

# A Tale of Two Nicaraguas: 8 de marzo's *Ser como el aire quisiera* and Lapta Yula's *La vida sigue* Dramatizing Nicaragua's Cultural Schizophrenia

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## Abstract

*An examination of two Nicaraguan dramatic texts exemplifies the tension between first world white feminism and a feminism that rejects the hierarchies often replicated in the first waves of feminism. Women's collective 8 de marzo's *Ser como el aire quisiera* rejects the hegemonic femininity that often oppresses transgendered women and neglects to embrace the multiplicity of sexual expressions. Lapta Yula's *La vida sigue* enfatizes solidarity, not just amongst women, but all those vying for a more equitable, just society whose mission is to promote the greater good of all. While both texts indirectly problematize the traditional concept of feminism, *La vida sigue's* dramatic stance against hegemonic performativities is a step further from *Ser como el aire quisiera's* primary dramatic thrust.*

## Introduction

The artificial boundaries of Nicaragua mask the historical tension between the primarily mestizo Nicaraguan Pacific Coast region and the indigenous, Afro Atlantic Coast.<sup>1</sup> The Atlantic Coastal region gained autonomy in 1987, after decades of cultural and political tension, whose differences will be exemplified in two women's collectively written plays: Managua's 8 de Marzo's *Ser como el aire quisiera* [I would like to be free like the air] and the from the Atlantic Coast, Lapta Yula's *La vida sigue* [Life continues]. French feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément theorize that "feminine writing" as "defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogocentric system; it will place and will take place other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination" (402). Neither group is feminist in the traditional, Eurocentric use of the term "feminist. Activist Angela Davis reminds us: "the category women is so internally racialized. We always have to ask ourselves, well, who are we talking about when we see women? Women have always been categorized from the general category women, which has been about white, middle class women." Both plays rally for deconstructing systems that oppress women; Lapta Yula's dramatic text has the most radical and least Eurocentric approach.

*Ser como el aire quisiera* forces Shante, who stumbles across a group of women rehearsing a play, to accept that her husband, Fidencio, abuses her physically and psychologically. She encounters Sharitín, Natasha, and Morocho, who, initially, wonder why Shante is there. While Shante watches them rehearse,

she starts to empathize with the play for which they are rehearsing, one dealing with abuse, as the female actresses play the roles of men, using such classic lines as: “human beings aren’t perfect and I come home drunk and you provoke me. Forgive me. Shut up, bitch. You know that I love you, but I can’t love you the way you want me to love you. If you aren’t mine, you aren’t going to be anyone else’s, etc.” (4)<sup>2</sup> It is only when the women are pretending to be men that they use such discourse. In Nicaraguan Spanish, *puta* is a very offensive word, as violence is directed explicitly towards the feminine, which is always a site of violence.<sup>3</sup> This gendered violence on the discursive level seems to condone violence against the feminine, against the female body. During the rehearsal, Shante admits: “my Fidencio is just like that. He always says ‘forgive me, ‘I apologize,’ ‘I am sorry’” (6). While these issues are often dramatized by both women’s collectives, Davis reminds us that “so many of the issues we construct as women’s issues: domestic violence, intimate violence, sexual violence, gender violence, they are by and large men’s problems.” Anthropologist Roger Lancaster echoes Davis in his research on machismo. “Machismo, no less than capitalism, is a system. Like racism, homophobia, and other forms of arbitrary power, arbitrary stigma, machismo is resilient because it constitutes not simply a form of consciousness, but a field of productive relations” (19). Men’s behavior is judged by other men, lauded or ridiculed and subsequently castigated by other men, and women are seemingly, at best, an afterthought under machista ideology. Chante is initially complicit in the system, as Sharitín asks her: “Chante, does he yell at you? Humiliate you? Treat you badly?” (7). But she keeps saying that “I know that he loves me. I only want him to change, that he goes back to being my Fidencio” (7). She does have an epiphany at the end; the entire play she has been tied to a stool, and, as the play’s close, she unties herself from it. Whether or not the men discussed in this play are transformed or not is irrelevant, reverberating Davis’ notion that these issues are men’s problems, but, in Shante’s case, perhaps her life can be spared.

