Field’s (1999) The Grimace of Macho Ratón: “Look, before, the state had nothing to do with El Güegüence. It was a protest against the state. Then the Sandinistas reinterpret the play, and they say it is about the revolutionary history of the Nicaraguan people” (p. 226). In what follows, I theorize that the Sandinistas endorsed a particular form of El Güegüense, not only in their quest for national solidarity but also in order to keep their potential cultural critics—politically charged practitioners of satire—at bay.
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*Itching a scratch: Contemporary forms of the performance*

Through an analysis of interviews with leading Güegüense practitioners, this project seeks to shed light on their views of *El Güegüense*. Not only to determine how and why it is important to Nicaraguans but also to flesh out by what means the performance is practised today. It would first be beneficial, however, for the reader to know that the Güegüense tradition culturally manifests in at least five forms: As a street festival, a theatrical production, a ballet, a musical, and an object of handicraft. In the first version, traditional steps are performed in the streets. In the past, though this form took place in Diriamba, Carazo and Masaya, I have come to understand that güegüencistas today can be found elsewhere in Nicaragua, particularly in the departments of Managua and Granada. When I travelled to Diriamba in January 2010, street practitioners performed traditional steps more or less in sync, and they were fully costumed. Most wore masks, but not all. A church mass followed this demonstration, and then a procession (see *Figure 3*). In that particular year, a shortened theatrical presentation was also put on in the evening. I have, however, come to learn that these performances greatly differ from year to year (Martin, 1994; Guevara, 2010; Westlake, 2010; Field, 1999).

The theatrical production (see *Figure 4*), one of the two manifestations upon which I will focus, typically lasts between one and two hours. This form should be considered even more traditional in that such representations have a plot featuring character dialogue, as well as dancing and live music. The dance steps performed today are similar to those at the street
festival, though the choreography tends to be more structured. These types of performances are typically put on by people with a background in theatre and/or traditional folklore and may or may not include professional dancers. Actresses and actors, as well as live musicians, work with a director to put on the show. Directors are the only practitioners who derive any monetary gain from these representations, although actors and actresses gain opportunities to acquire cultural capital.

The ballet form, my second focus, was originally initiated by one of my interviewees, Ronald Abud Vivas, at the urgings of the revolutionary Sandinista government in the early 1980s. This cultural form is easily the most recognized by contemporary Nicaraguans. The “low key” traditional steps of the street have been made much more spectacular. Once again, directors are the only ones who have the opportunity to derive income from performances, while dancers similarly gain access to cultural capital.

The purely musical incarnation has taken many forms. For instance, in Nicaragua I obtained a compact disc put out by the National Orchestra featuring seven songs. Another example that I came across was that of a disc jockey’s electronic hybridization of the folk songs, which a Nicaraguan friend sent to me via email. Typically there are no lyrics or dialogue.

The handicraft form can be seen in the hand carved masks and figurines representing the different characters of the internationally renowned performance that are available for purchase.
at the Flores household in Diriamba, Carazo (see Figure 4), the “Old Indian” market in Masaya, amongst other places in Nicaragua. Throughout the country, the performance has also been portrayed through paintings, figurines, mugs, tee shirts, pen and pencil holders, and so on, which, when taken together, represent some other means by which the performance manifests culturally.

In this project, I focus solely on the second and third forms introduced because they are the predominant forms today. In other words, when someone says “El Güegüense,” most people are going to think of the ballet or a theatrical representation. On the one hand, contemporary dance representations have been widely consumed via television during national holidays, as well as over the internet. That the vast majority of Nicaraguans are familiar with this form is well known, I would say. On the other hand, most Nicaraguans have not seen a theatrical representation, although they are aware that manuscripts and different texts or interpretations exist within their country. Most Nicaraguans are also familiar with the handful of writers, artists, and cultural performers who have made a name for themselves by interpreting and reinterpreting what it is that the Güegüense tradition stands for today.

Theory and Methodology

As well as proudly practising qualitative research, I strive to be completely transparent with the reader, which is an unreasonable goal to have; next to impossible in fact. I nevertheless suggest that my writings embody my biases and personal opinions through and through; in other
words, through historical documentation, footnotes and poetry, as well as through theoretical explanations and other reflective thoughts embedded in the text, I have attempted to shed light on what “bees I have buzzing in my bonnet” as historian Edward Carr (1961) once put it. The practice of reflective socio-cultural inquiry is of the utmost importance to me, not only when engaged in the field but also while composing my writings. I recognize that, in choosing to cover two large historical periods (1492-1600 & 1821-present) in what follows and by borrowing heavily from secondary sources in the next chapter, I have gone against the grain a bit. But I have my reasons. Such a narrative, or historical contextualization, may at first seem muddled up, but by the time the conclusion rolls around my reasoning(s) should become crystal clear.

Having undergone intense theoretical and methodological training within the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University, I have come to learn that the politics of representation is a serious issue that needs to be addressed by researchers. This “crisis of representation” created debates about how to treat research subjects and represent various cultural phenomena. According to Andrew Sparkes (2002), this representational crisis stems from the mid-1980s:

The crisis arose from a growing uncertainty about the adequate means to describe social reality, which led to a reassessment of dominant ideas across the human sciences. Here, it was not just the ideas themselves that came under attack but also the paradigmatic style in which they were represented---how we ‘write’ (explain, describe, index) the social.” (p. 4)

Some examples of the types of issues that I hope to shed light on vis-à-vis my research project include: who this (auto) ethnographic account is about and for whom it has been written, and for what reasons; to theorize how Global North researchers can represent physical cultures more
respectfully; as well as analysis and further validation of my own social position via reflecting on certain personal experiences within the text. Overall, I have been greatly influenced by many theories and readings, but at present I would situate my work within the intellectual discourse of postcolonialism.

Postcolonial Theory

Some people mistakenly interpret postcolonialism to refer only to a period of time after which a nation gains independence. Such a definition is not only too simplistic but it is also misleading. Especially since the critical nature of postcolonial theory directly involves the destabilizing of Western ways of thinking; it does not refer simply to historical periodization.

Frantz Fanon is one of the earliest writers associated with postcolonial critique. His book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), analysed the nature of colonialism and those subjugated by it. One of its main contributions was the characterization of colonialism as a source of violence, as opposed to a violent reaction by colonizing powers against subjugated resistors, which, until Fanon, had been the more common narrative. His portrayal of the systematic relationship between colonialism and its attempt to deny oppressed individuals of their basic human rights laid the groundwork for related critiques of colonial and postcolonial systems.

Another landmark text in the postcolonial movement was *Orientalism* (1979), written by the oft-quoted Edward Said. The title of the book was originally considered a neutral term used in the West to describe the study of the Orient. In his book Said subverted the term to mean a constructed binary division of the world into the Orient and the Occident (i.e. the East/West binary). Without the Orient, in other words, the Occident could not exist and vice versa. As a ‘superior’ society, the ‘West’ researched and wrote about the ‘East’ because that was the thing to do as a superior civilization: Western depictions of the ‘Orient,’ via anthropology, ethnography,
Hollywood movies, popular literature, and so on, constructed an inferior world, a place of backwardness, irrationality, and wildness. Such inaccurate depictions of people(s) and cultures have not been limited to the East/West binary, however. Postcolonial critique nowadays addresses a broad range of issues: identity, gender, race, racism and ethnicity; the challenges of developing a postcolonial national identity; how a colonised people’s knowledge was used against them in service of the colonisers interest; and how knowledge about the world is generated under specific relations between the powerful and the powerless, circulated repetitively and finally legitimated in service to certain imperial interests.

As a critical literary tradition, postcolonial critique deals with literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries, especially of European colonial powers Britain, France, and Spain. Postcolonial theory also deals with cultural identity in colonized societies: the dilemma of developing a national identity after colonial rule (Fanon, 1968); the ways in which writers articulate and celebrate that identity (often reclaiming it from colonizer, while maintaining strong connections); the ways in which the knowledge of the colonized people has been generated and used to serve the colonizer’s interests; and the ways in which the colonizer’s literature has justified colonialism via images of the colonised as a perpetually inferior people, society and culture. At the same time, postcolonial theory is open enough to encourage thought about the creative resistance to the coloniser by the colonised.

Another concept that shares some characteristics with postcolonial critique is decolonization. As we know, still today there exist major social and economic inequalities in the world. For this reason, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995) note that all “post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and

\[7\] See ‘On National Culture’ and ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth.*
independence has not solved this problem (p.2).” Is internalized colonialism the problem? What is it that is holding these nations back, according to Ashcroft, et al. (1995)?

The development of new elites within independent societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invader societies—all these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction.

In other words, decolonization could best be defined as an ongoing anti-colonial battle that means different things to different people, which I witnessed firsthand in a Department of Gender Studies grad course, entitled “Aboriginal Women.” When individuals were given the opportunity to clarify what decolonization meant to them, it became clear that a traditional understanding of the concept was belittling; which is to say, decolonization does not end once a colonized country has achieved its independence. After reading and re-reading Linda T. Smith’s (1999) Decolonizing Methodologies, I have come to understand that I, we—white settlers and/or the western world—need not educate ourselves on important issues, such as foreign cultures and gender politics, in order to just sit around and feel sorry for the disenfranchised. Instead there is a need for us to pick up these concepts, carry them with us, and attempt to work with them, both in our research and our everyday lives. For a settler in Canada, such as myself, for example, that would mean educating oneself about First Nation, Inuit, and aboriginal issues rather than pleading ignorance on the topic.

Data Collection

In response to familiarizing myself with the politics of representation, postcolonial theory as well as my interpretation of decolonization, I have attempted to turn my gaze back onto
myself. Loïc Wacquant’s (2004) *Body and Soul*, provides both the anchor and compass for such an ethnographic journey. Wacquant’s call for a “carnal sociology” not of, but from the body has influenced my thinking greatly (Wacquant, 2005). It is his notion of habitus (which draws on the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu) that led me to the decision to train my body, undergo critique of its movements, and then reflect on those experiences.

I enrolled in Güegüense classes at the Nicaraguan Dance Academy in Managua, Managua in July of 2010. From Monday to Friday for two hours per day for two and a half weeks I was scheduled to take dance classes. Because my dance instructor—Manuel Sanchez—spoke Spanish as well as English, it was relatively easy for me to communicate with him. I also kept an ethnographic journal, which I wrote in on a nightly basis. By videotaping, jotting down, or audio recording the physical movements performed, the conversations had, the stories heard, the memories shared, and the difficulties encountered, the “apprenticeship” was the means by which I collected my primary data (Wacquant, 2004, 2005). I also felt inclined to compliment this data with supplementary interviews for further contextualization. Altogether, I interviewed four individuals, or güegüencistas, three in Managua, Managua and one in Diriamba, Carazo, with the help of a Spanish-speaking interpreter when necessary. The interpreter was used extensively in only two of the interviews because the other two spoke fluent English. Utilizing an audio recorder, I recorded the four dialogues and then they were transcribed (with the help of the Spanish-speaking interpreter). After those interviews were transcribed, I looked for common narratives and themes via coding.

*Data Analysis*

This project seeks to shed light on how Nicaraguan and güegüencista identities have been discursively constructed. I am also interested in how these two identities are intertwined. In
order to analyze my data, I reflected on my experiences in the classroom and the everyday, as well as the interviews conducted, and then I established a set of themes. Working within the framework of postcolonial theory that I have already set out, I utilized these themes to structure my arguments. In turn, I focused on comparing and contrasting my experiences as a practitioner with nationalist ideology and the scholarly literature. Close, intertextual readings of scholarly work have permitted me to clarify the historical processes and contemporary social relations that enable certain knowledge, ideas, beliefs and practices and not others to gain legitimacy.

Language

This project was clearly limited by my lack of fluency in the Spanish language. Though I continue to study Spanish on a regular basis and am able to conduct basic communication in this language, I brought an interpreter/translator to all classes and interviews. The interpreter was only extensively used with two of four of the interviewees because the other two spoke English quite well. Nevertheless, that some of the nuances of our discussions will have been lost or altered through this process is obvious. I worked with this interpreter upward of two dozen hours while in Nicaragua, to capture as accurately as possible the information and perspectives conveyed to me.

Rationale and Review of Literature

With the exception of a recent study conducted by Guevara (2010), practitioners of the Güegüense tradition—that is, those individuals most intimately involved in contemporary reproductions—have not to my knowledge been the central focus of the English scholarly inquiry. In addition to seeking to fill this gap in the literature, there are two further reasons why I choose to engage with El Güegüence ó Macho Ratón as both oral and physical tradition: (1)
Brinton’s 1883 text and most other English representations are outdated; and (2) I want to build on the scholarly work conducted by Guevara (2010).

Beyond Brinton

Much of the context in Brinton’s 1883 translated representation may have in fact been lost, as some Nicaraguan scholars have argued (Davila Bolaños, 1974; Mántica, 1968-69, 2001, 2005, 2009). But what I find most disheartening is that Brinton had never been to Nicaragua. Nor had he ever seen the Güegüense tradition performed. To date, ethnographies by Randy Martin (1994) and Field (1999), along with a handful of peer-reviewed academic papers (Guevara, 2010; Westlake, 2009 & 2010), represent the only scholarly inquiries in English, since Brinton (1883), to have engaged with the Güegüense tradition. These critical analyses have tended to reflect on what it is that El Güegüense was in the past, however, and relatively few have reflected on how it culturally (re)presents, or how it is actually (re)produced, today.

In Socialist Ensembles, Martin (1994), who was interested in the socialist nature of theatrical performance as an intersection of the state and civil society, carefully outlines some occurrences at the annual Feast of San Sebastián (January 17-27) in Diria, Carazo. He is quick to note that Brinton’s “play is only quoted by the costumes and dances; its integrity as a text is not represented” (1994, p. 54; emphasis added). But, if what was occurring on the streets of Diria that day in no way resembled what was in Brinton’s text, then why did the dance scholar still utilize passages from the book in order to interpret what was occurring during the practise of the Güegüense tradition and the procession which followed? We could also ask how Martin, a dance scholar, came to take somewhat of a voyeuristic stance while attempting to outline how the Güegüense dance tradition manifested at the festival. Overall, El Güegüense was one of several performances discussed in Martin’s book, but definitely not the sole focus.
Recently, Les Field (1999) has also critiqued Martin’s analysis for its shortcomings. In *The Grimace of Macho Ratón*, Field argues that Martin “failed” in “his discussion of El Güegüense’s role in Nicaraguan culture” because he neglected to consult “the wide body of interpretive literature by Nicaraguan intellectuals” (p. 33; emphasis in original). Because I am not yet fluent in Spanish, I am afraid that my project could face similar criticisms. However, because Field has already extensively researched, summarized and analysed the positions of several influential Nicaraguan scholars and cultural critics, I have been able to draw on his work (see Table 2). This was essentially the same thing that Guevara (2010) did in his latest contribution. Like Field, I do not claim to have covered all who have commented on the performance. Nor can I even claim to have covered all the points Field discussed in his summary of the Nicaraguan literature. Instead, what I have included in my own summary are some key points that I hope will demonstrate that I am familiar with the debates surrounding *El Güegüense* as a literary tradition. This summary will simultaneously act as contextualization for my own project in its later stages.

Returning to *The Grimace of Macho Ratón* (1999), Field weaves together relevant passages from Brinton’s (1883) text with those Spanish texts that Martin’s account excluded, along with discussion of the trials and tribulations of underclass Indian artisan(a)s, to show how Nicaraguans who identify as “Indians” are marginalized in Nicaragua and how they overcome dominant ideology through cultural production. Utilizing the classic colonial-era play as a parable, as well as the Spanish and (limited) English literature relating to it, Field’s book challenges elitist nationalist racial discourse—the “myth of mestizaje.” The cultural process of mestizaje essentially suggests that the vast majority of Nicaraguans today, as well as majority of

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8 Which, in the case of Nicaragua, has been most effectively critiqued by the work of Jeffrey Gould (1990, 1998)
Latin Americans more broadly, are the biological products of indigenous Nicaraguan and Hispanic people(s). For Field, the discourse of *mestizaje* is best defined as the following:

as a process of biological miscegenation; as a process of nation-building that requires that mestizos, as individuals and collectivities, undergo ‘de-Indianization,’ both culturally-linguistically and in order to accommodate national identity in ways that Indians, who are positioned in opposition to the nation-building state, cannot; and as a process that necessarily creates a panoply of divergent mixed and mixing identity positions. (p. 189-190)

In other words, elite Nicaraguan nationalist identity discourse has suggested that *mestizaje* was a natural occurring fusion of two cultures. That the vast majority of Nicaraguans—as well as Latin Americans—today are of more or less half indigenous stock and half Spanish stock is a widely held belief. But Field complicates this myth, as have other scholars (Dore, 2006; Gould, 1990, 1998; Guevara, 2010; Whisnant, 1995), by noting how not everyone identifies with the state’s nation-building project.

Despite spending considerable time attempting to seek out practitioners, Field could only find two middle-aged men in Diríamba. Yet he was relatively uninterested in these practitioners’ experiences with the Güegüense tradition; that is to say, in seeking out practitioners, he was hopeful that he would be inadvertently directed to textual representations of the performance. Although Field’s (1999) account is intellectually stimulating, it is only tangentially concerned with the güegüencista. And instead, as Guevara (2010) notes, Field’s perspective has been influenced by other cultural sites: stories from artisan(a)s, essays by “local intellectuals,” and an ethnographic reconstruction of these artisans’ life stories.
Table 2

*Summary of Nicaraguan intellectuals and cultural critics writing on El Güegüense*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author:</th>
<th>Occupation:</th>
<th>Major contributions to the field of the Güegüense tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912-2002)</td>
<td>Poet, essayist, art and literary critic, playwright, graphic artist</td>
<td>In 1942, Cuadra retranslated the Güegüense manuscripts encountered by Brinton, dating its composition to the mid-to-late 16th century, which was described as the initial moments of cultural mestizaje in Nicaragua; “[h]e was the first to associate features of Güegüence’s character—disrespect for authority, satirical farce, sexual burlesque, a vagabond jack-of-all-trades lifestyle, facility with the spoken word—with a proto- and stereotypical Nicaraguan national character” (Field, 1999, p. 54-55); the close attention he paid to specific details catalyzed an explosion of text-based interpretations of the play in the decades to follow; and lastly, he advanced the argument that the play was composed by a mestizo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco Pérez Estrada (1917-1982)</td>
<td>Essayist, poet, anthropologist, folklorist</td>
<td>Even though Estrada co-authored Cuadra’s 1942 retranslation, he republished <em>El Güegüense</em> in 1946, utilizing another set of manuscripts that had been found in the 1930s; he once wrote that, due to the existence of the performance, for Nicaraguans there “is nothing to envy from the best Castilian writers (as cited by Field, p. 56); his research focussed on historical and ethnographic evidence (e.g. the masks) from the performance in order to</td>
</tr>
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exemplify how the it was a fusion of two cultures; and lastly, he suggested the author was a Spanish Creole who sought to publicly air an anti-colonial critique of the exploitative economic and social structures within Nicaragua.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carlos Mántica Abaunza</th>
<th>Linguist, popular writer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mántica continues to focus upon the Nahuatl-Spanish idiom in which El Güegüense was written, paying particular attention to the potential double, triple, and quadruple meanings of character dialogue (i.e. Nahuatl-Nahuatl puns, Spanish-Spanish puns, Spanish-Nahuatl puns, and Nahuatl-Spanish puns); he has fiercely debated the literal meaning of the title of the performance, names of the characters, character dialogue, and so on, and he argues that the “original” manuscripts actually stemmed from a long tradition of oral, textual, and performance-based transformations; he was the first to suggest that these manuscripts were, in actuality, a combination of two or more separate performances, while dating its composition to the 17th century.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Eduardo Zepeda-Henríquez</th>
<th>Poet, folklorist, literary critic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to Field (1999), Zepeda-Henríquez (and others), writing after Mántica, “returned to interpret El Güegüense with the far more focused agenda promoted by Cuadra ...”; that is to say, that <em>El Güegüense</em> was an allegory for <em>mestizaje</em> and the first document of Nicaraguan national identity; also, by drawing attention to Nicaragua’s diverse cultural and ethnic diversity, he complicated the notion of a perfect post-Conquest <em>mestizaje</em> by suggesting the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Güegüencista Experience

| **Alejandro Dávila Bolaños** (1922-1979) | **Doctor, author, Marxist** | According to Field (1999), Dávila Bolaños was fond of Mántica’s work and viewed *El Güegüense* as a piece of “popular revolutionary theatre” (19) with “revolutionary anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic intentions” (22; as cited by Field, p. 65). Also, “he set out to prove using etymology, history, and a withering score for the previous interpretive work written by reactionary intellectuals; he also ridiculed the fetishism over the “original” manuscripts, claiming “in reality, [the other versions] are no more than mutilated paraphrases of [Brinton’s] text” (as cited by Field, 1999, p. 70); because he felt that wrongful interpretations of the performance had been stimulated by Nicaragua’s national independence and the rise of capitalism, which resulted in the elites to term it folklore, he called attention to how the radical nature of the performance had seemingly been lost; he argued the play’s author to be an Indian, possibly a translator of colonial laws between the Indians and Spaniards (as cited by Field, p. 66); he furthermore advanced the argument that the actions and words of the characters operated as revolutionary code, which analyzed the contradictions of colonial society in order to motivate those
The Güegüencista Experience

viewing the play to organize the undoing of that society; overall, he interpreted the performance as a rejection of Spanish colonialism as opposed to an allegory for mestizaje.

| Jorge Eduardo Arellano (1946-present) | Historian specializing in Nicaraguan literature | Field (1999) describes Arellano as “the bibliographer par excellence of El Güegüence”; he republished the performance in 1984-85 after he came across another previously unknown manuscript of the performance in Germany, which, as an intellectual, gave his conclusions authority and legitimacy; he argues the performance originated in Nandaime, Granada, as opposed to Masaya, or even Diriamba (despite it being performed most faithfully there); his work is effective in that he critiques other authors, but does not pick fights with them (i.e. Dávila Bolaños’ work was ‘personal’ rather than based on Marxist scholarship; Cuadra and Mántica’s work are not juxtaposed, but the latter is described as a transformation of the former, etc.); he suggests that a priest wrote the play, arguing that the play could not have been composed by an Indian or a mestizo because neither would have had the intellectual capacity (p. 72); and lastly, it is ultimately as if Arellano has been given the final word because his analyses tends to be inclusive of his Güegüense literary colleagues. |

Table 2 Summary of Nicaraguan intellectuals and cultural critics writing on El Güegüense
Bringing the performers—and their bodies—back in

To my knowledge, besides Martin (1994) there have been only three attempts to either detail how the Güegüense tradition physically manifests or to give the practitioners a voice. In Folklore Nicaragüense (1960), Dr. Leopoldo Serrano Gutiérrez gave a detailed description of the festivities at the feast of San Sebastian. But, seemingly like Martin (1994), Serrano Gutiérrez took a “traditional” ethnographic stance in that he attempted to describe everything that was occurring, as oppose to chronicling, for instance, the practitioners’ life stories, how they prepared themselves, or what they had to say regarding the physical tradition. Though he paid meticulous attention to detail, by today’s ethical standards his methods are considered slightly outdated. For one, we know that not everyone would have experienced the performance the same way. This issue is further complicated by the fact that the performance is not performed the same way from year to year (Brinton, 1883; Field, 1999; Guevara, 2010; Martin, 1994; Serrano Gutiérrez, 1960; Westlake, 2010). Similar to the notion of an “original” set of manuscripts, therefore, Gutiérrez’s analysis appears to be frozen in time. Worse yet, we do not really come to know who the performers are and hence this is why the practitioners lack agency in traditional ethnographic accounts.

The first person to attempt to sort out these issues, as far as I know, was a Nicaraguan-Canadian, Alberto Guevara (2010). In 2000-2001 Guevara travelled to Diriamba, Carazo, joined a dance troupe, and interviewed its practitioners and sponsor. Though this research was part of his dissertation, he reflected on these experiences almost a decade later. He sought to map out how the practise of the performance compared to elite Nicaraguan literary and intellectual understandings of the manuscripts. Hegemonic discourses surrounding the performance suggest that it is a symbol of Nicaraguan national identity and cultural mestizaje. But Guevara argues
that this interpretation excludes other views, positions and identities. Such a nationalistic narrative of ethnic homogeneity, in other words, is complicated by the perspectives of local performers. As a participant-observer, Guevara not only learned the dance but also took part in the practitioners’ everyday lives. Guevara (2010) argues that Field’s analysis was on the outside, that is, outside the narratives of the performance of the play. He calls for less of a top-down understanding. In Diriamba, it was found that the performance had been reduced to a few lines and that only economic and political elite townspeople are capable of putting on performances nowadays, due to the economic responsibilities of supplying food and drink to practitioners who train for a good portion of the year a couple times per week. Traditionally, güegüencistas in Diriamba were required to provide their own costume, both for practice and actual performances.

In response to the lack of scholarly literature, and embracing the role of the qualitative researcher, using my own and others’ personal experiences, the transcripts of my interviews, the scholarly literature, my knowledge of Latin American history, and whatever else I can get my hands on, I too, by the end, will have offered up an (auto-) ethnographic account. Because it is the re-politicization of the Güegüense tradition that is of interest to me, I strived for my final project to have functioned as a critique of the Nicaraguan state itself, as well as the state of social life in Nicaragua. Such an analysis has the ability to go beyond both Brinton (1883) and Guevara (2005, 2010).

Chapter Outline

What follows is divided into three sections: Historical Context (Chapter Two), (Auto-) Ethnographic Notes (Chapter Three), and The Güegüencistas’ Account (Chapter Four).

Historical Context or Chapter Two frames the thesis as a whole and it does so in numerous ways. The chapter narrates a vision of what Nicaragua could have been as well as what it has become.
It could be interpreted as the work of a Sandinista historiographer, though it is critical of contemporary Sandinistas. While the first section attempts to map out the exploitative social circumstances under which the Güegüense tradition was born, the second section fast-forwards to Independence and proceeds to discuss the consolidation of the nation-state. It critiques not only what has gone on within the Nicaraguan political scene but also U.S. intervention.

Chapter Three takes the reader on a journey, an (auto) ethnographic journey. Utilizing my personal experiences in Nicaragua, both within the classroom and elsewhere, I have attempted to expose Global North readers to: (1) the politics of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) as well as the politics of culture in Nicaragua; (2) how cultural performers are manufactured in the classroom; (3) flesh out just some of the basic everyday struggles of the majority of Nicaraguans. Chapter Three also demonstrates how I think one should go about researching physical cultures.

The fourth chapter reports on the interviews conducted with leading practitioners of the Güegüense tradition. In it, I specifically seek to untangle by what means one becomes a güegüencista, what it means to be a cultural performer, and whether or not this ancient physical tradition can still be considered anti-colonial, that is, based on the work of these leading practitioners. At the end of Chapter Four I then situate my stance, not only as a researcher but also as a practitioner of the Güegüense tradition.

The final chapter brings everything together.
CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sandinista historiography teaches us that Nicaragua is unique as a nation in that there have been umpteen attempts to bring down the central state. This sense of rebelliousness is not limited to the “post-colonial” era, however, as it supposedly stems from a long history of opposition to foreign rule. The first such instance was in 1522, when Spanish conquistador Gil González Dávila and a crew of men arrived in the now-municipal region of Diria, Carazo; they were greeted by the leader of the local Chorotegan tribe, Diriangen. After Dávila somehow effectively communicated to the tribal leader a series of demands, which included not only religious conversion but also economic compensation, the chief told the Spaniard that he and other senior members of the community would think about the offer and then return the following day with a response. But that evening the Chorotegans came out firing on all cylinders. Though they were badly defeated by a well-armed and organized army, this historical event represents the very first instance of a group resisting foreign control.

With such a rich history of rebelliousness and revolt, which will be further fleshed out below, current Nicaraguan President, Daniel Ortega, has become increasingly known for hogging the microphone at international gatherings with his long winded, at times boring, anti-imperialist rants. The damage inflicted by the Spanish conquistadores should not be underestimated, but such colonialism occurred throughout Latin America, with the exception of the presence of the Portuguese colonizers in Brazil. This sense of collectiveness, of a common colonial experience, combined with the fact that most Latin American countries gained independence with the fall of the Spanish Empire during the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, is what has led me to believe that three centuries of conquest have all but been forgotten in Nicaragua. In other words, following independence, because the discourse of mestizaje suggests that most, if not all,
Nicaraguans are a product of Spanish and indigenous bloodlines, could it not be said that most no longer feel any hostility toward the Spanish? If there still is, then it would not be the same historical context anyway.

For Nicaragua, with so much agricultural potential and lands situated perfectly for a trans-isthmus canal, however, foreign domination did not stop following independence. The passing of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) in the United States speaks to this claim. Without asking any of the Latin American nations it spoke of, the bill essentially suggested that the U.S. had first dibs on commerce in the Americas. It was directly opposed to Europe’s further intervention in the Western hemisphere. And nowhere in Latin America have the effects of U.S. imperialism been felt more than in Nicaragua. This chapter works to contextualize my larger argument and its purpose, therefore, is fourfold: (1) to locate the country as a field of complex social and power relations; (2) to identify how, why, and by what means foreign intervention has so profoundly shaped the Republic of Nicaragua; (3) to shed light on the reasons for certain Nicaraguans, and not others, coming to support two separate revolutionary movements; (4) to provide some much needed contextualization regarding the Nicaraguan political scene, which will simultaneously function as historical context for practitioners of the Güegüense tradition in the chapters to follow.

**Some [Anti-] Colonial Historical Context**

At the time of European contact, the Aztecs—otherwise known as the Mexica or Nahua—were one of three major civilizations in the Americas. Researchers often group all indigenous peoples of pre-contact Mexico, the rest of Central America, as well as South America, into one of three categories—Aztec, Mayan, or Inca. For our purposes, however, the peoples of western Nicaragua—the Chorotegans and the Nicarao nations, specifically—had deep
connections to the Valley of Mexico. These nations had traditionally thrived on the fertile soil sandwiched between Nicaragua’s two freshwater lakes and the Pacific Ocean; lands that had been blanketed by the volcanic ash for millennia. This geographic area today is commonly referred to as the “Pacific Lowlands” (see Figure 6), which is the westernmost third of Nicaragua.

Historically, the peoples of the Pacific Lowlands and the Central Highlands—both with connections to Mesoamerica—experienced Spanish colonialism and then American imperialism. The Caribbean Coastal Plain, or the Atlantic Lowlands, by way of comparison, had connections to the Mayan Empire and experienced British imperialism. It must therefore be clarified from the beginning that this analysis is limited to two specific areas of Nicaragua: (1) the urban heart of the country (see Figure 7 for the darker shaded urban heart shape in western Nicaragua); and (2) the north-westernmost two-thirds of the Central Highlands (see Figures 6 & 7).

Although Christopher Columbus’s crew arrived at the eastern shores of what is now Nicaragua sometime in 1502, the Conquest of Nicaragua came relatively late. It was from Panama—at the southernmost point of the Central American isthmus—that Spanish exploration and expansion
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first began, that is, both southward into South America and northward toward western and central Nicaragua.

Historically, for Pacific lowlanders and Central highlanders, life was relatively comfortable. A population of up to 2,000,000 had thrived along what would become Nicaragua’s western shores (Stanislawski, 1983). Regardless of who these individuals identified with, the Nicara or Chorotegean nations, or that of the Matagalpan or Maribio, no one went hungry (see Figure 7 again). Living their lives as part of a small yet politically organized agrarian society based on communal values, members of these nations were not preoccupied by basic human needs, such as food and shelter. As previously mentioned, the Pacific Lowlands were extremely fertile and they traditionally represented the breadbasket upon which such fruitful populations thrived (Stanislawski, 1983). Diverse fruits and vegetables had historically been cultivated in the Pacific Lowlands. Of most importance was the variety of maize and beans, ranging in colour, taste, and texture, which were the main food staples. Living in extreme poverty was also not an issue. If a family needed a private dwelling, then the community came together to build it within a few days. Altogether the indigenous population identified with a sense of community and common well-being.

The densely packed corridor between the Pacific Ocean and Nicaragua’s two freshwater lakes, as well as the population just northeast of the lakes, was decimated by Spanish colonialism, with Old World diseases functioning as the primary killers. What occurred in the century and a half following the arrival of Europeans in Nicaragua and elsewhere in the Americas was in fact the greatest demographic disaster in history. In Born to Die, Noble David Cook (1998) estimates that at least 40 million people in the Americas had lost their lives by the end of the sixteenth century due to colonial disease, slavery, and warfare. In western Nicaragua,
however, it was not until the arrival of the conquistador Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, who “founded” the “Province of Nicaragua” and proceeded to establish both León and Granada in 1524, that disease broke out (Newson, 1987). The bubonic plague and measles then raged through the Pacific Lowlands like a wildfire in 1531 and 1533, respectively. Smallpox came to the Province, too, by the end of the decade (Cook, 1998; Newson, 1987).

