War in Paradise: Solentiname and the Sandinista Revolution

Ileana L. Selejan
Institutional Affiliation: Linda Wyatt Gruber '66 Curatorial Fellow in Photography, at The Davis Museum at Wellesley College
Address: 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Email: iselejan@wellesley.edu
Telephone: 781.283.2070

Abstract (200-300 words)

The essay presents a case study of the Solentiname archipelago in Nicaragua theorized as a site for the construction of Utopia, an idealized environment where an alternative community was formed during the sixties and seventies, in opposition to the Somoza dictatorship (1936-1979). The leadership of Ernesto Cardenal led to the creation of an enduring cultural legacy, which was essential to the development of the Sandinista revolutionary movement, as well as to sustaining the Sandinista government following the victory of July 1979, and particularly during the Contra War (1981-1990). Applying art historical analysis, the essay investigates how photography contributes to the formation of revolutionary identities, by fulfilling both descriptive and ideological purposes. Despite the scarcity of the surviving visual record from the islands, I argue that photographs of the site were fundamental in establishing the role of the community as a strategic ally for the rising opposition against the Somoza dictatorship. Not only did photography help envision Utopia, it equally contributed to situating these hopes in the context of daily realities, resisting the regime. Other forms of art and literature that developed in Solentiname in the years leading up to the Revolution of 1978-79 further shaped revolutionary identities, as grievances about poverty, inequality and political repression were expressed through egalitarian high-low aesthetics. The case of Solentiname thus serves to open a discussion concerning under-explored cultural alliances within Latin America and beyond, providing a close-up view of localized aesthetic practices seen in relation to transnational solidarity networks, framed by the context of the massive socio-political transformations underway during the Cold War.

Keywords: Nicaragua, Sandinista Revolution, resistance, Utopia, liberation theology, aesthetics, photography, documentary, primitivism, landscape, exoticism, travel writing, solidarity, human rights

Revolutionary Aesthetics

Largely forgotten now, Solentiname – the place, the name – once resonated with revolutionary idealism. It was here in 1966, motivated by the promises of the precepts of Liberation Theology, that Catholic priest, literary and political figure, Ernesto Cardenal, together with a group of like-minded artists and poets established a utopian community to escape and resist the Somoza dictatorship (1937-1979).[1] An archipelago of thirty-six tropical islands located towards the south-eastern shores of Lake Nicaragua, remote and independent from the rest of the country, with its own school of *primitivista* painting and sculpture, the community was a place of refuge for Latin American revolutionaries, artists and intellectuals in the years leading up to the Revolution of 1978-79. As utopian experiment, realised even if on a small scale, Solentiname defied its exceptional status, driven by transnational imaginaries of resistance and hope. Its name was whispered by the anti-Somoza resistance within and outside of Nicaragua, fuelling future political and social alternatives even as a common revolutionary movement was yet to take shape.

Originally intended to maintain a nucleus of peaceful resistance under the leadership of Cardenal, the community participated in the Sandinista-led insurgency during the 1977 campaign against the National Guard. After the end of the Somoza dictatorship and throughout the 1980s, Solentiname remained an important centre for arts and crafts production, with artisans continuing to work in the naïve manner introduced during the earlier period. Recreated through folklore, this vision of the islands as an egalitarian earthly paradise was nonetheless already nostalgic and mythologised. This essay proposes a reading of the site as an experiment in culture and society, one that provided an important model for social revolution and emancipation through art and

literature in Nicaragua in the years following the Sandinista Revolution.

Within the coordinates of greater post-war cultures of dissent, Solentiname must be seen in dialogue with analogous progressive utopian projects from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly those that also incorporated the production of art as a necessary component in their proposed ecologies of change. As Jean Franco (2009, 113) has noted: 'Solentiname was intended as the culmination of the historical avant-garde's dream of fusing art and everyday life, while reflecting at the same time liberation theology's view of the poor as the agents of history.' Yet while some of these movements have been prominently documented and archived – a prime reference here would be the events around 1968 throughout the U.S., in Paris, Prague or in Mexico City – others, as the example of Solentiname shows, stand out not only because of their singularity, but also due to their fragmented historical record, failing to register long-term beyond the sphere of national and/or local memory. As the editors of this volume indicate, the persistence of certain iconic photographs over the 'mass' of all others, while illustrative of Cold War conflicts and ideologies, has often led to the clouding of a greater range of visual cultural materials, establishing dominant discourses dismissive of seemingly 'peripheral' histories such as Solentiname. Connected through vast networks of revolutionary writers, artists and intellectuals, the ideologies introduced to the islands by Cardenal and his group led to the formation of novel socio-political categories, impossible to achieve otherwise under an authoritarian gaze, establishing trends that were both specific to the Nicaraguan context and symptomatic of the broader political climate of the time. In fact, important parallels emerge beyond Central and South America with the economically and politically aligned Third World, from Eastern Europe to the Middle East. These

ideological and cultural ties – indeed 'visual alignments' – were forged in reaction to authoritarian regimes, later to crystallise through diplomacy into multifaceted Cold War international relations.

The formation of Solentiname during the 1960s and 1970s directly influenced the types of policies promoted by Cardenal during his tenure as Nicaraguan Minister of Culture between 1979 and 1988. Begun as an incursion into utopian life and thought, and as alternative to an existence regulated by the overarching strictures of a dictatorial regime, *Paradise* – embodied and imagined, secular and devout – was fundamental to the nation-building program of liberated Nicaragua. It was also crucial to the resurrection of artistic production, of cultural institutions, and related educational programs. Government support for the arts, for instance, was redesigned through an integrative institutional model, inclusive of folk arts and crafts traditions, which were intended to actively engage the indigenous, pre-Columbian past alongside the contemporary ethnic diversity of the region. Analysed from a historical perspective, Solentiname provides an important case study for understanding the development of the ideological roots underlying the production of material and visual culture in revolutionary Nicaragua. Indeed, Cardenal's phrase, 'la revolución es cultura y la cultura es revolución', ('culture is revolution, and revolution is culture') resonates throughout the pages of this essay. (Cardenal 2009, 64)

