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*Corresponding author: Mary Louisa Cappelli, JD Interdisciplinary Researcher, Emerson College, Pacific Palisades, USA
E-mail: mlcappelli@gmail.com

Reviewing editor:
Michael Bintley, Canterbury Christ Church, UK

Additional information is available at the end of the article

LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | CRITICAL ESSAY

Women of the revolution: Gendered politics of resistance and agency in the cultural production of Margaret Randall

Mary Louisa Cappelli^{1*}

Abstract: Margaret Randall's cultural production of *Sandino's Daughters*, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, and *Risking a Somersault in the Air* examines the complicated socio-political processes and relentless struggles women encountered as revolutionary participants during the Sandinista Revolution. In this essay, I scrutinize the impact of gendered politics on female bodies and interrogate the written articulation of revolutionary feminist participation. I show how in many instances militarized sexual rape and assault were used as a political weapon to silence women's voices and interests. I argue that the failure of both men and women to recognize and systematically address gender inequality and reproductive violence was a critical factor in the present oppressive state of post-revolutionary gender specific violence and gender inequity in Nicaragua.

Subjects: Gender Studies; Latin American & Hispanic Studies; History; Cultural Studies; Literature

Keywords: sandinistas; revolution; Margaret Randall; gender violence; women in revolution; testimonios; oral history; ethnography

1. Introduction

In the preface to the 1995 edition to *Sandino's Daughters*, Margaret Randall explains the "renewed interest" in her work recording the efforts of revolutionary women who effectively assisted in the overthrow of Nicaraguan President Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza's oppressive government (p. v). She writes that her recordings of oral testimonies are the "first stories told to the world after years of silent struggle" (Randall, 1981, p. v) In this paper, I examine Randall's testimonial interviews of female Sandinista guerillas, which she conducted between 1979 and 1980. I concentrate on the

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Cappelli is a graduate and interdisciplinary scholar from USC, UCLA, and Loyola Law School, where she studied anthropology, theater film and television, law and literature. A former lecturer at Emerson College, she currently teaches at Nevada State College and is the director of globalmother.org where she researches the impact of globalization on indigenous populations in Africa and Central America. Her research synthesizes media, literature, legal anthropology and law.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Militarized sexual rape and forced disappearances are often used as political weapons to silence women's voices and interests. During times of war and civil strife, violence is gendered and women and children are most often its victims. Rape, sexual intimidation, gender-specific violence, psychological assault, and forced disappearance are furthermore strategically employed to ensure women's political destabilization and demobilization. It is therefore imperative to understand how military and paramilitary consistently target women's sexual bodies as strategic spaces of political terror and domination.

ethnographic production that bears witness to women making choices between their domestic lives and the revolution, and those accounts that testify to reproductive violence and reproductive torture during the revolutionary period as it relates to patriarchal political conquest (Randall, 1981, p. xvi).¹ I show how in many instances militarized sexual rape and forced disappearances were used as political weapons to silence women's voices and interests. Moreover, I reveal the gendered politics of resistance and agency in which Randall witnesses the female body and particularly the womb as a place of physical and hegemonic contestation against patriarchal dominion and ideology. Randall's testimonial discourses provide crucial political "her" stories to examine women's participation as guerillas in revolutionary processes, the impact of gender specific violence and gender agency in these processes, and, more importantly, the failure of women's advocacy networks to address, argue, and sustain a feminist agenda. As an interdisciplinary social activist, I read these works as historical documents to advocate for ethical and equitable gender rights.

2. Revolución Popular Sandinista

Because of its flourishing ecosystems and resources, Nicaragua has been a contested site of both domestic exploitation by its ruling elite and, moreover, foreign intervention and exploitation advanced by the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century. In 1522, Gil González contractually indebted to the Spanish Monarch, left Panama's hostile environment on an extended mission in which he "managed to covert close to 30,000 Indians, carry off 90,000 pesos worth of gold" and discovered the water canals between the Pacific and Caribbean (Walker & Wade, 2011, p. 299). The early colonists annihilated a thriving population of a million Indians to approximately one percent of its former population within a decade of the Spanish arrival. Death in battle and death by European diseases wreaked havoc on reproductive systems resulting in the demographic collapse of Indian populations.² In addition, the slave trade led to further Indian depopulation as close to half a million peoples were sold into slave bondage. Because of this demographic collapse, today's population is predominately *mestizo* (Walker & Wade, 2011, pp. 331–333).

Nicaragua achieved independence in 1838. In the 1840s, the United States made its descent into Nicaragua in an attempt to usurp the interoceanic routes from British interests. Both the United States and Britain wanted commercial control of the San Juan Canal connecting the Pacific and Atlantic. The Clayton-Burton Treaty of 1850 attempted to assuage some of the tension over interoceanic rights, so that neither country could claim land ownership of Central American lands. In a bizarre turn of events in 1855, William Walker from San Francisco marched into Granada and took over the city. In July 1856, Walker became president of Nicaragua encouraging "developmentalist ideas" "foreign investment" and "increased exploitation of Nicaraguan resources" – ideas that have had a profound influence on Nicaraguan society (Walker & Wade, 2011, pp. 384–386). Although Walker surrendered in 1857, and attempted a filibuster in 1860, he was captured by the British and sent to Honduras. He died by British firing squad, forever capturing the political memory of Nicaraguans who annually celebrate September 14 as the San Jacinto victory against Walker.

Since Walker's brief presidency, the United States has had an ongoing strategic military and commercial presence in Nicaraguan politics, playing a pivotal role in the shaping of Nicaragua's dependent capitalism. US political modus operandi was to support those presidential candidates that were favorable to American foreign interests.³ With the change of liberal and conservative presidents and the rising threat of revolutionary sentiment and *foco* led by Augusto César Sandino, the US secured its interest during the second US occupation of 1926–1933 by seizing control of its infrastructure.