Because the newly founded Province of Nicaragua lacked gold, silver, and other precious metals that the early conquistadores were after, the “Colonizers” were somewhat uninterested in the area early on. This by no means meant that the “Indigenous” population was to be left alone. Despite the massive loss of population, the Colonizers continued exploiting the Indigenous as a source of slave labour. Slave raiding was by far the premier economic activity in Nicaragua. The peoples of the densely populated Pacific Lowlands, especially, were rounded up and were organized into colonial-political communities. Hundreds of thousands of these individuals were boarded onto boats and shipped off to Panama to be sold in the slave trade in the early years of colonization. As many as 80 percent of these would be slaves died on the trips up and down the Central American coastline. While most of the displaced population ended up in Peru mining gold, a fair number were sent to the West Indies to work on plantations, to replace the locals who had already been devastated by colonialism.

The vast majority of slaves recruited from western Nicaragua probably died within a few years due to the harsh working conditions. It was therefore due to Old World diseases, the slave trade, and brutal colonial violence that a post-contact population of over 500,000 in western Nicaragua was reduced to 20,000 to 30,000 by the middle of the sixteenth century. That is a loss of 95 percent of the population. By the 1540s the thriving societies of the Pacific Lowlands and Central Highlands of just two decades earlier were virtually nonexistent, which explains the
relative ease for the Spaniards in conquering Nicaragua. But the Colonizers were ill-prepared to survive in Nicaragua. They did not know how to farm in the Americas and were forced to turn their attention to subsistent agriculture. Realizing their lives depended on the survival of the indigenous people, the conquistadores understood that those natives who remained needed to be put to work because the survival of Hispanic culture in the Americas depended on it. This fact ultimately resulted in the establishment of the *encomienda* system (Stanislawski, 1983). This land control mechanism put large tracts of lands in the hands of creoles in Nicaragua and the Indigenous were told to produce crops from it, first for the landowner and then secondly for themselves. Maize, beans, cotton, woven mantles and salt were the main items of tribute that the natives produced. They were forced to produce increasingly more as the years went on too. Overall, the *encomienda* system—with minor amendments—continued on for several centuries, throughout the colonial era, and it gave the Spanish full control over large estates that would be worked by the indigenous population to cultivate.

The complex social networks that the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua had nurtured for centuries were forever lost or altered, especially since the majority of the elders—known as güegüe and who were not only community leaders but also transmitters of knowledge—had passed away.⁹ If the colonial subject was lucky, perhaps she or he was able to maintain some sort of contact with family, kin, or community. Such a statement is purely speculative, however. The 20,000 to 30,000 survivors were forced to pick up the pieces of a seemingly impossible puzzle.

In *Politics and the Catholic Church in Nicaragua*, Kirk (1992) notes that it was early on that the conquistadores identified the children of caciques as potential future leaders: “By 1533, Governor Francisco de Castañeda had instructed some sixty-eight Spanish landholders to select

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⁹Of relevance to this project is that “güegue,” the root of the word Güegüense, means honoured elder.
the most promising Indian youth to be educated in Hispanic customs and the Catholic faith at the San Francisco de Leόn convent” (p. 9). Some of Nicaragua’s colonial authorities were, therefore, locals who had embraced Christianity and a European lifestyle. If contemporary Nicaraguans were aware of this history, surely they would agree that a local who had been befriended by the Spanish was a betrayer of their nation.

In the introductory chapter, I mentioned that *El Güegüense* was a satirical dance-drama, which critiqued society. As ambiguous as the storyline of the merchant trickster named Güegüence is, what became clear to me after conducting the interviews associated with this project was that the performance should be interpreted as a satire for two reasons: (1) it mocks the Spanish crown that ruled the country at the time, as well as the few conquistadores actually in the country who governed from behind the scenes; and (2) it mocks the native politicians who ruled the country on behalf of the conquistadores.

**A Historiography of Revolutionary Identification in Nicaragua**

“While independence emerged in the throes of colonialist ideologies,” historian Justin Wolfe (2007) notes, in *The Everyday Nation-State*, “it hardly culminated in the establishment of a Nicaraguan national identity. Rather, it opened up a power vacuum” (p. 7). The centralized state offered most Nicaraguans nothing. Local community, by contrast, was everything. Small-town and rural populations preferred their local traditions and practised subsistence agriculture and their own cultural traditions (Burns, 1991; Wolfe, 2007). In such environments the accumulation of wealth meant relatively little. In post-colonial Nicaragua, however, the potential spoils of political power were a rich resource in a poor country. Wealthy whites and *ladinos* vied for political power, while poor ladinos and Indians reacted by retreating from state
authority, as decentralized as it was (Burns, 1991; Wolfe, 2007). A good portion of the population made their way to the north of the country in order to avoid both the violence waged by the elites and the tentacles of the forming nation-state.

*Independence and the Age of Anarchy (1821-1857)*

I begin this second historical narrative in 1821 because that was when Nicaragua officially gained independence from Spain. “What is today the Republic of Nicaragua was until 1821 part of the Spanish colony known as the Captaincy General of Guatemala, which included the Central American isthmus from Mexico’s Chiapas state south to Costa Rica,” John A. Booth (1982) writes (p. 11). As a result of Mexico’s persistent resistance to Spanish colonialism, however, members of the Captaincy General of Guatemala—the administrative division that included the Province of Nicaragua—were incorporated into the Mexican Empire as Spain simply “handed the keys” over to Mexico. However, as Liberals gained support throughout Central America they broke with the Conservative dominated Mexican Empire and established the United Provinces of Central America. This union officially seceded from Mexico in 1823. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua in essence achieved independence by default, without war with either Spain or Mexico. With civil conflict between Liberals and Conservatives intensifying in each of the five provinces (especially in Nicaragua), however, the Central American Federation was eventually destroyed, thereby completing the second step of Nicaraguan independence in 1838.

Without a national police force, political power was radically decentralized and disorganized in Nicaragua. Struggles for land and political power were the immediate result, which translated into endemic violence: 1821-1857 is referred to as the “Age of Anarchy” by

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10 In Nicaragua, ladino meant a person of roughly “half Indian” and “half-Spanish” blood, though it cannot be limited to one or two or more of cultural groups.
some scholars (Baracco, 2005, p. 31; Burns, 1991, p. 35-50). *Caudillos* and their strongmen dominated the political scene throughout this period.\(^{11}\) Although it was far from universal, elite Liberals tended to reside in León, León, while elite Conservatives tended to reside in Granada, Granada. The Leónites believed strongly in free trade and had economic and political interests modelled after those of the U.S.A and Europe. “Peace, Progress and Liberty” was their slogan (Booth, 1982, p. 13). The Liberals tended to be businessmen, artisans, and public employees who would benefit from increased economic activity.

Elite Grenadinos did not want to improve basic infrastructural development because they enjoyed the monopolies that they had already achieved, as well as the protection that the Church and its patriarchal order had provided them since the colonial era. “Order, Church and Family” was their slogan (Booth, 1982, p. 12). Having accumulated much capital from previous trade and agricultural agreements, elites from Granada tended to be wealthier than their counterparts in León. The oligarchs of Granada tended to be cattle ranchers and required relatively few labourers. They were happy with the rents extracted from the mercantile system that Nicaragua already had in place. Although both “parties” shared a common language, religion, and culture, they had different political and economic agendas. Due to such a deep internal divide, it could be said that “Nicaragua” existed more in theory than it did in practice.

Besides coming together to squash popular revolts from time to time, especially between the years 1845-1849 (Burns, 1991; Wolfe, 2007), one instance whereby the elites collaborated and cooperated was to protect the sovereignty of their nation, which was being threatened by a foreigner. What happened exactly? Fearing defeat in yet another civil war with the Conservatives, the Liberals of León sought help from an outside source and contacted Cornelius Garrison; he was a main player in the U.S. owned and operated *Accessory Transit Company*

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\(^{11}\) Caudillos were the heads of rural and urban, usually all-male political gangs.
In return for military assistance Garrison was looking to gain the political backing of influential Liberals to get his hands on more capital to eventually take over the ATC (Baracco, 2005).

The ATC connected Nicaragua’s coasts via a trans-isthmian passage, which was put into operation by 1851. Travelling by boat, people and produce could be shipped up the Río San Juan, across Lake Nicaragua, and then go by stagecoach west to the Pacific Ocean. From there, steamships could run up and down the western coast of the Americas, as well as across the Pacific. This route, Booth (1982) writes, was “faster and more comfortable then the competing Panama passage ... [and] turned handsome profits,” especially during the years of the California gold rush (p. 18). Although the elites were excited at the prospect of profiting from a canal, Nicaragua saw little income from the ATC.

Controlling the lands upon which a future canal could be constructed represented to the American capitalist Cornelius Garrison something special. And it was he, in part, who managed to convince Tennessee native, journalist and political activist William Walker, “seen by some as the “first hired tool of ‘dollar diplomacy,’” to agree to help the Liberals gain power (Booth, 1982). The filibuster Walker invaded Nicaragua in June 1855 with fifty-something well-armed Americans. Initially defeated, Walker retrenched, regrouped with the Liberals, and, having received some 2500 reinforcements from planters/slave-owners from the U.S. south in October—because they had been convinced slavery could be re-established in Nicaragua—was able to capture Granada, the heart of Conservative territory (Booth, 1982, p. 19).

By early 1856, however, the Conservative governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica sent troops to wage war on Walker, in order to protect Central American sovereignty. Feeling the heat, Walker had himself elected as president in July and
“offered land grants to attract American troops, declared English the official language, legalized slavery, decreed a vagrancy law to ensure forced peasant labour for landowners, appropriated major landholdings, and instituted a general Americanization program” (Booth, p. 19). He furthermore used the state as an apparatus upon which to enrich himself and other Americans. Such manoeuvres did not go over well with the national elites. Facing defeat in April 1857—once the Liberals too had turned on him—Walker accepted a truce and surrendered, escaping to the United States, though he was later killed by the British in Honduras. The Liberals, having been discredited for their dealings with Walker, immediately lost influence in Nicaragua and the Conservatives regained control of the government, thereafter ruling for more than thirty years of unprecedented stability.

*Consolidating the Nation-State*

Not surprisingly, from 1857-1893—a period known as “the thirty years” in Nicaragua—political stability catalyzed the Nicaraguan economy (Barraco, 2005, p. 35). Had it not been for the introduction of coffee in the 1850s, however, Nicaragua’s economy would have been hit hard by decreased demands in the European market for natural dyes, which up until that time was its main export. In order for the coffee industry to succeed, a reliable labour force was needed.

By the 1870s it came to found that the temperate climate and rich soils of the Central Highlands were particularly conducive to coffee cultivation. Also during this time, Baracco (2005) notes, “the state [first] began to engage in a range of activities to propagate an official nationalism that actively engaged in constructing the nation” (p. 31). Much of the excitement had to do with the notion that the country was situated perfectly for a trans-isthmus canal. Nicaragua was set to become the central hub of international commerce. The rise of Pacific coast shipping facilitated exportation and consecutive Conservative governments encouraged coffee
cultivation through a series of economic reforms: (1) all lands, including Indian communal lands, were to be transformed into private holdings; (2) there was to be a drastic reduction in the amount of lands controlled by the Church; (3) prizes, subsidies, and land grants were offered to successful coffee growers and many white immigrants were recruited to grow coffee; (4) there was much capital invested in infrastructural developments, railways, and telegraphs, for example; and (5) a credit system to finance coffee production, backed by British banks, was formed (Booth, p. 20). In sum, the Conservatives too, like the Liberals, had come to believe that developing the export economy could be lucrative.

With consecutive Conservative administrations increasingly adopting liberalist policies, however, Liberal politics, which had been somewhat irrelevant ever since the Walker fiasco, were resuscitated near the end of the nineteenth century. The coffee boom had enriched a new class of liberal-minded bourgeois nationalists. In 1893, José Santos Zelaya—the son of a coffee planter from the department of Managua and a notorious anti-imperialist—was elected to the Presidency. The Liberals immediately re-wrote the constitution, which worked to further stimulate economic growth by integrating Nicaragua more fully into the world economy. Zelaya’s Liberals also raised the funds necessary to complete the national railroad; worked to expand communication networks; increased educational spending; and pursued negotiations for the terms of a canal with the U.S. government. The Liberals furthermore developed a small professionalized army, the first of its kind, to further reduce the economic power of the Church and certain Conservatives. Also, like the Conservatives before him, Zelaya instituted harsh labour laws. Nicaraguans were forced to choose between military service, working on public projects, or paid labour in the agro-export economy. Pass-books or work-books became mandatory to carry and were essential for social accountability.
When the American government out of nowhere closed the door on a canal deal, selecting Panama instead, Zelaya furiously sought out German and Japanese capital. Such planning infuriated the Americans as it was a direct infringement upon the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Washington sent the Marines to Nicaragua in response, not only to protect American investment but also to push Zelaya out of office. Following Zelaya’s presidential exit in 1909 Washington became particularly interested and involved in Nicaraguan politics, from thereon in appointing puppet Conservatives to run what was essentially an American show.

In the followings years the Conservatives consistently traded away control over the economy for political backing and cash from the Americans. It was these corrupt dealings which enriched certain elites and worked to indebt the country as a whole. Fed up with all the corruption, Liberal General Benjamín Zeledón—also known as “el indio” or “the Indian”—attacked government troops and managed to take control of most of the country on behalf of a coffee grower-exporter faction in 1912. In response, the Conservative president requested military assistance from the U.S.A., once again. Booth (1982) notes that “the force soon ballooned to twenty-seven hundred men ... [and] [t]he vastly superior ... forces finally crushed the poorly armed Liberal insurrection in November 1912 ... The victors, who captured and killed [“el indio”] Zeledón in the final act of this short *drama*, paraded the rebel leader’s corpse, lashed to the back of a horse, before the public” (Booth, p. 31; italics are mine). A 17 year-old named Augusto C. Sandino, who fifteen years later would lead his own revolutionary movement, bore witness to this “entertainment” and, upon reflecting on this act in his later years, claimed that the scene “‘made his blood boil with rage’” (as cited by Walker, 1981, p. 19).

In these years, due to international criticism, Washington became less interested in playing an interventionist role in Latin America. Not before they had been conveniently granted
the exclusive right to build an inter-oceanic canal with the inking of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty on 5 August 1914, however. Although the Americans already operated one such canal in Panama, the agreement protected their “cash cow.” What did Nicaragua receive in return? The Conservatives received a three-million dollar payment, which went right back to the Americans to pay off outstanding loans. Such deals exemplify not only that the greed of the U.S. government, but also how desperate and corrupt Nicaraguan politicians were. The Marines, moreover, were not removed until the elites agreed to develop a “coalition government” in August 1926, which Washington came to view as a “hopeful sign,” according to Booth (1982, p. 37).

With the departure of the Marines, old political tensions flared up and yet another civil war broke out in Nicaragua. The Conservative-dominated coalition government, running out of time, money and patience, once again asked the Americans for help. In response, Booth (1982) notes, Washington “permitted additional arms sales to the government and arranged new loans to help finance the war” (p. 39); and “By February 1927 eleven US cruisers and destroyers were in Nicaraguan ports and more than 5400 marines were occupying major cities (p. 40). The terms of the resulting U.S. brokered peace treaty, the 1927 Treaty of Tipitapa, otherwise known as the Espino Negro or “Black Thorn,” called for the formation of a U.S. trained Nacional Guard (NG) and a U.S. supervised election in 1928.

With whisperings of guerrilla activity, U.S. foreign-policy makers sought to prevent the development of a Mexican style “bolshevism” by organizing democratic elections. The formation of the National Guard, Thomas Walker (1981) notes, was considered “necessary” because “Washington had long felt that what Nicaragua really needed was an apolitical constabulary that could maintain stability and create a healthy environment for political and
economic development” (p. 23). Augusto C. Sandino, that 17 year old boy who had had his “blood brought to a boil with rage” (that is, when he bore witness to the killing of the Liberal General, Benjamin ‘el indio’ Zeledon, in 1912), was the only Liberal General not to sign the Espino Negro agreement. Instead, Sandino returned to his stronghold in Las Segovias and, in writing his first manifesto to the people of Nicaragua (and Latin America more broadly), eventually announced to the world his subsequent decision to launch a war of national liberation. Once he had sufficient support that is.

A critique of Sandinismo

When Nicaragua’s most famous revolutionary leader César Augusto Sandino was assassinated on 21 February 1934, historical sociologist Michael J. Schroeder (1998) estimates ten percent of Nicaraguans were supportive of the Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía Nacional de Nicaragua (EDSNN), otherwise known as the Defending Army of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua (p. 236). The main purpose of this army was to expel the U.S. Marines from Nicaragua, which would thereby end foreign occupation of what Sandino commonly called the “motherland,” once and for all. But U.S. occupation was not the only thing to which Sandino sought to put an end. He also noted how Nicaraguan history had been plagued by corrupt politicians and he therefore advocated for social accountability and economic transparency from future leaders. When the EDSNN was first formed in November 1927 it had just twenty-something members. However, by February 1933, at the height of Sandinismo, the EDSNN or Defending Army was supported by some 80,000-90,000 Nicaraguans, mostly from Las Segovias. The majority of Segovians were peasant-squatters and have been described as “a social sector ... unlikely to become the creators and carriers of national identity” (Grossman, Abstract). Although Sandino has been the focus of much scholarly work, there has been relatively little
written on members of the EDSNN; that is, who they were and why they would support such a movement. At the core of this movement was a blatant rejection of economic exploitation and other capitalistic values. In what follows, therefore, is a fleshing out of the social circumstances for Segovians coming to take up arms against the Yankees and a corrupt national government. 

_Las Segovias: Surveying the Land_

In the mountainous northern region of central Nicaragua, the departments of Nueva Segovia, Estelí, Jinotega and Matagalpa, as well as some parts of southern Honduras, compose an informal territory known as _Las Segovias_. Altogether this informal territory, in the late 1920s, “contained over 9000 square miles, and, according to one of the first Nicaraguan Census’, the total population was 178,631 inhabitants, or nearly 30 per cent of the national total” (Grossman, p. 86). Bordering the present-day department of Zelaya to the east and Chinandega and León to the south, and parts of the country of Honduras to the north and west, _Las Segovias_ was and is situated within the north-westernmost lands of Nicaragua’s Central Highlands.

Because Pacific lowlanders had connections to the Aztec Empire, and a history of Spanish colonialism and American imperialism, while Atlantic lowlanders had connections to the Mayan Empire and a history of British imperialism, the Central Highlands represented not only a frontier zone, but also a natural north-south human highway, conducive to violence, cultural exchange and social fluidity. This was especially so in _Las Segovias_; a region described as an “endemically violent place,” a place ideal for outlaws (Schroeder, 1998, p. 215). Historically, the rugged geography and dispersed population of _Las Segovias_ had imposed severe limits on the Nicaraguan state. Despite the limited reach of state, national elites and foreign capitalists were increasingly encroaching upon peasant-squatter lands. In fact, Richard Grossman (2008) writes, “[b]y the beginning of the twentieth century, both commercialisation
and proletarianisation had been initiated in the Segovias. Commercial agriculture, especially coffee producing, was expanding into the region, and the most important question for the success of any commercial enterprise was access to labour” (p. 86). Since a national bank did not exist in Nicaragua until 1910, not that such a ‘national’ bank would give a personal loan to a peasant, Segovian lands increasingly came to be concentrated in the hands of an emergent coffee-producing faction. No matter whether it was the communal lands of the Comunidade Indígenas or the “spoken-for-lands” of peasant-squatters, however, Elizabeth Dore (2006) notes that “[l]and privatization revolutionalized class, race and gender relations” forever (p. 94), which in turn intersected in the “new social order” (p. 25).

The social transformations of the mid-to-late nineteenth century that Dore (2006) speaks of in Myths of Modernity were for the most part restricted to the heavily populated Pacific Lowlands. By the early twentieth century, in other words, Segovian society had been relatively unaffected by capitalist policies and developments. Take the concept of race and/or ethnicity for instance: as we have already come to learn, the discourse of mestizaje implies a process of becoming one (that is, part of the mestizo race). The discourse of mestizaje is a dominant hegemonic nationalist narrative of cultural identity; that is to say, that the vast majority of contemporary Nicaraguans are of more or less half-Spanish and half-Indian blood is the norm in the country. Such a social-cultural-political project, therefore, is based on the internalization of a racist discourse, glorifying the whiteness of one’s skin. Take for instance the “trickster” main character in El Güegüense. Could it not be said that the white paint of the main character’s mask celebrates whitening oneself. If not one’s skin, one’s cultural values? In order for the “trickster” to overcome, why must his skin colour be white? Historically in Segovian society at this time, comparatively speaking, there existed few hierarchal constructs because everyone was ladino, a
term that had been used in the region since at least the mid-eighteenth century. “Ladino” was inclusive of all individuals, whatever the shade of their darker than white skin colour. The cafetaleros who came to the Segovias, by way of comparison, tended to be white—creoles, Europeans (British/Germans mostly) or North Americans (Americans mostly)—and were desperate for labourers, which, as previously mentioned, led to the establishment of vagrancy laws as well as several systems designed to keep the peasantry handy to cultivate and harvest coffee. For example, if a Nicaraguan did not have 100 pesos worth of cash or land, then they were defined as a labourer. But such a landowner/labourer dichotomy was complicated by the validity of indigenous claims to land. Because the land was communally owned, indigenous landholding patterns did not fit the definitions of the nation-state (p. 140). Indians were, therefore, considered to be labourers because of their race.

Dore also notes how the debt peonage system was greatly gendered. It was characterized by both a “patriarchy from below” (read: father or husband, head of family, pp. 158-163) and a “patriarchy from above” (read: planter-peon relations, pp. 151-158). The most relevant for our discussion is the first form of patriarchy as the father of the house theoretically had complete control over his wife’s body, telling her when and where to work. He also controlled his children’s labour. On numerous occasions, however, the disenfranchised of such households, especially the women, as Dore (2006) notes, expressed their agency by submitting complaints to the courts. The scholarly literature suggests such patronizing gender relations should not have existed then, and that they should not exist today, considering the notion of the male breadwinner completely misrepresents Nicaraguan society (Babb, 2001; Lancaster, 1992; Randall, 1981, 1994). Female-headed households were and are a norm in Nicaragua.
In *Coffee and Power* (1997), Jeffrey Paige notes how the new coffee export economy created deep divisions between a very small, privileged elite class, whom typically had lighter skin, and the impoverished rural masses as well (p. 13). The fortunes of a select few were built at the expense of much the rest of the population. Once the vagrancy laws of the post-William Walker era had been drafted many Nicaraguans living within the coffee zones of the Pacific Lowlands and the Central Highlands fled to the sparsely inhabited rugged northern mountains. These individuals who fled to *Las Segovias* were in search of a better life, one where they could express their autonomy and be free of unnecessary social control, which was the reason for Segovians traditionally practising subsistence and/or communal agriculture. Working-the-land meant something important in Segovian society, that one was “honourable,” according to Grossman (2008). Being honourable meant that you did not have to work for wages and that you were making a choice; a choice not to participate in Nicaragua’s capitalistic export economy, which was operated behind the scenes by foreigners. In *Las Segovias* Augusto C. Sandino was perhaps opportunistic in that he saw an opportunity; an opportunity to develop class consciousness and spread “light and truth.”

_A Revolution in the Making_

Upon returning to Nicaragua in the mid-1920s from his journeys to Honduras, El Salvador, and revolutionary Mexico, Augusto Sandino managed to secure employment at a U.S. mine and openly communicated to local Segovians how he felt about the country being occupied by the Marines: that it was unacceptable. Sandino, having been born outside of wedlock to an elite, Liberal-supporting father and a coffee-picking mother, lived with his mother in a very poor household. His father lived just down the road in a mansion and, for many years, ignored the fact that he had a son. Late in Sandino’s pre-pubescent years he screamed at his father in the
streets of their hometown: “Am I not your son!” This was reportedly when young Augusto’s father finally acknowledged that he had a son and thereafter at the very least enrolled him into a local school. This was how Sandino received his base education. His father also taught him his politics, although Hodges (1992) documents that, in his twenties, Sandino also developed a highly eclectic social vision, which drew on a wide range of ideologies and belief systems—“including socialism, communism, anarchsyndicism and spiritism” (p. 235).

Sandino spoke to the Segovian peasants about what he had seen in revolutionary Mexico. The problem was not capitalism in Nicaragua, but capitalism in the country run by North Americans and corrupted politicians. To be a part of Sandino’s vision of a “new” Nicaragua—a state within a state, one had to have patience and believe in a couple of causes. EDSNN member-supporters had to firmly oppose U.S. imperialism and identify with the Indo-Hispanic race, which was based on language and culture, as opposed to “blood quantum theory,” according to Sandino’s teachings.\(^\text{12}\) Also, “Nation,” as defined by Sandino, Grossman adds (2008) was “both patriarchal and familial ... The members of his army were all described as brothers; the homeland was their mother; and, implicitly, Sandino himself was the father” (84-85). Such a patriotic family was supposed to pursue personal autonomy, national sovereignty and social justice. It was first and foremost the EDSNN’s duty to take up arms against the Yanqui “invaders” and Nicaraguan “traitors.” The latter were labelled “vende patria” (betrayers of nation). These individuals had sold out Nicaragua by not joining the revolutionary cause and by henceforth supporting U.S. occupation the motherland, which was described as a “raping” of the country.

\(^{12}\)Blood quantum theory is a ridiculous notion which implies that we can somehow determine the racial and/or ethnic makeup of blood. For instance, to be classified as “Native” in Canada, that is, to have the opportunity to be exempt from taxes so long as one lived on a reserve, one must have 50% “Indian blood.” Historically, however, Indigenous Canadians and Nicaraguans alike, in determining clan membership, stressed the importance of cultural practices as opposed to biological roots, which is a much less racist then scientific determination of one’s blood.
Although Sandino was neither the first nor the last to preach about the Indo-Hispanic *raza*, the so-called fifth race, and the potential of a Latin American Empire, he strongly supported both notions. Nicaragua, not only geographically but also culturally, economically and politically, was to be at the centre of this Empire by 2012. This was in fact when the Aztecs had predicted the fifth and final life stage would begin. Such rhetoric was juxtaposed with the developing nation-state, as well as in response to other ethnic groups. For the first time in Nicaraguan history, Segovians were regularly coming into contact with white North Americans. Although not all would have considered themselves “Indian,” the majority of Segovians were seeking to continue a way-of-life that had preceded not only the American and British imperialists but also the Spanish conquistadores. Sandino worked hard to develop this state within a state.

When the original twenty-something members of the EDSNN came together in 1927 just two percent of Segovians were literate and a folk society had flourished there for millennia (Schroeder, 2007, p. 516). The existence of an orally oriented folk culture suggests local news and rumours spread quickly. Most Segovians would have identified themselves as Catholic, but they tended to practice folk religions that “mingled Christian notions of good and evil, the worship of ostensibly Catholic saints, and a robust sense of justice and injustice, with indigenous religious forms that included belief in healers, holy men and women, spirits and magic,” Schroeder (2007) writes (p. 516). Let it be known that Sandino was nevertheless disgusted by the deplorable conditions of the peasantry and, having experienced poverty and fatherly neglect, he interpreted his life to be dedicated to the spreading of “Light and Truth.”

Baracco (2005) notes several steps taken to exemplify how the new nation—a state within a state—was being consolidated: (1) An official seal was developed and minted onto gold
coins and printed onto stamps; it read “indios de Sandino,” which translates to Sandino’s Indians, and featured an EDSN member’s foot on a U.S. marine’s chest, arm raised, ready to start performing a vest cut, that is, hacking off the latter’s head and arms with a machete, the mark of a Sandinista (see Baracco, 2005, p. 46 for image); (2) Sandino re-named cities. Such branding created the sense that social transformations really were occurring; (3) a new Aztec calendar was adopted and hymns and narratives/chronicles were composed about the struggle. Such narratives identified the U.S. Marines as rapists and baby-killers; a notion which came out in interviews half a century later in interviews conducted by historical sociologist Richard Grossman (2008); (4) with the rejection of Nicaragua’s blue and white flag and the adoption of red and black, the Sandinistas were feared by Liberals and Conservatives because of their Bolshevik-like flags of the communist movement, symbolizing “blood and extermination”; and (5) “Patria y Libertad,” or “Fatherhood and Liberty,” became the official slogan of the original Sandinista movement. Sandino was the Father of the new Nicaraguan nation; the patriarch who was going to look after his people. In sum, everything Sandino said and did seemed to resonate with the peasantry, which is the sign of a good and timely leader. Unlike other peasant regions in Nicaragua, Segovian society was growing quickly. And Sandino’s nationalist language and cultural symbolism provided the framework by which different groups were able to give vent to their feelings about the injustices being committed against them by a corrupt national government (further corrupted by Washington) and the elites, as well as capitalists-imperialists and the U.S. Marines.

*Revolutionary War Tactics and Ideology*

In the first battle of the revolutionary war General Sandino’s employment of conventional military tactics, or sending large groups of men into combat, was a huge mistake because the
Defending Army was moving in on a well-equipped and technologically advanced Marine contingent. Because the EDSNN was hit hard, Thomas Walker (1981) writes, Sandino quickly “developed the more classical guerrilla strategies of hit and run. In addition, he cultivated the support of the peasants in the regions in which he operated. They, in turn, served as early warning communication network as ad hoc soldiers during specific guerrilla actions” (p. 22).

For the time being it was necessary that the Defending Army regularly collect obligatory taxes, protection-money, or what the U.S. government mistakenly called “extortion”. This extortion was nevertheless quite common in Nicaraguan society, especially during times of war. Thus is the reason for Schroeder advancing the argument that the Sandinistas were neither “bandits” (the classical Somoza/U.S. narrative) nor “selfless patriots” (the EDSN/FSLN narrative); on the contrary, he suggests “a more accurate characterization would be to see [them] as appropriators [of] the political-military techniques of Segovian caudillos into the struggle for national liberation and social justice” (Schroeder, 1996, p. 45). Yet the Defending Army was not a single military force characterized by solidarity; rather, it was more like a network of loose gangs pursuing their own interests, united under Sandino’s vision. Senior members of the EDSNN were instructed by their caudillos to destroy U.S. property and lives whenever they had the chance. How did these caudillos and their strongmen, political gangs, behave in times of war?

The story of Anastacio Hernández, a regional Conservative caudillo, provides some valuable context. Hernandez’s gang had a designated region where they were supposed to wreak havoc by performing murder, rape, and physical beatings in order to convince locals to vote/support the Conservative cause. Schroeder (1996) offers up a taste of what such semantics were like:
The Güegüencista Experience

The violence described by [an interviewee named] Arauz appears more festive and celebratory than that described in the depositions, a performance in which Hernández and his followers ‘found the greatest pleasure’: guitars, accordions, music, dance, song, and very probably drink, torture, and rape – all integral to the region’s political economy of fear. Many such songs were probably paeans to their party and patrons ... [and] the attacks on homes and ... night-time ‘dances’ appear marked by broadly similar intentions – most importantly, the creation of a field of social memories of terror and fear through the absolute violation of their victims’ humanity: doors broken down, religions images smashed, ... possessions robbed, loved ones beaten, women and girls raped, men and boys seized, bound, hacked, shot, tortured, killed, their corpses chopped to bits, followed by night-time ‘dances’ around tables full of decapitated bodies” (p. 413)

Altogether, these political gangs demanded political support and monetary contributions in exchange for “protection,” that is, protection from political rivals, whether that was Conservative, Liberal, or, as of 1927, Sandinista. Armed gangs were also known to destroy crops and vandalize businesses (Schroeder, 1996). Word of such atrocities spread quickly: “watch out for so-and-so and make sure you tell them that you support their cause!”

Members of the EDSNN, by way of comparison, have a much better reputation amongst scholars. Although there are accounts of rape occurring in life histories of people harassed by the Liberals and Conservatives, there are no such claims made against Sandinista “extorters.” By clearly outlawing rape from the get-go, Sandino in fact developed a sense of moral superiority amongst the EDSNN (Grossman, 2008; Schroeder, 1996). One should not forget that a woman’s body was intimately connected to what he called the motherland. Because the lands of Nicaragua were being “raped,” there were plenty who signed up for the revolutionary cause. In
other words, it appears as though Sandino took advantage of not only exploitative work relations but also the patriarchal societal relations of Nicaragua. Had the movement succeeded, as much as I love what his movement stood for, I am unsure how much it would really have improved the already inequitable gender relations of the country at the time. Perhaps someone can explore this question in the future.