The majority of the literature on Solentiname dates to the 1980s, a decade that saw the international recognition of Nicaraguan programmes for cultural renewal, education and social rehabilitation, and concomitantly the rise of a movement of international solidarity with the Sandinista government. The latter was the outcome of a series of interrelated political, economic and humanitarian crises, as Nicaragua became

caught in the midst of a violent U.S.-supported counter-revolutionary struggle, the Contra War (1981-1990). As a consequence, impacted by the grave human rights concerns brought about by a decade of conflict and civil war affecting the greater Central American region, a majority of these studies reflect the polarised rhetoric of the era.[2]

Building on these studies, the present essay focuses on the entanglement of photography within the formation of revolutionary, aesthetic identities that accompanied the rise of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional or FSLN) during the 1970s through to the 1980s. Several photographers visited the archipelago during the period under consideration, yet only two – Sandra Eleta and Larry Towell – created bodies of work that are substantial enough to yield significant reflections when placed under the art historian's loupe. As their accounts show, within the context of Solentiname, photography functioned primarily as an observational device, witnessing the progressive social movements active there, and later the Contra war. The analysis of this fragmentary record will be supplemented by other types of aesthetic evidence, forms of artistic practice which, I will argue, took on *documentary* functions, relegating photography to more prescribed illustrative purposes. While the task of the 'documentarian' may have largely been transferred to the poets and artists in the community (which helps explain the minimal trace Solentiname has left in the visual historical record), this did not preclude the participation of photographers in the creation of revolutionary aesthetics. Furthermore, as demonstrated by examples of prose written by Julio Cortázar in solidarity with the Sandinista Revolution, neither were related non-fictional, descriptive or reportorial literary forms, entirely devoid of visionary or symbolic meaning.

Art and Culture in Solentiname

Solentiname was strategically located along Nicaragua's southern border, overlooking sparsely populated areas, landscapes where the dense tropical vegetation was prone to disguise and overtake human presence. The sublime landscape appealed to Cardenal, leading him to establish a contemplative Catholic community on Isla Mancarrón, the archipelago's largest island in 1966.[3] The island's population amounted to around 800 inhabitants at the time, comprising families of *campesinos* (or peasants) farmers and fishermen with little access to education and health services, almost entirely dependent on the lake's ecosystem for their daily subsistence. The town of San Carlos, located at the confluence of the lake and the San Juan River, reachable by boat within a few hours, was the nearest point of connection to the rest of the country.

Cardenal (born 1925) was an unusual cleric, a poet and an intellectual, educated in Mexico, Colombia and in the United States. Drawn to theology, literature and philosophy from an early age, he travelled widely through North and South America and Europe. A stark opponent of the Somoza regime, he first became involved with the resistance during an April 1954 attempt to assassinate president Anastasio ('Tacho') Somoza García.[4] His political engagement began to converge with his spiritual education when, between 1957 and 1959, he became a novice at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, under the mentorship of Thomas Merton. A teacher of mystical theology, greatly influenced by non-Western religions, ranging from Buddhism to Hinduism and Sufism, Merton took on an increasingly progressive, activist stance on civil rights, non-violent protest, and social emancipation through spirituality.

The two maintained regular correspondence until Merton's death in 1968, with a hiatus between December 1959 and March 1961, when the Abbey congregation prohibited Merton from writing to Cardenal, due to the politicised nature of their exchange. On Christmas Eve 1962, alarmed at the prospect of Cold War nuclear proliferation, Merton wrote:

> I am deeply concerned about peace, and am united in working with other Christians for protest against nuclear war; it is paradoxically what one might call the most small and neglected of "movements" in the whole Church. This also is to me terribly significant. I do not complain, I do not criticize: but I observe with a kind of numb silence the inaction, the passivity, the apparent indifference and incomprehension with which most Catholics, clergy and laity, at least in this country, watch the development of pressure that builds up to a nuclear war. It is as if they had all become lotus-eaters. As if they were under a spell. As if with charmed eyes and ears they saw vaguely, through a comatose fog, the oncoming of their destruction, and were unable to lift a finger to do anything about it. This is an awful sensation. I hope I am not in the same coma. I resist this bad dream with all my force, and at least I can struggle and cry out, with others who have the same awareness.
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> (Merton to Cardenal in Merton (1993: 128-130))[5]

Largely due to his friendship with Cardenal, Merton's interest in Latin American culture, literature, philosophy, religion and contemporary politics was wide-reaching. He repeatedly expressed interest in travelling South, and maintained correspondence with numerous artists and intellectuals, translating and publishing their work in English, while his own work was published in Latin American journals.[6] An outspoken advocate of shared identities across the Americas, and of the need to reconcile the vast economic differences between the two hemispheres, Merton himself fantasised about founding a contemplative community in Latin America. (Cardenal 2000, 7-8; Cunningham 1993: 57-59) As the correspondence between Merton and Cardenal shows, discussions about the location of such a community were underway immediately following Cardenal's

departure from the United States. Merton's plans to visit Central and South America were never realised. Nevertheless, his writings, his conviction that a common spirituality could present alternatives to war and conflict, and that peaceful, equalitarian coexistence was achievable in the contemporary world, left an indelible mark on later movements for social and political emancipation throughout Latin America. These common ideals would coalesce through alliances between the Christian and the political Left on both halves of the continent.