Although considered a mixed economy, today, Nicaragua continues to be economically and socially dependent on foreign investments to maintain its socio-economic and political structure. The rulers of a capital dependent society have little concern in fostering a consumer society; instead of prospective consumers, people are viewed as cheap sources of exploitable labor. Here, once again, we witness the complicity of the United States and Nicaragua's government in undermining the prosperity and potentiality of its own populace. From the dictatorial governments in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Brazil, and Chile, dependent capitalism has been an objective economic

arrangement in which the privileged few gain access to the country's wealth and resources at the expense of the indigenous and societal marginalized (Randall, 1981, p. xiii).

Nicaragua provides a particularly ripe example of how dictatorships are inherited within a family dynasty, as is the case of the Somoza family. Between 1933 and 1977, the Somozas were able to establish their power base by maintaining strategic alliances with the United States in a bilateral exchange of commercial and political support and interests. One such fortification of power was the establishment of the National Guard, which ensured Anastasio Somoza Garcia's dynasty from 1937 (with a brief exposure from 1948–1950). After his assassination in 1956, his eldest legitimate son Luis Somoza Debayle took the helm from 1956–1963. Anastasio Somoza Debayle assumed the leadership of coercion and repression in 1967 and by the end of his reign was estimated to control “an economic empire estimated to be worth nearly a billion dollars, including one-third of the nation's arable land and many of the major industries” (Leogrande, 1979).

In addition to a widening gap between the ruling elite and the citizenry under Somoza, Nicaragua moved from subsistence crop-production to mono-crop production by focusing its agriculture on coffee, an introduced species brought to Nicaragua in the early 1800s. Because coffee was a popular component of saleable beverages for international consumption, the ruling elite redirected agricultural production to coffee as their sole export, resulting in a loosely based “Banana Republic” economy, which benefited US corporations. This stranglehold of the economy, resources, and people led to the confluence of revolutionary forces to regain control of the country. “Women of all classes responded to this repression” by also “becoming revolutionaries” (Randall, 1981, p. xiv).

According to reports from Amnesty International, Somoza faced international criticism from the Carter Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in which Nicaraguan bishops penned a “pastoral letter accusing the National Guard of humiliating and inhuman treatment ranging from torture and rape to summary execution”(Leogrande, 1979). Influenced by the memory of Augusto César Sandino, FSLN's Marxist Ideology, and Liberation Theology, which spread the “social gospel” that the poor too “were made in the image of God,” *Nicas* and *Nicos* from all walks of life joined in solidarity.⁴

Mounting pressures produced myriad anti-Somoza forces that challenged political corruption and rigged elections. *Tendencia Insurreccional*, (*Terceristas*), advocated military resistance and instigated the clash of October 1977. Margaret Randall reports that The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was founded in the early 1960s by a group of young Marxist revolutionaries who were inspired by the National Liberation Front in Algeria. The FSLN challenged Somoza's concept of democracy. Believing armed resistance was the only strategic option available to achieve democratic representation and social justice, the FSLN engaged in guerilla tactics of warfare, kidnapping, and other maneuvers against the Somoza regime. This groundswell of forces seeking social justice inspired the 1978–1979 War of Liberation, toppling the Somoza Regime in July 1979 (Walker & Wade, 2011, p. 901).

Margaret Randall's testimonies document the valiant women who engaged in the revolutionary struggle and bear witness to “history's telling” in which women retrieve their voices, scars, and stories from often violent patriarchal inscriptions (2002, p. 125). Randall's documentary oral histories in *Sandino's Daughters*, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* and *Risking a Somersault in the Air* demonstrate how women's bodies were often a site of reproductive struggle and contestation during the revolution.

3. Revolutionary women

It is estimated that 30% of the soldiers and top guerilla leaders of the Frente *Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* were women, and according to the Sandinista Social Security, approximately 6.6% of those “killed in the war against Somoza were women” (Kampwirth, 2002, p. 62). As Randall's testimonies attest, women's participation in the Sandinista struggle moved beyond gender specificity of

reconnaissance seductress to fill varied roles as military combatants, officers, and strategic planners. While myriad theorists have tried to gain an understanding of how gender operates in guerilla revolutionary movements in Latin America (Chomsky, 1995; González-Rivera, 2012; Montoya, 2012; Wickman-Crowley, 1992). The testimonies recorded by Randall provide first-hand detailed accounts of women's participation in revolutionary processes from former revolutionary guerrillas. What sets the Sandinista Revolution apart from other guerilla movements in the Americas is that women contributed their efforts and services to establish the Sandinista Coalition of guerrilla forces and revolutionary groups working as "both armed and unarmed members" (Kampwirth, 2002, pp. 260–261).

One such woman, interviewed by Randall in *Sandino's Daughters*, is Gloria Carrion, a former advocate for the *Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional* (AMPRONAC).⁵ Carrion historicizes women's "objective condition" in Nicaraguan society as "the pillars of their families." When men lost their jobs and could "no longer contribute to the support of the family," women took on the burden of finding work to maintain the family's economic sustainability (Randall, 1981, p. 13). Carrion argues that working class and peasant women's "involvement in the revolution is a result, in the first place of their class condition" (Randall, 1981, p. 13). Howe (2012) substantiates Carrion's claim that inequitable class structures placed Nicaraguan women "at the bottom of a hierarchical, corrupt, and exploitative system that was managed through dictatorial rule," subjecting women to "vicissitudes of abusive labor conditions and political repression" (loc. 735–737). While Carrion acknowledges that women participation "crossed class lines," the emotional depth of the struggle came from those non-bourgeoisie women who "had to fight each day for the bare necessities of life" and "had to struggle just to survive" (Randall, 1981, p.13).