Also contributing to the peasants’ sense of moral superiority was the fact that the Marines utilized aerial bombardment of “hostile” towns and hamlets (Schroeder, 2007). These dive attacks were the first time such tactics were used in the history of the world. In so doing, the Marines inadvertently forced resettlement of much the peasantry, which proved to be a powerful recruiting tool for Sandino. Locals came to view aerial bombardment as “savagery” because the Marines were hiding behind technology. Under such circumstances, members of the EDSNN were instructed by their caudillos to destroy U.S. property and lives whenever they had the chance. Intimidation had been central to Segovian society for centuries. For this reason, amongst others, Grossman (2008) notes that in the early-twentieth century most people living in the Segovias did not identify as “Nicaraguan” per se; on the contrary, it was more common for someone to first identify themselves as Liberal or Conservative, or, as of 1927, Sandinista, in order to avoid repercussions (p. 82).

Sandino’s war has been labelled both a “nationalist movement” and a “peasant movement” by at least one sympathizing scholar (Grossman, 2008). Although the country’s newspapers regularly published articles on the war, there was relatively little urban support for the revolutionary cause because the government censored news reports of Sandinista activity (Schroeder, 1998 & 2007). For much of the civil struggle, newspapers in León, Granada and Managua depicted Sandino and the EDSNN as bandits. The formation of the EDSNN—with its
red and black flags—was too often portrayed as a communist movement and many urbanites, as a result, came to view the war as a “Segovian problem,” according to Schroeder (1998, p. 132). The revolutionary army was also portrayed and referred to as “backward” and “bare footed” Indian-peasants from the highlands, and it was therefore due to geographic distance and government repression that the majority of urbanites did not know what Sandino’s movement was all about.

Had journalists and editors conducted thorough investigation into the movement, they would have come to learn that it was Sandino’s anti-imperialist ideology and sense of communalism which resonated with the peasantry. In the midst of the Great Depression, the Nicaraguan economy was hurting—tens of thousands were going hungry—and Sandinismo was spreading like a wildfire. There were also increasing numbers from the University who came to support Sandino’s ideology and numerous Latin American communists and other leftist radicals trekked from as far as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia to fight with Sandino’s army.

Although Sandino did not necessarily have a clear and extended, detailed political plan, he did have some revolutionary ideas; on how to govern, on where Nicaragua needed to go as a nation, and on how national security would be maintained: First, he did not believe in the state because politicians in the country had been corrupted ever since the colonial era. He also said that he would never own property, insinuating that property ownership was at the root of exploitative working conditions. For the new nation of patriots, political and economic objectives were to be achieved through the construction of a society characterized by the self-organization of workers and peasants. Self-management and shared property were the way of the future. The agrarian cooperatives were supposed to be an example and one was already in the
works along the Coco River in the north. The construction of schools and hospitals had begun by the early 1930s too.

Secondly, the anti-imperialist struggle was widely perceived by the EDSNN to be the beginning of a much larger movement; it was supposed to act as a catalyst. The exit of the Marines would just be the fall of the first domino: by 2012, according to the ancient Aztecs (via Sandino), Nicaragua was to be free of warring independent political parties. And the vast majority of Nicaraguans, it was believed, would eventually come to support the “new” Nicaragua once the agrarian coop example had been set. To Sandino, the construction of a canal in Nicaragua further represented national sovereignty because the Panamanian canal was representative of U.S. hegemony in Latin America. Nicaragua was to be at the centre of international commerce as well as at the helm of a Latin American Empire.

Thirdly, guerrilla war has often been associated with anti-imperialist struggles throughout the nineteenth century. What is not well known today, however, is that the Cuban War, what is perhaps the most famous guerrilla war, was in fact modelled after the success of the Nicaraguan movement. Sandino’s “crazy little army” was extremely successful in holding off the much superior Marine force. Millions of dollars were spent by the U.S. government to crush the EDSNN, though the efforts were largely unsuccessful. When the EDSNN raided U.S. banana and logging companies on the Atlantic coast, in November 1932, Washington finally decided that it was time to start pulling the marines out of Nicaragua. Too much money had been wasted, and the guerrillas were just too persistent.

_Sandino Vive_

Hostilities between the National Guard and the EDSNN continued following the departure of the Marines. Sandino ordered his “crazy little army” to continuously attack the
‘apolitical’ Guard because they were an unconstitutional force that had been initiated and implemented by the Americans. It was not only Sandino who felt that the Guard needed to be reformed, but also then Nicaraguan President, Juan Sacasa. The head of the Guard, Anastacio “Tacho” Somoza Garcia, was gaining much too much power. Against the wishes of the President, the Guard continued to wreak havoc in towns and villages known to be Sandino sympathizers.

After a series of discussions held with both Somoza and Sacasa, Sandino was preparing to sign a preliminary peace agreement. On the day of the most important of those meetings, February 2, 1933, thousands showed up for Sandino’s arrival in Managua; he was in fact greeted by “cheering crowds lining the streets, who were proclaiming Sandino as a national hero” (Smith, 1993, p. 99). In preparation for this meeting, Sandino had composed a list of demands: (1) no more foreign intervention in Nicaragua’s financial affairs; (2) a new department called “Light and Truth” was to be created and the Sandinistas were to be permitted to settle there as a politically autonomous community; (3) all government records which referred to the Defending Army as “bandits” were to be destroyed; and (4) “the [1914] Bryan-Chamorro treaty,” which gave the U.S. the rights to build a canal if they so desired was to “be revised and a canal conference called, not excluding the United States, but inviting all the Latin American republics on the basis of non-intervention, sovereignty and independence” (Smith, 1993, pp. 98-99). The hypothetical Nicaraguan canal was to be brought back under the control of Nicaraguans.

That evening, with the exception to the canal demand, the Sandinistas’ demands were met and Sacasa and Sandino signed off on the peace agreement. Also as a result, the EDSNN was disarmed to 100 “emergency” soldiers on 22 February 1933 (Smith, 1993, p. 99). After disarmament, Sandino planned to change Nicaragua forever: “‘not through rifle and arms, but
through political revolution,” he said (Sandino as cited by Gobat, 2005, p. 235). He was going to retreat with members of the EDSNN to the north and they were going to continue to develop the peasant-centered agricultural coops. In the following weeks, and then months, however, at the orders of General Somoza, the uncontrollable National Guard did not stay true to the peace agreements and continued to harass the Sandinistas. In response, Sandino travelled to Managua in November of 1933 and again in February of 1934 to negotiate with Sacasa and Somoza, to stop harassment and talk reformation. On the day of the most important of those meetings, 21 February 1934, Sandino and a few senior members of his army were abducted by the Guard and assassinated. Anastasio Somoza, who would eventually wrestle the right to the presidency away from Juan Sacasa, was the one who gave orders for the slaying.

The agrarian cooperative societies were supposed to be examples; a societal example not only for other Nicaraguans but also Latin Americans and the rest of the world. It was an example that I have come to believe in, one that could have worked in Nicaragua. At worst, had it not worked, at least the national population would have something to eat and a roof over their heads. At least they would not have been forced to subject themselves to exploitable working conditions (i.e. those which resulted from the establishment of a forty-five year dictatorship). But what if Sandino’s movement had succeeded much beyond my expectations? In consideration of what I have read, everything that I have heard, perhaps I too would have worshipped (the) César. Sandino Vive.

_Three dic(k)tators_

After Anastacio Somoza Garcia came to the Presidency he tried to wipe Sandino’s name from the history books completely. “Tacho” literally burned, or otherwise rid Nicaragua of any literature pertaining to the revolutionary leader. Furthermore he ghost-authored a still-influential
566-page book outlining his perspective on the historical events from 1927-1934, which simultaneously slandered Sandino’s name, labelling him an “illegitimate” child, a bandit and a communist (Somoza, 1936). After the revolutionary movement was crushed a national culture still had not yet developed amongst the bourgeois and middle classes, perhaps because of their small size. Nor was there any longer a national culture brewing in Las Segovias. The potential development of a national culture was further hindered by the blatant adoption of American culture, which became deeply engrained in Nicaraguan society in the decades to follow. Having been educated in the U.S., Somoza spoke English fluently and had made many friends there. The military dictator worked hard to please his political friends. During World War II, for example, Somoza went out of his way to let the Americans know that he supported the allies and confiscated lands and businesses owned by Germans, which were distributed to his relatives and members of the Liberal party. Dedicated to pursuing American interests, in what is an oft-quoted observation, American President Franklin Roosevelt once claimed that Somoza was “a son-of-a-bitch, but our son-of-a-bitch,” shedding light on his relationship with Washington (Kirk, 1992, p. 34).

“Riding the wave of post-World War II capitalist expansion,” Zimmerman (2000) writes, “the Nicaraguan economy boomed during the 1950s and well into the following decade” (p. 23). Tens of thousands of acres of forests were chopped down throughout the Pacific Lowlands to make way for cotton fields, which overtook coffee as the number one export. These developments had severe consequences: “Dusty winds and the rank of pesticides were the immediate result of cotton production increasing 120-fold. The department of León, once the breadbasket of Nicaragua, was transformed into a dust bowl, which simultaneously expelled tenant farmers and Indian communities from the land.” A lack of land and resources required to
feed Nicaraguans was nevertheless seemingly forgotten by the people due to a rapid increase in middle class jobs in the state bureaucracy. The availability of such positions deceptively painted the picture of a modernizing nation-state. Foreign dollars from capitalists flowed into the country to further develop the export economy, but Nicaragua was essentially a banana republic. Its natural resources were being exported to the U.S. at extremely low prices and U.S. manufactured products were being imported back into the country. Relatively little of the profits from raw materials were invested into infrastructures and other technologies that would have modernized farming techniques.

Moving forward, Somoza managed to get his hands in on virtually every major business, offering favourable terms for corporations in exchange for a piece of the pie. He and his cronies, along with American capitalists, profited at the expense of much the rest of the population. Such methods of governing may have produced loyal friends, but it also created enemies. As exploitative, corrupted, and concerned with capitalist development as Tacho was, he made sure to look after those who were loyal to him. By paying the “apolitical” National Guard a low salary, but putting them in charge of the country’s vices (gambling, prostitution, etc.), whereby they could pad their menial pay, the dictator managed to alienate soldiers from the rest of society so that they would be loyal to him (from Morris, 2010, p. 13). The dictator was also supported by the bourgeois and politicians from both Liberal and Conservative camps because he ensured them that their social positions would be maintained so long as they cooperated.

I have come to understand that for nearly two decades the masses seemingly cooperated because peace was maintained and due to the fact that the economic situation of the country was improving for once. The majority of the masses harboured their feelings of resentment, perhaps out of fear. Then, prior to a victory speech in León on September 21, 1956, just after Somoza
was “elected” to another term in office, he was assassinated by poet Rigoberto López Pérez, who was in turn slain by presidential bodyguards. No major political changes resulted, however. Somoza’s eldest son, Luis Somoza Debayle, took over the presidency, while Anastacio (“Tachito”) Somoza Debayle, his younger son, became head of the National Guard. Tachito would then follow his brother Luis as President when he died of a heart attack in 1967.

It was not as if Nicaraguans were unconscious of how corrupt and exploitative the Somozas were, but government repression was rampant. No one was to speak out against the Somozas in public, and the U.S. government openly supported the dictatorship. When the Cuban dictatorship fell in 1959, Zimmerman (2000) notes, Managua’s leading newspaper La Prensa reported that crowds filled the streets and shouted “viva Cuba libre,” “viva Fidel,” and so on (p. 50). Fire rockets were set off all day, perhaps foreshadowing what was eventually to come.

The second round of Sandinismo

“[Carlos] Fonseca [Amador],” Zimmerman (2000) writes, “killed in battle in 1976, was the undisputed intellectual and strategic leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) of Nicaragua (p. 1). An extremely gifted student from the National University of Nicaragua (UNAN) in León, traditionally a hotbed for anti-government activity, he was particularly interested in Marxism and the classics. He wrote for a student newspaper and spent much time criticizing the Somoza regime, all while proving himself capable to motivate the student body for different causes. Fonseca was easily the most well-known member of the movement and probably “the most important and influential figure of the post-1959 revolutionary generation in Latin America” (Zimmerman, 2000, back cover).

“Once writing that the FSLN existed because of 1959, 1956, 1947, 1944, 1936, 1934, 1927, 1925, 1914, 1912, 1910, 1893, 1857, 1856, 1855, 1838, 1824, 1821, 1812 ... 1743, 1650,
which are all important dates in Nicaraguan history, according to Zimmerman (2000, p. 128). Fonseca dedicated much of his time to studying the past in order to understand and change the present and future. He was not as spiritually-minded as Sandino, though he pulled on common threads—about unnecessary foreign economic and political intervention and how Nicaraguans politicians had been so easily corrupted. Also like Sandino, he was the “illegitimate” son of an elite father and a poor coffee-picking mother. His father lived in a mansion in Matagalpa, Matagalpa, while his mother lived in a shanty-house in the urban slums. This was not unusual, however. Fonseca would have noticed how it was primarily Indian coffee pickers on the farms of white planters.

The official founding of the Frente Liberación Nacional (FLN) by Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge in 1961 was a radical student response. Although the three had led anti-government demonstrations at the university in León, preceding the founding of the FLN, none had studied any of Sandino’s writings because they were not available. Such documents only became available to FLN members once they travelled to Cuba in the 1960s. Cuba’s revolutionary movement, headed by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, was in fact inspired by the success of Sandino’s (1927-1934) movement. Despite being “Marxists,” Fonseca, Mayorga and Borge knew that Marxism had to be adapted to the Nicaraguan situation.

The FLN was not popular in the beginning. They did not have much support and the movement existed more in their heads than it did in practise. Realizing that the economic situation of many Nicaraguans was improving in the 1950s and 1960s, the youthful group focused on smaller tasks. They started off by campaigning for electricity and water service in working-class neighbourhoods and advocated for redistribution of wealth, the elimination of illiteracy, and the creation of a new education system. All three founders of the FLN then
became members of the FSLN political party, which was officially born with the adoption of “Sandinista” into the name in 1963. This occurred after having established an idea of continuity with the movement of Sandino and using its legacy to establish the ideologies and strategies of the new movement. The “Sandinistas” were independent of Liberal, Conservative and Communist parties and they were committed to armed struggle, which was representative of the struggles that had preceded the founding of the party. Their movement, like that of Sandino’s, was acknowledged as a path or an ongoing journey, which was to be shaped by real-life experiences. Fonseca, considered the undisputed leader of the FSLN, was never challenged by Mayorga, Borge, or later on the Ortega brothers, and other senior members (Zimmerman, 2000).

There were three tendencies of the FSLN that developed due to internal disagreements: First, the Prolonged People’s War tendency (GPP) was headed by Jamie Wheelock. The GPP was the smallest and most intellectual of the three fractions and its efforts were focused on organizing the rural masses to mount a class-based revolution. The second group was the Insurrectional Tendency (T1, or terceristas), which was headed by Tomás Borge. This tendency advocated continuing warfare in the mountainous north, and was modelled after Sandino’s struggle and that of the Cuban revolution. It was believed that these attacks would eventually spark a revolution. Finally, the Proletarian Tendency (TP) was headed by the Ortega brothers, Daniel and Humberto, Eduardo Construna, and Victor Tirado. These four men sought to bring the battle to the cities and thought such a strategy would invite all Nicaraguans who oppose Somoza, from whatever fraction of society, to join the struggle. Despite their differences of opinions, all three tendencies agreed to cooperate when it came time to mount an insurrection.

Throughout the 1970s Fonseca travelled from safe house to safe house, from the north to Managua, from Managua back to the north, back and forth, usually disguised. Always insisting
on doing his own chores, he did not believe in a gender divide. He helped clean and cook.

Greatly influenced by Marxism, he did not consider the FSLN to be a communist party because, in his mind, the revolution did not have to wait for industrialization. The form that the FSLN’s revolutionary nationalism took, therefore, was exposing Nicaraguans to a rich history of rebellion and revolt. Fonseca and other senior members resurrected examples of Sandino to inspire a new generation to fight against a corrupt government and its unconstitutional “apolitical” National Guard. The FSLN deliberately set out to find old Sandinistas who had fought in or supported the original revolutionary movement. “Fonseca believed that Sandino’s struggle—along with the traditions of resistance to Spanish colonialism—is what had given birth to the sovereign Nicaraguan nation,” Zimmerman (2000) notes (p. 149). “In the eyes of the movement’s leader, the country’s long tradition of rebelliousness on behalf of Indians, campesinos and urban workers distinguished it from other Latin American countries” (p. 151).

The movement was defined as a fight against U.S. imperialism and the Somozas. The movement was defined as a socialist struggle, one that sought to end the exploitations of Nicaraguan workers and peasants.

So, how did one become a member of the FSLN? It was a long process, mostly because the organization had to remain secretive if they wanted to be successful. In order to become a member one had to be befriended by someone who was already a member. There was an official invitation once trust had been built up. The new friend/member would then be asked to perform small tasks for a responsable, or a senior member. Successful completion of smaller tasks led to greater tasks and higher positions within the organization. Current Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, for instance, became a full-time member of the FSLN in 1966. He was however imprisoned a few years later for his anti-government activities. Once released, following a 1974
raid, he was asked to develop a political party in the capital and secretly acted as the *responsable* for the *responables*. The identities of such high-ranking Sandinistas were kept secret and code names and disguises were oftentimes used.

Ortega biographer Kenneth E. Morris (2010) writes that the FSLN had two main strategies and/or justifications for the violence they inflicted upon others. First, “*ajusticiamientos*” (or bringing to justice) meant targeting corrupt politicians or specific members of the Guard for their anti-nationalist behaviour (p. 39). For instance, when he was released from prison, Daniel Ortega murdered a guardsman that had tortured him and other imprisoned Sandinistas. Why? The guardsman apparently forced them to sit on filthy toilets and eat feathers and cigarette butts. The second strategy was “*recuperacines*” (or recoveries), which included bank robberies, hostage takings, stealing from elites, etc. Because the elites had exploited the poor to enrich themselves, such recoveries were viewed as justified. It was a Robin Hood type narrative. Under the guidance of Fonseca, funds always went toward the movement, not to enriching individuals.

Theoretically speaking, it has been speculated that people may not have actually known what the struggle was all about. What “the people” did know for sure was that Fonseca could be trusted and that he was the main man behind the movement, that the Sandinistas were on the peasants’ and workers’ side, and that the Sandinista colours were red and black. Ultimately it was the increasingly exploitative conditions of the dictatorship which gave the masses reasons for turning on it. Only when the peasantry and workers came to view their situations as extremely unfair did they come to support the FSLN, from thereon in exemplifying and expressing their agency and henceforth giving the FSLN meaning, utilizing the organization as a method by which they could give vent to their feelings against the dictatorship. Popular support
in fact was not found until almost a decade after the FSLN was founded. Eventually, the Catholic Church came to support the movement, as did a good portion of the bourgeois. Overall, Kirk (1992) suggests there to be three main reasons for the majority of Nicaraguans coming to choose to support the revolutionary movement: (1) the corruption witnessed following the 1972 earthquake that demolished Managua; (2) the loss of respect for the Somoza regime by the popular masses and the bourgeois; and (3) the blatant and widespread human rights violations by the National Guard finally being recognized by the domestic and international media.

When the devastating 1972 earthquake shook Managua 10,000 were killed, 20,000 were injured, and 300,000 of 400,000 people in Managua were left homeless. In response, much of the Global North answered the third Somoza’s call for aid. The problem was that even if Tachito and his cronies did not simply pocket the cash, the government indirectly profited from it some other way. Of the top-20 companies in Nicaragua at the time the third Somoza had a hand in them all. Following the earthquake, Somoza developed and nationalized construction companies, thereby controlling how, when, and by what means reconstruction would take place. For instance, in *The Religions Roots of Rebellion*, Berryman (1984) tells a story of how Somoza personally bought 93.6 acres of land for $71,428 in July 1975 only to resell 56.8 acres of it to the central state at $1.7 million (see Berryman, 1984, p. 65). By the middle of the 1970s, through such corrupt dealings, Kirk (1992) estimates that the dictator owned five million acres of land and had a personal worth of $300 million (p. 62). Also, as perishable food items and other supplies made their way to Nicaragua, Somoza encouraged guardsmen to pillage the goods and sell them on the black market. Such supplies—like the cash—never made it to the people who needed it most and Managua was not rebuilt after the earthquake. Both Kirk (1992) and Morris
argue that this was when Nicaraguans started turning revolutionary, as opposed to reformist.

Secondly, following a December 27, 1974 Christmas party raid of the National Palace at the hands of the FSLN, it was determined that the Sandinistas were a legitimate threat to the dictatorship. In the raid an FSLN member dressed up as an air conditioning service man and drew up a floor plan for the attack. A few days later five women and eight men performed a flawless raid. Somoza agreed to pay one million dollars, to release political prisoners, including Daniel Ortega, and, from thereon in allow publication of uncensored FSLN propaganda. An escape plane was also organized on the FSLN’s behalf. In the past it was presumed that such a thing could not happen to the Somoza regime. With Liberal and Conservative politicians and other members of the bourgeois increasingly being forgotten by Somoza, they too were growing increasingly unsupportive of the dictatorship, which gave the raid further meaning. This dramatic and successful hostage taking marked the reappearance of the Sandinistas after several quiet years. Following the Sandinistas’ success, the National Guard began major repression in towns, especially in the northern departments, killing many civilians suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas, including many women and children, who in turn were heavily recruited by the FSLN. The guerrillas, like their colleagues in the capital, struggled to survive in the northern mountains under the repression, having to constantly search for food, collect firewood, deal with the cool and damp weather, and so on.

As news of such terror reached the cities, the desire to rid the nation of Somoza acquired new urgency. With the lifting of newspaper and media censorships, the widespread human rights violations were finally being recognized internationally, especially after Conservative politician Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, also editor of *La Prensa* (a popular daily newspaper), was gunned
down, which more or less marks the beginning of the insurrection in January 1978. For decades *Somocismo* was the only thing that Nicaraguans knew. The Somoza dictatorship denied Nicaraguans a national culture and, in denying the vast majority an education as well, kept much of the population illiterate on purpose: “I don’t want educated, but oxen” Anastacio Somoza once infamously proclaimed. This quote implies that the Somozas sought to maintain the deplorable social situation of most Nicaraguans so that they would cooperatively labour in the fields under exploitative conditions. Due to the thousands of reports of torture, disappearances, and other acts of lawlessness, however, one can understand how the people, uneducated and deprived of a national culture, came to support the revolutionary movement. The insurrection began in January 1978 and lasted until July 1979. Altogether, Pezzulo and Pezzulo (1993) note, 50,000 civilian deaths (9000 in Managua) occurred in the struggle to overthrow the dictator (p. 180). Part of the problem was that the third Somoza reacted by bombing his own cities—the first time that that tactic had been used to keep a ruler in power. When Somoza gave up and fled to Miami, Morris (2010) claims that he left Nicaragua with $500 million in war damages and $1.5 billion in foreign debt, with only $3.5 million left in the national treasury (see pp. 114-115).

*Was the revolution over before it even began?*

After the successful insurrection the Sandinistas had a tough road ahead. There was a huge national debt and the nation’s capital was in shambles. The people were tired of war and they wanted to see immediate changes. A governing junta of nine, three from each of the FSLN tendencies, was assembled and put in charge of national reconstruction. Daniel Ortega was voted to be head of the junta. “In less than one year,” Morris (2010) writes, “Daniel Ortega went from an obscure guerrilla commander in a fragmented revolutionary group, to the most powerful man
in Nicaragua’s proposed new government” (p. 210). Other high ranking Sandinistas were given important government jobs as well, as heads of Ministries, in bureaucratic positions, and so on.

In the first couple of years there was much progress. The literacy campaign reduced illiteracy from over 50% to 13% in less than six months (Kirk, 1992, p. 108). UNESCO recognized the movement as a huge success. Other accomplishments of the new government included: 45,000 campesinos getting land, which was taken from Somoza and his sympathizers; the construction of hundreds of schools; the initiation of preschool, adult education and special education; and the building of 10 hospitals and 300 health centres. The revolutionary government from thereon in worked hard to foster both education and culture, developing ministries for both. Things were looking up.

In promoting their liberalist policies through education, the FSLN’s relationship with the Church soured. Freedom of religion was not something of which the Church hierarchy approved of and they chastised the Sandinistas for their liberal teachings, calling them “too Marxist,” even atheist (p. 109). They disapproved of the direct politicization of educational and cultural matters. The Church feared for the worst and sought to maintain what little power they had, by becoming a major antagonist for the Sandinistas, making complaints to Washington about the new “communist” government. The FSLN responded by saying that their policies were based on “scientific and revolutionary principles” (Kirk, 1992, p. 129).

As early as 1982, American President Ronald Reagan set out to answer the Church’s call for help and to squash the “communist” FSLN. The result was the development of a military unit of 4500 “contras” who were CIA-trained and based out of Honduras (Kirk, 1992, p. 135). The Contras were composed of thousands of former national guardsmen and the unit went about conducting raids in the north of the country, starting in July. Reagan furthermore advocated—
and ultimately succeeded in—denying Nicaragua of foreign aid, including aid from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Inter-American Development bank. He also initiated and actively promoted a trade embargo. Foreign aid to Honduras during the 1980s, by way of comparison, increased dramatically from 3.9 million (1980) to 78.5 million (1986) for its supporting of the U.S. backed counterrevolutionary army. Morris (2010) also reports that Reagan funded censorship of newspapers, claiming that it was the Sandinistas who were doing it; that he paid individuals to draw pro-U.S. graffiti throughout the capital; that he paid former Sandinistas upward of $800,000 to defect; and that he urged one political opponent to withdraw from the 1985 election and make claims that the elections were corrupt and unfair (see pp. 148-149).

In 1983, the FSLN’s decision to start military conscription was chastised by the Church, despite the fact that the Contra force soon ballooned to well over 10,000 members. The counterrevolutionary army continuously wreaked havoc, specifically targeting gains that the FSLN had made to date. Hospitals and schools were raided and forced to close. Morris (2010) notes that, in total, 800 schools were forced to close because of war and 170 teachers were killed, while another 133 were kidnapped (p. 136). From 1982-1986, it was estimated that the Contra War claimed the lives of 20,000 Nicaraguans (on both sides), while another 40,000 were wounded, while some 250,000 were displaced due to fighting.

In response to the Contras, in 1984, the FSLN filed an international lawsuit against the U.S. government. The World Court ruled in their favour on June 27, 1986, finding that the United States had violated the UN charter for the following reasons: unlawful intervention in the affairs of another state through its support of the contras; use of force against another state, the sabotaging of hospitals, schools and ports, and so on; overflying Nicaraguan territory without
authorization; violation of Nicaraguan sovereignty; and publication of a guerrilla manual for the contras that encouraged abuses of human rights (Kirk, 1992, p. 182). Such a ruling should have resulted in tens of billions, if not hundreds of billions, of dollars being paid to Nicaragua. But the Reagan administration simply refused to recognize the validity of the court’s decision, partly because just two days prior U.S. Congress had authorized another $100 million for the Contras. By the late 1980s, despite there being over 15,000 contras as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in damage, the U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary army had not held a single town for a single day.

By 1987, 62 percent of the revolutionary government’s budget was going toward national defence (Kirk, 1992, p. 136). It would have been impossible for the Sandinistas to make revolutionary policies work under such circumstances. By 1987, for example, land reforms had been closed off even though tens of thousands of families still needed it. The following year the Ministry of Culture, which had offered free cultural classes (i.e. art, dance, poetry, folklore, and so on) for nearly a decade, succumbed to the fight for funding as well.

Decapitalization was another huge issue in Nicaragua. Many people with money feared that their assets would be distributed amongst the poor and got out of the country as fast as they could. Morris (2010) suggests businessmen fleeing Nicaragua took some $500 million in capital with them (p. 130-131). Other capitalists sold what assets they had and chose not to partake in communal projects, or to see how things would play out. Wealthy foreigners and Nicaraguans did not give the FSLN a chance. Many of these individuals had in the past cooperated with the Somoza regime and they emptied their bank accounts, taking their fortunes to Miami. Next to Nicaragua itself and Costa Rica, which is home to an estimated 1,000,000 Nicaraguans—both illegal and legal—Miami represents the biggest pocket of Nicas in the world and there are
approximately 250,000 in the U.S.A. total (Morris, 2010, p. 210). Most Nicaraguans currently living in the U.S.A. have, or came from, money. And they took it with them out of Nicaragua, waiting for the revolutionary government to fall.

What is most confusing to me, however, is the fact that neither the American people nor Congress supported the Contra War in Nicaragua. How can the United States be considered a democratic state if it does not listen to the majority opinion of the people? Had it been up to Congress or popular opinion, the Contra War would not have continued on in Nicaragua during the mid-to-late 1980s. Instead what transpired was a huge waste of money. The total cost of war to Nicaragua was in the neighbourhood of two to three billion dollars. Morris (2010) claims the cost of the war to the U.S.A., by way of comparison, was 13-14 billion, while it is estimated that it would have cost just $1-2 billion to get Nicaragua up on its feet after the fall of the dictator. What a waste of money.

During the contra war, FSLN political ideology moved farther and farther away from Fonseca’s “Historic Program” and even farther away from Sandino’s ideals. The FSLN in fact increasingly forgot about Fonseca and stopped publishing his works after he died in battle in 1978. They determined his “Historic Program” (or Fonseca’s 13 points of governing) to be of little use to them with the Americans breathing down their necks, and hence they took a more moderate electoral platform for the 1990 elections. The Daniel Ortega-led FSLN lost those elections. Kirk (1992) blames the Sandinistas’ poor economic record (but what else could they do?), Ortega’s style of campaigning and some minor corruption for the loss. With the Sandinistas out of power the Contra War finally came to an end as well.

The National Opposition Union (UNO), a U.S. backed coalition of fourteen different political parties headed by Violeta Chamorro—who was for a short time a member of the
FSLN—won the 1990 elections. The UNO came together at the urgings of the U.S. State Department, to take down the Sandinistas. Morris (2010) notes that the U.S. pumped more dollars into each vote than for its own election. Although the final tally was 41 percent for Ortega and 55 percent voting for Chamorro, Morris writes that most “Nicaraguans felt like they were voting with guns to their head” (p. 162). Chamorro was elected because of the desire for peace and in order to put an end to the economic devastation that resulted from the war. The first ever woman to be named to the Nicaraguan presidency was just another puppet for the Americans, enacting neoliberal economic policies, which nevertheless worked to control national debt and inflation. Her conservative bloodline tied her to the old Conservative order: despite Nicaragua being the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere at that time, the U.S.-friendly president finally settled the war reparation bill with the U.S.A. for $17 billion, a fraction of what it should have been.

With the fall of the FSLN, the United States also started sending foreign aid to Nicaragua again, and since then they have sent 1.4 billion dollars. But there are and were always conditions. For instance, people who had their property confiscated by the FSLN, even if they fled the country, and whether they were United States citizens or not, were the ones who got the money first. Most of these individuals were former national guardsmen or businessmen who had dealt closely with the three Somozas. In retrospect, Morris (2010) notes that the actual amount of aid flowing into Nicaragua is about 2 dollars per person per year.

Some concluding historical thoughts

In conclusion, what is there to say? Both revolutionary movements were left largely unfinished. The promises of improved lives left unfulfilled. Poverty is still rampant in Nicaragua. Not only the Spanish conquistadores but also elite Nicaraguans and American
capitalists have subjected the rural and urban masses to exploitive working conditions for almost five centuries. The Somozas were easily worth more than $300 million in just under four decades. Their allies and their families were looked after, having gained access to bureaucratic state jobs. How many hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions of dollars, did American capitalists take out of the country? Who knows? Furthermore, the Reagan-initiated Contra War, or counterrevolutionary war, cost Nicaragua $2.8 billion. And then there were the tens of billions, if not hundreds of billions, of dollars in reparations that were supposed to be paid to Nicaragua as a result of war crimes; dollars that never made their way to the country because former U.S.-friendly Nicaraguan president Violeta Chamorro signed off for a fraction of the price. In the 1980s Reagan had also advocated hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid be withheld from the country. So let us say for argument’s sake that there were about 120 billion extra dollars up for grabs in 1990, a conservative figure. For approximately 4,000,000 Nicaraguans, that works out to $30,000 per person. Because we will presume that those monies could have been given to those who actually needed it, we will say $40,000 per person. If you distributed the dollars controlled by elites at the time, based on past exploitations, perhaps we could pad this total to $50,000-60,000, though that total is probably more. Some people in North America cannot even purchase a vehicle for that amount. What a working-class Nicaraguan could do with $50,000-60,000 today would surprise you. More importantly, we must not forget the hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries as well as the psychological damage among the masses that resulted from the various struggles in twentieth-century Nicaragua.
CHAPTER 3: (Auto-) Ethnographic Notes

Monday, July 5, 2010—Getting Settled

Touching down at Augusto C. Sandino International Airport in Managua, Nicaragua just after 2:00pm on Monday, July 5, 2010, I rush through airport security and continue on down the hall toward baggage claim. I am immediately greeted by my mother-in-law, Angelina—who insists that I call her “mamá”—and her two sons, Fabricio and Victor—both of whom I sometimes call “bro”—through the massive window separating the arrivals from the greeters. Acknowledging all three of them with an ear-to-ear grin and a dramatic half-circle wave, I impatiently wait for my bags. Once they finally arrive on the conveyor belt I throw the luggage attendant a few dollars and then proceed through customs. After not having my bags ripped apart in customs for once, I greet my family with some hugs and kisses and Spanish salutations. It has been about a six months since I was last in the country. Over the previous three years, I had travelled to the country six times to visit my girlfriend, then fiancée, then wife, Cynthia. Having not yet received her permanent residence card in Canada, she was unable to accompany me, so I was staying with her family while conducting research. Cynthia, in turn, was staying with my family back in rural south-western Ontario.