In his later writings Merton passionately argued that the teachings of Christ, as put forward in the New Testament, can be applied through Marxist critique to the here and now.[7] Distrustful of the oppressive Communist regimes in the East (particularly the Soviet Union and China), Merton favoured the ideals of emergent Western and Latin American leftist revolutionary movements. Nonetheless, he claimed that these could only be realised in a monastic community, a uniquely sustainable form for collective social habitation. Cardenal, on the other hand, saw no contradiction between Catholic religion and his gradually militant Marxist convictions. In fact, much like other Liberation Theologians, he read the Bible, specifically the New Testament, though the lens of Marxist doctrine, his revolutionary élan reinforced following his visit to Cuba in 1970.[8]

Within the contemplative community in Solentiname, Cardenal's teachings gradually led to the development of a distinctive, politicised, interpretation of the New Testament directly applied to the context of Nicaragua during the Somoza dictatorship. Mass was held at the church of Nuestra Señora de Solentiname, followed by conversations with the members of the congregation, often held, as Cardenal (1985, vii) would recall, 'in the open air on other islands, or in a small house that we could get to by

rowing along a beautiful river through very tropical vegetation.' The conversations were originally published in four volumes as *El Evangelio en Solentiname* in 1975, which soon became an essential document for the global Liberation Theology movement. (Cardenal 1975-1977; the English translation 'The Gospel in Solentiname' was published in 1978.) Providing a localised, applied interpretation of the universal suffering and redemption described in the accounts of the New Testament, these collected commentaries equally serve as 'memory aids', oral histories that help deepen a textural analysis of Solentiname, reconstructing daily life in the community. Gathered around the ancestral figure of the storyteller, the *campesinos* emerge as equally formative figures, interpreting biblical stories and events from the life of Christ through their personal experiences. As recalled by Cardenal in his introduction to the Gospel:

> Marcelino is a mystic. Olivia is more theological. Rebecca, Marcelino's wife, always stresses love. Laureano refers everything to the Revolution. Elvis always thinks of the perfect society of the future. Felipe, another young man, is very conscious of the proletarian struggle. Old Tomás Peña, his father, doesn't know how to read, but he talks with great wisdom. Alejandro, Olivia's son, is a young leader and his commentaries are usually directed toward everyone, and especially toward other young people. Pancho is a conservative. Julio Mairena is a great defender of equality. His brother, Oscar, always talks about unity.
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> (Cardenal 1985, ix)

The Gospel is the most enduring cultural artefact from this period in the history of Solentiname. Yet similar collaborative exchanges inspired the development of various forms of art and poetry throughout the 1960s and 1970s, such as the poetry workshops led by Costa Rican poet Mayra Jiménez that contributed to the development of nationwide programs after 1979. (Jiménez 1980) In a context in which art-making was intrinsically bound to spiritual utopia, participating in the aspirational movement for

justice and personal emancipation, the importance of these dialogues cannot be overstated. Following several visits to Solentiname, inspired by Cardenal's work, dissident *nueva canción* folk singer Carlos Mejía Godoy wrote the *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Peasants' Mass), a liturgical mass composition that incorporated regional folklore and popular music from throughout Nicaragua, including indigenous languages and oral traditions. First released in 1975, it was immediately censored by the Somoza government.[9]

Godoy's *Misa* was considered subversive not only because of its political content. Its seditious status can also be ascribed to its celebration of Nicaraguan high-low cultural diversity, which was brought into dialogue, rather than circumscribed, through a hierarchical relation to canonical Western aesthetics preferred by the ruling elites in Managua. While no strict stylistic restrictions were imposed on cultural production during the Somoza regime, censorship was common, and, as was the case with Godoy's composition, materials suspected of subversive intent were frequently banned. After the Sandinista victory, these became incorporated into the larger cultural revolution as symbols of resistance, reminders of an 'era of hope' to use Sergio Ramírez's phrase, and fundamental to the nation-building process. (Ramírez 2001, 5-7)[10]

The intersection of religion, contemporary politics, and daily life translated most directly into the types of art made on the islands during the pre-revolutionary years. A small workshop was built as part of the commune in Mancarrón. With guidance from Spanish émigré and Managua-based painter, Róger Pérez de la Rocha, who first visited Solentiname in 1967, an informal 'school' of painting and sculpture was formed, leading to the development of a characteristic *primitivista* naïve style. Expanded to the larger

community in Solentiname, the *Escuela Primitivista* contributed to the emergence of several important artists, and in some instances to the development of multi-generational practices.[11] Responding to the dialogues with Cardenal, the paintings produced in the workshops staged scenes from the life of Christ in the local context, and translated spirituality through the everyday, hence creating analogous transcendent experiences in art and life. Gloria Guevara's *Cristo Guerrillero* (Christ as a Guerrilla Fighter) from 1975 is perhaps the most renowned example. In a text written following his visit to Nicaragua in 1986, Salman Rushdie (2008, 10) would recall the 'Christ-figure who wore, instead of a loincloth and a crown of thorns, a pair of jeans and a denim shirt. The picture explained a good deal. The religion of those who lived under the volcanoes of Central America had always had much to do with martyrdom, with the dead; and in Nicaragua many, many people found their way to revolution through religion.' As in Paul Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* (1889), martyrdom is historicised through the presence of contingent details such as dress and landscape, elements that would have been immediately recognised by the members of the community.

Landscapes and scenes of daily life constituted other dominant genres, universal harmony manifest in the extravagant greens, blues and purples, the Garden of Eden restored. In parallel with the development of the Solentiname social utopia, a formal visual imaginary hence began to take shape. Within this developing body of *liberation folklore*, fact and fiction combined along a fluid temporal axis, resulting in a type of figuration that David Craven (2002, 146) has described in the following terms: 'these paintings were not so much realistic representations of *campesino* life as they were textural evocations with visionary overtones of its daily fabric.' Across various artistic

practices, we see a reoccurrence of familiar tropes. Thematically, the manner in which life in the countryside is represented remains consistent: immersed in nature, miniature figures are engaged in various activities, whether labouring (fishing, tending animals and the land) or coming together on festive occasions. While the first generation of artists such as Eduardo Arana, Alejandro Guevara, Miriam and Gloria Guevara, or Olivia Silva introduced subject matter derived from local myth and folklore, with occasional reference to historical topics, formally they relied upon a small number of compositional schemes. This can be attributed to the prominence of communal practice over individual expression, 'models' which, nonetheless, remained pervasive throughout the 1980s as Solentiname *primitivism* was becoming more widely recognised.