In Randall's reportage of Carrion's testimony, we witness how the exclusion of bare life from the political realm makes "the bare necessities of life" a revolutionary objective.⁶ So many poor farmers were pushed off their land. By 1978, shortly before the overthrow of Somoza, more than "three quarters of the economically active population engaged in agriculture could be classified as landless or land poor" (Kampwirth, 2002, pp. l.299–l.300). Randall reports that in response to the pressure of food insecurity brought on by land grabbing, displacement, and the increased cost of living of food for consumer goods, many women joined the *Movimiento Pueblo Unido*. Under the umbrella of the FSLN, women mobilized to launch the "Our Children Are Hungry, Bring Down the Cost of Living Campaign." Mothers donning aprons and empty pots demonstrated in the streets to demand fair prices (Randall, 1981, p. 16). Mothers joined together to put on skits about the difficulty mothers faced in maintaining their households and protested increased taxes placed on food items that were precluding the purchase of basic necessities to feed their children. Their slogan: "Our Children are Hungry" was capable of "mobilizing large numbers of women" (Randall, 1981, p. 17). Mothers also politicized Mother's Day as a way to draw attention to the struggle against economic and political oppression by using the slogan "The Best Gift Would be a Free Country" (Randall, 1981, p. 16). In 1973, Women protested the commercialization of Christmas claiming it undermined the true spiritual intent of the holiday. In another campaign, women implemented a letter campaign to "guards' wives in neighborhoods urging them to convince their husbands that they were betraying" their fellow Nicaraguans because of their work (Randall, 1981, p. 23).⁷

4. Gendered sacrifices for the revolution

Unfortunately, women's participation in the revolution had adverse effects on family structures and domestic cohesion as more involvement meant less time resulting in a change in family dynamics. Randall's reportage demonstrates the double bind women faced in making choices between serving their families, their lovers or the revolution. 26 year-old Julia Garcia testifies to the difficulty balancing her participation in the revolution with her family. She recalls: "It wasn't easy being politically active with my kids and all. I nearly abandoned them, not because I wanted to, but in order to fight for what we have now" (Randall, 1981, p. 20). Other mothers faced similar either/or choices and were forced to choose between their families or the revolution.

In her ethnographic reportage, Randall gives voice to Revolutionary mother and poet Vidaluz Meneses who left her young children to take part in the “takeover of the United Nations building” (Randall, 1984, p. 46). Randall captures women’s personal struggles, solitude and conflicting sentiments in the revolution in the lines of Vidaluz Meneses’s poem “To My Aunt Adelina.” In this poem, Meneses shares an unfinished “bedtime story,” and the dilemma of choosing which bedtime stories to share with her children. Can these stories ever be stories of innocence when lurking in her memory is the story of her “brother’s death”? (Randall, 1984, p. 53). While putting her children to bed, should she “explain the Sandinista Revolution” and her “militia uniform” and why she and other “women stand guard”? (Randall, 1984, p. 53). Should Meneses explain why on some nights she must take up arms and leave her children without the maternal comfort of good night rituals? In a victory that took down a US backed dictator, Meneses’s absences from her family and unfinished “bedtime stories” seem as urgent as the “rectification” of government shortcomings.

In another testimonial recording, Randall details how Giocondi Belli sacrificed her poetry to work solely for the revolution. Belli vowed to “make my work the best poem I could write” (Randall, 1984, p. 141). Belli, who later worked in the information office of the Sandinista government, affirms Francisco de Asís Fernández’s belief that “we won’t bring the dictatorship and injustice down by poems alone” (Randall, 1984, p. 144). For Belli, the revolution was the “most urgent poem all Nicaraguans had to help write” in order to create and shape a new society (Randall, 1984, p. 146). It was through Belli’s relations with other writers and revolutionaries that she learned to develop the praxis between expression and experience, affirming “that being a poet could also be a weapon in the struggle” (Randall, 1984, p. 49). Yet, the poetry that brought her “euphoria,” “at being a woman, a mother,” and celebrating her sexual womanhood was “scandalous”; it was considered “immoral” “that a woman would dare speak in that way of her body, of her sensuality” (Randall, 1984, p. 145).

Twelve years later, Giocondi Belli recalls how the “Sandinista women’s movement operated more in line with male interests, with the so-called national interests” (Randall, 1994, loc. 2910). In regard to domestic concerns, Belli testifies to how mothers were censured from discussing their families as it was “a mortal sin” and “if a woman said, ‘I can’t go to that meeting on Sunday because I have to be with my children,’ that simply wasn’t acceptable” (Randall, 1994, loc. 2921). Belli further remembers arguing with her comrades that this type of oppressive reprimand would only harm the children because they would “inevitably” equate the revolution with domestic collapse and “the loss of parents” (Randall, 1994, loc. 2921). In her novel, *La Mujer Habitada* (1989), Belli explores these conflicting emotions in which women are roused between romantic notions of love and revolutionary commitments, act upon their political obligations at the critical moment.