Upon exiting the airport the four of us are swarmed: “Taxi-taxi!” several men shout at us at once, their eyes seemingly fixated on me, the gringo.

“Taxi?” another guy asks.

“No, no—gracias,” I say with a smile, trying to make eye contact with all of them. Every time that I travel to Nicaragua, Angelina insists that I be picked up from the airport directly. She has heard the horror stories about gringos being duped by individuals posing as taxi drivers. One of the more common narratives is that of a gringo being driven out to nowhere and told to empty
their wallets at gun- or knifepoint. Sometimes the victim is said to have been beaten mercilessly. Such violence is not unusual in Nicaragua.

Once we reached home (see Figure[s] 8 & 9), which is located in the heart of eastern Managua’s urban barrios, I come to learn that the family had fallen on some tough times as of late, something that I had already gathered from previous conversations over the phone and the internet. Both of my brothers had been unemployed now for almost a year. The global economic recession was being felt everywhere, even in Nicaragua where things already were bad enough. The brothers did not lack ambition though and, a few months prior, they had expressed to Angelina that they would like to try their luck in Panama, where their mother was originally from. So mamá took out a loan for the boys to travel and stay with her brother in Panama at the beginning of the year. Although Fabricio and Victor were eventually successful in obtaining employment in the construction industry, both of them became homesick and, as a result, used what money that they had earned thus far to return to Nicaragua. Fabricio had left a common-

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13 Angelina insists that the family’s house is just as much mine as theirs. A barrio is a neighbourhood, usually of working-class status. Colonia Nicarao, the barrio in which our house is situated, has, ever since the insurrection, traditionally been a Sandinista neighbourhood. Throughout the community red and black flags still flutter in the wind. Hydro poles are painted these colours too. During the insurrection Angelina tells me that revolutionary supporters fought ferociously in the streets with rifles, pistols, machetes, bottles, rocks, and homemade bombs, whatever they could get their hands on. They also constructed barricades in order to slow the war machines (tanks and armoured vehicles) of Somoza’s National Guard. Such tactics were used in neighbouring barrios as well.
law wife and child behind in Managua, while Victor left his mother—for the first time—as well as his fiancée of a couple months. Furthermore, the cuarto, located just off of the garage, which had traditionally supplied the family with an extra 1000 córdobas (or $50US) per month, had not been rented in almost a year. The family was therefore reliant upon Angelina’s meagre monthly salary of $200. She works as a secretary of the culture department for Managua’s City Hall. A female-headed household subject to such financial hardships is not uncommon in Nicaragua.

Angelina used to be married but she grew tired; tired of the emotional abuse, tired of the drugs, and tired of the stealing and all the lies. Her ex-husband—at one time a respected military man, a hero of the revolutionary war—took off when things got tough. Originally from the north of the country, he has now been gone for over a decade. Is he dead or alive? No one knows. Not even his parents. Nor his other family; the one he kept secret for a long time. Despite life at times being tough, and the courting of several men, mamá never felt it necessary to marry again.

Prior to my arrival Angelina had prepared some dinner. She lit up the gas stove and proceeded to reheat some homemade tortillas, re-fried beans, fried cheese and fried plantains for me, which, along with white rice, are essentials in most working-class Nicaraguan households; essentials that had seemingly been purchased with the few dollars that the family did have available. The fridge was otherwise bare and the car was running on empty, having not been used in a few weeks. But gasoline was of secondary importance, not only too expensive but also an unnecessary expense, especially when one could catch the bus for a few pesos, if the

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14 Translates to “fourth (-place)” or “room.” The second translation is what I am referring to. My reason for not using “bachelor apartment” here is because the room would not really be considered one by North American standards. It is more of a single 8 x 12 foot room with approximately a 3x 6 area sectioned off for a ‘washroom,’ which nevertheless has a shower, sink and toilet. There is no kitchen, and therefore no countertop, stove, fridge, etc., however.
destination was too far to travel by foot. Mamá had, nevertheless, pumped 100 córdobas (US$5) worth of gas into the car in order to pick me up.

After dinner the boys and I drive a couple blocks east to fill up the car at the neighbourhood Esso / On the Run. On the street corner two street vendors approached us. One was selling issues of *El Nuevo Diario*, a Nicaraguan newspaper, while the other had some flags for sale, including Canadian, British, German, and American ones. I make eye contact with the vendors, smile, and shake my head “no” so we can proceed to the gas station. Victor fills up the car and I pay the fifty-something dollars to fill the tank of the Hyundai. We then proceed to *Pali*, which is literally right next door. *Pali* is a supermarket chain in Nicaragua that tends to have better prices than *La Colonia*, which is considered to be a more upscale grocer, although the latter has great deals on Wednesdays. There we buy five pounds of Nicaraguans’ beloved *frijolitos rojos*, five pounds of white rice, three dozen eggs, a loaf of bread and some lunch meat, as well as a couple of boxes of cereal, some bananas, vegetables (lettuce, tomato, cucumber, onions), oil, sugar, and six cans of tuna; altogether some much needed necessities. After that we drive to *La Colonia* to pick up a gallon of water, a couple of bags of milk, and some meat (ground beef and chicken quarters). I cover both the bills.

Upon returning home Victor informed me that it is his best friend’s birthday and implied that we should go out later that evening. I agreed. It had been a long day; a long flight mostly. So Victor and I walked two doors down to pick up his buddy, someone that he had known since his childhood, to take him out for a few *cervezas*. We also had to celebrate my arrival apparently, according to the friend. That night at the *cantina* there was a special on: litres of *Toña*—a tasty Nicaraguan lager—two of them, were on special for 54 córdobas (about)

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15 *Cerveza(s)* translates to beer(s)
US$2.70). Well, we sure had our fill! Because I am not planning on partying that much this time around, such an evening feels justified. Remembering the three pints of Heineken that I had at seven bucks a pop back home a few days prior, celebrating my departure with friends back in Canada, I gladly pick up the tab, which comes to US$20, inclusive of tip. Paying the bill is the last thing that I coherently remember from this particular evening.

Tuesday, July 6, 2010—Setting the stage; or, Sight-seeing

“Paaaaaaannnn ... ... paaaaannnn! ... ... paaaaannnnn!!!”

“Uggggghhhhh!” I moaned from my bed, having forgotten about the bread lady. Every time I stayed over at the house she woke me up. There was the cute little enchilada boy too, but his voice was not so annoying. Plus, his work day tended to start a bit later.

“Paaaaaaannnn!! ... ... paaaaaaannn!!! ... ... paaaaannnn ... ...”

Finally she passed on by. In the confines of my apartment back home I was not used to all the hooting and hollering from the streets. Instead there was the comforting hum of my air conditioner or furnace that I have long ago become accustomed to. Feeling a little groggy I decided it was time to get up and gather myself together. What time was it anyway? I thought to myself. 8:35am, not bad. Mamá was already up and having taken the day off was as busy as a bee in the kitchen (Figure 10). Victor, on the other hand, most definitely was not. He was still passed out on one set of the double foam mattresses in the room that he is sharing with his mother, now that I am here. I sat down at the kitchen table and said good morning to Angelina,

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16 Cantina means small bar, or a neighbourhood bar.
17 El pan translates to “bread”
who is more than prepared to prepare an extensive breakfast for me. But I tell her no thank you and opt for some All-Bran cereal with banana and milk. High fibre cereals are something I usually consumed in Nicaragua, to keep the pipes operating smoothly and more slowly. I gratefully accepted the cup of java from Matagalpa that had already been brought to a boil, however.

“Cafe con leche o solo?” mamá asks me.  

“Cafe solo, por favor,” I say with a smile, although I pour a little bit of milk in it. The taste is always quite strong, so I reach for the sugar, which I usually do not do back home. Still in a bit of a daze—when I open the sugar jar, a few ants scurrying through the grains startle me and I drop the sugar jar onto the table.

“Que paso?”

“Nada mamá, lo siento, I’m just tired,” choosing to say nothing. Because not only did I not know the Spanish word for “ants,” but I also did not want her to feel embarrassed. Having travelled to Nicaragua several times in the past few years, however, I had come to understand that nature and home-life are somewhat intricately connected in working-class neighbourhoods. Ants, bats, birds, flies, mice, mosquitoes, spiders, and the odd cucaracha (cockroach) certainly kept me on my toes. One of the first times I travelled to Nicaragua I freaked out when I saw a mouse scurrying through the living room. Victor told me: “Relax man, he is just passing through.” On another occasion there was a cockroach the size of my big toe, which Vic and I hunted for a half hour, eventually managing to capture and kill it. The presence of a mouse or cockroach in a house does not necessarily translate to infestation, however. Because every house

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18 In Nicaragua it is quite popular to drink one’s coffee “con leche” (with quite a bit of milk), or half coffee and half milk.
19 Translates to “what’s up”?
20 Translates to “Nothing mom, I’m sorry”
leaves their doors and windows wide open half the time such critters are usually spread out across a community, which I consider to be more environmentally friendly.

She smiled, “okay my son,” probably presuming that I had had a bit too much to drink the previous evening. We then proceed to talk about what was on the agenda for the day. Because my dance lessons were not starting until tomorrow, she suggests some family visiting and then some sightseeing.

In the afternoon, after the family visits were complete, Angelina, Fabricio, Victor and I embarked on our journey to see some tourist attractions. As always I brought along my camera. Although North Americans can drive in Nicaragua I preferred not to. I had little experience driving standard or with roundabouts. In addition, driving in Nicaragua requires much more patience and reaction time than back home. So Fabricio drove. He was used to it anyways. Neither Angelina nor Victor had their license yet. Plus, Fab is a driver. That was his job. He in fact has a special license and once held a job as a seller, which paid him nearly $600 per month trucking consumer goods (e.g. chips, juices, oil, soup, water, etc.) to different stores in western Nicaragua.

When we are all ready to go, mamá insisted that I sit in the front of the Hyundai as the back is much too small for my six-foot-three frame. She is always concerned about my comfort. To get to where we are headed more quickly Fabricio takes a shortcut through La Fuentes, a neighbouring barrio. While driving, he turned toward me and tapped me on the leg. Waving his finger side to side about a foot from my face, he told me not to pass through the community alone, especially at night. From what I gather there are gangs that would call you out in the street, or swarm your car once it had stopped at an intersection. Gringos were of particular interest because the whiteness of one’s skin equals dollar signs. Although I am itching to
become comfortable in my surroundings I took his warning seriously. Meanwhile, I just imagined what the locals would think if I was walking outside by myself: *What in the world was a gringo doing in the barrios of Managua?* Clearly, I would be perceived as a tourist-transient.

Once we hit the main drag, *Pista Juan Pablo II*, I began to recognize where we were. Traffic, as usual, was steady, all the way to and up the *Avenida Bolivar*. There were just as many motorcycles and dirt bikes as cars and trucks. Fumes from the vehicles consumed my breathing space through the open passenger window. Recycled, revamped, and colourfully painted North American school buses spew out the blackest of black smoke. I motion to close the window, but it was stuck down inside the door. Something that Angelina suggests we had better get fixed soon because it was currently the rainy season, a period of time which spans the beginning of June to the end of July. The dark and gloomy skies indicated the forecast for today, but that is no reason to stay home.

The first place we were headed is *Parque Histórico Nacional Loma Tiscapa*, situated on a hill overlooking the Lagoon of Tiscapa at the geographic centre of Managua. Once at the entrance we are greeted by a park attendant. Angelina introduces herself and explains what we are doing. Because she is a government employee, he waves us on through free of charge. The park is home to what is perhaps Managua’s most recognizable landmark: a humongous charcoal statue of Nicaragua’s most famous revolutionary leader, Augusto C. Sandino (see Figure 10). Such a towering presence was obviously erected by the

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21 Translates to “National History Park of Loma Tiscapa”
FSLN, otherwise known as the *Sandinistas*. Situated on top of a hill overlooking both “new” and “old” Managua, the figure stands tall next to the remains of the old Presidential Palace, from where the Somoza regime used to govern. Apparently at any one time during the dictatorship the palace had sixty military men on duty (Black, 1981). These bodyguards slept over too. Below the palace there is a prison where political prisoners used to be tortured. Nowadays, however, it houses a Sandino museum.

Although we are doing some sightseeing, I have come to Nicaragua armed with a critical gaze this time around. Having undertaken rigorous theoretical and methodological training within the Department of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University during the past year, I have come to learn that national cultures cannot necessarily be interpreted in ways that coincide with official portrayals. Also, although *El Güegüense* is supposedly a satirical dance-drama that critiques the state, this critical dimension of the performance has seemingly been lost. Due to my understanding of the performance, as well as my academic training in cultural studies and feminist theory, I am particularly sensitive to how the state promotes itself. I also feel well equipped for the research questions I have set out to answer. Finally, having a keen interest in history, I have become increasingly curious about how and why the social state of the country seems not to improve.

In the background of the Sandino statue photo one can see that there was some background activity occurring (see *Figure 11*). Next to the statue there were also two large white poles. One is usually the bearer of an extremely large Nicaraguan flag, but the flag was being cleaned. The other pole, it appears, is dedicated to communicating political messages. Two sides of the four-sided pastel coloured structure read: “2011 Viva la revolucion.” Such a message could be read in a number of ways: (1) as a reminder to locals about the upcoming 31st
anniversary (July 19th) of the triumph; (2) as propaganda for the November 2011 national election; and/or (3) that the FSLN, still today, is dedicated to pursuing the ideals established by the brains behind the revolutionary movements: most notably Sandino, but also Carlos Fonseca Amador. Such a message takes on further significance if we consider the placement of the structure itself, above the statue. President Daniel Ortega suggests that, under the guidance of his party, things are better than they would have been even had Sandino (or Fonseca) lived on.

The other two sides of the structure, also opposite of each other, read: “Nicaragua CRISTIANA, SOCIOALISTA, SOLIDARIA,” which exemplifies how the FSLN is trying to promote not only a sense of commonality, but also by what means they attempt to bind the nation together. As I noted in the previous chapter, the Sandinistas have had a love-hate relationship with the Church. The fact that the FSLN promotes Christianity as a whole speaks to this relationship. Ever since the insurrection the FSLN has promoted a sense of religious toleration. Although members of the original governing junta would have considered themselves Catholic, most—if not all—would have identified with the popular church, which is to say that there is a two-tier system. The other faction of the Catholic Church would be those members who hold more traditional or conservative beliefs; those likely with money and power. Yet Ortega nevertheless managed to reconcile with the Church hierarchy prior to winning the 2006 election when he finally married his common-law wife of almost three decades, Rosario Murillo. Doing so enabled President Ortega to maintain his stance on religious plurality, while he is still able to appease the hierarchy by exemplifying and publically promoting himself as a practising Catholic. Also, for the current administration to claim to be at the helm of a socialist project is absurd. President Ortega lives in a monstrosity of a house near Lake Managua. The concentration of land in the hands of a few is one of the roots of the “Nicaragua problem.” By joining ALBA, a

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22 Translates to “Christianity, Socialism, Solidarity”
socialist project and alliance headed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the FSLN has attempted to put to rest the notion that they are communists once and for all, while simultaneously practicing national sovereignty, supposedly. Despite the contradictions, Morris (2010) noted that Ortega juxtaposes the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America’s (ALBA’s) twenty-first century socialist project with the “savage capitalism” of other nations. Other nations that have since joined ALBA include Honduras, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Lastly, the notion that all Nicaraguans share one common identity has been critiqued throughout this project. The blood that flows through the arteries and veins of contemporary Nicas is about as diverse as you will find anywhere. Such diversity is something that should be celebrated, rather than pretending some pure Nicaraguan identity actually exists.

Moreover, for me, “solidarity” goes beyond ethnicity or social class. In Rascally Signs in Sacred Places (1995), David E. Whisnant opens his analysis with three vignettes. One of the vignettes is representative of something that occurred when the author was photographing FSLN propaganda:

Standing on a Managua street in 1987, photographing a revolutionary mural painted on a long fence around some ruins from the earthquake, I suddenly realize... that a group of women [are] shouting at me from across the street that that art was not their art, that it most emphatically did not represent their views, and that above all I should not use the photograph later to show folks at home that all Nicaraguans were united in Sandinista solidarity (Whisnant, 1995, p. 1-2).

Such a vignette suggests not all Nicaraguans were, or are supportive of the FSLN. Is that any different from the political situation in any other country, though? In Nicaragua, just because
other political parties are seemingly not allowed to promote themselves through public propaganda does not mean that reclamations of urban space are not occurring.

On the way to our second destination we encountered some billboards. Because they were probably the ninety-eighth, ninety-ninth, and one-hundredth ones that I have seen since arriving in Nicaragua, I decide it is finally time to snap a picture. These billboards reiterate Sandinista rhetoric, but they also do so utilizing imagery of popular Nicaraguans (see Figure 12). To the left of the enlarged picture of Ortega, from right to left, are the following: Sandino; internationally renowned poet, Ruben Dario; and the stone-throwing freedom fighter, Andreas Castro, who, during the William Walker filibuster fiasco of the mid-1850s, is known to have killed an armed American imperialist with a rock after his rifle backfired. The appropriation of such important cultural figures is not uncommon in Nicaragua. Whisnant (1995) sheds light on how consecutive governments in Nicaragua have read, interpreted, and promoted popular cultural figures in different ways in order to promote their political cause. The Sandinistas, especially, have used both indigenous and traditional campesino culture and folkloric forms for a variety of cultural-political purposes.

By putting his image alongside that of Sandino, Castro and Dario, there are two messages that were loud and clear. First, the images of Castro and Sandino screamed that foreign intervention is over. It was in Nicaragua’s past, which has allowed the country to express its national sovereignty. Second, the image of Dario shouts that the FSLN are far from being “bandits.” Instead they are cultured and in fact foster, nurture, and promote national culture. Whisnant (1995) implied that immediately after the revolution the Sandinistas tried to
communicate how the poet’s work embodied the revolutionary spirit. The funny thing is that the Somozas promoted Dario’s work for their own purposes too. The third Somoza even constructed the Ruben Dario National Theatre in 1968 as a playground for elite friends. With a national election looming in November 2011, Ortega is pulling out all the stops.

Sandinista rhetoric and imagery has not gone unchallenged though (see Figure 13). Ortega biographer Kenneth Morris (2010) notes that as soon as Ortega won the election and subsequently plastered his own face all over the country some billboards and posters were defaced. In León, traditionally a hotbed for student movements and anti-government activities, “a banner was unfurled that depicted Anastasio Somoza Debayle and Ortega together. The caption read, ‘Ortega and Somoza: The Same Thing.’ The banner was splattered with red paint and ‘signed’ by Rigoberto López Pérez, the poet who assassinated the elder Somoza in 1956” (Morris, 2010, p.204).

During my time in Nicaragua, throughout the capital I noticed both pro- and anti-government graffiti. “Viva [President] Daniel [Ortega],” “Viva FSLN,” and “Viva la

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23 The counter message “Nicaragua libre!” in Figure 8 translates to “Nicaragua free!” and implies that in order for the country to ‘truly’ express its sovereignty the Sandinistas must be brought down, which is represented by the crossing out of “Sandinista.”
revolucion” are some of the simpler messages that are spray-painted on buildings and street curbs, in support of the current administration. Some of these messages have been defaced or crossed out (by the Sandinista colours of red and black interestingly enough) in other urban spaces (see Figures 13 & 15). Such anti-government imagery called for the current administration to be brought down by whatever means possible. Whether the artist intended that to be via anarchism, the next election, or by revolutionary means is something I do not know.

When we reached Plaza de la Revolución, our second destination, Angelina suggests that we go inside the Palacio Nacional de la Cultura (see Figure 16).

Housed inside the Palace of Culture is the National Museum, which features a variety of interesting artefacts, ranging from pre-Columbian ceramics (over 4000 years old) to modern paintings and recent sculptures. When I tell the cultural attendant what I am doing in Nicaragua, her eyes light up. There just so happens to be a one-room exhibit dedicated to El Güegüense this week. She lets us into the exhibit for free and then gives me some relevant documents, to photocopy and translate. The exhibit itself is interesting, but it provides me with little new information; however, there are some materials available for purchase that ended up being beneficial to my project.

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24 The black spray painted counter message translates to: “DICTATOR NO!”
25 Translates to National Palace of Culture
After I purchased the cultural materials, the four of us continued to explore the plaza. To the right (or west) of the cultural palace is Central Park; a park featuring Comandante Carlos Fonseca’s tomb, which features an eternal flame that burns twenty-four hours a day. Angelina told me that the flame represents that the revolutionary spirit lives on. Around the plaza there are some other buildings of importance. To the east of the cultural palace is Managua’s old cathedral, which finally was currently under construction to repair damage caused by the earthquake of 1972. To the left of the cathedral (directly across and north of the National Palace of Culture) was a beautiful, brightly coloured building called “La Casa de Los Pueblos,” formerly known as the President’s House (see Figure 17). Constructed by the Liberal government which followed the UNO, who followed the revolutionary Sandinistas the first and only time they fell out of office in 1990, the President’s House was re-named after Ortega won the 2006 election. No one lives at this house, but government meetings were at one time held there. Such gatherings are now instead held at President Ortega’s highly secured private estate. In Unfinished Revolution, Morris (2010) speculates that such combining of private life and governing screams of an authoritarian government. Perhaps even a dictatorship. He further speculates that Ortega holds government meetings at his own estate because he fears for his life. It will, therefore, be interesting to see how the November 2011 national elections play out.

26 Fonseca was originally buried in his hometown of Matagalpa until the FSLN decided to re-bury him in the capital and inadvertently dug up his body. Comandente...
27 The “President’s House” was renamed “the house of the towns” presumably because the latter does not sound so elitist.
Outside the building there was a bronze statue of Sandino that had been erected (see Figure 16): Standing leaning to one side, holding his jacket in one arm with his hand on his hip, it is as if Sandino is waiting to get inside. But seemingly like the rest of Nicaraguans, he is not allowed. The “house of the people” is not open to the general public even though government meetings are not held there anymore. In other words, there goes another million dollars or two that could have been spent on the people.

After checking out the rest of the plaza and Central Park, we hopped back onto Avenida Bolivar and continue our trek a few more blocks north, toward Lake Managua. From the car, I noticed a particularly interesting monument. It was a larger than life statue of a hyper-masculine “nameless guerrilla soldier,” which supposedly honoured the true heroes of the revolution: the people. The figure held a pick-axe in his right hand and an AK-47 in his left, which is pointed in the air as he looks up toward the sky with his hair flowing in the wind, presumably an image that is representative of the “average Jo[s]e” in the army because it was dedicated to them by the state. Although it was admirable for the Sandinistas erect such a statue, for the people, I am critical for a few reasons. First, the vast majority of guerrilla warriors and urban soldiers did not look like the monument. With its bulging muscles, the statue made American cartoon soldier G.I. Joe look shameful. Members of the armies that defended Nicaragua’s sovereignty were for the most part extremely poor. Every day they struggled just to eat. Secondly, the vast majority of the good guys did not have an AK-47. If they were lucky perhaps they had a rifle or a pistol. Others fought with machetes, bottles, rocks, home-made bombs, and whatever else they could get their hands on. Such an image is therefore historically inaccurate. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is estimated that a third of revolutionary soldiers were women. When the FSLN decided to erect such a monument, did they even think of whether women (or for that matter, all
men) would identify with such a hyper-masculine representation? The opinions of at least one-third of the army clearly did not matter. Why are these women (and men) being forgotten?

Overall, these buildings and monuments represent just a fraction of the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been blown on architectural structures that stand in the streets of Managua—representative of what was a U.S. initiated “modernization” project during the Somoza era, and that was continued on by the FSLN. But most Nicaraguans do not see those architectural structures day-to-day, so what do they matter?

Also on the left, not far from the nameless guerrilla soldier, is “the projects” of Managua (see Figure 18). When Ortega was elected back to the presidency in 2006, he, like every other newly elected Nicaraguan President, proclaimed that he would tackle country’s number one problem: poverty. Due to the ineffective and corrupt governing that preceded him, however, the President inherited a nation that was worse off than when he left office in 1990. That basic agricultural supplies would be provided for the impoverished of the countryside was one promise. And that houses be built for the poorest urban poor was another. Ortega biographer Kenneth E. Morris (2010) suggests that the president has made good on most of his pre-election promises. Although great progress has, apparently, once again been made in the countryside, the carrying out of the second promise is not so clear.

Upon first glance the projects are communal-looking: all houses are the same size; they are all white; they all have government subsidized internet and cable television service.
Throughout the community red and black Sandinista flags flutter in the wind, presumably to say “thank you.” But several people I talk to in the streets—who wish to remain anonymous—tell me that the people who have been given housing are political friends and allies, friends of friends, people who do not even necessarily need the money. In other words, if you want a house, then you better be a Sandinista supporter and you better know someone that knows someone! The people who perhaps need housing and subsidized services the most do not necessarily enjoy such access.

Evidence of such inequality is found right next to “the projects” (see Figure 19). Hundreds of people have taken up residence and continue to essentially camp out on the land surrounding the houses. Some are protesting the development. Others are upset about chemicals being dumped in their backyards. Regardless of where these individuals are from and what their complaints are, at every intersection there are young children peddling candies or begging for a few córdobas because young children tend to have better luck in the streets than their parents or older siblings. Having a knack for getting a few pesos here, a few pesos there, keeps some children out of school. But what does it matter? Children cannot learn if they cannot eat.

Also around “the projects” a much-publicized hunger strike occurred in 2007, which was followed by several other hunger strikes in protest the “dictatorship.” The fact that President Ortega managed to convince the Supreme Court to allow him to seek re-election in 2011 speaks
to the claim that this is indeed a dictatorship. Historically, the Nicaraguan constitution has prevented individuals from running for the presidency twice in a row, not only to prevent Somoza-like eras from coming about again, but also to keep powerful individuals in check.

Another obvious instance of political corruption took place a few years prior when Arnoldo Alemán’s Liberal party was in power. After the 1997 election he and Ortega—the leader of the official opposition at the time—held a series of thirty closed-door meetings and what has become known as El Pacto was the result. From those gatherings, Ortega successfully convinced Alemán to increase Supreme Court membership, which likely benefited friends of both of them. Meanwhile, Ortega probably agreed to keep quiet about the Liberal leader’s political corruption: In the five years (1997-2002) that Alemán was in power he amassed a personal fortune of $100 million. He has since become known as one of the most corrupt political leaders in the world, yet he still holds much influence in the Supreme Court and domestic politics.

The pact between Ortega and Aleman also changed the power of the vote from 40 percent to 35 percent, which means that a presidential candidate needs just 35 percent of popular votes in the national election to gain access to a majority government. But what is most interesting is that it is as if Ortega knew what was going to eventually transpire. In the 2006 national election, Ortega’s buddy Alemán—the most corrupt politician in Nicaragua’s history—was never going to win, yet his party fielded a Liberal candidate. Because a breakaway Liberal party had also formed, however, the amount of votes that the collaborated parties together would have received was halved.

*El Pacto* furthermore pardoned Ortega from having to attend a court date regarding the allegations of rape made by his stepdaughter in 1998. The claim that he repeatedly forced her to engage in sexual relations with him when she was a child, starting at the age of eleven, still to
this day has not been adjudicated. Though Sandino would have shunned him back in the day for such acts, President Ortega—a “Sandinista”—is a very powerful man who has all sorts of tricks up his sleeve and politicians and law enforcement officials packed away deep in his pockets. Although Ortega may be above the law in Nicaragua, he unfortunately cannot escape historical documentation and satire. Although I do not know if his stepdaughter’s accusations are true, the fact that she has been prevented from having her case heard is despicable. I therefore composed the following poem in her honour. It is purely hypothetical, satirical in nature, and combines both truth and fiction.

*       *       *

**Vende patria; or, my Republic**

Girl on the street
Standing outside she is
Tears streaming down her face
Shouting out 2 the world
About women’s rights:

“My father,” she hollered
“la dic[k]tadura\(^{28}\) of our ‘democratic’ Republic...”
“Raped me ...! He fucking raped me!!”
“God damn it...” (Pope: comment?)
“And no one [fucking] cares!”

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\(^{28}\) Translates to “the dic[k]tator”

\(^{29}\) El policia...
Blows an AK-47 bullet—Right(s)?
She’s dead! Crack-berry type news
An *earthquake* rocks the nation
’72, no ’78 all over again: *Boom!*

So Mr. President... (?)
Please, stand up. Come on, Get Up!!
True to the revolutionary spirit you are
Prepare 2 face the ‘intertrans[Nation!]al(-l)’
Feminist(s) [Policies; Cock] Please!

* * *

It had been a long first day thus far and, although mamá wanted to show me some more structures that are not too far away (e.g. Ruben Dario National Theatre, “Sandino Park,” etc.), we decide that we had better be on our way. It is spitting outside and we have a twenty-something minute drive back home. When the rain really starts to come down a few minutes later I get soaked because that passenger side window is busted. And then the stupid windshield wipers stop working! Periodically I have to hang out the window on the ride home to manually move the wipers just so Fabricio can see or else surely we will be involved in a car crash. Once we finally make it home I am freezing. The rain was cool and the temperature had dropped to the high teens. But a hot shower is not an option. Working-class families like this one do not have that luxury. For dinner we have BBQ chicken, homemade tortillas, gallopinto, hard boiled eggs and salad with lemon vinaigrette for dinner. Then I teach the family how to play “asshole,” a Canadian card game.

\[29\] Translates to “policeman”
Wednesday, July 7, 2010—May I have this dance?

For breakfast this morning I have gallopinto again, scrambled eggs, fried cheese and a cup of coffee. I am going to need the energy! Due to some heavy traffic on the morning of my inaugural “Güegüense dance class” at Academia Nicaragüense de la Danza, however, there is no way that I am going to get there on time. And in the car I am freaking out in my head: Oh great; my first lesson and I’m going to be late! Mamá notices that I keep peering over Victor’s shoulder to check the time.

“Don’t worry, I talk with Manuel,” she reassured me.

But it was 8:41am already and my lesson was supposed to begin precisely at 8:30am. In my head I pictured Manuel standing there, waiting, looking at his watch, wondering where the hell we were. What is worse is that we are still about ten minutes away from the Academy. 

Ughh! I think to myself. I’m going to look like such an idiot.

When we finally arrived at the Academy (see Figure 20) we are greeted by a security guard receptionist. Mamá told him what we are there for and he let us know that Manuel has not yet arrived. I feel so relieved. But, where the hell was he then? It was almost nine o’clock. Perhaps he forgot about the arrangements that we had made. I noticed that the clock at the Academy was about eight minutes behind the car. With the exception of the security guard at the entrance, and a woman who was seemingly mopping nothing (which is to say the beautiful orange tiles already looked

Figure 20 Nicaraguan Academy of Dance

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30 Translates to ‘The Nicaraguan Dance Academy’
spotless), the facility was empty. It was early though. I am curious about my new surroundings, so I decide to explore.

In total, the Academy has five classrooms with planked hardwood floors. One is quite big and can hold up to 60 dancers, my dance instructor, Manuel Sanchez, later tells me in an interview. Of the four remaining rooms two are medium size (approximately $45\frac{3}{4} \times 22$ steps of my size 13 Nike indoor soccer shoes)—one of which I will work out of (see Figure 21)—and two are smaller. Each classroom is in the shape of a rectangle and at least three of four of the walls do not go all the way up to the ceiling. This allows natural sunlight and fresh air to penetrate the space. If the walls touch the roof it would be too hot in the classroom and much too expensive to air condition, especially in the Nicaraguan heat. Several fans have been strategically placed in each room, to circulate the air. In each of the classrooms, on the wall opposite the door, a stereo system, a large rectangular mirror, and a clock have been fixed onto the wall. These are necessities of any dance classroom.