As Craven (2002, 125) has established, the type of 'popular dialogue, or dialogical process', observed in the parish meetings in Solentiname, led to 'the idea that the making of art, like the interpretation of key texts, should also be made accessible to the popular classes in Nicaragua.' Tested out first in the small island community, this ideological framework was applied through government programs for what Cardenal (1986, 408), in a statement delivered on 23 April 1982 at UNESCO in Paris, described as the 'democratization of art and culture' in Nicaragua during the Sandinista 1980s. Even before the revolution however, word of mouth regarding the progressive practices in Solentiname reached broader communities in Latin America and beyond precisely through the circulation of objects produced on the islands. The use of photography, which might appear most obvious to the contemporary reader, was in fact only minimally deployed. Nicaraguan photographers would have encountered considerable difficulties in producing independent, let alone subversive work due to censorship, working in addition

in a context where materials and resources were scarce, if not impossible to obtain outside of government commission or of the press. An exception was Panamanian photographer Sandra Eleta, who visited the islands several times, beginning in 1974.

A Journey to Solentiname

Photographer Sandra Eleta and writer Gloria Guardia, both Panamanian, undertook the first comprehensive documentation of Solentiname in November 1974. Their collaborative travelogue was published in a book titled *Con Ernesto Cardenal: Un viaje a Solentiname* (With Ernesto Cardenal: A Journey to Solentiname, 1974).[12] With a *primitivista* landscape on the cover, showing a birds-eye view of bucolic island topographies outlined against the pale blue lake, the title page opens with a snapshot of Cardenal. Seen together with a group of people, presumably members of the commune who are carrying new provisions to the house, Cardenal is the only figure in the frame who meets the gaze of the camera. In the foreground, a man leans a large box of *Belmont* cigarettes on his shoulders, pulling the account back into the immediate present. Guardia's text follows on the next pages, succeeded by the remainder of Eleta's series. Viewed alongside, yet independently of the evocative essay, the photographs thus acquire presence and authority, by-passing a purely illustrative function.

Guardia met Cardenal in Panama City in October 1974, through an introduction made by the Nicaraguan poet and literary critic Pablo Antonio Cuadra; the circumstances surrounding this encounter serve to preface the journey to Nicaragua, motivating the energy and enthusiasm behind it. Although inflected by the complimentary tone in her characterisation of Cardenal, Guardia's account remains mostly reportorial, narrating the

journey in minutely detailed descriptive passages. After a short stay in Managua, 'una gran ciudad despedazada' ('a great shattered city'), as Guardia remarks, ruined during the massive 1972 earthquake, the travellers head towards the colonial city of Granada.[13] (Eleta and Guardia 1974, 9) There they board the ferry to San Carlos together with Cardenal and William Agudelo's family, who are returning to Nicaragua after two years spent abroad in Colombia and Peru. An overland itinerary is chosen 'en nuestro afán es recorrer las huellas humanas del poeta', ('in our eagerness to record the human tracks of the poet') a clear confirmation of the way in which the text sets out to fetishise Cardenal's character. Guardia and Eleta's journey is more than a journalistic incursion, or even a sightseeing escapade; rather it resembles a pilgrimage. Part of the travellers' drive is a search for authenticity, a desire to witness, and participate in Utopia.

'Esta hermosa travesía' ('this beautiful journey') continues in a small boat, and the group finally reaches their destination: 'Estamos en Mancarrón, en la "Comunidad de Solentiname" que se levanta toda ella – minúscula y gigantesca – en la punta de una isla verde y arboleada, donde el amor cosecha revolución.' ('We are in Mancarrón, in the "Community of Solentiname" which rises – minuscule, yet gigantic – on the tip of a green, luscious island, where love has sewn revolution.') (Eleta and Guardia 1974, 14). Eleta's series finally picks up here, and the photographs, although succeeding the text, parallel Guardia's descriptions of the community. While formally set apart, the text and the series of images are interrelated, their meaning is co-dependent, and emerges through dialogue. The narrative voice thus switches back and forth throughout Guardia's and Eleta's expedition, careful to record the scene in its smallest detail.

Guardia takes the reader inside the main building, *La Casa Grande*, which

contains the library, and the shared living quarters, where communal meals and assemblies take place. Several people live in the commune, including Laureano, Elvis and Alejandro, the three young men who contributed to its building from the earliest stages, and Doña Justa, the cook. All men wear the same 'uniform', jeans, white cotton shirt, and sandals, Guardia tells us, as she quotes a text by William Agudelo from 1966: 'Aborrezco los vestidos de paño, las camisas almidonadas y las corbatas. Y ese blue-jean que usaré será un hábito, la insignia de un monje que vive en el mundo, la ropa humilde despreciada.' (Eleta and Guardia 1974, 15). ('I hate wool suits, starched shirts and ties. These jeans will become a habit, the emblem of a worldly monk who lives in humble, rejected clothing.')

Eleta's photographs abound in similar familiar details, capturing the intimacy of the domestic sphere: a farmer's hat and a pair of work pants (jeans) dry out in the sun, cows graze at the entrance to the church – comical relief perhaps, a type of humour characteristically found in rural genre scenes from Bruegel, while still framed by a solemn simplicity reminiscent of Jean-François Millet. Yet the photographs only reference labour, rather than portraying it directly. A sense of tranquillity and ease pervades such pastoral scenes of unperturbed earthly delight. In fact the only labour depicting scene is captured inside the artists' studio, where we see Laureano painting a small balsa wood figurine, where art-making is portrayed as a pleasurable, contemplative activity.

[Insert figure 1]

Aside from the daily routines, an overall sense of harmony and *joie the vivre*

pervades the photographs. A telling image is of Ernesto and Juan Agudelo, aged five, in a boat. A tightrope bisects the frame, drawing attention to the child's distracted, contemplative gaze as they drift along the water. Cardenal seems caught mid-way through a phrase, and we are reminded of a conversation between the two – as recounted by Guardia a few pages back – as it took place on the way from San Carlos to Solentiname: Juan enquires about good and evil, the existence of God, life after death.

A photograph of the interior of the guesthouse shows a crucifix hung over an unmade bed, positioned in turn under the watchful gaze of Che Guevara, whose haunting effigy, stencilled from the iconic photograph by Alberto Korda, reappears further to the right of the frame. The resting body, its weight still registered through the visible wrinkles in the white sheets, becomes an equivalent for the body of Christ, whose suffering and martyrdom is placed in direct relation to contemporary sacrifice, and political-ideological struggles for freedom and emancipation, in Cuba, Chile, and beyond, as the *collage* of posters and revolutionary paraphernalia that frame the bed seeks to confirm.