As women’s issues were seconded in favor of patriarchal nationalism, discussions of abortion, reproductive choice, rape, battery, and control of women’s bodies were tabled. Women caught between this dialectic of country/home and soldier/woman are depicted in the first verse of the “Girl of the Sandinista Front,” by Carlos Mejía Godoy. Used as an epigram to Randall’s chapter “The Women in Olive Green,” in *Sandino’s Daughters*, the song portrays an almost sensual image of a young girl who chooses the revolution over her lover:

Lovely girl of the FSLN
with your boots and pants of drill
machine gun in hand
your long flowing hair
that grew in the month of April.
You left your lover
to begin another relation
for your true love
is he not he but another
it’s the love of an entire nation. (Randall, 1981, p. 129)

The romanticized juxtaposition of her “flowing hair” in April’s month of renewal suggests the girl leaves the carnal desires for her lover for the lofty desires of a nation in a sexualized exchange of a penis for a machine gun. The “other relation” is now the “love of an entire nation,” usurping all other feminine needs for what is another form of patriarchal nationalism, in which the male writer writes from his masculinized imagination—a sexualized revolutionary object of phallogocentric propaganda. Cynthia Enloe’s ideas on “masculine political privilege” are quite apropos in discussing the power and powerlessness in the Sandinista Revolution in which we witness woman after woman in Randall’s her-stories sacrificing feminine desires and children for the “male-led collectives” of the “mythic later” (Enloe, 2014, p. 63). In this case, nationalism seems to derive from “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope” (Enloe, 2000, p. 45). Women were given “Not now, later” advice, and told that the revolution was first and foremost; other issues of personal relationships, family sustenance, and sustainability were seconded to the needs of the nation (Enloe, 2014, p. 62). The idea that women needed to be “patient” that “they must wait until the nationalist goal is achieved,” before “power relations between men and women” were addressed is one of several key factors in the failure of the revolution (Enloe, 2014, p. 62).

Randall’s reportage of Dora Maria Tellez’s oral testimony further demonstrates the conflicting dynamics of motherhood and political activism and how women suppressed their personal desires for the future of the revolution. Dora Maria was one of the women who commandeered the takeover of the National Palace in August 1978. She reflects on the difficulty of women trying to find their place in society and narrates how her time working in a delivery hospital inspired her to fight for equality and social justice. After assisting in the delivery of an 8 lb 6 oz baby boy, she asks, “Have I completed my mission by aiding his birth?” To this question she answers, “No. Our work will be done when we can give these young ones a new world” (Randall, 1981, p. 49). It is here that Dora Maria commits to birthing a new world, her actions dedicated to the symbolic delivery of giving birth, which is both “painful” and “joyous” to a new vision of the world (Randall, 1981, p. 49). Similar to Che Guevara’s “new man” who is “more egalitarian, more altruistic, and more socially conscious, in short, more revolutionary, than the men of the old regime,” Dora Maria’s birth requires a steadfast commitment to the procreative birthing of this unrealized mythic world (Kampwirth, 2002, pp. l.2392–l.2395).

In Randall’s interview, Dora Maria recounts how women put down their kitchen pots and took up arms to become combatants in the revolution and the important role mothers played in seeking justice for the deaths of their sons and daughters. In *Sandino’s Daughters*, poet and former vice-Minister of Culture Daisy Zamora adds that “our goal was to raise consciousness around women’s participation in our struggle” to show how mothers and daughters struggled to participate beyond their gendered roles of domestic task workers (p. 115). Zamora writes of Dora Maria Tellez:

Commander Two*
Dora Maria Tellez
 22 years old
small and pale
with her boots, her black beret
her enemy uniform
 relaxed.
Behind the railing
I watch her talking to the comrades.
Beneath her talking to the comrades.
Beneath the beret her white neck
and the newly cut hair.
(Before she left we embrace each other.)
Dora Maria

the warrior girl
who blasted the tyrant's
heart. (Randall, 1981, p. 108)

Responsible for the emancipation of León, Zamora aptly describes Dora María as a young, “small and pale” almost innocent young woman of “22 years” of age taking on the courage of a warrior capable of gathering her rage at Somoza’s inhumane regime to annihilate his heart of darkness. Her casual demeanor as she converses with her fellow comrades and the contrasting imagery of “white neck” and “black beret,” suggest that when confronted with evil she is capable of blasting “the tyrant’s heart” with relaxed resolute determination. While young women made up one-fourth of the revolutionary forces, records of female military deaths are found to be 6.6%, signaling a small percentage of women who actually served in combat positions.⁸ Many of these women who joined the Sandinista ranks came from the bourgeoisie sector with a level of education and political awareness to believe that they were fighting for a new social vision inclusive of women’s rights and gender equality.⁹ The 1969 Party Platform articulated this commitment to gender equality pledging to “abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared to men [and further] establish economic, political, and cultural equality between men and women” (Rosset and Vandermeer, 1983, p. 144).¹⁰

Although Randall reports many women like Dora Maria actively served in the revolution, Ilja Luciak provides substantial evidence that the FSLN egalitarian ideas to extend recruitment to women were likely motivated by strategies of inclusive mass mobilization. Luciak argues that Section VII on the Emancipation of Women in the FSLN’s 1969 Historic Program “was conceived by an ‘internationalist’ FSLN collaborator” and was more “instrumental” than “principled” in terms of sustained female empowerment and gender equality (Kampwirth, 2002, pp. 2505–2507).¹¹ In Ilja Luciak’s interview with Dora Maria Tellez about her participation in the guerilla movement, Dora Maria recalls never specifically discussing issues of gender equality. As Randall’s oral histories attest, women working against socially oppressive governments face myriad challenges trying to negotiate their national identities with their political identities as women. Because of this, a feminist standpoint agenda was subsumed in rhetoric of nationalism.