At the Academy there is also an open-air outdoor stage, a decent sized gym, and an office for staff members. The facility employs three full-time office administrators/teachers who offer different classes for people of all ages, abilities, and nationalities. Ballet, salsa, “nightclub dancing,” and “traditional folklore” are just some of the options.

One class that is not offered is the one that I will be taking; “Güegüense dance classes” in fact do not exist. In order for someone to learn the Güegüense dance tradition they must either join a folklore group, of which there are approximately 70 Angelina estimates, or pay for private
The Güegüencista Experience

lessons. The latter option is the route that I have taken. Mamá did the negotiating with Manuel Sanchez, my dance instructor, prior to my arrival and he agreed to charge me twelve dollars per hour, which is a reduced rate. He usually charges fifteen for such one-on-one lessons.

“But, for Angelina,” he tells me on the first day, “I give you a better price.”

Another option—if one does not have the cash for private lessons, or if one did not want to join a folklore group—is to attempt to teach yourself from a video of some sort. Although I guarantee not many Nicaraguans attempt to do so I manage to find one such DVD—a sort of “teach yourself folklore” type of thing—at the Masaya market, also known as the “Old Indian market.” The Güegüense dance tradition is just one of twenty traditional dances featured on the video, though the simpler steps of the video do not resemble the more complex ones that I end up learning in the classroom. In sum, not that many Nicas, let alone gringos, know how to perform the Güegüense tradition.

Eventually my dance instructor does arrive, although it is closer to 9:00am. I did not bother asking him how or why he was late, because I have come to understand that notions of time are a bit more fluid in Latin America than they are in North America. After some Spanish salutations between the Nicaraguans I am introduced to Manuel, who firmly shakes my hand with a smile. He asks me a few questions: where I am from; why I am in Nicaragua; what my goals are; and what I want to accomplish in our time together. He then asks me how many of the six dances I wanted to learn and I express to him that I wish to learn them all.

“Okay then!” he says with a laugh, “then we better get to work!”

I ask Victor, my videographer and sometimes translator, to take his position. He sits down and sprawls out (at times rolling around) on a pile of workout mats.

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31 The fact that Manuel spoke Spanish as well as English was certainly of assistance in the pursuance of this project.
After fiddling with the stereo system Manuel invited me to center stage. At centre stage both of us faced the mirror and Manuel asked me to follow his lead once the music began. Leading with his right foot he shifted his body weight from the left foot onto the right, and then, stepping back, returned to the position that he started. He proceeded to do the same with his left. After he repeated this one more time I dove right in. With every step forward he snapped his fingers to keep the beat.

“Good,” he said, “...now (implying that we are moving on)... up!” (Stepping forward onto his right foot, he raises his right shoulder and forearm, while looking straight at the mirror, before returning to the neutral position.) ... And down (he steps forward onto his left foot this time, dropping his left shoulder and looking down toward the ground)... Up! (He repeats the first motion)... and down (the two of us are now in sync)... Up! ... up ... up ....”

And so we continue on, with and without the music. I clearly exemplified that I could do whatever Manuel was doing. The next set of steps were the exact same as those already performed, but I had to spin around while performing them; which is to say, I perform those same right and left foot manoeuvres downstage, then a set toward stage right, followed by a set upstage, and, finally, to stage left. And then back again. But that is only the first step of the first dance.

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32 For those unfamiliar with such terms—“upstage,” “downstage,” etc.—an explanation is in order: In order to simplify communication of how Manuel and I moved around the dance floor I will use traditional blocking terminology. “Blocking” refers to the division of the stage into four areas: upstage, downstage, stage left, and stage right. The words were developed in accordance with the traditional raked stage, which was elevated upward away from the audience. Such a stage was designed to prevent the covering of the bodies of performers at the back of the stage by performers at the front. From the perspective of the audience, then, downstage would be the equivalent to the front of the stage; upstage would be the back of the stage; stage left would be on the right side of the stage; and stage right would be on the left. For our purposes, therefore, if I were standing at centre stage looking at the mirror in the classroom, “downstage” would refer to the area of the dance floor closest to the mirror, in front of me; and stage left and stage right would be to my left and right respectively, while upstage would be behind me (see Figure 20).
In the first dance you start from the upstage-stage right corner and once you finish the first set of steps you come to a brief pause at centre stage in a neutral position (explained below), while the pace of the music changes slightly, slowing down. From the neutral position—back arched over; left hand holding the ‘mask’ and right hand holding the maraca\(^{33}\); left leg straight, left foot flat on the ground; right knee slightly bent, right tippy toe touching the ground—Manuel showed me what I needed to do next: hop forward (with the right foot preceding the left), standing straight up, and, landing on your right foot, three tippy toe steps, before hopping backward (leading with your left leg this time), re-arching your back, and then doing three more tippy toe steps.

Complicating this series of events, however, is that you need to do so to the beat, while giving your maraca two shakes for every three tippy toe steps performed. Out of all of the steps I end up learning, the second step of the first dance was the one that I have the most difficulty with. Keeping time with the maraca while performing the steps is tough!

Manuel then introduced me to some steps from other dances, the second and third specifically. The first step of the second dance involved the following: starting from the neutral position (right knee slightly bent, right foot toes touching the ground), standing straight up, you slowly step forward with your right foot, and then with the left. After the second step, however, you start to move your right foot forward again, but you only bring it as far forward as the back of your left foot. And then you step backward with that same leg; afterwards sliding the left foot (still in front) along the ground back towards the right foot, maintaining toe contact with the floor throughout the sliding of the foot, but bringing your heel increasingly off the ground. This made it easier to perform the salute; that is, the arching of the lower back to bend over forward,

\(^{33}\)While performing Güegüense, it can be assumed that my left hand was always up by my face, holding the mask that I may or may not have had during a particular instance; also, my right hand was always in front of my torso holding the maraca—once again that I may or may not have had in each instance—keeping time.
whereby the audience is not supposed to see your face. To the music I performed this step from stage left to stage right and vice versa numerous times. Although I do not learn the second step of the second dance at this time, the second dance is relatively easy and it is an opportunity for the güegüencista to catch their breath before the physically demanding third dance, Manuel tells me. But we take a five minute break first...

In the third dance there were two steps. For the first step: from the neutral position, you hop forward about twelve inches and land on your left foot, simultaneously slinging your right leg forward (it reminds me of an Irish jig). With the knee slightly bent and your toes pointing away from your body on a forty-five degree angle, the flung leg needs to be straightened somewhat. Until you hop again, that is. During the second hop on the left foot, not moving forward as much this time, the right leg is slung again. Then, you switch legs, projecting yourself forward about twelve inches again, hopping on your right foot twice this time, slinging your left leg forward on the forty-five degree angle (see Figure 22). It is of utmost importance is that the transitions need to look fluid, Manuel instructs me. Also, each time one of your feet hits the ground the maraca is supposed to be shaken. It is easier to keep time in this dance because the shake corresponds with foot-floor contact, as opposed to the second dance, whereby you have to perform two equally spaced shakes during three tippy toe steps.

Next, the second step of the third dance involved the same type of movement, but you moved side to side. The transition from step one to step two feels somewhat natural. With your
knee slightly bent and your leg extended in front of you, instead of flinging the right leg forward, you fling it less dramatically out to the side, keeping the knee slightly bent. Utilizing the abductor muscles the right leg moves away from the body’s midline as you hop off of your left foot onto your right. With your left leg now in front of you, you then hop on the same foot, maintaining that position, which means that your left leg would now be in front of you. The second time you hop off of the right foot you perform the same move with the left leg this time, abducting it, and landing on your left foot (see Figure 23). Again, about twelve inches from where you originally take off. Then you perform the second hop and repeat the initial movement, abducting the right leg and vice versa. Back and forth you go, eventually throwing in a couple 180 degree spins, while performing the same step, until the pace of the music picks up and you thereby know that the song is about to finish. At this point you start performing the first step again—or, the ‘Irish jig’ step—and make your way to the upstage-stage left corner to prepare for the fourth song.

By the end of the lesson I am drenched in sweat. It is literally dripping from my head and arms onto the ground with every hop. Nevertheless, the first day of class was fantastic. Not only was it fun but it was also a great workout. Because of how well it went I was feeling quite comfortable and looking forward to tomorrow’s class.

*Thursday, July 8, 2010*—Practice, practice, and more practice

This morning Manuel and I were both on time. We started off by reviewing the steps that I had learned the previous day, working from stage left to stage right, and back again, for fifteen
minutes, which also functioned as my warm up. After I performed them to his satisfaction he brought out two maracas. A maraca is at all times carried in the right hand of all the characters in all of the dances. Playing the music to the first three songs, Manuel proceeded to explain to me how each of the first three songs had different beats. I listened carefully. We started to move the maracas to the beat. And then he stopped, challenging me to keep the beat. Whenever I lost it he started shaking his maraca again, getting me back on track. Although I consistently lost the beat while keeping it myself, Manuel told me “that is something we can work on later.”

My instructor then shows me another step, the first from the fifth song. Prior to actually performing the step, however, we use the bar along the downstage wall to keep my balance as he walked me through the leg actions. We needed to see if my hips are even flexible enough first of all. The step went something like this: from the neutral position, hop forward onto your right foot and simultaneously acrobatically kick your left leg straight forward, straightening it in the process, just above waist level. Once that kick has been completed you hop again on the same foot and, while suspended in the air, kick the flung-forward leg backward; the kind of kick that a mule would perform. Then, you switch legs, hop forward onto your left foot and kick your right leg forward, straightening it, before hopping again on the left foot and mule-kicking the right one backward. Performing this step once may not seem that difficult, but when you have to perform it, practice it, from one side of the room to the other, back again, and in circles, over and over, it is quite physically taxing. My body glistened with sweat after just thirty minutes today. After showing me that step it is decided that we could start putting things together choreographically.

The dance in its entirety, that is, the first step of the first song, begins in the upstage-stage right corner. Manuel pressed play and runs over to where I am before the eight-beat introduction is over.
“Okay, now follow me!” he says.

The first step, which runs along upstage, and curves toward centre stage was no problem. I even managed to keep time pretty well. But it was the second step, which involves keeping time while doing the tippy toe steps that I had difficulty with. A few screw-ups and re-starts later Manuel just asks me to just keep the maraca silent while performing the second step. At centre stage, after successfully performing the series of turns associated with the second step, we break back into the first step and circularly make our way from centre stage to the downstage-stage left corner, up to the upstage-stage left corner, across to upstage-centre where the first song concludes.

We practiced the choreography for the first song numerous times. First, we did it together. Then it is just me with Manuel seemingly critiquing my every movement. Not that it was a bad thing. His gaze, and the simple orders he barked—“Relax your body!”; “More fluid”; “Move your knees higher, Max!”; “Knees higher, Max!”; “Don’t jump so high!”; “Smaller hops, Max, smaller hops”; “You need to bend over more. Arch your back more. It’s a salutation, remember that”; “You need to feel the music, Max. Feel it”—not only act as motivation but force me to subject my body to his disciplining (see Figures 24 & 25). At all times I try to apply his comments and criticisms to my body, even while moving or suspended in the air. The last time that we practiced the first dance I ‘wore,’ or carried with me, the mask of macho ratón. It was hard to see out of and, as a result, I experience even more trouble performing the second step. What direction am I going? Which way am I facing? I could not
even tell at times. Before I know it, however, our second day of class was over. For two hours, except for a five-minute break, I constantly moved. Manuel ran to his office and quickly burned the music we had been working with onto a compact disc.

“This is for you, to practice the steps at home,” he said.

When the lessons had been set up a few months prior I had been warned that I was going to be worked hard, but that was what I wanted. Bang for my buck. I had only planned to spend one month in Nicaragua, so I needed to learn the dance and answer my research questions quickly. Nevertheless, in the evening I am too exhausted from the first lesson and opt not to review the steps. My left calf muscle is already in pain from overuse; too many damn plyometrics! The kind of pain I used to get in football during training camp early on (the two-a-day practices, plus the gym). Dance, like football, is physically challenging. In the little time that I have spent with Manuel I have already come to appreciate what ballerinas do; do not let anyone tell you that dancers are not athletes! By the end of this month, I come to think to myself on numerous occasions, I’m going to be in the best shape of my life.

Friday, July 9, 2009—dancing like a macho

Today Victor and I show up for class a half hour early because I want to practice what I was supposed to rehearse the previous evening. I demonstrate to him that I am able to reproduce the choreography of the first dance from the previous day. When Manuel makes his way over to
the classroom he tells me that heard me practicing from his office, but says that my maraca shakes are still a little off, especially for the second step of the first dance.

“That will come, though,” he reassures me.

Once again we start off with a warm up, reviewing all the steps. Then we quickly run through the second step of the second dance (the first step being the salutation one), which we have not covered yet, and which is somewhat hard to explain: coming out of the first step of the second dance, you step forward with your right foot—and turn the front of your body sideways (to the left)—as your hip comes through (over top of your right foot), you need to flamboyantly protrude your butt out to the side, while giving the maraca a shake at, or just above shoulder level. Then you slowly drop your arm, bending over in the process, and shake the maraca again below your waist, which signifies that you are ready to switch, or do the same with the other side of your body. So you start to turn. Left foot forward, body turn sideways (to the right this time), maraca shake at shoulder height, flamboyant (left) butt-cheek movement, and then repeat. The problem I am having is that I make the movements look too rigid. Perhaps I am thinking too much as I move?

The steps need to melt together, “more fluid,” Manuel kept saying.

Had I taken up salsa lessons prior to travelling to Nicaragua perhaps my hips would have been a little looser and I would be able to make such flamboyant, fluid movements. By the midpoint of our lesson, however, I have managed to put the first two dances together choreographically. Fine tuning and fluidity could come later.

I am tired and sore at the break. After my seventh towel down and guzzling another 500mL of water, I feel somewhat rejuvenated though. We leave the choreography for now and move onto an introduction of the fourth dance, which is easily the fastest and most popular
amongst Nicaraguans. Manuel, Angelina, Fabricio, Victor, amongst others, all tell me that “the dance of the machos” is easily the best. In order to break me in, Manuel instructs me to perform the steps from stage left to stage right, and back again, while standing straight up. The first step involves strongly kicking your feet forward, while moving forward, which is quite challenging. As soon as you hear the music, the beat (“ta” or “ka”), you have to move your feet! Right, left, right, left, right, left, and quickly! Taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka, taka-taka-ta-ka (repeat two more times; 1:06 minutes total). Literally, three steps per second right from the beginning, which travels on a direct slant from upstate-stage left to downstage-stage right, and then, once there, three steps per two seconds, while moving around in a circle, and then doing the same steps, only backwards, to ‘upstage-stage right.’ All while shaking your maraca in front of you every time you push a foot forward. What makes the dance even more complex is that you have to perform the foot kicks bending over in a crouch; a very low crouch.

The second step of the fourth song begins from upstage-stage right. From the crouch the güegüencista suddenly stands up and moves into a skip, and you pop up their left knee to waist height in the process. Using the knee to propel oneself forward, then, the next knee follows in the same pattern. Whenever a knee reaches its maximum height—that is cue to give the maraca a shake, to the beat of course. The skipping goes from upstage-stage right to upstage-centre, before curving toward centre stage. From there the skipping pattern continues, but on the fourth high knee the dancer does a complete 360 degree circle to the right. Then again, it is one knee, two knee, three knee, and turn! By the second turn one needs to be at downstage centre, but then you have to break down into the first step again (i.e. “taka-taka-ta-ka”), carving out a circular
pattern from downstage center, to the left, but not as far as downstage-stage right or upstage-stage right, eventually ending up back in the centre. From there you pick up the pace again. Moving forward the entire time the dancer thereby moves in a figure eight, from centre stage to downstage-stage right, to upstage-stage right, and across to downstage-stage left. A series of backwards steps and stomps follow, followed by a few steps forward, in order to finish up at upstage-stage left, in preparation for the next song (or, in this case, day).

Saturday, July 10, 2010—A short but eventful day

There was no cameraman today because my little bro had a job interview—thank god. Mamá, in the morning, was somewhat nervous that I am going to be alone at the Academy, especially since there have been student riots and fighting between two Universities located across and down the street from where I am taking lessons. To comfort her I took off my gold chain, wedding band and earrings before I left with Victor, who was dropping me off at the Academy prior to his interview.

Class is only for one hour today and I am looking forward to having the rest of today and tomorrow off, to rest and lick my wounds. Manuel tells me that today is simply a review day. After a brief warm-up we walk through the choreography that I have learned up to date and he specifically points out where and what I need to improve. To the music, I fully practice the first three dances a few times. I have not learned the choreography for the fourth dance—the dance of the machos—yet, although it has been outlined above. Class is only for one hour today.

When Victor got back from the interview, which was for a security guard position, he looked disappointed. For ten hours a day seven days per week he was expected to work in a parking lot at a plaza. How was he to be remunerated? Not that well: a meagre monthly salary
of $100, which translates to about thirty six cents per hour.\textsuperscript{34} Such an individual might make a few córdobas here or there in tips, by offering/promising to “keep a special eye” on someone’s vehicle, or by helping that individual back out of a parking space, but Victor tells me at this point of his life—being a third year accounting student and all—that he would not agree to work for more than forty-five hours per week and for no less than a monthly salary of $150.\textsuperscript{35} 

\textit{Sunday, July 11, 2010—Working hard; or, hardly working}

I have the day off from dance today. Mamá wants me to practice later, which I do not end up doing. Because I have sweated so much (dance class, gym workouts, general hotness of the sun), I am already running out of clothes. So I decide that it be best that I go ahead and wash my clothes. Mamá offered to do them for me, but I refuse. She then suggests Victor do them while he did his that afternoon, which I tell her I think is silly. The washing of clothes at the Garcés household usually takes place in the morning, so that they can catch the afternoon rays to dry. Hopefully it will not rain today. It has in fact rained every day since I arrived. Some days it lasts for just fifteen minutes. Other days it pours, spits and then pours again for hours and hours. To wash two towels, a pair of jean shorts, five pairs of boxers, four t-

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{34}The sad thing is that there are individuals—most likely men with families to feed—who would in fact take that job.

\textsuperscript{35}After a few more months of job searching, Victor managed to put his incomplete University education to good use. He landed a job as a banker, which pays $200 per month for four forty-five hour work weeks.
shirts, and eight pairs of socks, it took me 1.5 hours. Not bad for a rookie, eh (see Figures 26 and 27)?

Later that afternoon was the FIFA World Cup 2010 championship. Every Nica in our barrio seemingly was glued to their television set. You can hear the “ooh’s” and “ahh’s” whenever a Spaniard made a nice play. Victor laughed at the profanities people yelled at their TV whenever they thought the Dutch are about to score. The Spaniards prevailed.

*Monday, July 12, 2010—Back to work*

Today I arrived at the Academy thirty minutes early again because I wanted to practice before Manuel had arrived. This was in fact what I was supposed to do on Sunday sometime, but due to a lack of time, space, energy, and imagination, practicing had been put off. Victor noticed that I had become increasingly comfortable with the dances, though my body was not completely in sync with the music yet, something that Manuel seemingly constantly reminded me of. I was nevertheless able to perform the choreography of the first three dances flawlessly, with the exception of the flexibility and fluidity required for some of the moves.

When Manuel arrived, because I was able to rehearse all of the steps that we had previously reviewed, we moved onto the choreography of the fourth dance. By the end of the day I had this dance memorized too. I was surprised and impressed, as is mamá—who had joined us because she had the day off. Manuel told her and Victor in Spanish that I seemed to be picking things up very quickly. And I noticed that there are even some spectators near the end of class.36

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36It started off as just two little girls and their mom at first, and then six more girls shortly after. The crowd soon ballooned to fifteen, however, and they watched me rehearse the four songs that I had learned up to that point. I thrived on the pressure, which I attribute to a long history of high performance sport, and managed to put on quite a show! The crowd, including Manuel, mamá, and Victor, did not clap, but they seemed mesmerized by the ‘performance.’ I am not a mind reader, but the others in attendance must have been thinking: *hmm, not bad, but why the hell is this gringo dancing traditional folklore?*
That afternoon mamá, Victor, and I travelled to Managua’s Roberto Huembes mercado\textsuperscript{37} to buy some groceries. Commonly known as “the people’s market,” it existed long before the Sandinistas came to power. At least since Angelina was a child because she remembered travelling there with her mother as early as the 1960s. She described the market as a relatively safe place with the exception of the buses that motor in and out, as well as the odd vehicle that tries to navigate the area too quickly. The vast majority of sellers at the market were women and every fruit, vegetable, and root that one could imagine seems to be available for purchase; everything from apple, banana and carrot to watermelon, yucca and zucchini (see Figure 28), all fresh from the farm.

For basic foodstuffs (rice, beans, fruits, vegetables) the prices at Roberto Huembes market were generally cheaper than \textit{La Colonia}, which Angelina describes as being for people with lots of money, and \textit{Pali} (generally for the “middle class,” or “lower class” individuals who do not have access to the markets). The Oriental Market, sometimes referred to as the “West Nicaraguan market,” is even bigger than Huembes. Fifteen times bigger, Angelina estimates. The prices were even cheaper too. But it was described as unsafe by Angelina. And, being from the east side, it was far too far for her to travel.

After touring the outside of the market we stopped and watched the tortilla makers for a few minutes before checking out the inside of the market; a building which features even more produce, including fresh fish and meats, household products and mini-restaurants. It was really hot inside the building. The sun

\textsuperscript{37}Huembes, a hero of the revolutionary war, died in 1976
was scorching today and I was feeling the heat. That was why I was always sure to carry around a water bottle with me. We picked up some kerosene, and then Angelina spots an old neighbour of hers that just opened a drink stand. So I indulged in a frothy cup of cacao, while mama and Victor opted for something fruitier (see Figure 29). Afterward we continued walking around and I bring the water bottle to my lips, after which I read the outdated “coca-cola” label. But it was too late. I spat the liquid remaining in my mouth out knowing I had just made a huge mistake.

“Que paso?” mamá asked.

“Ohh shit!” Victor shouts, proceeding to tell his mother in Spanish that I had just ingested some kerosene.

Mamá rushed over to a vendor and asks her for some milk. In a state of shock I try to puke, without sticking fingers down my throat, which was unsuccessful. The taste of the gas was repugnant. I downed the milk—although I did not know whether that was the best thing to do or not. The vendor also gave Victor some water and lemon juice for me. I rinsed out my mouth as best as I could, but I was worried. *What should we do? Was I going to die? Should we go to the hospital?* Thankfully I had purchased health insurance before leaving Canada. We rushed to the car. I sat down on the passenger side where my actual bottle of water was. I continue rinsing out my mouth. Spitting whatever fraction of the kerosene I could out. My stomach was turning. I got out of the car and vomited in the parking lot, not once, but twice. *At least that should have got some of it out of my system,*
if I had even ingested any at all, I thought. I could not recall if I had swallowed any. When we got into the car Angelina asked if I wanted to go to the hospital. I told her that I thought I was fine. For the rest of the day, however, I kept burping and tasting kerosene. I prayed for it to one day go away. One of mamá’s friends, a doctor, came over to check on me twice that evening. Even if I had ingested just a little bit, he says that I would be fine.

After a late afternoon nap I woke up and had some homemade soup for dinner. A hearty bowl of the concoction, made with water, chicken broth, chicken quarters, yucca, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, chicken, tomato broth (just a little), plantains, onions, garlic, chiltoma, and maize seemingly pleased my stomach. I threw some rice into the bowl as well, which made it even heartier. Once I had downed the soup I rolled up my homemade tortilla and cleaned up the mess, thereby trying to leave the memories and taste of the kerosene behind me.

Tuesday, July 13, 2010—A funny feeling in the pit of my stomach

I started the second week of classes today (hours 8 & 9 total), but I was not feeling that well. There was the kerosene incident on Saturday, yes, but the high-fibre cereal was also not doing what I expected it to do. Fabricio came over for breakfast that morning and, upon learning that I had woke up numerous times to go the washroom the evening prior, he proceeded to give Angelina trouble for letting me drink cacao, implying that it was the tainted ice cubes that were the source of my sorrow. Although it may very well have been the ice cubes, I usually had this problem when I travel to Nicaragua. It was likely some combination of the thirty-plus degree weather and foods and drink that I was unaccustomed to, I conclude. Also, this time around I was working my body way too hard. Besides dance classes, Victor and I had been going to the gym regularly and we had also been playing soccer three times a week. I may have very well
been conducting research, but my time in Nicaragua could certainly have been mistaken for some sort of sport camp.

For the first hour of class Manuel and I revisited the third and fourth songs, and then the entire piece up until that point, which is to say, we put everything together. I run into some difficulties with the second third of the fourth dance, which involves high knees and spins (the choreography has already been described, although I have not practised it that much up until this point). I keep turning the wrong way, like five or six times in a row! Sometimes when Manuel does the moves I feel like I understand him (how his body moves), but then I cannot reproduce it. He has performed this dance so many times and looks so elegant. Another part I need to improve on is the side step ballet kicks (dance three). There is a need for me to rotate my shoulders a bit more to distinguish it from the “Irish jig” step. In other words, not just the footwork but also the upper body is supposed to exemplify this.

*Wednesday, July 15, 2010—got the local bug?*

I was unable to attend dance class today because at 8:00am my stomach was in so much pain. Angelina had to go to work so she left me under the watchful eye of Fabricio. Every time I woke up for a bathroom break he asked me how I am doing. With only two weeks left in Nicaragua, I communicated to mamá the previous evening that we needed to start setting up interviews. Earlier in the day she had spoken with *profesor* Ronald Abud Vivas—the director of *Ballet Folklorico Nicaragüense*—who taught my dance instructor at one time, on the phone and he agreed to meet with us for an interview later that afternoon. Abud is an entrepreneur in that he formed his dance group in his early twenties, which has gone on to become one of Nicaragua’s most famous. He was also the first one to try and portray El Güegüense through contemporary dance. Feeling a little bit better later in the day I thought it might be a good idea
to get that one out of the way. During the interview, Victor acts as my interpreter, which he did for the rest of the interviews as well, and Angelina and Fabricio accompany us.

_Thursday, July 16, 2010—Out for a day or two_

Although I felt better this morning, I was still not feeling up to jumping all around just yet. I had woken up every hour to go the washroom the night prior. For breakfast mamá refused to let me eat my daily ritual of milk and cereal, so I have fruit salad: mango, pineapple, papaya, and banana. Angelina noticed that I have lost some weight since arriving in Nicaragua. Most of it was just water weight, from all the sweating, but the sickness probably played a role too.

Rather than dancing, we decided it would be beneficial to get Manuel’s interview out of the way today. Victor accompanied me. I spent much the rest of the day resting in bed.

_Friday, July 16, 2010—A busy day_

Having made it throughout the entire night without waking up to go the bathroom, I was looking forward to continuing classes today. Manuel and I begin with a warm up: I perform all the steps in accordance with songs one, two, three and four. From stage left to stage right, back and forth I go. Learning the steps to dances five and six are next.

The first step of dance five was one that I had already been exposed to, that is, whereby the güegüencista hops on one foot and kicks their other leg straight forward and then mule-kicks back, while hopping on the same foot. Each leg then performs the opposite move and vice versa. Choreographically, after a four beat introduction, this step begins from upstage-stage left and proceeds for sixteen beats. During this count the dancer was to move diagonally across from upstage-stage left to downstage-stage right, up to upstage-stage right and then toward centre stage. Entering the central stage from the back the dancer then could proceed to carve out a three hundred sixty degree circle clockwise around centre stage before breaking out into the next step.
The transition from step one to step two I found awkward, mostly because step one involved suspending oneself in the air, flinging one’s legs forward and backward as one constantly moved forward, while the second step was more of a stationary gallop, performed standing up straight, and moving ahead only a couple of inches at a time. For the second step body weight is mostly maintained on the left foot. It starts off by raising the right knee to waist level, flexing the hip. From there the hip is re-extended and the front half of the right foot briefly, but thoroughly touches the ground. During this quarter of a second or so, the left foot is raised off of the ground a few inches and body weight is shifted to the front half of the right foot, after which the left foot steps down once again and the right knee pops up. The second step lasts just ten beats or twenty gallops. Shaking of the maraca occurs when the right knee reaches its climatic height and there are therefore twenty shakes. I have trouble picking up the gallop because it requires quick footwork. Altogether the galloping begins at downstage-centre stage and proceeds in a counter clockwise direction, carving out a small circle, ending up at centre stage, after which the dancer breaks out into the first step again.

This time around the dancer kicks his legs forward and backward in a figure eight from centre stage to downstage-stage right, to upstage-stage right, back to centre stage before proceeding from there to downstage-stage left, upstage-stage left, across the back of upstage, and ending up at centre stage with a hop, landing on two feet with a *thud* in a crouch on the last beat. Managing to perform the steps and then the choreography correctly, after a few attempts, the sixth dance is up next.

The final dance involved three steps and is relatively easy to explain. The song is the same as the first song, although the choreography and steps are a little different. When the song starts out the dancer is at centre stage. The first step of the sixth song is the same as the first step
of the first song, but travels from centre stage to downstage-centre stage to downstage-stage right. Between centre stage-downstage and downstage-stage right, however, the dancer discontinues their straightforward path, performing the step in a circle instead, that is, toward upstage, toward stage left, and toward downstage, before continuing along their path to the corner. From downstage-stage right the dancer then curves up toward upstage-stage right corner where the first step culminates.

From the upstate-stage right corner was where the second step, a new step begins, which was a mutation of the first step. The güegüencista first was to step forward with their right foot, raising their right arm to head level in order to shake the maraca, after which they were to half-step with the right foot back before proceeding to step forward with the left foot, shaking the maraca at chest level. After half-stepping backward with their left foot, instead of stepping forward with the right foot again, as would be the case in the first step of the first and sixth dances, the dancer was to instead propel themself forward, or “run” forward, performing a series of three butt kicks. First it was the left foot, right foot, left foot, and then, after the second series of forward steps, the opposite: left foot, right foot, left foot butt kicks. Whenever the dancer performed the first of the two forward steps, between the butt kicks, no matter whether it was the right or left foot, the arm was raised during the first step, which is in contrast to the first step of the first and sixth dances whereby the arm was raised to shake the maraca when the right foot stepped forward only. The second step travelled from upstage-stage right diagonally to downstage-stage left. From there it goes up to upstage-stage left, across upstage to upstage centre, and ends up at centre stage.

The third step of the sixth song was the same as the second of the first dance, that is, the one that I have so much difficulty keeping time while performing. One difference was that the
dancer does not turn in a circle (i.e. downstage, stage right, upstage, stage left, downstage and then back). No, the step was instead further complicated during the sixth dance because you have to perform a series of 180 degree spins. One will recall that from the neutral position: the dancer was to hop forward, leading with their right leg, landing on their right foot, and then perform three tippy toe steps, which was divided equally by two maraca shakes. After the tippy toe steps you were to hop backward, with your left leg leading this time, followed by the tippy toe steps and shakes. In the second step of the sixth dance you perform such a series of events twice. On the third series of steps forward, however, you were to perform the tippy toe steps while turning around and then the backward steps with your back facing downstage, thereby performing a 180 degree turn. When you hopped forward, toward upstage, you were to immediately perform another 180 degree turn and then repeat that series once more, that is, two sets of normal steps followed by two 180 degree turns. It took me a while to get that one. I also had trouble keeping time, as I had during the first song.

The fourth step of the sixth song, which was the first step from the first dance again, was the last step of the performance in its entirety. This time the step occurred five times counterclockwise around centre stage, ending up at the upstage-stage right corner of centre stage, facing the downstage-stage left corner. The dancer finished in a crouch with their arms in front of them. At the end of class Manuel asked me to try and put all the dances together. I managed to perform the choreography flawlessly, although some of the steps were, as usual, far from perfect.
Later that afternoon Victor and I picked up mama at work from Alcadila, or Managua’s City Hall (see Figure 30), and she starts talking to me about the other interviews on the way home. Just as we were about to turn onto our street she points excitedly to the car next to us. It was Carlos Mario Peña, son of Nicaraguan folklorist Don Enrique Peña Hernández, the latter being one of the persons I was supposed to interview. Angelina had not managed to get a hold of him as of yet so we followed the car to the folklorist’s home, just a couple blocks from ours. Outside his casa some formal introductions were made and he invited us in, cracking numerous jokes in the process. I was not wearing a shirt at the time because it is disgustingly drenched in sweat. I felt a little embarrassed meeting a man of such status. Don Peña was a former Supreme Court Judge and a distinguished author.

“Where is your shirt?” Don Peña asked me as soon as we arrive. Mamá apologized and explains that we had just come from dance class.