Guardia's rich descriptive passages again complement the photographs: 'Ernesto trabaja en una mesa, donde está su máquina de escribir y, a la derecha, tiene anaqueles de madera repletos de libros. Ahí vive él con los muchachos de la comunidad y la habitación, aparate de la mesa que sirve de escritorio, sólo alberga camas, un lavamanos y una hamaca.' (Eleta and Guardia 1974, 16). ('Ernesto works at the table with his typewriter, to his right are wooden shelves full of books. He lives in this room with the other men from the community, and apart from the table that serves as his desk, there are beds, a sink, and a hammock.') All snapshots and narrative fragments converge in the

eponymous figure of Cardenal, the 'cool' wandering monk, spiritual leader, intellectual, humanist, poet, and artist.[14] In a final symbolic image, his figure dissipates in the bright light of the day. Ringing the dinner bells, Cardenal calls time, gathering the community, maybe calling for their spiritual and political awakening too.

[Insert Figure 2]

Scenes from the Church of Nuestra Señora de Solentiname show Cardenal and Laureano performing mass; details from the decoration of the church are visible in the background. Inspired by pre-Columbian indigenous pictograms found on the islands Róger Pérez de la Rocha worked with local children to distil a language of play, plants and animals recognisable from their environment, abstracted into signs, metaphors of innocence regained. The islands contained a scattered archaeological record of pre-Columbian habitation, preserved in pictograms and rock carvings by tribes that had migrated from the Northernmost part of Mesoamerica, settling along the banks of the Great Lake – a source of fresh water and sanctuary of abundant variety of plant and animal life – during the last millennium before the Spanish conquest.[15] Local artisans had maintained some of the motifs in use, yet an educated awareness of these cultures was for the most part lacking. Exchanges between such region-specific and contemporary art practices in Managua, are clarified through formal correspondences with the avant-garde group *Praxis* (active between 1963 and 1972), since several members of the group, including Pérez de la Rocha, employed *indigenista* symbols in their abstract compositions.

Pictured in the background of the photograph, the central mural in the church depicts the Tree of Life, symbol for knowledge, and of the primordial Garden of

Paradise. The Tree of Life is representative of the ideals projected by Cardenal's group during this first period in the life of Solentiname, while still 'under construction'. The altarpiece centres on a rectangular relief made out of stitched metal cut from gasoline tanks, painted red, symbolic of the blood of Christ and the Eucharist. Bursting through from the bottom edge of the wall, close to the ground, tendrils reach upwards, gathering in their path the rich diversity of plant and animal life. Harmoniously co-existent, the human element is signified solely through habitation and use in the form of homes and fishing boats. Crowning the composition is a peacock, with its train feathers open wide, an early Christian symbol of Paradise and of the plenitude and totality of the cosmos, frequently depicted in association with the Tree of Life. The altar stone, barely visible in this image, frames the composition in real space, and concentrates the rich content of the murals through the repetition of minimalist geometric motifs, markings, patterns of waves and spirals reminiscent of indigenous carvings from the islands. Bright, saturated primary colours dominate, complemented by milder shades of oranges and greens. Gravitating away from the centre, the side murals serve to diffuse the overall cosmic allegory. These transitional passages work in parallel to the seating area, where the congregation would gather. The formal relationship between the various murals and decorative registers is reinforced through the consistent colour scheme employed, which further relates the church interior to the surrounding natural environment, through a sequence of monochromatic sieve screens that make up the main entrance façade.[16]

Expressed through the architecture and art made in Solentiname during this period, the impact of Cardenal's revolutionary poetics and spiritual philosophy reveals itself forcefully. While one could argue that Cardenal's vision of the islands was indeed

'romantic', it nonetheless reflected the broader revolutionary and social convictions of its moment. The importance of the artefacts produced on the islands (and here I include the *Gospel in Solentiname* and Cardenal's literary output) resides precisely in their contemporaneous 'constructed-ness', rather than in a search for authenticity. Cardenal's project was profoundly ethnographic, his role in the community was as both participant and witness. Rather than attempt either to justify or to contest the philosophical foundations of this project, Solentiname could perhaps more aptly be interpreted as sign of its time and place, a complex ecology of change, grounded in a utopian worldview that sought to nurture the development of organic cultures in localised, more or less cohesive regions from an ethnically diverse national culture.

Alongside the other accounts, and the objects produced in Solentiname, *Con Ernesto Cardenal* was essential to demonstrating the survival of an alternative, resistance cultural movement, rallying support for the anti-Somoza struggle. The almost immediate publication of the book draws attention to the urgency of its context, especially considering the rarity of these 'views' into Utopia. In addition, Eleta and Guardia's collaboration should be seen as part of a key period of transition from the photo-essay format to the photobook. During the late 1970s and 1980s, photobooks would become the preferred medium for independent documentary photographers, and were often employed as rhetorical weapons circulated across Cold War ideological divides. While the 'golden era' of picture magazines had come to an end in the U.S. (*Life* magazine folded in 1972 due to diminished readership), in lesser developed mediascapes in the global South we see the continued proliferation of paper-based mass-produced forms of photography (magazines, books, etc.), due to cheap production cost, the possibility of wide

distribution, and of reaching a broader, popular readership.[17]

Violentamente dulce[18]

Solentiname was an important point of convergence for Latin American artists and intellectuals in the years leading up to the Sandinista revolution of 1978-79. Led by the Frente Sandinista, the oppositional movement had gathered tremendous popular support and key political allies throughout the region. Following his clandestine visit to the islands in 1976, in solidarity with Cardenal, the renowned Argentine writer Julio Cortázar would write his first short text about Nicaragua, 'Apocalypse in Solentiname' later published in the volume 'Nicaraguan Sketches' – a collection of fifteen essays written between 1976 and 1983 in support of the Sandinista revolution. In the story, upon his return to Paris, where he was living in exile, Cortázar rediscovers, almost by accident, forgotten pictures from Solentiname:

