

Stories of the Civil War: Empowering a Generation through Community Filmmaking.
Matagalpa, Nicaragua
Princeton University
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I grew up in a family that, like most, was divided by the Nicaraguan civil war in the 80's. Two of my dad's siblings supported the revolutionary government while the other two were in exile involved with the "contra" - the counter-revolution. During those years, 170,000 Nicaraguans migrated to Costa Rica, and thousands more were displaced within the country. Almost every family was directly affected by the war in some way. Because of the fragile political situation, the peace process that started in 1990 focused on disarmament, but did not address other peace-building strategies that concerned the effects of the war on the wider population that was not directly engaged in combat. In the Nicaragua of twenty-five years later there hasn't been a truth commission, there are no history museums, and there are very few avenues for my generation to learn about and reflect on what our country went through. Furthermore, the cleavages produced by the civil war remain, and are expressed in extreme political polarization, which does not allow the construction of a collective development project for the nation¹.

This summer, I spent two months doing fieldwork research for my Senior Thesis in a community in the Southeastern border of Nicaragua. I wanted to learn about their experiences during the war and was interested in seeing what role the past plays in their lives today. The result of my thesis research will be a film that collects some of these memories of their experiences and reflections on the war. While I was there, people constantly expressed a profound interest in having their narratives and the history of their town collected and preserved. Just like learning about one's family history is crucial for one's individual identity, I find that it is extremely empowering for a community to know where it has been, in order to think about where it wants to go. Through this project, I realized that the presence of the camera gives an "excuse" for socializing stories. It allows one to ask about the past, and allows the person expressing stories a space to be heard, and the viewers a space to reflect on their own experiences and those of others.

With this Davis Projects for Peace, I am interested in taking my experience this summer one step forward and contribute to the avenues available to reflect on the past, an essential component of any peace-building process. Over the course of four weeks, high school and college students, video artists, scholars, and the broader Matagalpa population will collaborate in a workshop to produce a video documentary about the "histories" of the revolution/civil war in Matagalpa. Matagalpa city was one of the main loci of the revolutionary movement that rose against the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970's; however, the counter-revolution was able to recruit heavily in the surrounding rural areas. This characteristic makes Matagalpa an interesting and worthwhile site for the project. To our advantage is the vibrant urban and rural civil society that has emerged there, which will give us access to a diverse group of student participants and interviewees. I say "histories" of the war because the premise of the project will be not to build one narrative of "what happened", but rather to highlight the multiplicity of experiences that were lived during this period, even within one region. The overall goal of the project will be to bring together personal narratives of the war, which collectively will provide a view of the recent local history of Matagalpa. As I said before, understanding the past is empowering. It gives us tools to think about our present and re-imagine our future.

This project proposal is modeled after *Abre tus Ojos*, a project funded by Save the Children in which I participated as a high school student, where we produced five-minute television pieces every month on children's rights issues in collaboration with trained filmmakers. I have also learned about collaborative filmmaking in a Visual Anthropology course at Princeton University, and have researched the experience of similar projects, like Talatala Films in Spain. Las Venancias, a local women's rights NGO that hosts the Centro Cultural Guanuca, the main cultural center in Matagalpa, will be the local partner for the project. Guanuca will provide a classroom space, as well as logistical and conceptual support throughout the workshop and filming process. The first week will be devoted to introducing the Nicaraguan civil war from diverse perspectives through guest lecturers, and to watching related films

¹ Arnson, Cynthia. *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*. 1996.

and thinking about how they have addressed similar topics. By the end of the week we will have created a loose script of our film and a production plan. The student participants will ultimately decide the specifics of what the film should include, how to address the past, and how to represent their community in images. The second and third week will be dedicated to the collective filming of the project. This will involve the filmmakers and the students working together in production teams (logistics/production, audio, photography, art direction, and editing). The filmmakers will provide the technical expertise, and will ensure that the final product is of the best quality possible. The final week will involve the editing of the film with the support of the Centro Cultural de España en Nicaragua (CCEN), which has kindly offered their editing lab for the project.

A call for workshop participants will be made through diverse NGO's² who already work with youth in Matagalpa, and applicants will write a statement of interest where they will address why they want to participate, what they hope to get out of the experience, and whether they already have any relevant experience. I will review the applications along with Las Venencias staff and select 12-15 participants. Filmmakers will be invited to participate through the Centro Cultural de España en Nicaragua (CCEN), which is a center funded by the Spanish Embassy in Nicaragua that strives to promote citizen participation in the arts as a mechanism for promoting social inclusion, and mutual understanding. It has a strong network of artists, and has also stated interest in collaborating with the formulation and planning of the content and methodology of the workshop, which I expect to be one of the greatest challenges of implementing this project successfully. Everyone interviewed will be asked to sign a consent form to ensure we can use their video recordings. That said, I have a strong commitment to making sure that all participants are comfortable with the material that will be screened. I will send transcripts of the portions of the interviews we wish to use in the documentary to each person in order to obtain their consent over the material.

My project hopes to serve the student participants in multiple ways: it will be providing the basic technical skills of the filmmaking process, and will introduce film and video as a form of expression to students that would otherwise not have access to it. There is a strong emphasis on teambuilding and collaboration, and the goal is to ultimately empower young people by taking their ideas and their perspective seriously. Furthermore, they will have the opportunity to learn about their own community, and perhaps even about their own family histories. The project also hopes to serve the community of Matagalpa by engaging them through the camera. People that are interviewed will have an opportunity to reflect on the past and on the present, ultimately creating a space for dialogue that promotes mutual understanding, which I consider to be the essence of peace. The camera provides an excuse to have a discussion on multiple channels: it is a bridge between people that lived the war to reflect and come to understand the commonalities and divergences of their experiences, and also a bridge across generations, between the interviewee and the interviewer.

Once the film is finished, it will be screened in rural communities in Matagalpa and cultural centers in other towns of Nicaragua. With the help of CCEN, I have compiled a list of venues where the film can be screened in Managua, Granada, Leon, and Bluefields. The film will travel with one of the participants and myself to hold a discussion at each location, both about the content of the film and the experience of making it. This will provide a space to explore some points of contention, including the similarities and differences of the experience of the war for different people and in different places. In this setting we will reflect on what was really at stake in the war and what it all means twenty-five years later, in an attempt to transcend current political boundaries and provide a new perspective on the roots of the war. My hope is that people will walk away better able to understand difference, and in turn, better able to see the commonalities within difference. Finally, the project will be screened in Universities, where it hopes to engage a younger audience and serve as the jumping-off point for a discussion about the memory of the war and the political culture that my generation has inherited from this conflict. Ultimately, it will be up to us to re-appropriate the past rather than try to occlude it, recognize in that past the seeds of our current political and social issues, and use this understanding to build a more just and peaceful future for Nicaragua.

² Including Plan International, Save the Children, Un techo para mi país and Cantera.