Women’s participation in revolutionary movements was first given rhetorical momentum by Che Guevara’s 1961 manual on guerilla warfare in which he writes: “Men and women, especially women, should infiltrate; they should be in permanent contact with soldiers and gradually discover what there is to be discovered. The system must be coordinated in such a way that crossing the enemy lines into guerilla camp to be carried out without mishap” (qtd. in Harlow, 1992, p. 39). Che’s military insight to see the “seductive” power of women as “reconnaissance” soldiers able to insinuate themselves across enemy territory to recover intelligence information, exploits the “traditional construction” of woman as seductress (Harlow, 1992, p. 40). While Randall’s testimonies and photographs report myriad instances of women dressed in olive green combat fatigue fighting alongside their male counterparts, it has become sadly apparent that the nationalistic pride these women felt in regaining their country’s integrity and human rights was under the banner of patriarchal nationalism.¹²

5. Gendered specific violence

Women’s bodies were recurrent sites of struggle and contestation during the revolution. In addition to women employing their bodies to gain access to power relations, there are moreover many instances of gender specific abuse reported. Randall reports that Luisa Amanda Espinosa, who bears the name of the Organization, is admired for being the first female revolutionary to fall during battle as she was “murdered by the Guard on April 3, 1970” by a round of gunfire from 20 guards (1981, p. 24). She is more importantly admired for fighting off a rapist and killing him. Her story is an example the “plunder, sex and death” that fueled Somoza’s regime (Howe, 2012, loc. 767–71). According to Emmet Lang:

I remember once when Luisa Amanda was coming from the mountains and three guards stopped her. She was dressed as a nurse. They took her in and one of them wanted to rape her. He took her down to the river and at first she played along with him. Then, right there by the side of the river, she killed him. That's the kind of strength Nicaraguan women have... Luisa managed to get away, like she did so many other times. (Randall, 1981, p. 30)

Luisa Amanda's courage and strength became a source of strength for other revolutionary women caught in the grip of national patriarchal violence, her rape becoming a political symbol to rally support for the revolution. Enloe (2000) argues that when "we try to increase the visibility of particular rapes committed by particular men as soldiers, we are engaging in a political act" (p. 108). In the case of Luisa Amanda's rape and subsequent death, her story has been "framed in complicated ways," and shaped by the myriad actors within the socio-political system—all of whom have had specific "motives behind the 'telling,'" retelling, and dispersing of Luisa Amanda's story (Enloe, 2000, p. 109).¹³

Randall's works bear witness to decades of rape and other stories of gendered specific violence within the revolution and most certainly from Somoza's military regime. This is especially true in Randall's documentation of Amada Pineda's testimony who recalls being raped by several National Guard men seventeen times: "My legs were black and blue, my thighs, my arms. I had bruises all over me. That's the way they treated all the peasant women they picked up; they raped them and tortured them and committed atrocities" (Randall, 1981, p. 80). These testimonies demonstrate how Somoza's regime systematically tortured women in gender-specific ways, combining rape and torture as a brutal mode of intimidation. Women, moreover, were psychologically tortured as mothers as another weapon of ruthless oppression. Amada Pineda further recalls how Maria Castil was raped and tortured in front of her own three children (Randall, 1981, p. 89). Although wartime rape is endemic in masculinist military operations, Enloe (2000) urges against casting soldiers as rapists as an inevitable outcome of war:

This assumption shores up the (mistaken) belief that there is no policy choice being made, that there is no one responsible – in other words, that soldiers' behavior is universal and ahistorical, that soldier-perpetrated rape is nonpolitical, that rape is nonpolitical. A more analytically useful task is to look for the decisions and the policy behind these acts of rape. (p. 127)

Chilean anthropologist Ximena Bunster has probed the psychological reasons behind rape linking it to a patriarchal strategy to buffer "national security" (Enloe, 2000, p. 129). Bunster argues that psychologically, "women's torment is ... systematically directed at her female sexual identity and female anatomy" as is the case throughout Randall's testimonies of reproductive violence (qtd. Kampwirth, 2002, p. l.2656).

In addition, the influence of *marianismo* and Catholic constructions of woman as the sacred, chaste all abiding self-sacrificing mother aides and abets patriarchal violence when women dare step outside this construction. Enloe (2000) argues that torturers weave these notions into their motivations as "militarized masculinized protectors of the nation" and defenders of *marianismo* (p. 129). Women who stray from these images are perceived as not only a threat to national security, but to patriarchal images of motherhood. Bunster's investigation reveals how militarized rape and torture were specifically aimed at women's reproductive systems making it a discursive space for the imposition of patriarchal ideology. Bunster writes:

The sexual violence against women political prisoners is seen as the key in controlling them, through punishment and interrogation. Gang rape, massive rape becomes the standard torture mechanism for the social control of imprisoned women. Politically committed, active women who have dared to take control of their own lives by struggling against an oppressive regime demand such torture – as do the women who have stood by their men in an organized political effort to liberate their country and themselves from a coercive military regime. (qtd. in Harlow, 1992, p. 170)

The political aim of militarized rape and torture was to reduce women to nonbeings who could be reprogrammed and follow patriarchal orders as the dutiful self-sacrificing, submissive, all abiding mothers when they returned home (Enloe, 2000, p. 130).¹⁴ Amnesty International continues to have concerns regarding impunity for gender-specific violence against women. In this “hush-hush” patriarchal world, “Nicaragua has closed its eyes and ears” to the increasing levels of gender specific violence against pubescent and adolescent girls (Witte-Lebhar, 2011, p. 1). Amnesty International’s 2011 analysis of police records demonstrates that of the “nearly 14,400 rape cases reported between 1998 and 2008. More than two-thirds (9,695) involved minors under the age of 17” (Witte-Lebhar, 2011, p. 1).¹⁵

In spite of the fact that in 1996 The International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague established rape as a separate war crime, Daniel Ortega’s administration has failed to address the alarming epidemic of sexual violence.¹⁶ Amnesty International evidences Nicaragua’s 2006 failure to initiate a 2001 task force to address sexual violence, dissolving the “*The Consejo Nacional de Atencion y Proteccion Integral a la Ninez y la Adolescencia* (CONAPINA), a government agency tasked with coordinating strategies for protecting children from violence” in 2007 (Witte-Lebhar, 2011, p. 1).