> Claudine took the rolls of film to be developed. One afternoon, walking through the Latin Quarter, I found the receipt in my pocket and hurried to pick them up - eight rolls - images suddenly returning of those paintings in Solentiname. Back in my apartment I checked the boxes to find the first slide in the Nicaragua series. I remembered that I had first shot Ernesto's mass, the children playing in palm groves exactly like those in the paintings, children and palm groves and cows against a violent blue sky and a lake only a bit more violently green, or was it the other way around? I put this box into the slide carrousel, knowing that the paintings would appear near the end of the roll.
>
> (Cortázar 1989, 30)

Through snapshots, animated by a slide projector on the walls of his Parisian apartment, Cortázar revisits the pastoral community as an in-between space, indeed a Utopia, where that 'primal vision of the world' depicted by local artisans in lush *primitivist* canvases could radiate despite, and even if under threat. 'I almost hated to push the advance button, wanting to linger with each image of this fragile, tiny island,

Solentiname, surrounded by water and – *police*, exactly like this boy was surrounded, this boy I was suddenly seeing […] there he was, clearly outlined in the middle distance, his face broad and smooth and full of astonished disbelief as his body collapsed slowly forward, a dark hole appearing in his forehead, the officer's pistol still indicating the trajectory of the bullet, and beside him there were others with submachine guns and a blurred background of houses and trees.' (Cortázar 1989, 31) The insertion of the photographic medium as a literary device appears earlier in Cortázar's 1959 short story 'Las babas del Diablo' (translated in English as 'Blow-Up' and an important source for Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film), which is briefly referenced at the beginning of this text: a closer look, reveals yet another, underlying level of reality and consciousness, causing a disruption in the narrative flow, where the viewer, caught unawares, is thrown in a semi-delirious state. Drifting along mementos of latent yet unrelenting danger – signalling the political violence and instability of Nicaragua – the author's eye travels beyond to Buenos Aires, then El Salvador, Bolivia, Guatemala and São Paulo. The text was written in April 1976, soon after the 24 March coup d'état in Argentina, ushering in the military junta (1976 – 1982), during which it is estimated that up to 30,000 Argentine citizens were disappeared. Crossed by violence present, and past in Latin America, such memories collapse.

Apocalypse waited. As anti-Somoza factions were gathering around the country, Cardenal became more actively involved with the revolutionary movement. The peaceful, contemplative resistance movement he had initiated in Solentiname turned to armed struggle. In October 1977, following an attack on the Somocista National Guard headquarters in nearby San Carlos, as part of a nation-wide Sandinista armed campaign,

Solentiname suffered violent retaliation, and an extensive bombing campaign led to the destruction of the island community. 'La contemplación nos llevó a la revolución' ('contemplation led us to the revolution'), Cardenal would comment that same November, in a letter addressed to the Nicaraguan people, published in exile. 'Solentiname tenía una belleza paradisíaca, pero está visto que en Nicaragua no es posible ningún paraíso todavía.' ('Solentiname had paradisiacal beauty, however, as is seen, no paradise is possible for now in Nicaragua'.) (Cardenal 1977, 24-25)

Although Cortázar's story indeed prophesized the tragic fate of Solentiname, it redeemed it through a 'vision of radical transformation' to quote Lois Parkinson Zamora (1989, 182). The writer returned to Nicaragua on several occasions following the Sandinista victory, and to Solentiname in February 1983. Remembering his trip from seven years before, he wrote: 'There's something very distant about the memory of those days, as if somehow *everything* began on that date when I first set foot on the archipelago of Solentiname and entered, in secret and in the middle of the night, the community of Ernesto Cardenal.' (Cortázar 1989, 110) Compared to the tragic innuendos of 'Apocalypse in Solentiname,' the tone of the account shifts radically, and he exclaims: 'Prodigious acceleration of history! Culminating on July 19, 1979, and opening today on the vast panorama of a truly popular process, which has already achieved so many tangible successes.' (Cortázar 1989, 110)

Numerous contemporary writers echoed Cortázar's unshaken, although not necessarily uncritical, support of the revolution, also artists and many other intellectuals who participated in the global movement of solidarity with Nicaragua, determined to end the aggressive interference of the United States in the region.[19] The claims were further

legitimated by the escalation of the Contra War (1981-1990), as the Reagan administration was providing military and financial support of counter-revolutionary, former National Guard and paramilitary forces. The war would eventually corrode their idealistic stance.

[Insert Figure 3]

The haunting vision of the young boy in Cortázar's 1976 story is significant in this sense, symbolic of the countless *muchachos* or fighters who had become martyrs of the revolution. This portrait of a boy aged somewhere between ten and fourteen, a teenager perhaps, his tender young skin clad in military attire, was taken in the reconstructed parish church in Solentiname in 1984. He stands beside one of the murals, his head crowned by flowers and leaves: an airplane plunges down through the clouds towards him, while a reptilian creature hides behind his back. He looks upwards, contemplative, capturing a bird in flight. In his arms is an AK-47, pointed upwards, following his gaze. Distracted, he draws the weapon close, as if on display; a heavy burden for a child his age, yet notoriously 'light' enough to arm soldiers regardless of age. The boy wears the uniform of the Ejército Popular Sandinista (Sandinista Popular Army, EPS), and was either a member of the Milicia Popular Sandinista (Sandinista People's Militia, MPS) or a recruit of the Servicio Militar Patriótico (Patriotic Military Service, SMP) – a draft instituted in August 1983 to enlist soldiers and personnel during the Contra War, controversial due to its low age admission requirement.[20] Other photographs from the same group show civilians, mainly women and children receiving training from the military, 'civil defense militia' brigades as the captions specify, much needed in areas where the majority of the population was responsible for their own

defence. Some of the children play, others look on, while others pick up the weapons to train. Childhood innocence, protected through maternal care, and the responsibilities of manhood converge prematurely under the enforced strictures of the militarised state.