He followed that up with other questions: “Don’t people from Canada shower?” Next, it was my earrings: “why do you have two earrings? Do you play for the other team? Or, are you a pimp or something?” Upon being reminded that I am looking for an opportunity to interview him, he asked: “How much are you going to pay me?”

“How much you want!” I replied, “Or maybe some lunch?”

“No, I don’t like food. How about you take me to a nightclub” he joked, with his wife within earshot, insinuating that it might be fun for us to “pick up” some women.

After we agreed to conduct an interview later that day, and chit chat a bit more, I gave his wife a kiss on the cheek, just as we were preparing to leave, which is customary to do to family and friends, or friends of family, in Nicaragua.

38 Don or Doña is used to show someone older, or ‘of status,’ respect. For instance, some of our neighbours call mama: doña Angelina.
“Are you hitting on my wife?” he asked. “I know they don’t do that sort of stuff in Canada.”

“No, no—you don’t need to worry about me,” I said with a smile, sticking my hand out to shake the old man’s hand, telling him that I would see him in a few hours.

When we return to the folklorist’s house to hold the second interview, the old man did not poke so much fun at me. But, mamá did make sure that I was dressed appropriately for the encounter. Obviously a shower and a shirt were in order this time around. She also told me to wear neither a pair of jeans nor a pair of cargo shorts, which I usually do in Nicaragua because it is so hot. Rather, she suggested that I wear dress pants and a dress shirt. I ponder whether this has something to do with a sign of respect. *Or was it something to do with cleanliness and hygiene? Perhaps it has something to do with the ‘old school’ way to dress?* I did not know. I followed her instructions though. Although a distinguished scholar, having chronicled most all occurrences of Nicaraguan folklore (the whereabouts and when) in his *Folklore de Nicaragua* (1986 [1968]), and having composed several language books that were staples in the Nicaragua’s public school system prior to and after the revolution, Don Peña admitted to me that there were better scholars to read or interview (e.g. Jorge Eduardo Arellano, Carlos Mántica A., Davila Bolaños, and co.). He, by way of comparison, was a generalist, a man of knowledge, and in fact has not seen *El Güegüense* performed live in some time. One thing that I did learn from him and his son, Carlos Mario, reinforced the notion that the performance was a “trickster” tale. They informed me that when something surprising occurs in Nicaraguan society—for example, when someone wins an election that is not supposed to; or, when a baseball teams wins that is not supposed to—people sometimes say “ah, it must be [because of] the Güegüence.” Westlake (2009) has further validated this claim in her piece *The Güegüence Effect*. Such an interpretation
of what the performance or main character represents is what inspired me to write the following poem.

* * *

#1 Trickster: Said says sayings

A gringo travels to Nicaragua:

He learn to dance folklore

“It must have been the Güegüense”

In the barrios of Managua:

Yuma became a boxer

“It must have been the Güegüense”

In the next World Cup, the boob tube screams:

“‘Nicas’ beat the yanquis! ‘Nicas’ beat the yanquis!”

(People will say?) _____________________

* * *

After the “interview,” which ultimately turned into an interview of me, Don Peña and his wife, and Angelina, Victor and I sit back, enjoy a glass of chicha, a corn based drink, and spoke about everyday things. The old man gives me three of his books and signs them all. He furthermore expressed interest in obtaining a copy of my project once I finished it.

So why did I choose to include data from my dialogue with Don Peña? I did so for two reasons. First, to provide reference as to where I heard the saying: “it must have been the Güegüense.” Secondly, the old man is simply amusing, interesting, light-hearted and witty. Yes, having written several influential books, and having been a lawyer turned Supreme Court Judge for a number of years, he has managed to accumulate quite a bit of capital and is therefore not
your typical Nicaraguan. Perhaps it is true that he is at ease then, and feels comfortable with what he has accomplished in life. Good humour is not limited to the rich and/or influential in Nicaragua. My family and friends are constantly telling jokes, laughing and smiling. I even observe people working the streets for ten or more hours per day, peddling candies, fresh fruit, or car accessories, finding time to have a good laugh. Despite the deplorable conditions of their country, Nicaraguans feel a sense of pride in their heritage. In Managua, I came across a man selling cell phone accessories. His vest proudly read “soy 105% Nica,” which perhaps sheds light on such light heartedness (see Figure 31). Because the vast majority of people I know in the country—in contrast to the Don Peña—do not have money, how should the good humour they bring forth day in and day out be explained?

That evening we decided to go to a nightclub after all: Moods, perhaps Managua’s most popular, though Victor and I did not take the folklorist along with us. We instead met some friends at the disco and proceeded to have a few drinks. Afterward, hungry from all the dancing, we opted to go to a late-night pizzeria. By this point Victor was now driving regularly, and, although he did not yet have his license, he was studying for the test at my urgings. About a block away from the pizzeria we are stopped by two police officers. One of them approached us, told us to get out of the car, and asked Victor for his license. Bro gives him his Panamanian citizenship card. Had la policia taken the time to read the card a little more closely he would have realized that Victor did in fact not have a license and
then we would have been in real trouble. He asked if Victor had any alcoholic beverages that night. Victor tells him that he had had just two beers.

The policeman believed Victor, but informed him that his Panamanian license was no good in Nicaragua: “So what are we going to do?” he asked in Spanish. Victor suggested that the policeman accept some cash that we had. He only wanted five dollars. We dodged a bullet. Although Victor was not impaired, a Nicaraguan ex-friend of mine regularly drove drunk because he could afford to pay the forty or fifty dollars that would probably be requested. I pulled out my wallet, grab 100 córdobas and start handing it to the cop who urged me—through Victor—to be more secretive in my actions. He did not want his partner to see that he was extracting cash from us.

Saturday, July 17, 2010—it’s all economic

Realizing that I had thus far already spent well over half of the US$1600 that I had brought to Nicaragua, and knowing that I wanted to leave some money for the family at the end of the trip, I informed Manuel that today was going to be our last class, even though we were scheduled for three more days. Besides more or less being able to perform the choreography that he had taught me, I also had it recorded on film. So I could practice at home in Canada. It was not as if I was going to turn into an elegant ballerina over night or anything. He understood the circumstances. After the typical warm-up we ran through the choreography of dances five and six again, which I was having the most trouble with simply because I had not practised them much. For an hour we focused on those two. After I managed to memorize the choreography Manuel asked me to try and put it all together, which I do. This time, the choreography is flawless.
At the end of class today my instructor presented me with a bright orange headdress with shiny spots on it, one that is hard to find in Nicaragua. In other words, Manuel either gave to me something that is of sentimental value to him, or he had gone out and purchased it for me. I graciously accepted the gift. Because I had also told him that I was interested in purchasing the full dress, a friend of his comes to the Academy who has experience making such costumes. She took my measurements and told me that the price was going to be $25, which I think to be more than reasonable. Mask and headdress already in hand, I was to pick up the rest of the costume on my last day in Nicaragua. And so Manuel and I said our farewells, took some pictures, and I told him that he was one hell of a teacher. My instructor, in turn, told me that I am a pretty good dancer, explaining that he knew how white people experienced difficulty dancing.

_Sunday, July 18, 2010—prepping for tomorrow’s big day_

Today I slept in until 10:00am because not much was going on. We just have an interview with actor-director César Paz at 2:00pm. In one of my previous interviews, that of _profesor_ Ronald Abud, I was told that Mr. Paz was someone that I needed to talk with as he was probably the most familiar with the storyline of _El Güegüense_, having studied it for over two decades.

We returned to _la casa_ just after 4:00pm and you could tell that celebration was in the works (see _Figure 31_). Tomorrow was the 31st anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Tonight there was a live concert at the _Masaya Carreterra_, which was closed down for a street party. Each community, or _barrio_, seemingly also had their own minor celebrations. For instance, just down the street, near Fabricio’s house, there was a group...
gathered around a miniature stage upon our return. Children took turns thwacking at piñatas for caramel candies. Trophies and other awards were also given out for various sports accomplishments, something that mamá told me the Sandinistas support quite well. The local political leader also gives a speech while I am there, which includes a reflection on the Revolution and Sandinista policies. In all there are sixty-three people at the gathering when we stop by and approximately half are seated on white plastic chairs brought from home. Tomorrow is the big party though, at Plaza de la Fe Juan Pablo II, near Ruben Dario National Theatre. Each year that President Ortega has been in power since its construction he has addressed a crowd of about 500,000 from the bandstand, or acoustic shell (see Figures 32 & 33), which stands just south of Sandino Park and Lake Managua, across the road from the National Theatre.

We opted to stay home tonight. On television the activities from the Masaya Highway looked to be a bit too much for me: collapsing human pyramids, celebratory drinking, fire rockets, loud music, etc. Instead, I swayed back and forth to the revolutionary tunes that are being played over the speakers in our barrio, which make me feel like I am on an adventure, although I am unable to understand the words. Fabricio and I played a few games of chess, which was quickly becoming one of our favourite pastimes together. Mamá watched one of her
favourite Latin American *telenovelas* on the TV, while Victor visited his fiancée. Firecrackers popped all night long.

*Monday, July 19, 2010: Viva la revolución?*

Today marked the 31st anniversary of the revolutionary triumph in Nicaragua, though the Sandinistas have only been in power for 16 of those years (1979-1990 & 2006-present). There will be a huge televised street party later today at the *Plaza de la Fe Juan Pablo II* (see *Figures 32 & 33*). Upwards of 500,000 Sandinista sympathizers were expected. Our family—traditionally Sandinista supporters—opted for something a bit more intimate, however. We went to the house of Angelina’s sister and her husband. Their daughter and her husband, along with their daughter, were also there. They in fact lived with my *tío* and *tía*. I purchased four pounds of ground beef, a package of chicken hot dogs, some buns, and a twelve-pack of Heineken for the gathering. It was the first time that anyone in my Nicaraguan family had passed a holiday with barbequed food, which was much more common in my family, especially for July 1st, Canada Day. There was much to drink at the gathering as well. *Tío* had an extensive bar, but I opted for some national rum, *Flor de Caña*, and cokes.

That evening at *tío* and *tía*’s, their granddaughter performed some folklore. She looked so beautiful in her traditional dress. Throughout the performance, her reddish-brown curly locks bounced around and her green eyes periodically looked at us for approval. We clapped as she takes one last bow. Dance was one of her favourite hobbies and she took classes every Saturday. Having just turned four, she picks things up so fast. Although we could not communicate that well, she could count to 10 in English and knew some basic phrases, such as “hi, how are you?” and “where are you going?” I wrote her letters and sent her postcards from Canada often. After my little cousin went to bed, *tío*, his son-in-law, Victor and I continued to throw back the rum,

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39 *Telenovela* translates to soap opera.
while tía, her daughter, and mama opt for some wine. Angelina, Victor and I introduced the rest of the family to “asshole,” that card game that my family had come to enjoy so much, and we proceed to laugh the night away.

*Tuesday, July 20, 2010—Hangovers, comfort food, and poetry*

A little bit before 7:00am I roll out of bed because I could sleep. It was not because of the bread lady this time, though. There was a stupid rooster that keeps screaming “cock-a-doodle-doo” and a neighbour’s dog barking uncontrollably. Plus, the birds were chirping noticeably more this morning. Probably payback to the humans for keeping them, nature, awake all night with the loud music and fireworks. This morning I wanted Victor to accompany me for a workout so I woke him up and told him it was 10:00am. He does not realize the actual time until we reached the gym and vowed to pay me back. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but sometime before I left, he told me. The rest of the morning we relaxed, metabolizing what alcohol remains in our circulatory system.

By midday Victor and I were both quite hungry so I take him out for a late lunch to *María Bonita’s*, an all you can eat Mexican restaurant. We have our fill of soup, fried plantains, pasta, nacho-pizzas, sausages, and lemon beef on rice, and then I ask for the tab. Inclusive of a *Toña* and a Pepsi, as well as a mandatory tip, the bill comes to just US$14.

After lunch we have a couple of hours to kill and Victor suggests that we go to *Metrocentro*, Managua’s main shopping centre. The problem is that most of the prices are comparable to North American shopping malls, so we window shop for the most part.
Located on the Masaya highway, just five minutes north of the hill where the towering charcoal Sandino statue stands, the mall has over 120 shops and a wide range of other services available: financial institutions, immigration and migration offices, a food court, a movie theatre, free internet access and playgrounds, etc. Along with a huge parking garage, the mall also has the space available to host concerts, fashion events, theatrical performances, trades shows and more. Because I always try to bring a gift for each one of my immediate family members when I travel, but had neglected to do so for Fabricio this time around, Victor and I determine that a cell phone would be perfect, considering Fab’s phone had fallen into the toilet a few days prior.\footnote{40} Even though I did not want to buy the phone, knowing how badly Nicaraguans get “ripped off,” I know it is important for him to have it.\footnote{41} Victor and I purchase a stylish, yet simple red and black phone, and then we hop in the car and start heading toward mamá’s work.

At lunch, because we did not have any dessert, and because my youngest “bro” had never had a McFlurry, we stop at the McDonald’s just off of Rotonda El Güegüense, located about halfway between Metrocentro and the building where Angelina works. Every day we have driven by the monuments located at the centre and along the perimeter of the roundabout, but I had neglected to bring my camera until today. The monument at the centre of the roundabout is

\footnote{40}{For instance, this time around my parents had purchased a laptop for Angelina, while I had brought along a new pair of soccer cleats for Victor. Also, prior to embarking on my ethnographic journey, I had stopped by a dollar store and a second-hand store to purchase some kitchen materials for the family: an ice tray, a couple of spatulas, a wine opener, a can opener, etc. Such gifts may seem insignificant, but it is money that the family does not then, in turn, have to spend. It also makes everyday chores easier. For example, before I gave them the can opener, Angelina, Victor, and Fabricio opened cans with a knife and a rock.}

\footnote{41}{Nicaraguan phone companies, of which there are only two (Movistar and Claro) are a rip off, relatively speaking. We put $3 on Angelina’s phone yesterday afternoon, which Victor tells me is about twenty minutes of talk time, to people who have a phone with the same company as you, that is. In other words, a couple of text messages and a few phone calls later, the cash we put on the phone was finished. How so? She made a minute and a half phone call to a friend signed on with another company, which I am told ate up most of the money. Essentially, all your friends need to have the same phone or else you are getting charged an arm and a leg for service. But mamá is not stupid and she does not use her phone when it is unnecessary, and she is careful to calculate when she should purchase minutes, as well as when and how she to use those minutes—sometimes there are promotions whereby you can get an extra 15 minutes of talk time. If she and Victor spent $50 per month on cell phones, then that would be a quarter of her monthly income. Comparatively speaking, most North Americans with a $50 monthly phone bill could pay that off with the earnings from less than a day of work.}
a scene from *El Güegüense* (see *Figure 35*). To me it represents the part of the performance whereby *Alguacil* (the mayor) instructs Güegüence how to perform proper salutation to the Governor. The fact that Güegüence’s hand is cupped around his ear suggests that he pretends not to hear whatever is being said. A third figure is off to the right and seemingly performing “the dance of the machos,” although I am not one hundred percent sure. When I dangerously cross the lanes of the roundabout to approach the monument, perhaps to read an inscription if such an inscription exists, I am turned away by a security guard.⁴² Monuments at the centre of roundabouts are located throughout the capital and are intended to enrich the urban environment; they can be considered part of Nicaragua’s “modernization project.”

Surrounding the *El Güegüense* scene at the centre of the roundabout are four more statues, which represent the Province of Nicaragua’s first four governors: cacique Agateyte, cacique Nicarao, cacique Diriangén and Don Gonzalo (see *Figures 36 to 39*).⁴³ Located at each of the four corners of the roundabout, that is, the spaces located between where traffic motors in and out, the four statues provide some necessary context for Nicaraguans’ indigenous past, one that they are ill aware of.

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⁴² The reason why I was not allowed to approach the sculpture was because some, such as the one of Jesus Christ, also in Managua, have been defaced. I nevertheless came to learn, thanks to Angelina, that the Güegüense monument at the centre of the roundabout was constructed in 2004, that it was initiated and promoted by Alcadila of Managua, that is, the branch of the Ministry of Culture that mamá works for, and that it was sculpted by Noel Flores and Pablo Vivas.

⁴³ The order is unknown, but Agateyte was ruler of the Nahuas of the Chinandega region; Nicarao was cacique for the Nahuas of the south-westernmost lands of Nicaragua, what is now the department of Rivas, and he is said to have accepted Gil Gonzalez Davila—the first conquistador—with open arms. Mass baptisms were the result. When the Spanish party travelled north toward lands of the Chorotegans, however, Diriangén was hostile, ultimately driving the invaders away, although they were shortly after defeated. Don Gonzalo was an overlord that inhabited the territory which had traditionally been dominated by the *cacique* Nicaragua. The erection of the statue of Don Gonzalo, as opposed to his predecessor, Nicaragua, is something that I am critical of. His name and title, “Don,” implies that he had already been Christianized, which in turn implies that the indigenous he governed over had already been ‘conquered.’
Regardless of my position and opinions about the monuments at rotonda El Güegüense, I find it humorous how there are golden arches standing tall right next to them. This particular McDonald’s re-opened in 1998 after it had been forced to leave the country by the FSLN almost two decades earlier. Not to pick on McDonald’s, because there obviously exists other North American fast food chains in Latin America, but to me the golden arches embodies what capitalism stands for.

Despite having not been to McDonald’s in almost a decade, we stop for the ice creams, which cost the equivalent of a couple days’ worth of rice and beans. It is the presence of unaffordable consumer items, relatively speaking, along with the presence of other foreign corporations (e.g. an American Airlines office is right across the road from McDonald’s), that perhaps prompted the anti-American graffiti, located just a half block away (see Figure 40). With the FSLN colours painted on the hydro poles in the background, it reads el yanky se va joder, which translates to “the Yankees can go fuck themselves.” Victor bursts out laughing as he snaps the picture from the car. Also on curbs nearby there are other simpler, pro-Sandinista, and presumably anti-imperialist, messages: “Viva Sandino,” “Sandino Vive,” “Viva [President] Daniel [Ortega],” and
“Viva FSLN.” Nicaragua nevertheless shares deep cultural ties to the U.S.A. that cannot be ignored.44

Despite my having not been to a fast-food restaurant in years, the fact that I break down and purchase the ice creams can be interpreted as having participated in something that I do not necessarily believe in. But to what extent I partake in capitalism is not the point. Nor is it simply my point that the cost of the items at the golden arches in Nicaragua is unfair relative to the average income of a local. Rather, my point is that, from the Spanish conquistadores and American filibusters to contemporary contras and capitalists, foreigners have plunged the country to its current situation of deplorability. Domestic political corruption has only added to the mess. As we are going through the drive thru I ask Victor whether McDonald’s ever offers free coffee, like they do in Canada for a two week span; he in turn informs me that never would such a thing happen in Nicaragua. Nothing is free unless it comes from a family or a friend. I therefore include the following two poems in this project, which come as a result of my experiences and analysis of the space surrounding the roundabout.

* * *

**Free (Arabic) coffee in Nicaragua (?)**

“Nicaraguan” and “poor”

44 For instance, baseball was introduced to Nicaragua by the Marines and it has since become the national sport, and New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers games are regularly broadcasted on Nicaraguan television; new Hollywood movies are played in theatres with Spanish subtitles, or they are burned and available on the street for a dollar; North American music can constantly be heard over the radio; and a two litre bottle of coca-cola is considered to be a staple at any holiday.
Like “Nicaragua” and “coffee”
Together two intricate words
Similar to “fair” and “toffee”

The Nicaraguan sun too
Like coffee—is hot, hot—hot!
Caffeine kicks in Managua?
Most certainly a have not

At the Golden Arches; however,
Perhaps if the coffee was free
Surely Nicas would line the streets
Not for hamburgers nor iced tea

Like the good old days then
Prints of feet leaving each town
Not to the planter’s fields
The capitalists are going down

* * *

Reverse Capitalism

Dear, Uncle Sam,

The Golden Arches of N. America
Offer up some of the finest coffee
Sometimes for free for 2 weeks
As a political demonstration, then
I go not once but twice per day

Through the drive-thru I walk
Can they take my order?
Well by golly they can!
My patronage; always with a 😊

“I hear you’re sampling your coffee?”
“...can I get you anything else today?”
“No, that will be all, thanks” and Bam!

28 free coffees = a Caffeine Kick in the balls,

Thanks Uncle Sam!

From Me

* * *

Wednesday, July 21, 2010: Picking up a masterpiece

The previous evening Angelina had informed me that my final interview, with Doña Irene López, had been set up. At the end of the interview, López offers me a DVD of her 2003 recreation of El Güegüense, entitled El Gran Picaro, as performed at Ruben Dario National Theatre. When I try to pay for it she refuses. I instead donate $20 to her dance school, which is
sometimes starved for funds. Irene invites to come back on Saturday at 3:00pm for a practice. That is my last day in Nicaragua so I agree.

Thursday, July 22, 2010: Urban expeditions

With my interviews out of the way it is time to relax. Fabricio comes over in the morning and he and I play a few games of chess and then we watch a pirated version of *La Yuma*, the 2010 “Latin American Picture of the Year.” Fab had purchased it for a dollar on the street the previous day. You can get any North American movie for the same price. We also picked up *The Karate Kid*, which was not even out of theatres yet in North America.

*La Yuma* (2009) tells the story of independent-minded and rebellious working-class woman who, in dealing with the culture of *machismo* in her barrio, finds solace and pleasure in subjecting her body to a rigorous training regime. Situated in the streets of Managua, the film is emotionally charged and is very realistic. Having watched it several times now, and spoken to several Nicaraguans who have seen it, I have come to understand that this portrayal of social life in the country is very realistic. “That’s so Nica[raguan],” bro kept saying as we watched the film. For instance, it was actually shot in the urban slums of Managua. Also, the individuals who play the roles such as, but not limited to, the local drug dealer and the national boxing coach actually fill those roles in real life. In the movie, Yuma’s youngest sister experiences sexual advances from their mother’s new common-law partner. Though not every female child experiences sexual predatory behaviour from a stepfather, some estimates suggest that a good portion of young women in that particular situation, perhaps as many as half, do, which is to say it is somewhat considered “norm,” in Nicaragua.

Also in regard to the main plotline, Yuma’s trainer/friend introduces her to a famous boxing coach in Nicaragua, who in turn decides that she has what it takes to become a fighter
and effectively turns her body into a punching machine. But Yuma does not find support from many other places for her newfound hobby. Yuma’s family and two boyfriends, as well as most of her peers, shun her for challenging gender norms. But this is confusing and contradictory because boxing is the second most popular sport in the country, behind baseball and ahead of soccer. For a country approximately the size of the state of New York, Nicaragua has certainly had its share of world champions: Alexis Arguello, Ricardo Mayorga, José Alfaro, Rosendo Alvarez, Juan Palacios, Luis Alberto Pérez, and Adonis Rivas. Yet for a woman to be a boxer is considered sacrilegious, culturally speaking. Despite the fact that Yuma quickly moves up the ranks and becomes the women’s champion in the country, it could be said that hegemonic societal values are what force her and the number one challenger, the former champion that she beats to become champion, to join the circus. Perhaps they did so just to earn more money, but one of the main points of the film, I think, is that the circus is the only place that they would be accepted. This is, however, where the film mysteriously ends: two boxers and two children, including Yuma’s younger sister, who is trying to escape their predatory stepfather, riding off into the sunset with the circus people.

After watching the movie, Fab and I are hungry and we recruit Victor to join us. Over lunch Victor and I get into a disagreement because he has not yet got his driver’s license situation figured out. I had been constantly encouraging him to study, but he is procrastinating after learning that a friend of a friend could illegally authorize licenses for $40-50. He plans to use part of the money that I am eventually going to pay him for helping me out,
even though I had communicated to him that I would gladly pay for the driver’s license test as a “bonus.” Victor wonders why he should bother studying for a $25 test when he can just pay $15-25 more and get the license anyway, without wasting hours and hours studying. My reply is that it is not as if he did not have the time to study given that he is unemployed and that he could use the $15-25 for food or some other purpose. But he tells me that he is also nervous about taking the test. Some of his friend’s had made mistakes and were forced into uncomfortable positions whereby the driving instructor insinuated that they could be bought off to look past the mistakes. As Victor and I bicker back and forth, I slam the driver’s study guide down on his bed, which inadvertently hits his stomach, leaving a red mark. He grabs a few pesos and takes the bus to his fiancée’s house.

That night, after Fabricio and I pick up Angelina from work, still upset over that afternoon’s incident, I decide that I want to go out for a few drinks, by myself to the new Chamàn. The second birth of the nightclub had taken place the previous year and, when we drove by it my first day here, it had been pointed out to me that it was in the shape of a block pyramid. The structure literally looks like something the ancient Aztecs erected (see Figure 41). When I inform mamá about my plans for that evening she is resistant. By this time, however, I am feeling comfortable, not only in my immediate surroundings but also in navigating the city. Although it took some convincing, I finally receive Angelina’s blessing and embark on a night out on the town.

Well, somewhere along the Carreterra Masaya I take a wrong turn and get lost. But I am not nervous. Still recognizing where I am, near rotonda El Güegüense, I know that I am at least close to Angelina’s work. So I continue along that path, toward Alcadila de Managua. Okay, I think, after reaching Alcadila, now I just need to start heading home. Chamàn is on the way. Not
a problem. The only difference is that I had been accompanied by my brothers or mamá on the other days. There are no street signs in Nicaragua. After making another wrong turn at some point I roll up to a male, who is about my age, standing on the sidewalk.

“Pardon mi, pero, donde es rotonda El Güegüense?” I ask.45

After coming to realize that I did not understand everything he is saying, the man points straight ahead, says “derecho,” something-something, “estadio” and “esquina,” and then, with his hand, implies that I should turn “derecha.”46

I say “gracias” and am on my way.

Surely I missed the stadium because, before I know it, I am in a part of the city that I do not think that I want to be at. It reminds me of the projects. Sure enough, Lake Managua is to my left. So down a series of back streets I continue on, eventually approaching a group of youth sitting on a curb. The littlest one stands up and flails both of his arms at me, yelling at me, seemingly implying that I am not to go down that street. Perhaps there are some large potholes or something. I contemplate stopping. Or, maybe I am going to get swarmed I think. Well there is no way I am stopping here, sorry buddy. I speed up. Eventually I come to a main road and recognize the building straight ahead.

“Ruben Dario National Theatre”! I shout. And my anxiety melts away. A little off course, but definitely closer to Chamán than I previously was.

I turn right and head south. At a gas station on the right, just south of where I snapped the picture of the projects, I notice a group of girls standing below the walker’s overpass. With all of them peering over toward my car, one of them smacks their lips at me through the open passenger side window. When I stop at the stop sign, she whispers something in Spanish, yet

45 Translates to “pardon me, but, where is the El Güegüense roundabout”?
46 The words, in order, translate to: (1) “(go) straight”, (2) “stadium,” (3) “(on the) corner (?)”, and (4) “(turn) right”.
loud enough for me to hear. I do not understand. She is about my age, maybe a little younger. I roll pass the stop sign and continue driving slowly up the hill toward Chamán, taking in my surroundings. Along this route there are women staggered about every 200 metres on either side of the street. Some of them are clearly under the age of eighteen, perhaps as young as fifteen I estimate. I notice a couple of adolescent-looking males too.

Being the only car in sight, each pair of eyes noticeably tries to make contact with mine. Curious, I have to look, but I keep driving. I suddenly feel alone, isolated. I want to talk to the youth, the girls especially, about how they feel, why they stand where they do, what their hopes and aspirations are, etc. I would, however, feel obligated to pay them for their time. To help them get off the streets. But it is doubtful that they speak English. Plus, their situation is beyond what my ten or twenty dollars could offer anyway. My compensation for their time could also be interpreted as a request for other services. What if a police officer suddenly hops out from the bushes? Surely they would extort a couple hundred dollars from me for recruiting an underage prostitute. So I keep driving.

When I get to the top of the hill I can see Chamán, lit up like a firework in the valley. I navigate to the bottom of the hill and pull into the parking lot. There are several security guards roaming around. One of them accompanies me before passing me off to the next. Such companionship continues right up to the nightclub, perhaps to prevent thieves and vandals from going to work. Admission to the nightclub is $7-8, but beers are just 50 cents. And rum and vodka are free all night. Right away I see a girl who recognizes me.

But, “...esposo de Cynthia...,” or husband of Cynthia, is the only thing that I am able to make out. I cannot recall who she is. I try to chat with her for a bit, despite the language barrier. On centre stage, where dancing usually occurs, there is a performance taking place. Two
cowboys and one cowgirl, provocatively dressed, are dancing up a storm to the reggaeton beats blaring over the speakers, to the hoots and hollers of the crowd. I stay for three drinks—two Toñas and a tall triple rum and coke. Looking around, all the locals seemingly get a single rum and coke. Their drinks are in mock, plastic rock glasses. Why did I get a triple tall drink in an actual glass made of real glass, then? Probably because I am a gringo and because had I left a tip on the previous two beers. Tips are rare for Nicaraguan bartenders. If you throw down a tip, the barmen keep their eye out for you, fighting for your patronage. But tonight I cannot stomach much more. Plus, I have to drive. I purchase a bottle of water for 15 pesos and tip another five. I walk around the club a bit more, watch the rest of the three person dance show, and then, fittingly, as Ludacris’ “Roll Out” comes on, I decide to do just that. I go say goodbye to that girl who knows me, trying to communicate to her that my stomach is not good.

When I return home mamá is sprawled out on the couch, asleep, with the television on. She had stayed up because she felt worried for me. I say goodnight and then go to bed.

*Friday, July 23, 2010—a fun filled family affair*

Today, again, Victor, Fabricio and I did not do too much until we pick up Angelina, who had scored 10 free tickets for a street festival in a neighbouring barrio at work. The tickets are 10 córdobas otherwise. She also managed to get tickets to see Ballet Folklórico Macehuatl perform on July 25, 2010 at Ruben Dario National Theatre. Tickets for the show are 200 córdobas (or US$10), but, once again, mamá manages to get them for free.

In the evening we go to the street festival, called Feria Expica, which is essentially a fair. Mamá, Fabricio, Victor and his fiancée and her mom, and Angelina’s sister’s family all come along; ten of us in total. When we arrive parking is hectic. Locals are offering up their driveways for a price. But once again Angelina uses her cultural connections to gain access to
free valet parking. It seems as though whenever mamá speaks she has the ability to melt people like butter. After a walkthrough of the fair we sit down at one of the patio sets to take in our surroundings. Some in our party taste some Salvadorian food: two thick tortillas packed with beans, cheese, and cream. After a couple litres of beers and some coca-colas, the bill comes to just $15. I pick up the tab.

As we are preparing to leave I notice one of my Nicaraguan friends walking by. Let us call him Marcus. Formerly the boyfriend of a friend of ours, he got caught cheating on her. I thought that he was a decent guy otherwise and we had previously played basketball and gone to the gym together a few times. Because Angelina’s sister’s family wanted to start heading home, to put my little cousin to bed, I suggest to Victor that we stay for a bit more of the party and then Marcus could give us a ride home as he had offered to do. It is clear to me that Angelina does not want us to stay. She keeps worrying about how, when, and what time I am going to be home.

“*Soy 25 años,*” I tell her and she makes me go get Marcus to ask when I could be expected home, which is when I become a little snappy.\(^{47}\)

“Mama, mi no a niño, okay?” Her sister tries to calm her down as well.\(^{48}\)

After the family leaves, though it took some convincing, Marcus, Victor and I make our way to the dance party, which finishes at half past midnight. In the two remaining hours the three of us dance casually, at times with groups of girls, but we are just playing around. My friend keeps trying to push girls onto me, mostly for his own benefit. When the deejay stops spinning tracks I am ready to retire for the evening and communicate this to my friend on several occasions. But he really wants me to go to *Moods*. Victor wants me to go too, but when I say no, that I prefer not to, he stops recruiting. So we hop into Marcus’ car.

\(^{47}\) Translates to “I’m 25 years old”!
\(^{48}\) Translates to “mom, I’m not a kid, okay?” in ‘Spanglish’
Between the fair and our house, however, Marcus spots some girls walking on the street. Before all of this he had kept using the word “bitches.”

“I need bitches!” he kept saying, laughing. “Where are the bitches? Tonight we are going to find some!” He is clearly intoxicated, or is he? Regardless, I have never seen him like this. I laugh with him, partially because I am uncomfortable, partially because I find him amusing, although that amusement comes to a screeching halt with what transpired shortly afterward, that is, when he spotted those two girls on the street.

“Oy!” he shouts to, or at them.

But they ignore him, even after he repeatedly tries to get their attention. Driving past them he speeds ahead and conducts a u-turn, so they are closer to his side of the car now.