Taking official US documentation into consideration along with Randall’s historical reportage, it becomes evident that the US government aided and abetted the perpetration of gender-specific violence against women, including Nora Miselem and Maria Suarez who were kidnapped and disappeared in Honduras for less than two weeks in 1982. As stated in a 1993 report from the *International de Resistentes a la Guerra*, “during the US-supported Contra War in Nicaragua, an estimated 5,000 women were kidnapped and held in Contra-Camps, where they were constantly sexually abused. Their release was never an issue in negotiations for peace, and no one knows what happened to them.” Several reports from Amnesty International dating from 1979, provide clear and convincing evidence that the rape, torture, disappearance, and other human rights abuses detailed in Randall’s testimonial reportage were encouraged by the CIA.¹⁷ According to former contra leader Edgar Chomorro, as reported by McManus and Rohter (1985) article “Nicaraguan Rebels Accused of Abuses,” “Rape was very common.” Chomorro further charges Contras with sexual abuse as, “Contra officials rape their own female soldiers,” and have sometimes been “raped at knifepoint by contra leaders.” In Chomorro’s statement, he said the “contras targeted Hondurans who disagree with their policies” and strongly suggests that these sexually violent activities “would not exist without the CIA.” Randall’s ethnographic reportage supports these findings, establishing that “Violence, like all other human interaction, is gendered: women and children are most often its victims, men or male-controlled states their victimizers” (2002, p. 28). Historically significant is how the US trained, funded, and supported Nicaraguan government and paramilitary forces—the same forces responsible for “disappearing women” and committing numerous documented gender-specific crimes (2002, p. 84).

6. Reproductive Justice

Randall’s reportage of the traumatic sexual journey of another *compañera* by the name of Lesbia further captures the violent nature of Somoza’s regime. Lesbia became pregnant by a guard after being “arrested, imprisoned, and raped” at the age of 16 (Randall, 1981, p. 37). Lesbia’s story adds credence to sexual exploitation and marginalization by Somoza’s regime that were “known to use sexual torture against dissidents, male and female, to illicit information from political prisoners and punish political adversaries” (Howe, 2012, l.752–l.757). Her story produced a great deal of public controversy as to whether she should give birth or abort the baby. Some believed that the baby should be aborted because it would carry the stigma of hate and cruelty; Lesbia, on the other hand, believed that the child’s life would be living symbol of the revolution and a testament to the lives lost and struggles fought. Randall’s recording of Lesbia’s story testifies to a personal history of imprisonment, torture, rape, abortion, and birth in a world where women still had little freedom to make decisions concerning their bodies. Here, and in other texts and contexts, Randall gives voice to women’s collective experiences in which we witness the female body, and particularly the womb, as a place of physical and hegemonic contestation against patriarchal dominion and ideology.

According to the 1969 political platform, “the basic unit of society” was the family, which ensured “social reproduction, continued societal growth, and transmission of hegemonic notions of family” (Chinchilla, 1990, p. 371).¹⁸ The ideology of family growth was adverse to preventive methods of contraceptive birth control and abortion, which reduced population growth and “elective abortion was illegal in Nicaragua prior to Sandinista control” (Howe, 2012, loc. 915–17). In order to maintain solidarity with adherents to Catholic ideology, the Sandinistas compromised allowing for abortion in “special circumstances” that endangered a women’s life or “when the pregnancy had been caused by incest or rape,” in which cases therapeutics were allowed (Howe, 2012, loc. 915–17).

Nicaragua’s abortion laws regulating women’s bodies in the world have since become the most restrictive legislation in the Americas.¹⁹ “Amnesty International’s 2014 Periodic Review” corroborates that the criminalization of abortion has had a devastating impact on women. It argues that restrictions on choice is highly concerning, given the high levels of sexual violence against girls in the country” (p. 3).

The shaping of reproductive politics in Nicaragua cannot be divorced from politico-religious influences, *Fundamentalismo Cristiano* and Catholic pro-natalist polices that profoundly placed woman’s wombs within the jurisdiction of patriarchal legislation. Nor, I argue, can it be divorced from the failure of patriarchal influenced organizations such as AMNLAE who ignored women’s reproductive agency. According to AMNLAE’s general secretary, Glenda Monterrey in September 1981, “some women may think about abortion, but not the majority! And even if they did, now is not the time to dwell upon such issues; women and men alike must make fighting the enemy our main concern ...” (Randall, 1994, loc. 485). Here, yet again, Randall’s oral history reportage exposes patriarchy’s fabrication of the “the mythic later,” an emancipatory reproductive justice that has yet to arrive in Nicaragua even after women deployed themselves on the frontlines of revolutionary struggles.

Daisy Zamora observes in reflecting on the 1987 Constitution that women did not voice their concerns for reproductive autonomy “in spite of the fact that a number of women had an active role in writing the Constitution, the truth is that abortion or freedom of choice isn’t established as a right” (Randall, 1994, loc. 1802–1803). According to Zamora who cites a study carried out by Managua’s Berta Caleron Hospital, “71.7% of all women begin to be sexually active between the ages of nine and fourteen and are considered fertile until the age of forty-nine, only 26% use any form of birth control” (Randall, 1994, loc. 1804–1807). The high pregnancy rates among young girls have led to “illegally induced abortions” and the rise of maternal mortality rates (Randall, 1994, loc. 1809–10). There are many social actors involved in the failure of the revolution to advocate for abortion and reproductive choices. Cymene Howe explains the traumatic repercussions of restrictions on reproductive autonomy: “In part, the FSLN and AMNLAE were wary of addressing any change to abortion law or fear of alienating the politically and morally influential Catholic Church” (Howe, 2012, loc. 917–919).