Taken in 1984 by Canadian Larry Towell, a member of Magnum Photos since 1988, the photographs constitute rare records of life on the islands of Solentiname during the war. On this first journey to Nicaragua in May 1984, while traveling with the U.S. based humanitarian organisation Witness for Peace, Towell received an invitation from Ernesto Cardenal to visit the remote archipelago.[21] At the time, the Contra War mostly consisted of low intensity battles waged in the border regions with Honduras and Costa Rica. Some of these photographs from Solentiname were included in his 1990 book *Somoza's Last Stand, Testimonies from Nicaragua*, which focused on testimonials by victims of the war. On several trips between 1984 and 1986, the photographer travelled to the war zones, and collected first-hand accounts from witnesses and survivors. A small group of photographs, primarily portraits, illustrates the text, as a visual counterpart. The book is a stirring anti-war document driven by the concern for human rights, exposing the devastating effects of U.S. foreign policy in Nicaragua. [22]

Yet despite the war, another rhythm, another flow seems to permeate these pictures of life in Solentiname. Although few in number, Towell's photographs project a nostalgia for Utopia, a yearning for community and for communion with the land in an idealized pre-industrial world, devoid of war. Due to his far-reaching interest in questions related to the intersections of conflict, territory and geography, Towell was perhaps more attuned to recognising the land itself as a major protagonist in such high political stakes. With a large percentage of the population living from agriculture, the implementation of

land reforms in Nicaragua had been a major achievement of the Sandinista government. 'Land makes people into who they are,' he writes, 'from the landless of Central America, to the Palestinians, the Kurds, or the First Nations, there is a predictable outcome to their dispossession. The resultant uprisings are the inevitable outcome when one's identity is threatened or lost – an identity which is in the land itself.' (Towell 2008, 145) In a scene redolent of Christian symbolism, a *campesino* is shown in profile, his arm captured while still in movement, now covering his face just under the broad brim of the straw hat. He proceeds with soft and elegant gestures, highlighted by the elongated trajectory of the winnowed grain. Through the improvised rectangular frame created at the centre of the image, the *primitivist* landscape reveals itself once more.

[Insert Figure 4]

Solentiname represented an exotic landscape and populated utopia, equally it was a Garden of Eden and of earthly delights. By comparison to idyllic depictions in pre-Revolutionary primitivist paintings, or in Sandra Eleta's photographs, the islands 'found' by Towell in the 1980s were a lost paradise, contaminated by the surrounding poverty and violence, a documentary stance foretold by Cortázar's redeeming, yet eventually overpowered, revolutionary prose. Ultimately the Contra War provoked an internal political crisis, alongside economic collapse, and major disillusionment in regards to the revolutionary ideals initially presented by the Sandinistas. Yet despite its half-mythical and only partially documented presence, the memory of Solentiname endured. To quote Cortázar's account of his second and final journey once more: 'in the midst of what is still poverty and still the tropics, these persistently tropical tropics, with all their drawbacks and holdovers from the past, the exacerbated machismo – This is Latin

America in its most torrid zone, Nicaragua as violently sweet as the sudden sunsets when pink and orange bleed into velvet green and night descends, fragrant and dense, thick with tiger eyes.' (Cortázar 1989, 110-111)

A return to that moment of contemplative dissent; one might ask whether the presence of utopia, confirmed through word and image, was indeed necessary to bolster resistance against the inequality and violent abuse of the dictatorial regime. If Solentiname was a sustainable model, then a cultural revolution could conceivably succeed countrywide. As Diana Sorensen (2011, 225) has written, 'Utopian thinking transcends the constraints of the present and tries to build speculative bridges between critique and vision.' A more in-depth analysis would reveal perhaps further clues as to how the legacy of Solentiname was more specifically integrated in Cold War visual networks and alliances, especially considering the influence exerted by the Sandinista movement worldwide, even if during the span of just one decade. While this essay does not seek to evaluate either the achievements or the faults of this experiment, it prompts a valuable question, one that applies to the broader Central American context throughout the Cold War era: to what extent is utopia necessary to sustain revolutionary ideals?

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Figure 1: Sandra Eleta, *Juan Agudelo and Ernesto Cardenal in Solentiname,* 1974. Reproduced by permission of the author, as printed in *Con Ernesto Cardenal: Un viaje a Solentiname* (Editorial Litográfica, 1974). © Sandra Eleta.

Figure 2: Sandra Eleta, *Ernesto Cardenal in the Church of Nuestra Señora de Solentiname,* 1974. Reproduced by permission of the author, as printed in *Nostalgia del futuro, Pintura y Buena Noticia en Solentiname* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, Ediciones Monimbo, 1982). © Sandra Eleta.

Figure 3: Larry Towell, *A Nicaraguan child soldier stands inside a Catholic church against invading U.S.-backed Contra counter revolutionaries*. Solentiname Islands. 1984. Reproduced by permission of the author. © Larry Towell, Magnum Photos.

Figure 4: Larry Towell, *A campesino peasant winnows wheat by hand with a fan and a coconut shell. The Solentiname Islands in Lake Nicaragua became famous for their style of peasant paintings*. Solentiname Islands. 1984. Reproduced by permission of the author. © Larry Towell, Magnum Photos.

[1] Anastasio 'Tacho' Somoza García came to power following the 1936 coup against President Juan Bautista Sacasa. Leader of the repressive National Guard (Guardia Nacional), the Nicaraguan military and police force trained by Marines during the U.S. Marines occupation (1912 -1933), Somoza also planned the assassination of revolutionary leader Augusto César Sandino in 1934 – the figure who would later inspire the Sandinista movement. Once uncontested head of state, Somoza solidified his power and influence through military force, leading to his assassination in September 1956 by Rigoberto López Pérez, a Nicaraguan poet. He was succeeded by his two sons, Luis Somoza Debayle (1956-1967) and Anastasio 'Tachito' Somoza Debayle (1967-1979).

[2] Examples vary from academic sources, to a broader body of human rights-focused literature, photo-books and collections of poetry. David Craven's (1989; 2002) significant contributions remain the most comprehensive studies of contemporary art in Nicaragua. Other recent studies have addressed the history of the islands, referencing the types of art produced there, as well as the relationship between aesthetics and national and/or regional identity, yet primarily from an anthropological, ethnographic perspective. See Field (1995; 1999).

[3] Cardenal moved to Solentiname in February of 1966, together with William Agudelo and Carlos Alberto, colleagues from his seminary in La Ceja, close to Medellín, Colombia. Through to the Revolution, the commune subsisted mainly on Cardenal's revenue from publishing rights, and on the sale of items from the arts and crafts workshop.