Sexual abuse and alcoholism are prevalent in the actresses’ depiction of machismo. Sexual abuse, in particular, alludes to the fragile construction of masculinity and the ownership of the female body. If a woman does not own her own body, then who does? During their rehearsals, lines in passing like “at night he puts himself on top of me, he forces me to...” or “I am going to buy you lots of bras and panties and a ton of cloth so you can make your own clothing because your body is mine, no one else can see it. It is mine, or “all you will do is think of me” dramatize the construction of machismo (11). Marital rape isn’t even addressed in the play, demonstrating to what degree sexual violence has become the norm.<sup>4</sup> Whether in theater or television or music, women symbolically are more of a body than men, as their body parts and bodies themselves are valued or devalued on their potential usefulness to machismo. Bodies are compartmentalized, objectified, often animalized, while, the male body, always present, is seldom alluded to. The female body and its sexual organs are discursive sites of violence, the male sexual organ symbolizes power, violence itself. A man’s member can connote pleasure, as a man is permitted to engage in unlimited sexual conquests. Even during these sexual acts, as a man penetrates the female body, he is asserting his power over the feminine. In the worse scenario, his sexual member is a violent weapon. A man, thus, should be violent, always seek pleasure as the expense of the feminine, and try to augment his power. As the women dramatize roles as men, they justify this with the time old response: “you should be grateful that we allow you to live in our world. Here exist laws that protect women, laws that exist and others that we

are creating” (8). How useful are these laws as cases of domestic violence appear to be increasing? Would laws be necessary if men came to realize that physical abuse is never justified? Since women should be grateful they are even allowed under machismo, which is resilient because it is a field of productive relations, not just an ideology. They must tolerate devalued linguistic signs such as “pretty little doll and bitch.” Drunkenness, which is also alluded to in Lapta Yula’s play, is considered an intrinsically masculine behavior, but, certainly not appropriate for a woman, which may lead to sexual promiscuity, the epicenter of proving manliness while simultaneously defaming the notion of a “good woman.”

While this play is radical in its emphasis on female solidarity, the character Morocha represents the possibility of bisexuality or lesbianism as a viable social expression as an escape from machismo.<sup>5</sup> In a scene where Sandra plays the role of a priest, during the enactment of a confession, Cristina unwillingly admits to the priest: “I fell in love with another woman, father, ANOTHER WOMAN. And, how can this be, if God created a man for a woman, and a woman for a man? But, what I feel for her is absolutely unbelievable” (11). The priest’s response: “God made us in his divine image.. he accepts us all the same. This sensational feeling you have is because God is speaking to you through him. Remember where there is love, there is God” (11). While his reaction is in contradistinction to Catholic theology, lesbianism as a viable sexual practice, the promotion of lesbianism forces the system to be problematized, especially if, as Judith Butler reminds us, “the loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (146). The women in this play portray a variety of performative behaviors, as Natasha is described as bossy, Morocha is sweet, Sharitín, as whiney, Chante, has a hidden strength, as, she has taken the first step to flee from her abusive household. If, as Davis has written, “the roots of sexism and homophobia are found in the same economic and political institutions,” homophobia, by extension, cannot be maintained if the goal is to eradicate racism and sexism.

While often called colorism instead of racism, this institution has a particularly interesting tension between the lighter Nicaraguan Pacific coast, and the Atlantic Coastal region, populated by indigenous and Afro Nicaraguan communities. In fact, according to Lancaster, “in popular discourse, blackness becomes a sort of semiotic sponge, absorbing the entire range of possible negative connotations... essentially *whiteness* dominates *blackness*” (231). The women’s collective, Lapta Yula, whose name in Miskitu, is one of the indigenous groups in the Atlantic Coastal regions. The group is a venture of RAAN (North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region). During the Sandinista 1980s, the Sandinista government’s failure to include the Atlantic Coast region in the socialist program is highlighted by the fact the Atlantic Coastal region became autonomous into the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions, created in 1987, that both have had their own regional governments since 1990. Lapta Yula, founded in 2010, is composed primarily of farmers, teachers, craftswomen, and students from the Waspam and Puerto Cabezas region. The group was founded to collectively create and communicate the urgency of revitalizing and protecting the indigenous and Afro Caribbean cultures. They also aim to help men work together to eradicate violence, problematizing hegemonic masculinity.