Because of this miscarriage of reproductive justice, Nicaragua is one of seven countries in the world that maintains strict reproductive control over women’s wombs banishing all abortion procedures even in instances of child pregnancy, rape, and mother’s health endangerment. According to Klibanoff’s August (2013) report for the Pulitzer Center, birth rates for girls between the “ages of 10 and 14 who give birth has risen by 48% since 2000,” with “one in every four births here is to a girl between the ages of 15 and 19.” The ban on abortion has created dangerous situations for young mothers wishing to terminate their pregnancies with health experts reporting close to 30,000 illegal abortions performed each year. Amnesty International 2011 Report testifies to Former Marxist Revolutionary Daniel Ortega’s “newfound zeal for Catholicism” Medieval restraints on women’s reproductive systems with a “blanket ban on abortion, which is illegal even for girls and women impregnated as a result of rape” (Witte-Lebhar, 2011, p. 1). The report further declares that “the country’s ultrarestrictive abortion law—updated in 2006 to remove all exceptions—adds insult to injury for rape victims, who have no choice but to carry their pregnancies to term” (Witte-Lebhar, 2011, p. 1).

7. Disappearing women: *Women, terror, and resistance*

Maria Suarez and Nora Miselem's personal stories of disappearance testify to this on-going gendered violence against women. Nora Miselem is a Honduran woman who at the time of her disappearance worked with a Human Rights Organization that worked with refugees in Honduras called COSPUCA: the Committee of Solidarity with the Peoples of Central America. Nora recalls working on a campaign that published "lists of the names of the Honduran soldiers who were raping children, murdering refugee[s] ..." (Randall, 2002, p. 195). In her interview with Randall describing her abduction and torture, Nora details how her reproductive systems were violated by the paramilitaries:

They made me open my legs and began running the electricity to my vagina. And they said: You bitch, women like you shouldn't be allowed to give birth. They said they were going to sterilize me, because I didn't deserve to have children – that idea they have of a woman as some sublime being whose sacred role is bearing children. According to them I was breaking with the tradition of what a woman was supposed to be. And they were going to punish me, from their point of view, so I wouldn't be able to have children. A woman like me didn't deserve to be a mother. (Randall, 2002, pp. 325–327)

Nora's testimony to the vaginal shocks to her womb, her maternal site of birth and reproduction evocatively demonstrates to this other "kind of information"—patriarchy's gender specific degradation of women, "systematically directed at her female sexual identity and female anatomy" (Kampwirth, 2002, p. l.2656). Nora recalls, however, not giving in to her torturers, not allowing them to turn her into a "disposable" nonbeing. She concedes that while her tormentors physically brutalized her, she refused to let them "morally, or emotionally, or ideologically" conquer her (Randall, 2002, pp. l.349–l.350). "The only recourse I had was to attack their morale, because they wanted to rape a woman who was afraid" (Randall, 2002, pp. l.349–l.350). Nora's declaration testifies to the type of merciless retributive reproductive violence meted out against women deemed as threats to capitalist objectives. Here, we witness how imprisonment and gender specific torture is used to destroy both the physical and political body. As a survivor of this torment, Nora's testimony yields a specific historical record to indict the political systems of torture that violently abridge human rights.

Maria Suarez, another of Randall's interviewees, was a professor in the School of Education at the University of Costa Rica working on a literacy campaign in Honduras at the time of her disappearance. She recollects her abduction and forced disappearance as one of thousands of people during 1965 and 1985 who were engaged in social activism and forcefully "disappeared" to "ensure democracy," a "euphemism" for safeguarding patriarchal imperialism (Browdy de Hernandez, 2005, p. 3).²⁰ Maria ruminates on the irony of her disappearance because she had "worked for five years on behalf of the disappeared in all the countries of the region, and they never knew that. I myself had been one of the disappeared" (Randall, 2002, pp. l.2279–l.2280). Randall cites the tens of thousands of disappeared "during the two decades of the dirty wars" throughout Latin and Central America:

Argentina (30,000), Chile (20,000), Uruguay, Paraguay, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru. Central America offers similar statistics. In El Salvador, since the 1980s, 7,000 cases of disappeared persons have been reported. Guatemala is the Central American country with the highest number of disappeared: more than 40,000 since the 1960s. In Honduras, 185 men and women have been disappeared since the early 1980s. (*Women, Terror, and Resistance* 1169–74)

Nora and Maria are five of the 185 who survived their disappearance in Honduras and live to humanize the historical record of abductions, their testimonies providing documentation to never forget the 180 women who still remain faceless. According to Randall (2002), the incidents of disappearance are so common that the word "disappeared" itself transformed to a "reflexive verb" indicating a victimization in which people were taken against their will during their regular daily activities (l.1149) The phrases, "He was disappeared; she was disappeared," were the frightful words linking together the victim and the ensuing psychological terror felt by the family and the community (Randall, 2002, pp. l.149–l.152). Of all the tactics for planting fear in families and communities, fear

of losing a family member to the void of “disappeared” is the most frightening. Community and family members who have had a loved one “disappeared” have experienced psychological distress and emotional disturbances ranging from severe anxiety to clinical depression.²¹ After the disappearance, the absence of legal and psychological resolution makes the family’s healing process more difficult to endure. Important to remember is that the arousal of terror and fear is precisely the desired socio-political and psychological objective of the perpetrator’s action. Once a mother, daughter, wife is disappeared she immediately becomes a symbol of retributive justice in the community of what happens when women step out of submissive domestic roles. Tully (1995) explains in “A painful purgatory: grief and the Nicaraguan mothers of the disappeared,” the devastating “rupture” that occurs within social and domestic spaces in which life is torn asunder and domestic units and reproductive livelihood permanently impaired. Yet, here and elsewhere, women resisted the overthrow of their individual integrity.