[4] These events led Anastasio Somoza to believe in an international plot orchestrated by Costa Rican president José Figueres Ferrer and Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz (ousted in the June 1954 coup supported by the C.I.A., a first instance of direct U.S. intervention in Central American politics during the Cold War). The socialist reformist ambitions of both leaders reinforced Somoza's cautioning arguments that a Communist stronghold was forming in Central America, and reaffirmed his allegiance to Washington. See U.S. Department of State (1983).

[5] The letter parallels a series of 111 letters written to friends in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1961 to October 1962), all of which address the topic of atomic war. Under the title 'Cold War Letters', the collection was mimeographed and distributed, evading the censorship imposed by the Abbey.

[6] See for instance his correspondence with Victoria Ocampo who published his writings in the seminal Buenos Aires literary journal *Revista Sur*. (Merton 1993, 207-212) In Nicaragua, his texts were published in the magazine *El pez y la serpiente*, edited by the poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra.

[7] In an important lecture titled 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', which was delivered in Bangkok on 10 December 1968, Merton addressed the topic of monasticism in relation to

contemporary politics, highlighting the essential perspective of the monk, 'where he stands, what his position is, how he identifies himself in a world of revolution.' See Laughlin, Burton and Hart (1975, 326-341).

[8] In the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban revolution and the 1968 worldwide youth and civil rights movements, these principles of engagement would coalesce around a broader reconsideration of Christianity in the context of the anti-authoritarian, anti-imperialist struggle in Latin America. The phrase 'liberation theology' was coined by Peruvian Dominican theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, and is discussed in his important treatise 'Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas' was published in 1971 (translated into English in 1973, 'A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation'). Placing Christian piety and compassion at the forefront of contemporary social and political transformation, Gutiérrez considers the pervasiveness of poverty and the lack of individual freedom in relation to economic circumstances and class inequality in Latin America and beyond. Far from isolated, these ideas lay at the core of a larger paradigmatic and institutional shift in a region of the world where Catholicism still represented the majority religion. An important debate was held during the 1968 meeting of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM, Latin American Episcopal Council) in Medellín, Colombia, which supported the creation of *comunidades de base* (base ecclesiastical communities), in order to facilitate access to worship and religious education to destitute, and sometimes illiterate communities located in remote areas throughout Latin America. Many of these communities became politically engaged, recognising class-based divisions and systems of citizen abuse in place in their most immediate context.

[9] The National Guard interrupted the first performance of the mass held by Cardenal' brother Fernando Cardenal in 1975 in Ciudad Sandino (near Managua). While officially banned by the Archbishop of Managua Miguel Obando y Bravo immediately after, recordings were distributed underground, and the mass continued to be performed clandestinely. Other examples of folk adaptations of the Catholic mass appear even earlier, in several contexts in Latin America; in Argentina, for example, the Missa Criolla was composed in 1964 by Ariel Ramírez.

[10] Ramírez, himself a writer, was amongst the most prominent figures of the anti-Somoza revolutionary movement, and later became the vice-president of Nicaragua, during the 1985-1990 presidency of Daniel Ortega.

[11] During my visit to Solentiname in 2011, I met with Rodolfo Arellano (born 1940), who was one of the first artists to participate in the workshops, training with de la Rocha. Several members of the Arellano family, across three generations, identify as 'primitivist' painters, working in a manner and style that recalls the landscapes and genre scenes from the pre-Revolutionary era. In fact, one could argue that the support the Sandinista Cultural Ministry offered artists and artisans from Solentiname during the 1980s, the demand for a specific 'product', contributed to the solidification of these painterly styles, as art and artisan goods became an important source of income for the community.

[12] Several photographs from this publication were reproduced in Cardenal (1982), with additional material from the November 1974 series.

[13] Translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

[14] In addition to Eleta and Guardia, detailed descriptions of the daily routines in the contemplative community appear in several visitors' accounts for which the most comprehensive source is Vivas (2000). See for instance William Agudelo, 'Un día en Solentiname'; James W. Heisig, 'Solentiname: un poeta y una revolución'; Kenneth Arnold 'En Nicaragua'.

[15] The Chorotega originated in Chiapas, southern Mexico, and were mostly based in areas that are now a part of Costa Rica, until their populations declined during the colonial period; Nahuatl tribes were of Aztec ancestry (from Central Mexico) and dialects of the language are still spoken in parts of Central America, including Nicaragua. See Cooke (2005).

[16] I wish to thank architect and artist Marcos Agudelo, son of William and Teresa Agudelo, who supervised the most recent restoration of the church in 2011, for accompanying me to the site and for sharing important sources and insights.

[17] In the preface to the most comprehensive volume on Latin American photobooks to date, Fernández (2011) highlights the importance of these publications to the history of photography in Latin America, despite the scarcity of associated documentation. *Con Ernesto Cardenal* provides a pertinent example: an object with great aesthetic and historic significance, that preserves a little known, and otherwise inaccessible, body of work by a major contemporary photographer.

[18] 'Nicaragua tan violentamente dulce' ('Nicaragua so violently sweet') is the original title for the collection of short texts and stories by Julio Cortázar (1983).

[19] For a discussion of the literary solidarity movement see Hardesty (2012) and Beverly, Zimmerman (1990).

[20] 'By 1983 or 1984, the Sandinista Army, which had held constant at around 24,000 strong since 1981, increased to over 40,000; in addition, late in 1983 a military draft was instituted. At the same time, the Sandinista Militia – a lightly trained body of over 60,000 civilian volunteers who had previously been armed with liberated Somoza-era weaponry and obsolete Czech BZ-52 – was largely reequipped with Socialist Bloc AK-47 automatic rifles.' Walker (2003, 51).

[21] Telephone conversation with the author, 13 November 2013.

[22] Towell returned to Central America on several trips throughout the 1980s to document the ongoing state of war in the region. *House on Ninth Street* (1994) is a collection of interviews and testimonials related to the disappeared in Guatemala during the civil war (1960-1996), accompanied again by a short selection of photographs taken between 1988 and 1989.