“Life goes on” (in Spanish *La vida sigue*, or Iwan gka, as Spanish and Miskitu are inextricably linked in their plays, as these linguistic systems are on the Atlantic Coast), dramatizes the devastating effects of a

flood on crops. The Atlantic Coastal region, unfortunately, is an extremely impoverished region; most earned money is spent on food staples, and a floor or a drought can literally mean a meal or hunger. “*La vida sigue*” and “*Ser como el aire quisiera*” dialogue and share many similar themes: the emphasis on collectively, on solidarity. But, in *La vida sigue* there is a male character, the father, Atas, whose worries start the play: “it hasn’t stopped raining for three straight days. I am worried about the crop of beans that I had to pick. What am I going to do?” (1). The male voices portrayed by 8 de marzo focus on the negative behaviors associated with masculinity to empower women, collective action between men and women is shown as a means of survival. His wife, Samlita, and his daughter, Pancita, try to assure and calm him throughout the play, even suggesting that “maybe it is better for you to look for work in another place” (1). In desperation they sing to the sun, a reference to the group’s name, as well as the significance the sun has in indigenous cultures. Miskitu, often the language used at home, is interspersed in the text: *lapta, lapta, lapta, yan sika wis kat luhpia.*” Atas, much as we saw in *Ser como el aire quisiera*,” initially gets drunk to escape the impending doom his family will surely encounter if food isn’t found soon. Why is the consumption of alcohol by men prevalent in both plays? Derek Iwamoto correlates the relationship between traditional masculinity and the consumption of alcohol. According to his study, “masculine norms may indirectly affect alcohol use through heightened psychological distress. Men who attempt to adhere to strict male codes experience heightened psychological strain and psychological burden. To reduce this strain, they might engage in avoiding coping methods, such as drinking as a means of regulating their negative mood. Numerous studies have supported this notion – masculine strain related to trying to fulfill dominant gender role expectations, have been found to be positively associated with heavier alcohol use and alcohol-related problems among men.” (245). Atas’s wife asks him “why did you come back home drunk? Why?” (2). While it is no secret that men lose under machismo, albeit differently and not to the degree as women, at the very least on the biological level, the damage to one’s kidneys and liver is not averted simply because one embraces hegemonic masculinity. But, while Fidencio verbally and physically abuses Chante, Atas drowns his frustration in alcohol and, the female members in his household are spared any violence. While Shante is too afraid to confront her husband, Atas and Salmita confront the male head of the household about his drinking. Why? To encourage an audience to change the narrative, change history, as long as it was being used. Irigaray reminds us that “if we speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Being the same stories all over again. Don’t you feel it? Listen: men and women around us all sound the same. Same arguments, same quarrels, same scenes. Same difficulties, the impossibility of reaching each other. Same.. same.. always the same” (69). By speaking back, by questioning, in this case the story isn’t the same, it has changed.

The differences between *Ser como el aire quisiera* and *La vida sigue* highlight the different historical realities between the Coasts. For many Nicaraguans who occupy the Pacific side, the Atlantic Coast is often referred to as the “other Nicaragua,” separated by nearly impenetrable terrain, and, the necessity to fly from Managua to get to Bluefields, for example, attests to this literal and figurative othering. Nicaraguans of primarily mestizo descent occupy the “better side” of Nicaragua, while three primary indigenous groups (Miskito, Sumas, and Ramas) and Afro-Nicaraguans occupy the Atlantic side. *La vida sigue* ends with the emphasis on collectivity, as Atas was able to find work and returns home with gifts. Pancita joyfully says

to him: “you arrived home just in time to celebrate Christmas, let’s go celebrate the el urah li with the entire community” (51).<sup>6</sup> Seemingly there are several instances of neoliberal, capitalist influences on “*Ser como el aire quisiera* that do not exist in *La vida sigue*. Lapta Yula’s text emphasizes the “we,” not a radical first world feminism that is often hostile to women of color, non-heterosexual, transgendered women, but a “we” that includes all “women,” being careful to avoid the traditional racialized sign that word conjures up as a result of white, bourgeoisie, middle class feminism. It also includes progressive men, men who are willing to partake in the struggle against individualism and work towards the the collective good. In *Ser como el aire quisiera*, for example, Natasha exclaims “I think that each woman has to make her own way, find herself, but count on us, the “us” being the female “nosotras” in Spanish (13). Even though Shante’s individual struggle is a struggle, by extension, to all women suffering any type of abuse, it is still portrayed as a “she” versus “him” and then a “she” helped by “a female them.” *La vida sigue* uses a slightly different paradigm: a “me” should always be a “we,” the “communal” we. Women are more likely to be victims of abuse, as acknowledged in the groups’ goals, as well as criticisms of men who refuse to allow women in positions of authority. Atas’s constant drinking appears to a larger criticism of machismo as an ideology, one that is perhaps a vestige of Eurocentrism. This speaks to the colorism or racism towards those in the Atlantic Coast, and this sexism, albeit not as explicit in *La vida sigue*, has been a necessary foundation for the racism/colorism that enabled (and continues to enable) the destruction of the indigenous cultures that the Miskito have been desperately trying to eradicate. Cynthia Enloe, in fact, posits that it is machismo that helps maintain classism and colorism in place: “the colonially seeded culture of machismo serves to legitimize class and racial stratifications; that is, the subjugation of all women helps perpetuate the inequalities among the country’s men. Many men who are denied access to decent jobs or to public decision-making continue to feel powerful as long as they can control women in their daily lives” (428). Fidencio classically fits this paradigm, as Shante, who is economically dependent on him for survival, allows a psychological festering, a neocolonization of her mind that manifests itself in her justification and borderline need for this abuse. Perhaps for fear of this same microcosmic model, Atas’ wife chides him for drinking, and, he ceases this destructive behavior eventually and heeds his wife’s warnings.