Nora, Maria, and Randall believe that retrieving the collective memory of these experiences is a necessary step in recovery, healing, protest, and advocacy. Remembering the stories of torture and disappearance is to go deep inside the psychic wound to travel “the length of one’s own history, but inside” to recover “those files we keep in our bodies and souls” (Randall, 2002, pp. 1.580–1.582). Recovering these personal historical files is a way to bridge the past and the present with the future in a “her” *storiography* that “recognizes our shared wombs” and shared experiences as women constructing our own stories.

8. Conclusion

Randall’s ethnographic reportage provides an evidentiary framework for the intense scrutiny and interrogation of masculinist oppressive policing powers and their inhumane systems of political imprisonment. Her reportage substantiates how women’s participation in revolutionary movements destabilizes patriarchal construction of gender roles. Through the veracity of Randall’s historical documentation, we witness women’s participation in the Sandinista Revolution and how women’s bodies transformed into political struggles—women’s reproductive systems often the site of militarized violence. Sexual intimidation, gender-specific violence, psychological assault, and forced disappearance were furthermore strategically employed to ensure women’s political destabilization and demobilization. Military and paramilitary consistently targeted women’s sexual bodies as a strategic space of political domination—rape a powerful tool of brutal antagonism to silence women’s voices.²² The persistence of widespread sexual violence, brutality, and torture against women has prevailed with impunity.

In a world that “trains its people to forget,” Margaret Randall’s cultural production provides a “political space” to examine women’s participation in the revolution. It is in the remembering of individual stories and testimonies in which the power lies to “disentangle” political memory from deceitful mechanisms of hegemonic control. In this sense, memory is the political space of social activism and political resistance against a privileged patriarchal power structure that persistently subordinates women’s lives to years of injustice and gendered impoverishment.

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Author details

Mary Louisa Cappelli¹

E-mail: mlcappelli@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0419-9411>

¹ JD Interdisciplinary Researcher, Emerson College, Pacific Palisades, USA.

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Notes

1. I specifically concentrate on *Sandinista’s Daughters* (1981), *Risking a Somersault in the Air* (1984), and *Sandinista’s Daughters Revisited* (1994).
2. See: (Radell, 1969; Walker & Wade, 2011).
3. During the years 1912–1925, the United States backed Adolfo Diaz, Emiliano Chamorro, and Diego Manuel Chamorro (Walker & Wade, 2011, p. 501).
4. Advocates of Liberation Theology included both lay people and clergy working together to advocate for a social justice action agenda.
5. The *Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional* (AMPRONAC) later became the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Women’s Association.
6. For further discussions of Giorgio Agamben theory on the politicization of bare life see *Homo Sacer* 41.

7. Mothers as social activists collectively joining together to bring attention to human rights violations and injustices has been documented throughout Latin and Central America in Jo Fisher's *Mothers of the Disappeared* and Marjorie Agosin's *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*.
8. See (Vilas, 1986, pp. 108–109).
9. See: (Monterrey, 1983, p. 325).
10. Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), Rosset and Vandermeer (1983, p. 144).
11. VII. Emancipation of Women.

The Sandinista people's revolution will abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared to men; it will establish economic, political, and cultural equality between woman and man.

- (A) It will pay special attention to the mother and child.
 - (B) It will eliminate prostitution and other social vices, through which the dignity of women will be raised.
 - (C) It will put an end to the system of servitude that women suffer, which is reflected in the tragedy of the abandoned working mother.
 - (D) It will establish for children born out of wedlock the right to equal protection by the revolutionary institutions.
 - (E) It will establish day-care centers for the care and attention of the children of working women.
 - (F) It will establish a two-month maternity leave before and after birth for women who work.
 - (G) It will raise women's political, cultural, and vocational levels through their participation in the revolutionary process.
12. Randall's photograph of Ana Julia Guido dressed in olive green army combat from head to toe with a military rifle by her side as her lips open wide to the camera in a half smile provides evidence of working machista military women.
 13. Margaret Randall's inclusion of this story in her text and of course my analysis of Luisa's story as an object of academic inquiry is included within these political activities.
 14. Maria Mies refers to this as "the ideology of the eternal victim" (*Patriarchy and Accumulation* 165).
 15. Similar conclusions are corroborated in "Listen to their Voice and Act: Stop the Rape and Sexual Abuse of Girls in Nicaragua," a report published in November 2010, *El Instituto de Medicina Legal's* 2008 study and findings from *Movimiento contra el Abuso Sexual* (Witte-Lebhar 1).
 16. According to Christian Chartier, a spokesman for the court, "This is a landmark indictment because it focuses exclusively on sexual assaults, without including any other charges." She further notes that: "There is no precedent for this. It is of major legal significance because it illustrates the court's strategy to focus on gender-related crimes and give them their proper place in the prosecution of war crimes" (Simons, Marlise. "U.N. Court, for First Time, Defines Rape as War Crime." *New York Times* 28 June, 1996).
 17. See: (McManus & Rohter, 1985).
 18. Chinchilla (1990).
 19. Criminal Code Law 641 declares all forms of abortion criminalizing abortion "in all circumstances, even if the life or health of the woman or girl is at risk, or she is a victim of rape," imposing long "prison sentences on women and girls who seek or obtain an abortion" in addition to abortion providers (Nicaragua: Amnesty International submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review 19th Session of the UPR Working Group, April-May 2014).
 20. While Browdy likens "ensuring democracy" as a euphemism for "securing safe conditions for imperialist capitalism," I believe it is important to clarify the nature of this global patriarchal project (3).

21. See (Munczek & Tuber, 1998).
22. (See the works of Diane Nelson, Alicia Portnoy, and Dette Denich).

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