“Mamacita, you need a ride?” he said in English, so that I could understand him. When they ignore him he repeats it in Spanish. At this point I am unsure what he means by “ride.” He then proceeds to use me to try and get their attention.

“Look at this gringo, nice looking guy, eh?”

His behaviour, which I had been laughing at just thirty seconds earlier, when no one else was around, quickly begins to disgust me. Growing increasingly uncomfortable I voice my opinion to my “friend”: that he should stop, especially since these girls look young. There is no way they are older than 16 or 17. And he is 33. He ignores me, turning his attention to the girls again. The two of them nevertheless remain silent and continue to walk at the same pace they had when they had first been eyed out. Strong and independent they are. Eventually Marcus becomes agitated, calling them something disrespectful in Spanish before speeding off.

I know at this point we are close to home, but then I stop recognizing the streets. And then all of a sudden we are at Moods. Even if I had wanted to go to the nightclub I am not going
to be able to get in because of what I am wearing: shorts, a t-shirt and sandals. I communicate to Marcus that I have no problem taking a cab home. I know where I am going, to what barrio anyway. Once there I could easily find the house. After recruiting a taxi Marcus does not let me close the door. With the cab driver and I both becoming increasingly irritated, I shove him out of the way, get out of the car, and slam the door shut. I walk off. The cab driver wants too much money anyways. Eventually I recruit another cab, but I have to pre-pay the driver $5 because he does not have any gasoline. I arrive home to a worried mamá, who is sleeping on the couch again. I share my story with her and acknowledge that I probably should have listened. I also tell her that I am a grown man and can get home if need be. Rather than hanging out with Marcus and eyeing out women who “wanted it,” who “needed it,” I watch some television with my wife’s mother and then go to bed.

__Saturday, July 24, 2010—homesick__

Today is my second last day in Nicaragua. And the entire family comes over with the exception of the husbands of Angelina’s sister and niece. Mamá prepares that concoction of a soup again, my favourite, so we sit down and have a nice meal. As we take our seats Angelina is sure to instruct me to take a seat at the head of the table. My bowl is noticeably packed with more veggies and it has the largest piece of chicken. Also beside my bowl is the special spoon from Panama, the biggest one, easier to corral the soup with. Perhaps because of my hearty appetite and 6’3” 200lb frame, but I cannot help but notice the symbolic meaning.

Later that afternoon we are supposed to go see Doña Irene López’s folklore group in action. But practice has been cancelled, out of respect for her neighbour who passed away earlier that day. There is no dancing and loud music on such a day. In the evening I stay home. I am supposed to go to Granada with a friend, but I am growing increasingly tired in Nicaragua.
For the first time I am somewhat homesick and I miss Cynthia, perhaps because my research is pretty much finished, so I do not feel so busy. She calls again tonight, as she had done each evening in the past few days, because my mother and stepfather were away celebrating their anniversary. The silence of the south-western Ontario countryside scares her.

*Sunday, July 25, 2010—we’re going to the ballet*

Today is quiet. In the afternoon two women whom Angelina recently met come by the house. They are looking for housing and decide to take mamá up on her offer to rent out the room just off of the garage for 50 dollars per month. Angelina is happy to have the room rented for the first time in almost a year. She can pay the monthly bills for electricity, television and internet with that money.

At 6:00pm we leave for Ruben Dario National Theatre, to see Antonio Cuadra’s *Ballet Folklórico Macehauatl* in action (see Figure 42). It is going to be my first time seeing ballet performed live. The program features 52 dancers in total and eight musicians, or two bands, one for the first part and one for the second. The 1,121 capacity theatre, which is completely decked out in red and black, I estimate to be about 80 percent full. There are three balconies, but we are in the seventh row on the floor. There are some other gringos in the crowd.

Tonight the performance is opened by a band wearing red and black tops with blue jeans. As the band plays, an image of Augusto Sandino pops up in the background, reminding the people of what political party is in power and perhaps revealing that the director supports the FSLN. A newer Sandinista dance/song follows, reinforcing my suspicions.
After the first half I go searching for a beer at intermission, but the makeshift bar has only water or juice available. Returning to my seat empty handed I am anticipating the beginning of the second half because El Güegüense is the first dance to be performed. But the group only performs three of the five or six dances, and the costumes are noticeably of lesser quality. Some of the steps have been made more spectacular than I am able to perform, which is warranted by the nature of the performance, a ballet. The masks, like the costumes, are also makeshift and not of the hand crafted quality available for purchase in Diriamba or Masaya. Perhaps it is too expensive to budget. Another thing I am critical of is that the music and steps of this representation are noticeably faster. In sum, I did not appreciate how the dance is performed, probably because I have vested so much time into understanding what it is all about.

Monday, July 26, 2010—Farewells

Today I wake up early, but Angelina had taken the bus to work already, as she usually does when I am not here. She must have decided to let me sleep in today. For breakfast I have corn flakes, banana, milk and coffee. I am planning to do some work, uploading dance videos onto my computer, and to do some transcribing of interviews. The propane gas runs out as I start to prepare lunch so we place an order, which arrives two hours later at a cost of US$12-13. The canister had last been replaced on May 30. The gasman did not have change for a twenty dollar American bill so we have to go to Esso / On the Run to get smaller bills. While we are there I fill up the car one last time. After paying the gasman I ask Fabricio to accompany me to Pali so that I can pick up some basic foodstuffs. I buy $25 in groceries for the family, and then we go to La Colonia for some other items.

Closer to two o’clock Fabricio and I take the car to the Oriental market for a job interview. This interview is for a position as a driver for an egg company. Although there is no
good word today, he did eventually secure employment with the company after I had left. Working 12 hours per day six days per week, his salary is US$400 per month. That afternoon, after picking up mamá, we also go to Roberto Huembes market to further load the house up with groceries before I leave that evening.

In the evening, on the way to Augusto C. Sandino International Airport, I am overcome with emotions; emotions that I rarely express. Never have I cried before when leaving this country. It is too dark for Mamá, Fabricio or Victor to see. I am quiet, seemingly strong, I think ready to go home. I cannot wait to see Cynthia; it has been twenty-five days. In past departing trips to the airport I always wanted to seem like I was strong. Angelina had written me a letter this time, however, telling me thank you for everything that I had done for the family this past month. There were a lot of bills that had been taken care of. Although I say thank you to her as well, for setting everything up for me, for housing me, for cooking for me, and for generally looking after me, my words cannot express how thankful I truly am. When we arrive at the airport, Fabricio takes me to the side and tells me that I am “the special person in his life,” a brother. Victor approaches me afterward, shakes my hand, pulls me in, hugs me, and kisses my shoulder. For the first time I feel like a true family member here. I had only spent 20-something days with them over five previous trips to the Nicaragua. The boys wait by the car as Angelina sees that everything goes well as I check my bags. I stuff 960 córdobas—just under US$50—into her hand, keeping $12 myself for airport food. As I kiss and hug mamá goodbye, I look up and notice Sandino looking down upon us from a painting. I bid both of them one last farewell, until next time, and disappear into the crowd. I pray for the health of my mother-in-law and for the boys to find employment soon. As of tomorrow things go back to normal, both for all of them as well as myself.
CHAPTER 4: THE GüEGüENCISTAS’ ACCOUNT

For this chapter I conducted four interviews of leading practitioners. The first interview conducted was with Ronald Abud Vivas, director of Ballet Folklórico Nicaragüense, while the second was with a former student of his, my dance instructor, Manuel Sanchez, who teaches dance at the Nicaraguan Academy of Dance. Actor-director and dramatist César Paz was the third practitioner I interviewed. He has taken part in over 400 representations of El Güegüense. I also questioned Irene López, who is director of La Compania de Danza de Irene López. Altogether, these interviews allowed me to shed light on the research questions set out in the introduction: how and why one becomes a güegüencista; what it means to be a cultural performer; and whether the practice of El Güegüense has maintained its transformative anti-colonial nature three centuries following its colonial birth.

Becoming a Güegüencista

When profesor Ronald Abud Vivas saw a güegüencista for the first time as a young boy in the mid-to-late 1950s, he recalled being frightened. The experience took place on the streets of his hometown of Diriamba, Carazo (see Figure 43), which was described as the “cuna Güegüense” (the cradle of the Güegüense). In an interview, he noted:

I watch[ed] this dance and I felt scared [of] the ... dancers because I believe[d] they [were]... monster[s]. But [then] my father ... stopped one dancer and asked the dancer [to] take off the mask and at that time my father told me: ‘you can see the dancers, they [are]

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49 Abud is commonly called ‘profesor,’ although it should be noted that he is not a profesor at a University; rather, the term is used out of respect for the former dancer, who is now director of Ballet Folklórico Nicaragüense, which is his dance company.
50 Translates to ‘cradle of the Güegüence’ in English.
human people.’ So in that moment I [stopped] crying and feeling scared. The next year... I start[ed] to dance Güegüense.

Traditionally, the only place that *El Güegüense* was performed was annually in Diriamba, on January 18 and 19, which is actually in the midst of a larger ten-day celebration (January 17-27), the Feast of Saint Sebastian. In fact, thousands of people flocked to the church plaza on those two mornings in 2010. But it is not as if it is only güegüencistas at this festival; there are also dozens of other characters from Nicaraguan folk tales, along with their musicians. There were, moreover, hundreds of sellers, who provided local food and drink, jewellery, sunglasses, toys, etc., as well as approximately two thousand participant-observers.

After the young Abud had been initiated into the Güegüense tradition, he became further involved in dance and, by the age of 17, was widely recognized as one of Nicaragua’s best performing artists. In the interview he described himself as “a natural,” something that I have heard from several other people. Although a natural talent, Abud (see Figure 44) recognized that he had weaknesses as a dancer, and hence this was his reason for enrolling into a folklore school out of Masaya. “I danced until 1978 when the Commander Zero [took] the National Palace,” he told me. “At that time I [had] to make a decision, [whether] I was [going to continue to] be a dancer or [become a] ballet director.” Weighing his options, he eventually decided to become a dance instructor because “the life of a dancer was [relatively] short.” As a result, Abud noted, “I decided to devote [my time] to teaching and [the] discipline attached to the ballet
and the costumes, makeup, costume design, investigation, promotion of the group and choreography.”

Abud’s relationship with El Güegüense deepened further when he attended teacher’s college in Jinotepe, Carazo. For one of his courses he was asked to do a project on the Güegüense tradition. The problem was that he did not have a background in theatre. So instead he decided to create a ballet. Utilizing the knowledge that he had gained in the street and at the folklore school in Masaya, he went about altering some of the steps, making them more spectacular. He also created unique costumes for the performance. The majority of his colleagues thought it was a fantastic show. It was, therefore, at teacher’s college where the foundation for Abud’s version of El Güegüense was cemented.

When the Sandinistas came to power, they were familiar with Abud and his work. The FSLN asked him to capture the revolutionary spirit by spearheading a new representation of El Güegüense, one that they could utilize to consolidate and promote a national culture. As Abud noted”

There began a movement ... at that time ... I had the advice of Jorge Eduardo Arellano, Carlos Mántica, poet Jaime Mayorga, and a lot of güegüencistas ... The first proposal we make in ... Managua, Nicaragua was a pilot proposal, where they saw my portrayal [of El Güegüense] and critiqued it, indicating what [was] right and what was wrong. I listen[ed] and went back [to work in order] to submit [another] proposal to the whole team of intellectuals, güegüencistas, Nicaraguans, and [then they] said it was okay. They liked it so much that [it] is in a book by Jorge Eduardo Arellano, which mentions my work.

Altogether, Abud’s portrayal of El Güegüense features five dances and is around eight minutes.

His choreography, which was informally labelled “Nicaraguan” because it was composed for the

Ministry of Culture, has since been reproduced by dozens of other directors. The thing is that each one who has followed him took what he had already done and altered it somehow. Some have become famous.

From there, with the knowledge Abud acquired at the Masaya folklore school, along with his personal experiences, he created his own school. Aiming to promote his interpretation of El Güegüense, he told me the following:

By teaching my methodological approaches and pedagogical knowledge ... students began to re-evaluate their appreciation [for their country], so my work [was and] is not only to teach dance, but also to instil appreciation for our country, our values, our traditions ... The school has had a national seal for 42 years now, so the phenomenon that is me this was when I started to make the transition, as the people do in Academia, and that’s why they are saying I’m a pioneer.

In other words, Abud stressed how his becoming a household name was linked to the recognition that the dance has gained as a national culturally significant tradition. Before this could happen, however, Abud used the directorship of his ballet company as a way to gain a fuller and more mature understanding of the Nicaraguan dance tradition. By the mid-1980s, Abud said he was widely considered “one of the five pillars upon which the modern dance movement rested upon.”

But El Güegüense was just one cultural form that Abud has portrayed through contemporary dance. Some of his past programs that he gave to me during the interview say it all. He has portrayed physical culture from all eras and all regions of the country. In the words of the profesor himself, his performances are “like do[ing] a tour [of the] history and geography of Nicaragua ... [El] Gueguense is [just] part of a whole.” Abud continued on in the interview, “For my ballets, there has never been an empty chair; the venue is always full,” which is the
reason why his folklore group is the highest grossing one at Ruben Dario National Theatre. He summed up this argument later:

As I was saying earlier in the interview, when you go to the theatre and I’m going to dance you have to book a week before because [one] does not find tickets. There are other companies that do not have people come and [the directors] give away the tickets (for free). [Some of these shows] are very good shows and maybe even better than mine, but they have more resources and [they] have friends with influence and [manage to] get a good sponsor. But I am not [a] selfish person, and I don’t have a selfish attitude, or [turn a] blind eye not to recognize that there are very good groups. But they lack the charisma that [my] ballet has ... [My ballet] is stuck in the heart[s] of Nicaraguans. If you do a survey about Ballet Folklórico [groups] on the street, ‘Ronald Abud’ [is what] people say immediately.

The name Ronald Abud seemingly became a household name with the rise of the Sandinistas. I have come to learn that a surge in the arts occurred, and Abud told me that there were a group of intellectuals that wanted to rescue traditional folk culture. He told me that “because this surge [in the arts] was directed at very young people finding their identity, there was something new [occurring] in the country.” Abud went on to say that it was becoming increasingly “that the tradition[s] of the street [were] taking the stage.”

Other people I interviewed also reported on how they stumbled across, or became involved in the Güegüense tradition. For instance, it was through the grapevine in early 1940s Granada that the eighty-eight year old author of Folklore de Nicaragua (1986), Enrique Peña Hernández, first recalled hearing about the performance from a professor of language at University. But Don Peña would not see it performed live until at least another decade or so had
passed on by. By way of comparison, Manuel Sanchez, a forty year old dance instructor from Managua, learned about the performance in high school. Such an account differs from that of Don Peña largely because of a generational gap. In the 1940s, though Don Peña did have access to an education, most Nicaraguans did not. Following the 1978-79 Sandinista revolution, however, formal education became the norm in the country. And from thereon in, Sanchez noted, children began learning about *El Güegüense* at an early age: “[in] kindergarten and middle school and secondary school, Güegüense was [taught] at every level.”

Sanchez suggested that students’ understanding of the performance was greatly shaped by “a class called moral and civic[s], where teenager[s] ... study ... the traditions and popular culture [of Nicaragua],” which is to say that his interpretation of the performance was greatly influenced by the revolutionary government. He also noted, however, that just a single class was dedicated to introducing, discussing and analyzing the performance in high school. This was considered problematic by another interviewee, actor-director Cesar Paz.

Also, during Sanchez’s high school days his mother took him to see a folklore group perform. After seeing some traditional dances, including *El Güegüense*, Sanchez told his mother right then and there that he wanted to become a dancer: “I fall in love [with dance] in this moment,” he told me. Although his mother did not have a background in dance, she communicated to her son that she would support his newfound interest so long as he continued on with his studies, which is to say, he had to first complete high school and then pursue a university education.

Sanchez turned out to be quite a dancer and eventually joined a government funded national folklore company headed by *profesor* Ronald Abud Vivas. Although Sanchez was not paid to join such an organization, he received what could be considered a “grade A” dance
education and continued to hone his skills from thereon in as he pursued a sociology degree over the next couple years. It was from Abud, among others, that he learned to perform many traditional dances, such as *El Güegüense*, *Palo de Mayo*, and *El Viejo y La Vieja*. When probed about what his favourite dance to perform was, he responded with the following: “I like ... any dance, many dances in Nicaragua. Ah, maybe my favourite is Palo de Mayo because it’s, ah, more exciting, it’s more free, for dancing, it’s a Caribbean coast song and the music is very rich for the ears ... The dress is very colourful. It’s not formal, I can do anything: I think when I dance on the stage and I can do whatever I want. For *El Güeguense*, I have to do the same thing every time.” When I asked Ronald Abud the same question, he refused to answer, implying that it was inappropriate for him to answer. It would be like asking a parent to choose who their favourite child was. And in fact through today’s most popular social networking site the professor lists himself as the “father” of his folklore group through the family application. In sum, from the perspective of a ballerina, being a güegüencista does not mean that one is a one trick pony.

Following high school, Manuel Sanchez noted that it was shortly thereafter that he became a dance instructor, despite the fact that he managed to obtain a sociology degree: “my passion, my work, my life is dance,” he told me. He has danced for twenty-seven years now and has taught for twenty-one. When I interviewed him he was also still dancing recreationally with a folklore group. Practices were usually held on Saturday and Sunday mornings and lasted a couple of hours, although extra sessions were held during the week if a performance was approaching.

In regards to their childhood experiences with dance and/or drama, both actor-director Cesar Paz and Doña Irene Lopez told similar stories. Like Sanchez, neither of their parents had a
background in dance or theatre, yet both became increasingly involved in the performing arts and became well known in Nicaragua for their cultural pursuits. César Paz (see Figure 45) remembered when he was introduced to *El Güegüense* as if it were yesterday. It was for mother’s day that his Managua middle school put on a special performance. As an adolescent, Paz proceeded to devote much of his time to pursuing a career in drama. Having been an actor for thirty-one years now and a director for twenty-five, Paz has broad and diverse experience. He has taken part in over 400 representations of *El Güegüense*, ranging from street theatre to puppet shows, over the past three decades.

Paz further reiterated what Abud and Sanchez had already implied, that it was ever “since [the] 1979 [Sandinista revolution] ... that ... there was considerable institutional support [from] the state for the different artistic events ... From this time we [the cultural performers of Nicaragua] emerged. I am ... part [of the whole] that appeared in that moment; we were children, youth at that time.” In 1987 and 1995, Paz said that he brought together some 110 of Nicaragua’s most capable performing artists, actors, dancers and musicians, and took them throughout the country to perform *El Güegüense*. Then, in 1999, he did the same thing with actors from Managua’s *Ballet Folklórico Macehuatl* and members of the National Ballet and National Orchestra. The 1999 version was staged 48 times throughout Nicaragua. Overall, Paz’s efforts marked the second attempt to contemporarily integrate all the different elements of *El Güegüense*: “set design, dance, music, and acting.” His work has been greatly praised.
When I interviewed Paz, I met him at a small bar in Managua, which he owned and operated. He has since become a restaurateur not only because the busiest portion of his theatrical career was seemingly over, but also because there was not much money in theatre. Despite a lack of resources, Paz had recently submitted a proposal to a sponsor for $3,000. That is how much it would cost to put on a performance. If he were successful in obtaining such a sponsorship, he was planning to put on a show, most likely at Ruben Dario National Theatre. The average ticket price would be approximately ten dollars.

**What it means to be a Cultural Performer**

When I asked interviewees about what it meant to be a cultural performer I found more commonalities than differences. Undoubtedly, the number one reported benefit of being a cultural performer was it brought happiness to the participants. The interviewees also reported that they felt a sense of accomplishment. All four Güegüense practitioners, whether they are still performing today or not, furthermore described themselves as respected members of their communities. Some were even household names. But I tried to dig deeper in the interviews, to determine what it meant to be a cultural producer.

**Creativity**

For Irene López, her happiness stemmed from the fact she has had the opportunity to be actively creative and creatively active: “I love to dance,” she told me, and I love to create things, and to dance with people. [But the] choreography ... [the] choreography is my passion. And, well, [as for other] benefits [...] that everyone knows me. And I’m a respected woman (like Ronald Abud, only [a] woman) in my country, everyone knows me, only that. Because there is not much money..., [only] a little bit.
That is why I have my school, to [earn] some money to maintain the folklore dance, [to] keep it alive.

López also spoke to me about characters that she added to her 2003 representation, which was something that she has been chastised for by some traditionalists. One character was a skeleton figure who kidnapped Nicaragua’s corrupt politicians. Such characters, López clarified, “they’re not in the book. I took it from my mind and, as the conductor, put it in the show... [For example,] part of the book talks about the housekeeper of the Governor, [about how she] wash the clothes, so I make a dance of that, the washing of the clothes [dance].” This is an addition to the performance which has the ability to resonate with contemporary Nicaraguans who continue to wash their clothes by hand.

**Travel**

López was grateful that her cultural pursuits have taken her abroad. This was something that the vast majority of Nicaraguans are not able to do as they typically cannot demonstrate to the foreign government that they have enough money to travel, even if they have people willing to sponsor them. Because of her cultural status, Lopez has had the opportunity to meet and perform in front of several influential people including Hillary Rodham Clinton, Violeta Chamorro, Daniel Ortega, Fidel Castro, Anastacio Somoza García, and Pope Juan Pablo II.

Both professor Ronald Abud Vivas and his former student, dance instructor Manuel Sanchez, also were pleased to have had the opportunity to travel abroad. Since 1984, Abud has been to the United States four times (Miami, New York, Washington and Atlanta). He has also travelled to England, Norway, France, Bulgaria, and countries of the former USSR. He has furthermore travelled throughout Central America numerous times, and to Mexico and Cuba. Both he and Sanchez insinuated that they derived happiness from the fact that they are able to
share their Nicaraguan heritage with other people. Sanchez was especially outspoken as to how
dance contributed to his sense of well-being:

For me, [to] be a dancer is a very beautiful experience because I know, I knew different
countries. I give my culture to other countries and I travel to [many] different [places]:
Europe and North America, Latin America and Asia. I enjoy [those] experiences because
dance for me is my work, my life. The benefits for me are [being] very healthy... and
[that]... I can give my knowledge to other people, because, when you are a teacher—you
need ... to give your knowledge to the kids, to other people (e.g. your partner, your
family, or your people).

Economic vs. Cultural capital

Being happy, well respected and well known, and having garnered much cultural capital,
does not necessarily translate to having economic capital. For instance, in my interview with
Manuel Sanchez, he told me that cultural performers tended to “have another job ... They come
Saturday and/or Sunday to practice with [their] group. But, in the week, they work in a bank, a
University, or different job. Dancing is for a hobby.” Irene López also reported having
struggled just to keep her folklore/theatre school open for the past few decades. For actor-
director Cesar Paz, moreover, the ability to act was for many years the means by which he could
survive, though he held other jobs at times. Paz—like Sanchez, Lopez and Abud—has never
owned big cars or multiple homes. Most of the money he earned over the years was put toward
basic foodstuffs, household items and a few luxury items. “In Nicaragua the theatre does not
pay, you do not make money,” Paz told me, but “such a struggle is [also] important, it makes you
more professional.” I interpreted ‘more professional’ to mean that one does not sell oneself out
or take part in corrupt dealings.
Of all the interviewees it was profesor Abud who was most openly critical about how performing artists were treated in Nicaragua. When Abud was told by the government which preceded the current administration that his dancers could no longer practice at the local Culture House, he was forced to demolish half of his home in order to provide a space for his dancers to practice. The renovations led to the development of two spaces (one of which used to be a backyard): one room for the dancers’ clothes and another space, a dance floor, to practice choreography. Abud noted that because of his popularity and because it is nearly impossible to find a ticket to one of his shows, people mistakenly think that he is a wealthy man. Although he described himself as thankful for the support that the FSLN has historically provided him with—including 100,000 córdobas (US$5,000) per year for the past three years—he also noted that “that [money] barely covers expenses for two months [worth] of school.” The profesor assured me in the interview that “if at the end of every presentation I have 100,000 córdobas, you can be sure that 120,000 are for the ballet in the next presentation. It doesn’t matter if I wear the same clothes all year. I do not care because my ballet ... it’s my life, a matter of mysticism; I have sincere passion for my work.”

Abud was also very critical of those NGOs that supposedly promoted culture in the country and “what they do to get rich at the expense of the artists themselves.” He told me that some individuals created a non-government organization and then proceeded to make a foundation that is said to promote culture. The organization advocates for funds on behalf of certain artists or ballets. “But, it’s a [dirty] business,” Abud said,

The artists never receive the money. If you look at the managers and owners of foundations—their fancy shirts and cars, always with bodyguards—they are characters trying to look good and are surrounded by twenty people all the time. As an artist for
these [individuals and] associations, I cannot even talk to them because there are ten walls, like those people in charge of ‘culture’: the Ministry, the mayor, the houses of culture, etc. God [would] get you in his office faster... [Yet,] the ballet is rewarding as a person, as an artist, and I think I can give [even] more than I am [now] because I feel I’m like a volcano that just erupted and [will] never finish; but I’m just limited [financially]...

The artistic show involves costumes, research, orchestral arrangements, [and] the human element; the dancer is a fan because he does not have a salary. An accomplishment that I always claim as a merit in my show is that you’ll find, in any high school or college, a graduate of [my] ballet [school]. They are instructors; I have ... developed [many] teachers.

The reality is that Abud—like César Paz and Irene López—has been forced to supplement his income by other means: “I have to do a lot of parallel activities like beauty competitions, gymnastics, art, directing different events, etc. If, for example, I ha[d] a steady income and [could] dedicate [myself to] only this, I think it would have [even] better results.” Abud summed up his argument: “When people see my show in other countries they believe that I have a big company, that I have a building with three floors.” But this is just not the case.

**Gender politics**

According to interviewees, the only other drawback associated with being a cultural performer—other than a lack of funds—was that not everyone felt accepted as a dancer or a güegüencista. Historically, it has been frowned upon for boys and young men to get involved with dance/folklore groups; in other words, due to Nicaragua’s sex/gender norms it was considered unusual for a boy or man to become a cultural performer. But that was mostly before and in the years immediately following the revolution. Manuel Sanchez noted that when he was
in high school some of his classmates did not think highly of him: “[some of] my classmates [told] me: ‘Ah, you are a dancer, you are no good man. You are bad.’” He furthermore noted that some of his male colleagues were the recipients of homophobic taunts. When I asked Sanchez about potential reasons for his classmates’ close mindedness he communicated to me that it was because Nicaraguans did not previously have access to formal education prior to the revolution. In his eyes, it was the fact that sexual education and diversity were taught formally that helped open up minds about the gender roles and sexual identities of men and women. Nowadays, according to Manuel, many parents encourage their kids to dance so long as they have the resources available to them: “It’s about half and half,” he told me, although I was unsure how to interpret such a statement.

Another issue within the dance/folklore community is within the cultural field of Güegüense itself, that is, a place where girls and women have traditionally been prohibited from participating. Although one interviewee claimed that this prohibition of women was a European tradition that had followed the conquistadores across the ocean, at this time I am unsure of the accuracy of such a statement. One major question I had for interviewees was in regard to the sex/gender of the people behind the masks, though: To what extent have women participated in this performance, historically? All four interviewees, as well as folklorist Enrique Peña Hernández, told me that in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, it was unlikely that women took part in representations of El Güegüense. More contemporarily, however, things were not so clear. On the one hand, Don Peña noted that “there [has] always [been] a combination of women and men ... [because] folklore is both men and women. What happens is [that they wear] the same suit, same masks, so you can’t see the difference.” Cesar Paz added the following: do women participate? “As far as I know, no ... [But,] in the show by College Frances
Nicaragüenses, I was director and the character of Don Ambrosio was played by a women. So, yes women [can] participate, but [usually just] in a secondary school.” Manuel Sanchez reinforced Paz’s comments, based on his own high school experiences.

On the other hand, Sanchez—who was a former student of Ronald Abud—told me that women tended not to partake in the cultural form that is the ballet because the steps were “too heavy.” He added the following:

For dance Güegüense, the dancers need ... strength, flexibility, agility ... because this dance is a very, very strong dance. And ... in professional Ballet Folklórico, only the men dance [it] because the women dance other dances. But in high school ... [or] in the street, it’s mixed: women and men, girls and boys. When you see the professional Ballet Folklórico, [though,] it’s only men because the song[s that are] more easy is for women or girls and the more heavy song is for men or for boys.

These comments represented to me a vision from the ballet.

Were the steps made more spectacular so that women could not participate on purpose? That I do not know. Yet, if so, who is to say a woman cannot perform the same “heavy” steps that a man can? It is not as if there are those outdated concerns that “too heavy” of steps will harm the reproductive health of women, such as was the case in Canadian public schools in the early twentieth century. Despite Ronald Abud reinforcing Sanchez’s belief, that women generally do not participate in the ballet, he also noted that he was aware of at least one woman who danced, though she remained unnamed until I interviewed her.
In 1964, when Irene López (see Figure 46) returned to Nicaragua from attending high school in Los Angeles, California (in the early years of second-wave feminism), she was in her early twenties and questioning her own female identity. In Nicaragua, López saw something that she had never seen before: dancers dancing traditional dances somewhere other than at the Patron Saint’s festivals. This was when she became quite interested in performing folklore, even though women had been prohibited from taking part in street festivities in the past. What a wonderful dancer she became. My mother-in-law, Angelina, described López as one of the best dancers in the country at this time. On her body movement, her ability to activate the right muscles at the appropriate time, mamá said to me, smiling, recalling one such performance of pure muscularity in Masaya, Masaya during the late 1960s: “she was so beautiful, such a beautiful ballerina, and she move[d] so elegant[ly].”

In 1966, Lopez formed a group out of Masaya, Masaya. This group is what would ultimately become La Compañía de Danza Irene Lopez and has come to be represented by a wide range of boys and girls and women and men. In my interview with Lopez, she thereby rightfully described herself as “the first one, the pioneer,” which is to say that no one had attempted to create a folklore group in Nicaragua before. Yet, Nicaraguans, generally lacking in formal education and having been denied a national culture, were growing tired of the oppressive conditions they faced in their country. This was the reason for López coming to quickly absorb the physical cultures compiled and catalogued by historian Enrique Peña Hernández in 1968. From there she proceeded to teach her students to dance to many different songs. Starting with a small dance school, she taught only to small groups in the beginning. But when the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 and recognized López’s value as a cultural resource, they appointed her as director of the newly formed National School of Dance. Moving forward, the National School

52 http://www.irene-lopez.com/home.html
taught folkloric forms and produced a generation of new dancers steeped in a unique historical movement. The success of the school, as well that of López’s dance company, paved the way for many other dance companies in Nicaragua. In sum, if López’s success as a dance instructor was to be measured by the embodied survival of traditional folklore, which is what she initially set out to do, then her cultural efforts have been a huge success.

As late as the early 1980s, López told me that the Güegüense street festival practitioners of Diriamiaba had little idea about what the performance was all about. The performance had literally lived on through cultural transmission. “Nobody understood the entire piece” at this time, Lopez told me, and she in fact reproduced the dance steps the way they were performed by Ronald Abud and other residents of Diriamiaba for almost two decades. But, she has always been sure to not only extensively research what she was performing but also teach the histories behind each dance to her students, something that not all dance instructors do. For instance, in the months leading up to one 2003 performance, El Gran Picaro, which was a historical recreation of El Güegüense, and which was her initial portrayal of the performance, it was noted that practitioners had once celebrated up to 22 dances, but now there more often than not existed just five, something that she implied was corrupt and referred to as “sexist.” Several of the dances were dances for women, but they have long been forgotten. So she started experimenting, “thinking of things in [her] head,” and “reading and investigating, reading and investigating and reading and investigating, for like twenty years.” She was the first one to put women in the Güegüense show.

Lópe also told me the following in the interview:

*El Güegüense is one of the few colonial-era dramas [that] exist throughout Latin America and the world that keeps alive and dancing. The entire work was not sustained because it*
had fallen apart bit by bit; for instance, the music, the songs slowly changed, the theatre scenes were changed, [and] all the influences of the complete show disappear[ed], so that in Diriamba ... the dances were the only thing that remained of the Güegüense.

But for Lopez, the original storyline was ambiguous and it is natural for one to become confused reading it for the first time. Like an onion, it has many layers. “The first ten times I read it, I understand nothing,” López told me with reference to the Spanish version. But this is how most Nicaraguans feel, if they are even familiar with the text at all. Although most cannot explain the performance that well, “they know that it is extremely important because it is their history and it is their culture.” This is why López set out to simplify the performance and make it more accessible. Since then hundreds of Nicaraguans have come up to her and told her “‘thank you’ for making [them] better understand the Güegüense.”