In *La vida sigue* the emphasis on solidarity is seen in the grandmother, who resides with the family and is portrayed, as someone who is respected and revered. This may be an allusion to the notion of time in traditional indigenous cultures. Capitalism compels us to measure the world in a small, individual way. Under capitalism, thinking about one’s great-great-great grandparents seems foreign, but, six generations is not a long time for many traditional native groups. These struggles are communal struggles, and, their focus is not necessarily on the here and the now. Davis touches upon this when she discusses the concept of the “imaginary:” “activists cannot measure the work that we are doing by our own selves, by our own individual selves, by even our own lifetimes, because I would like to think that today we are living the imaginaries of those who have been long gone. We are living the world they wanted. And therefore we can expect that others will be inhabiting a world that we imagine, a new world that is impossible if we do not engage in the kind of activism required today.” While, for the Miskito, the somewhat idealized imaginary may be, on some level, a more contemporary pre-Columbian time period, as the residues of Spanish colonization have forever altered the structures of these Caribbean societies. “Somewhat” because, while

it is doubtful the pre-Columbian societal structures were free of oppression, it can be argued that the Eurocentric, neoliberal ideologies, such as machismo, sexism, racism, homophobia (and it should be remembered that many native cultures recognized the existence of third genders), are the structures to be dismantled. *La vida sigue* begins and ends with explicit references to Miskitu, the title of the play “Iwan gka,” and a reference to the song “el urah li” that the entire community celebrates at the end.

While it is easy to emphasize the failure of capitalism (individuality, Cedric Robinson’s racialized capitalism, reminding us that these concepts are inseparable, they co-exist), the socialist project in Nicaragua has failed in its own right. The Reagan administration is rightfully blamed for the failure of the socialist model in the 1980s, as U.S. funding destabilized Nicaraguan society, forcing the Nicaraguan government to spend nearly half of its budget on the military defeat of U.S. funded Contras. That said, the Sandinistas failed on many levels. While the marginalized (women, the indigenous, the poor) were certainly given a voice, and gays and lesbians were not the scapegoat for any failures, the ambitious socialist project failed. The Sandinistas ultimately let the Atlantic Coastal region become autonomous: following the Sandinista revolution, indigenous groups’ rights to communal property became law, protected under the Constitution and the Autonomy Statute of 1987. Article 36.1 of this statute states “*The communal lands are indissoluble; they cannot be donated, sold, leased or taxed, and they are eternal.*” The Atlantic Coastal region continues to be the least developed, most impoverished region of Nicaragua, as Nicaragua itself has become under socialist Daniel Ortega’s rule. *Ser como el aire quisiera* and *La vida sigue* both, to varying degrees, propose dismantling current societal structures: in the first play, sexism and homophobia, in the second, neoliberal system. The perennial question remains: if capitalism is inherently racist, and thusly, it must be abolished, with what system can or should it be replaced? A similar structure that tries to eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia? Or, a more indigenous focused post-colonized structure that rejects colorism? Both projects are ambitious yet, as seen in these plays, do not seem radical enough. How can we tell a different story?

## NOTES

1. The people who live in the Atlantic coastal region of Nicaragua are referred to as *costeños* in Nicaraguan Spanish.
2. All translations are mine.
3. Luce Irigaray seems to imply that there is always an element of violence when the male penetrates the female. She describes this act as follows: “the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from self-caressing she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations” (74).
4. Irigaray posits that “rape has become the model for the sexual relation” (70).
5. Adrienne Rich defines lesbian existence as “a reality and a source of knowledge and power available to women, or, with the institution of heterosexuality as a beachhead of male dominance” (229).
6. The *el urah li* is a traditional Christmas song and dance.

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