In El Gran Picaro, which was performed at Ruben Dario National Theatre in 2003 and then made into a DVD, López filled the role of director, dancer and even narrator at times (see Figure 47). Though some of the dance steps are not as spectacular as you would see from the students of Ronald Abud Vivas or Manuel Sanchez, they are steeped in tradition. The performance, moreover, featured considerable dialogue, which included local slang and background characters who made interesting and coordinated movements. For instance, if the lead woman in a particular scene put her hands over her face in awe at something that was said, then the rest of the dancers would mimic her movements a few seconds later. These coordinated movements, I believe, are supposed to represent the strength of Nicaraguan women throughout their colonial history.
López (see Figure 48) also argued in the interview that there had to be more to the story, or at least more than what has been portrayed in the past. Güegüence—the main character, as opposed to the title of the play—had to have had a broader social network, she said. For instance, in Brinton’s 1883 text, where were the rest of protagonists’ family and friends? Surely the women of such a community, such as the Governor’s daughter, would not have just been auctioned off for marriage and have had nothing to say about it. If the performance truly is something that ‘all Nicaraguans [are supposed to] have inside’, as Carlos Mántica A. once put it, then would it not be relevant to portray a broader community as well? Also, would it not be better to have not only the voices of the men but also the voices of the women present? Where were the women and why have they been ignored and deemed historically insignificant? “Because it was traditionally that way” is not a good enough answer anymore. López therefore included several of the forgotten female dances in her 2003 representation and, still today, she is said to be the only person ever to do so.

To Be or Not to Be: Anti-Colonial Connotations?

Whether the practice of the Güegüense tradition is anti-colonial or not is a complex question. Do contemporary (re)presentations still destabilize dominant hegemonic societal relations as they once did? How does the performance deal with issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, national identity, and so on? In my efforts to unravel these issues, this section discusses the challenges associated with studying, teaching, and (re)producing El Güegüense as a literary tradition. This
section also works to flesh out the ongoing discursive battles going on between leading
practitioners. By the end, I hope to have situated where I stand within the Güegüense cultural
field, not only as an academic but also as a practitioner.

*The Problem of Authenticity*

The fact that the “original” manuscripts were first published by a foreigner is indicative
of this complexity. In the introductory chapter, I suggested that Daniel G. Brinton’s (1883)
presentation of *The Güegüence* could be interpreted as a colonizing account. That his foreign
version then proceeded to become the reference point by which Nicaraguan scholars came to
understand and critique the Güegüense tradition complicates the task of unravelling the colonial
connotations of the performance. Was it that these scholars placed less value on the spoken
word and real life experiences of güegüencistas? In other words, did they attribute more
authenticity to the written, published word of an American scholar? Although I agree that
domestic reinterpretations of the “original” manuscripts were necessary, these scholars focused
upon only one form of the performance, which is to say they neglected the multiple ways in
which the Güegüense tradition was performed and understood.

This was perhaps the reason for actor-director César Paz communicating to me at several
points in the interview that the Güegüense tradition was first and foremost empirical, which
means that whatever it represents was guided by human experience and only had to be proven or
verified by further experience, without a need to reference theory or “more authentic”
manuscripts. Paz was critical of how *El Güegüense* has traditionally been taught through the
public education system, as these teachings have been too simplistic and heavily filtered. As he
put bluntly,
That’s what happens here. El Gueguense is studied in all secondary schools, but is not the dimension that should be studied because some people think that the repetitiveness of the performance is too boring. But this reflects a rhythmic structure of the musicality of this piece; music is repetitive and repetitive is life, but when people see it as a literal document, people read it, and they feel bored. The first people who should have the motivation are the educators. They should know better of this show and how to teach it. 

Paz also noted that you cannot learn, let alone teach, the meaning of the Güegüense tradition in one class. Also, what has been focused upon in the classroom (i.e. the masks, the “original manuscripts,” the dramatis personae) in the past is not what should have been focused upon. More important issues to discuss are the structure of the performance and its satirical, anti-colonial nature. Further complicating its meaning is the fact that many people within Nicaraguan society have mistakenly come to believe that the masterpiece simply exists as a dance (i.e. the ballet form) today.

From there, Paz drew my attention to the fact that UNESCO’s proclamation had little to do with the contemporary ballet form. His opinion was seconded by Irene López. Instead, both practitioners argued, the purpose of the proclamation was to preserve its essence as street theatre. And it was implied in both interviews that the plot and its anti-colonial connotations were most clearly articulated to those in attendance via a theatrical form. For instance, López stated: “the performance that was named Patrimony was the whole piece, because that is how the whole thing was, the performance complete. Not just dance, not just music, [and] not just theatre.” Under such circumstances, Paz noted that Nicaraguans needed to take notice of UNESCO’s proclamation and study the performance in order to form an opinion about it. On UNESCO’s interest in the performance, he had the following to say: “[El] Güegüense is being studied
because it is an act of rebellion, is not an act of submission. [The] message is not be submissive, not morally, not indiscriminately, [and] we [Nicaraguans] must have criteria: to not give away the country.” But Nicaraguans and others, he also noted, “have to remember that the story is supposed to be a farce, is a comedy, a joke that [we] make [of] the government.”

Both Paz and Lopez were critical of how the masterpiece’s satirical nature has been lost. How did this happen? Government repression and then filtration, I argue. Oftentimes when a government changes hands the new administration seeks to eliminate or appropriate cultural forms. In twentieth century Nicaragua both of these circumstances have been demonstrated. First, at some point during the Somoza dictatorship they outlawed the practise of the Güegüense tradition because they understood that it was intended to critique the state. No one was to speak out against the Somozas. Secondly, ever since the revolutionary Sandinistas came to power, a heavily filtered form of the performance has been promoted. When the FSLN asked Ronald Abud to compose a ballet representation, it was part of a much broader movement to appropriate all indigenous/traditional culture for their own political purposes. Meanwhile, in the classroom, teachers spoke of Brinton’s (1883) text as well as domestic reinterpretations. Most of these reanalyses have tended to look backward, however, which is to say that Nicaraguan scholars have worked tirelessly to reinterpret the manuscripts encountered by Brinton, rather than try to shed light on how the Güegüense tradition manifests today. Teachings based on these domestic reinterpretations were what made the performance seem outdated as the majority of students were not invited to utilize it as a vector to think critically about the state as well as the state of social life in their country. In sum, what has resulted from these two historical periods is that it is now popularly understood that El Güegüense originally existed as simply a beautiful ballet, or a dance form, as opposed to a politically charged piece of street theatre.
The struggle over meaning

So the next question to ask is: how have popular understandings of the masterpiece been altered? Even though the revolution sincerely was a “people’s movement,” once the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 they quickly sought to change the revolutionary mindset that had helped them overthrow the dictator. This was partially accomplished with and through the promotion of a particular form of the Güegüense tradition. Paz notes how the main character Güegüence [was] called ... a liar, thief, all negative adjectives to change the mood of the people’s struggle, the struggle of a man who will not pay taxes, some critics argue.... the little ‘Güegüence Nicaraguans have inside’ may be true, but not [to] the demands of the Nicaraguan element. We must look at the Güegüence with a good vision, a vision of integrity with a vision of struggle, but struggle of wisdom because the Güegüense [tradition] transcends. [El] Güegüense goes [far] beyond the simple staging.

Could it be said that the FSLN actively promoted *El Güegüense* as a contemporary dance form in order to keep the masses from digging deeper? The main character is called a “trickster,” a “scoundrel,” a “rascal,” a “cheat” because he and his family get rich at the expense of the colonial authorities, which would be the equivalent of the state in contemporary times. The reason for the FSLN asking Ronald Abud to compose a ballet, therefore, was not just to be part of a nationalist project. Such a representation simultaneously worked to alter the revolutionary mindset and influence popular understandings of the performance. When observers see the ballet form today, that it was once an anti-state demonstration is far from obvious.

This is why I have been led to believe that the ballet form does not do the Güegüense tradition justice. Contemporary dance representations have in fact caused much confusion in
Nicaragua, as to who the characters are and what the storyline represents. For instance, according to Paz,

The Mules [or the ‘machos,’] are drawn to carry the load ... but they also dance and serve as a kind of distraction through the entire show. In Nicaragua, it is mistakenly believed that these animals, [that] they are Gueguence. But these mules, because they are the ones [that] jump higher and have more projection while... dancing [in the ballet], people [tend to mistakenly] believe they are Gueguence [and/or his sons].

Some of the confusion may have to do with the fact that the “dance of the machos” is not only the fastest but also the most popular among Nicaraguans. Because the performance was supposed to be satirical or anti-colonial, perhaps some individuals unfamiliar with the storyline identified with the hardworking machos. Another reason Nicaraguans may have mistaken one or all of the machos for Güegüence was because their masks are traditionally painted black, while those of the three mestizos—or Güegüence and his two sons—are painted white. The “white” skin colour of the main character and his two sons could have easily been mistaken for Spaniards. This was in fact what I had done when I saw a contemporary dance representation for the first time at the Miss University competition in 2007. Although each of the fourteen principal characters has their own mask with its own characteristics, the machos look more communal and have commonly been mistakenly associated with representing indigenous-/Nicaraguans.

Interviewees also implied that Nicaraguans and non-Nicaraguans alike needed to look into “the good” of the performance. How can this be done? In the story, it has been noted that Güegüence is travelling with both of his sons, one of whom was born inside wedlock and one who was born outside. Exemplifying how one could read into the “good” of the performance,
César Paz notes that the protagonist in fact appears to be a “responsible father, who carries his two sons; a parent [who] will teach [his] trade to his sons, teaching how to work ... and not leaving them alone as we [Nicaraguan men] traditionally do ... So you got there then just ... a small brush around the fascinating Gueguence [as] the prototype of man,” an honourable father. In Nicaragua, there is a presumption that, because female-headed households are a norm, many men do not acknowledge that they have a child, let alone provide any financial support. This trend may very well be true, but there are as always exceptions to the “rule.” My brother-in-law, Fabricio, has helped his common-law wife take care of her biological son for over a decade. Paz would argue that it is precisely such demonstrations of love and support by Nicaraguans that need to be documented and discussed in the classroom.

As critical as Paz is of how the Güegüense tradition has been taught, I am unsure how far he himself has strayed from the traditional El Güegüense manuscripts in his own representations. To me, López’s El Gran Picaro (2003) embodies not only how the performance can be adapted to local and contemporary conditions but also how contested its meanings are. Although her performance was set in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, I interpret it to be taking jabs at the Liberal administration that was in charge of the country from 1997-2002. For instance, then President Arnoldo Alemán has widely come to be known as one of the most corrupt politicians in Nicaragua, perhaps even the world. Near the beginning of El Gran Picaro, two of the characters make reference to the Governor’s “guaca,” which has no direct English translation. Guaca refers to stolen money or “bad money,” money that has been taken by corrupt politicians through unnecessary and illegitimate taxation of the people. Alternatively, it can also refer to money from private corporations, drug deals, and so on. In this scene, one woman asks the other in Spanish if she has heard the news about the Governor, about how he is struggling with poverty
and has decided to tax all items coming into the country fifteen percent. “Of course,” the second woman replied, “it’s not easy to deal with corruption and the bad ways one spends the money.”

Throughout the performance, the Governor character is chastised by the people for having a *guaca*. López clarified in a follow up interview that *El Gran Picaro* (2003) does not only refer to a past president, but to a political system. In other words, “guacas” and secret pacts have always been part of political practice in the country. The audience, she said, knew the types of things that she was referring to.

López is critical of contemporary *Ballet Folklórico* directors, such as Ronald Abud, who have introduced changes in the dances and the performance as a whole because she claims they have essentially weakened the purity of this folkloric form. According to Lopez, these directors have increased the rhythmic work rate and the steps have been made more spectacular, too spectacular. Though the dozens of *Ballet Folklórico* directors would put forth the argument that they have worked tirelessly to improve the Güegüense tradition under a vision of free and democratic creation, López would counter that they have robbed the performance of its historical and traditional base. Thus was her reason for arguing that all Nicaraguans, especially young Nicaraguans, need to think critically about their cultural identity and about what the *Ballet Folklórico* groups represent.

As far as the meaning of UNESCO’s proclamation goes, *profesor* Ronald Abud’s opinion differed from that of Irene López and César Paz. Abud noted that many people have congratulated him because, from what they understood, it was his ballet that ultimately acted as the catalyst for UNESCO’s proclamation. He justified the changes that he made to the dances and costumes by arguing that one of UNESCO’s conditions for a cultural form to remain recognized as “Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” was for it to continuously be worked
upon and improved. He furthermore suggested that it was the spirit of a representation that was important, as opposed to the plot. On the topic of El Güegüense’s patrimony, he had the following to say:

It’s an icon that represents us in the world. Nicaragua has known the Gueguense during all these years and it is a way to tell the world that we have roots; that we have our own identity ... The Masterpiece has been a benefit for Nicaraguan literature and for tourism. It also has benefits for the artisans, to the artists who interpret for the public who want to see the show. This means the Masterpiece is a set of elements involved in the benefit of the country and I think if the Gueguense does not continue to improve, the risk that UNESCO will remove the title because to promote the show is a requirement by UNESCO. In my opinion I don’t think they will remove the title to Gueguense, because there have been many different efforts.

Although Abud’s contemporary dance form is not unlike those choreographed by other Ballet Folklórico directors, his representation was the first of its kind. The problem with contemporary dance representations like Abud’s is that, unless one has an understanding of the history of the performance and the plot, then the performance is completely depoliticized. In such representations there exists no obvious satirical element and no political positions are presented.

I will therefore advance the argument that, with the exception of López’s El Gran Picaro, the practise of El Güegüense is no longer anti-colonial. If “alternative” versions of the performance are being repressed, as I feel they are being, then I believe UNESCO should remove the patrimony. In turn, I ask that President Daniel Ortega, as well as every future Nicaraguan leader, recognize this and invite cultural performers to fund not only the ballet form but also satirical theatrical (re)presentations. To do so would be to demonstrate not only that the state is
in support of freedom of speech but also that the current administration is indeed not a dictatorship. The uninhibited and unrepressed practise of *El Güegüense* is something that I think Nicaragua and Nicaraguans need(s). I question whether *El Gueguense* is the appropriate symbol of national identity when it flattens rather than articulates Nicaraguan national identity. The masterpiece literally needs to be put to work to improve the contemporary Nicaraguan situation, which it is not doing right now.

*Re-politicizing the performance*

What López’s dramatic example teaches us is that *El Güegüense* is supposed to be forever transforming. Contemporarily, what is commonly misunderstood about the origin of the performance is that it does not just critique the presence of the Spanish in Nicaragua, but also locals who had been befriended and corrupted by the conquistadores. These individuals had inadvertently been thrown into positions of power. And it is from these positions of power where we can pull on common strings, even though we are in the “post-colonial” era. Once Spanish control of the Province of Nicaragua came to an end, local elites vied for political power. But the central state would not be consolidated for at least another three decades. Following Nicaraguan independence, therefore, dare I speculate that the Güegüense tradition was no longer as culturally important to Nicaraguans as it once had been? In other words, because there were no conquistadores to critique, because there was not a central state, of what importance was the Güegüense tradition? Perhaps at this time it only existed in popular memory. By 1883, Brinton suggested that the Güegüense tradition was more or less obsolete, speculating that the cost was too high for potential sponsors, which still seems to be a problem today (Guevara, 2010). Altogether, it is unclear to me whether it was still practised at the turn of the nineteenth century, but I have reason to believe not.
A revival of the Güegüense tradition occurred in the streets of Diriaamba, Carazo in the first decades of the twentieth century. How did it once again come to be performed at religious festivals? Perhaps it was in response to foreign economic intervention and U.S. occupation. Or perhaps it was in response to the instability of the Nicaraguan political scene. That I do not know. What is known is that when the revolutionary Sandinistas came to power, the governing junta interpreted themselves to be representative of the interests of “the people.” The FSLN worked hard to appropriate indigenous and traditional (peasant) culture as their own. But members understood what El Güegüense stood for and what it was supposed to be doing. In order to keep cultural critics off their backs, I have theorized this to be the main reason for the FSLN purposely promoting and funding depoliticized versions of the performance (i.e. the ballet). Although they did fund some theatrical projects, the scripts largely stuck to domestic scholars’ reinterpreted versions of the “original” storyline, as opposed to alternative (re)presentations that would have critiqued the politics of the then-revolutionary movement. Even with the fall of the Sandinistas in the 1990s this has been the case, however. For instance, most of César Paz’s “traditional” El Güegüense projects received funding in the 1980s and 1990s, while Irene López’s El Gran Picaro (2003), which was critical of the Liberal party, did not. López was forced to look abroad for funding and it was the Danish embassy that eventually came through.

As we have come to learn through the political messages displayed on contemporary Sandinista billboards, solidarity is very important to the current administration. And I, for one, have mixed emotions about Ortega. On the one hand, I idolize him: for helping inspire a generation to fight; for what he accomplished following the insurrection (i.e. education and healthcare for all; everyone had access to food, and so on); for the torture he endured as a
political prisoner. On the other hand, he disgusts me as a leader and as an individual: for his philandering; for his outright political corruption; for a lack of political and economic transparency. So, how do I interpret these changes in his behaviour that Nicaraguans have witnessed?

During the 1970s and early 1980s Ortega was completely caught up in the revolutionary movement. Just like Carlos Fonseca, he studied and had knowledge of Sandino’s societal example, and he fully believed in the revolutionary principles that Fonseca, the movement’s leader, had set out. But, in the midst of the Cold War, the Americans would not have any part of a revolutionary government, especially one that was influenced by Marxism. The FSLN was put into a box, labelled communist. For almost a decade the FSLN tried to implement revolutionary policies, all while dealing with the U.S. initiated Contra War. By 1986 the FSLN was spending well over half of their budget on national defence. This was when Ortega’s mood began to sour. The people grew tired of the FSLN, simply because peace could not be maintained and because the revolutionary promises were not kept. The U.S. government bullied the Nicaraguan people into supporting the National Opposition Union (UNO), a coalition party made up of thirteen political parties. Upon exiting the presidency in 1990 Ortega and other senior members stole millions of dollars and left the national coffers empty, just as the third Somoza had done when he fled to Miami in 1979. In many ways it remained, therefore, an unfinished revolution.

In Unfinished Revolution (2010), Kenneth E. Morris acknowledges much of the political corruption that Ortega has been a part of in recent years, which I have described and critiqued, utilizing the Güegüense tradition as a vector, not only through scholarly writing but also through poetry. For all of Ortega’s faults, however, Morris (2010) argues that the president is the best thing for Nicaragua at this time, simply because there are no candidates who would do a better
job than him or be any less corrupt. Everyone who comes to power in Nicaragua claims that
they will put an end to poverty. The problem is that poverty reduction is not a four year job.
Nicaragua is caught up in a global system dominated by capitalistic values. So how can one keep
these grand promises?

Clearly, President Ortega has strayed from Sandino’s path. Can he really still be
considered a “Sandinista”? That Ortega may not be as Sandinista as he claims to be is perhaps
something that the Nicaraguan people have come to realize. Ortega’s popularity has plunged in
the last year and a half, which does not bode well for the upcoming national election in
November 2011. I am expecting there to be much turmoil and violence in the months prior to
and following the vote, especially if Ortega is voted out of power.

Throughout this project it has become obvious that I am a fan of Sandino’s movement.
And I think it is important to expose Nicaraguans and others to the underpinnings of his
movement, what it represented, and so on. I believe in his principles, of agrarian communalism
and nationalistic consumer capitalism (i.e. that everyone eats before produce is exported). When
combined with the construction of a hypothetical canal, as well as the unrepressed practise of the
Güegüense tradition, I think it is these social circumstances that could have helped launch, and
that still can launch, Nicaragua’s economic development.

*Roasting Uncle Sam*

In the past, Nicaragua has tended to be ignored by foreign investors and tourists because
it was seen as a politically unstable country. Now that it is considered “safe,” however, it has
become a hot tourist destination. The tourism industry, in turn, has been heavily promoted by
the current administration. Promotion of the tourism industry has come at a cost, though: The
problem is that foreigners do not simply come and go; rather, they are buying up prime real
estate in the country at bargain basement prices because land is the one thing that Nicaragua has an abundance of. Where else in the world can you get oceanfront lots or forty acre farms for thirty or forty thousand dollars? That amount of money is a small fortune in Nicaragua.

In order to promote tourism and attract foreign dollars, consecutive administrations have passed a series of tax incentive bills, which have recently been modified by the FSLN to provide even more benefits. For 10 years, qualified tourism-related businesses can receive the following tax benefits under the Tourism Investment Incentives Law: eighty to ninety percent income tax exemption; property tax exemption for ten years; import tax and value-added tax exemption on the purchase of accessories, furniture, or equipment, and so on. As a result, international hotels, waterfront condominiums, surf camps, bed and breakfasts’ and gated communities have been popping up all over the country. What is problematic is that it is the presence of these businesses that has prevented Nicaraguans from enjoying their homeland. In some places one cannot even go for a stroll on the beach any longer. An internet documentary entitled “Land” speaks to this problem further. In Granada, Granada, one family reports being forced to list their home on the real estate market for forty thousand dollars—a small fortune in Nicaragua—because of the influx of retirees, vacation-goers and U.S. dollars. This family simply cannot survive any longer. The price of everyday necessities is on the rise, which is problematic because the vast majority of Nicaraguans are still paid in local currency. And so what you have there is social reproduction of hegemonic global relations. With all the tax exemptions, foreigners—mostly white—are the only ones who have the opportunity to gain access to excess economic capital, while Nicaraguans have been forced to take on menial service jobs. Perhaps it is true, that these developments will eventually lead to Nicaragua’s economic development. But is this the right
way to go about it? I find it problematic that the current generation is being exploited in order to
“develop” the country, especially when the land could be producing so much more.

If the Güegüense tradition is re-politicized, as I feel it can be, then perhaps it can draw on
these experiences, among others, to demonstrate how Nicaragua and Nicaraguans is/are still in
(a) subordinate position[s] within a contemporary colonial system. Globalization and capitalism
are two major issues facing the country today: the elephants in the room. The country is in a
very complex political moment at the present time and struggles over the meaning of the
Güegüense tradition reflect this. For now, so long as the current trends continue on, I can assure
you that Sandino is turning in his grave.
Conclusion

When I originally set out on this ethnographic journey, I expected to be surprised and to experience much confusion. Not only because the Güegüense tradition was several centuries old but also because I was attempting to make sense of a cultural field that was completely foreign to me. Consciously, I chose not to study the Güegüense from afar or as an “outsider.” Rather, I followed in the footsteps of Alberto Guevara (2002; 2010) in that I learned a form of the Güegüense tradition. Loïc Wacquant’s notion of habitus was another guiding light, which is to say the “apprenticeship” was the means by which I gathered primary data (Wacquant, 2004, 2005). This physical training was complemented by oral testimonies and the scholarly literature, which helped further contextualize the performance. Though this project spoke to El Güegüense as a literary tradition, I was relatively uninterested in it in that way. My goal was not only to shed light on how güegüencistas were manufactured in the classroom but also to determine what it meant to be a cultural performer. As well, I was curious as to whether El Güegüense could still be considered satirical or anti-colonial, as well as how and why the performance is linked to the Sandinistas’ nationalizing cultural project.

From my experiences in the classroom as well as the interviews conducted, I came to learn that the apprenticeship I underwent was one of a kind. No practitioner in Nicaragua simply dances or acts out the Güegüense tradition, which is to say that cultural performers tend to be able to perform many folkloric forms. In other words, my experiences in the classroom were atypical. Because the lessons I enrolled in do not even exist, the form of the Güegüense tradition that I learned was catered to my own needs. It was a crash course and I was the lone student. Some of the traditional choreography that I learned via my instructor had been altered, while some of the moves were made less spectacular, due not only to my limited flexibility but also to
my limited dancing abilities. But there are other issues associated with my “version” of the Güegüense tradition as well. We have come to know that the ballet form is just one form of the masterpiece: it in fact manifests culturally in at least five different ways, of which I discussed only two extensively. The hegemonic ballet form, which was initiated in the early 1980s, has never featured character dialogue or a plotline, and thus cannot necessarily be considered anti-colonial. The reason why I consider this form a hegemonic form is because it is the form that consecutive governments have financially supported. The ballet form is the one that the state wants Nicaraguans to become familiar with; however, *El Güegüense* as a dance tradition has caused much confusion in Nicaragua, as to who the characters are, what the original storyline was, as well as its historical significance. Although these muted (re)presentations may very well still carry on the anti-colonial “spirit” of the show, as Ronald Abud claims, if an observer does not have firsthand knowledge of either the storyline or its historical context, then the spirit of the show, I would confidently counter, has been lost.

Comparatively speaking, and secondly, it could be said that theatrical representations have traditionally been performed by the book, which is to say that the “original” manuscripts that Brinton (1883) encountered were altered slightly by Nicaraguan scholars. More traditional theatrical representations, such as those directed by César Paz are the ones that have tended to receive funding. But *El Güegüense* as (re)produced “more traditionally” is frozen in time. Perhaps this is why most Nicaraguans have been said to find the masterpiece boring as a literary form, which was reinforced by all of my primary interviewees, with the exception of Mr. Paz. This was also the main reason for Irene López adding characters and adapting it to contemporary social conditions in her *El Gran Picaro* (2003). To do so is to keep the Güegüense tradition alive and well.
Bringing it home, literally

On the 10 hour plane ride back from Managua to Atlanta and from Atlanta to Detroit, which was followed by a three hour drive down the 401, through Windsor, London and Woodstock, on route to my south-western Ontario home, I could not sleep. I kept thinking and asking myself the following: As a self-proclaimed güegüencista, moving forward, how was I going to utilize this physical tradition contemporarily to do anti-colonial work? There was my thesis, yes, but that was only one form, a literary form, and in this project I have blatantly critiqued limiting ourselves to understanding a physically active cultural tradition strictly by the book.

Between my homecoming and the present day I have (re)presented my version of the Güegüense tradition on three occasions: At my wedding in August 2010; in a series of elementary school visits near my hometown of Delhi, ON in May 2011; and, most recently, in front of my colleagues at Queen’s University during the annual Research Day. Research Day is a day-long event where School of Kinesiology and Health Studies graduate to other students and faculty. To bring it home, therefore, because I have not necessarily spoken to how this project is potentially anti-colonial as of yet, I seek to exemplify under what circumstances the performances I gave could be considered decolonizing.

The first occasion I presented my own masterpiece was at Cynthia’s and my wedding on August 28, 2010. Following dinner, I snuck out a side door, escaping to a walk-in closet. My bright and colourful costume was already there waiting for me. I changed quickly, but then I realized I had forgotten my macho ratón mask. Damn it! As I approach the back door, I could hear the emcee and one of my best men, a Nicaraguan from Phoenix, was almost finished the introduction. He wrote his own seven or eight minute introduction about Nicaragua and the
performance, which included a map so that the performance could be situated for those of the 200 guests who did not know where it was. I also asked him to include what I considered to be some “key points” (i.e. it was a comedy-dance-drama that critiqued colonial control; it was performed in the streets originally; it made fun of the Spanish; the plotline features a mestizo, or approximately “half-Indian,” “half-Spanish,” “Trickster” character that manages to get into a powerful position without utilizing violence, and so on). When I walked out there were some “oohs” and “ahhs,” probably in response to my flashy costume. On the microphone, I notified the crowd that it was unfortunate that I had to perform without my mask.

The form of Güegüense tradition that I introduced my closest family and friends to is one of a kind as it features only one dancer. Usually there are upward of 20. I performed the choreography (which was introduced and (re)produced in Chapter Three) flawlessly up until the fifth song. I was getting tired and it was not as if I had practised that much as of late. Plus, I had just eaten dinner and had had a few glasses of wine, some beers, and so on. In total, I exposed a room of 200 people, of whom 96% were white settlers, to the country of Nicaragua as well as some of its rich cultural history. The predominately white crowd was wowed by my displays of plyometric jumping and flamboyant hip movements (see Figure 49). Prior to my
having actually embarked on my ethnographic journey, a good portion of my family would have guessed that Nicaragua was in Africa.

The second set of circumstances under which I (re)presented my version of the Güegüense tradition was in preparation for Research Day. The week beforehand I travelled to two rural south-western Ontario elementary schools. The half hour or so set aside for the performance (getting children organized, introductions, performing the dance, answering questions afterward) acted as relief for teachers on a hot May afternoon. Both times, after being introduced and proceeding to walk through the door, I was greeted by curious bright eyes and differently sized smiles. I introduced the performance in a simple manner, that is, by juxtaposing the Spanish colonial experience in Nicaragua to that of the English and French in Canada; by explaining that the performance I was studying was a piece of theatre that made fun of the Spanish; and by explaining that over the years the street theatre form changed into different things (e.g. handicraft [my mask], ballet, and so on), but that the ballet is the main form today.

For the children I performed five of the six dances on these two occasions, for which I had practiced for several days. There was lots of laughing, especially during the quick footed dance four, the dance of the machos. Afterward, I received a wide range of interesting comments and questions from the crowds which ranged between 60-80 elementary students and their teachers: One young girl asked why the natives made fun of the Spanish. I said it was because they felt like they were being treated unfairly by the Spanish. Another girl asked me how to say the dance. Confused, she asked me how to spell it. I instructed her to find me after the question period and I would write it down for her. In our follow-up conversation, she notified me that she was familiar with how to pull up a video on the internet and I wrote down “El Gueguense” on a piece of paper. Another child, a boy in kindergarten, waved his hand anxiously above his head
from side-to-side. When I pointed to him, he said that he thought that he would just tell me how silly he thought I looked in my costume, and then he asked why I performed the dance. I said that the dance was supposed to be funny because the natives were making fun of the Spanish, and I added that I performed the dance because I was doing research about it at University. Throughout the six or seven minute question periods, there were five or six children who must not have heard each other’s questions or my answers because they were interested in where my mask and costume came from. I did not mind answering these questions, though. They had never seen anything like it. I explained to them that it came from a friend of a friend, a woman, who works at a market, in Nicaragua. They seemed to be curious about the open air markets in Nicaragua, so I shared a bit more about that. I wish that I had brought some pictures with me.

What had to have probably been the most emotionally captivating question for me was when a thick and tall aboriginal girl approached me. She was approximately 10 years old. Confidently, she stood next to me and told me that she thought my performance was interesting and that some of the steps reminded her of what she had seen at some local powwows. I told her that I thought that was extremely interesting, that I had been to a powwow in Kingston before, and that there were perhaps similar themes or meanings in those steps or performances, but that I did not know for sure. She seemed satisfied, said “thank you” and rejoined the line-up of students going back to class. Reflecting on this conversation in later days, it has already pointed me in new directions. Perhaps powwows need to be taken a look at by the Ministry of Education. Provide teachings or the opportunity to go, to expose children of different ages, and to teach critically about how they exist within a “multicultural” society and an increasingly globalizing world. We are all neighbours.
Last but not least, I most recently performed the dance at Research Day for colleagues at a Kingston hotel. The space was extremely small and I was forced to adapt the (re)presentation (i.e. by moving a projector screen; by cutting and editing some of the choreography; by being careful not to back into anyone, and so on). To me, this rearranging of the room and the ensuing performance symbolized a carving out of a larger space within the School for experimental and experiential qualitative research methods. Because I had only 20 minutes to present, and 7 minutes of dancing to do, however, I rifled through a Microsoft Excel presentation, which focused on some historical context and my ethnographic techniques and methodology. The main mistake I made was that I did not leave enough time for questions. But perhaps it was for the better as I would have rambled on for much too long.

Final Thoughts

My inclusion of the experiences of me as a practitioner-researcher, I believe, are what have enabled me to persevere through this project. If it were not for the inclusion of these empirical experiences, then I in fact would have had relatively little to say. It could also be said that I have envisioned my project to act in the following ways: (1) As a call for exploration of re-politicizing the Güegüense tradition via critical discussions of sex/gender, ethnicity and fatherhood, as well as capitalism and globalism, and so on; (2) as an (auto-) ethnographic example, a (re)presentation of how to unleash the “apprenticeship” as methodology, respectfully as a qualitative researcher; (3) as a critique of the development of the Nicaraguan state and the state of social life in the country, as well as a critique of the FSLN’s nation-building project; (4) as a questioning, a simple asking of what if things were different in Nicaragua? What if the blatant anti-imperialist Sandino had lived on? What if the dictatorship never made all those deals with the U.S. government? What if the masses in Nicaragua received all of those hundreds
of millions of dollars back from economic exploitation, unnecessary taxation, foreign economic intervention, unnecessary wars, and so on, following independence? Today, can we really call Daniel Ortega a “Sandinista”? Utilizing the Güegüense tradition as a vector of knowledge, I hope this project has helped unravel some of these tangled up issues.
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