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# RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

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## AMONG SANDINO'S GIRLFRIENDS

### Carmen Sobalvarro and the Gendered Poetics of a Nationalist Romance

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*Abstract: Carmen Sobalvarro (Nicaragua, 1908–194?), widely known during the 1930s as General Augusto Sandino's "platonic" girlfriend, was the only female poet officially admitted into the Nicaraguan vanguard movement. Despite her significance to Nicaraguan politics and letters, until recently she has been virtually forgotten. In crafting her public persona, Sobalvarro combined traditional and modern stereotypes of womanhood, thus providing Central Americans with a viable model of women in literature and politics. Through her poetry and image, she also shored up the romantic notion of Sandino as a valiant general deserving of international respect and adoration, especially among female followers. In these ways, the poet serves as a significant case study of the cultural anxieties surrounding changing gender roles upon the arrival of the "modern" woman and a growing women's movement in Nicaragua.*

As an epigraph to the introduction of *Sandino's Daughters*, one of the best-known accounts of women's participation in Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution of 1979, Margaret Randall (1981, 1995) quotes the revolutionary María Lidia. At age sixty-eight, this Sandinista recounts her work as a messenger for Augusto César Sandino, the Nicaraguan national hero who led a guerilla campaign against U.S. imperialism from 1926 to 1933 and for whom the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) was later named in 1961. Invoking the participation of

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María Lidia and other female collaborators in Sandino's army, Randall (1995, xii) writes that the women of the FSLN were effectively "carrying forward a tradition of Sandinista and women's militancy that was transformed and extended to allow for the full participation of women." Although the participation of women in Sandino's war is regularly acknowledged in histories of the movement, women's military and political contributions in the campaign have not been examined in depth, perhaps because of an early failure to see their significance and the paucity of documents outlining their involvement.

Sandino's writings and his biographies are peppered with references to women in solidarity networking and in the guerrilla camps of the Segovian Mountains as soldiers, nurses, launderers, cooks, entertainers, spies, and messengers, but these texts do not go into detail about women's roles in the conflict (see, e.g., Román 1983; Somoza 1976; Ramírez 1990; Beals 1928; Alemán Bolaños n.d.; Zamora 1993; Belausteguigoitia 1981). Sandino even relegated leadership positions to women, notably to his wife, Blanca Aráuz, who was his official secretary, spy, and gifted telegraph operator; to his lover, Teresa Villatoro, who also accompanied him in the mountains; and to the soldier Emilia, whose remarkable story the Nicaraguan journalist José Román recounts. Based on interviews with early Sandinistas, the historian Richard Grossman asserts that the camp *juanas* were strictly in supportive roles and that women did not fight; however, archival photos of female Sandinistas bearing arms and crossed with bandoliers suggest otherwise, indicating perhaps a historiographic gendered anxiety about the proper role for camp women (Román 1983; Grossman 1996, 724; Schroeder 2010, 20; Arellano 1979, 35, 58, 62; Gobat 2005, 142).

In light of the contradictory nature and shortage of information about female participants in Sandino's war, this research note examines the role of the female poet Carmen Sobalvarro (Nicaragua, 1908–1942) in shoring up the romantic image of Sandino as a potent, manly, valiant general worthy of international respect and following. Sobalvarro, most of whose poetry has been lost, was one of the most publicized girlfriends of the general, and as a political organizer in Honduras and Nicaragua for Sandino's cause, she used her poetry to garner public support for the general. Just as Randall argues that María Lidia began a tradition of women's militancy in Nicaragua, Sobalvarro initiated a tradition of Nicaraguan female political activists and poets, which would culminate in the 1980s with revolutionary female poets such as Daisy Zamora, Michele Najlis, Rosario Murillo, and Gioconda Belli. In crafting her public image, Sobalvarro combined traditional and modern stereotypes of womanhood, thus providing Central Americans with a palatable model of women in politics. In this way, the poet also serves as a significant case study on the cultural anxieties surrounding changing gender roles upon the arrival of the "modern" woman and a growing women's movement in Nicaragua. The subsequent discussion of the treatment of women in Sandino's army, as well as discourses of masculinity, femininity, and feminism in 1920s and 1930s Nicaragua, sets the stage for my analysis of how Sobalvarro crafted her image and poetry.

## SANDINO'S GIRLFRIENDS AND THE MODERN WOMAN

According to historical accounts, Sobalvarro was one of many of Sandino's girlfriends. Referred to by the Basque journalist Ramón de Belausteguigoitia (1981, 170) as the "Pancho Villa de Nicaragua," Sandino, like Pancho Villa in Mexico, earned an international reputation for being a lady's man. He told Belausteguigoitia (1981, 86), for example, "Quiero serle muy franco en cuanto a mujeres. ¡Claro que me gustan!" General Anastasio Somoza, who ordered Sandino's 1934 assassination, exploited the general's philandering in his 1936 defamatory biography *El verdadero Sandino*, which presented the hero as a womanizing bandit whose barbarism could be seen in the numbers of dangerous women employed in his ranks. Somoza (1976, 10) even accuses Sandino of taking his wife Blanca's cousin Angelita as his concubine in combat only three days after Blanca's death in childbirth.

Commenting on the almost-total absence of Sandino's amorous exploits in the FSLN's mythical version of the hero, the cultural historian David Whisnant (1995, 376–382) provides a chronology of Sandino's girlfriends.<sup>1</sup> Whisnant summarizes Sandino's womanizing history with his first love for his cousin Mercedes Sandino. Just before marrying her, however, Sandino was exiled from his home in Niquinohomo after shooting a man with whose sister, it was rumored, Sandino was having an affair. Sandino went to La Ceiba, Honduras, where Whisnant (1995, 376) documents "more troubles with women." He then went to Mexico, where he married and had a daughter. In 1927, back in Nicaragua, he married Blanca in the Segovians. In the Costa Rican newspaper *La Prensa Libre*, the contributor Pepita Barbat (1931) reports on an interview she had with the mother of Sandino, who paints her son's relationship with Blanca as a cosmic, passionate, and preordained affair of sacrifice and love. The story is aptly titled "Los romances ignorados: Habla la madre de Augusto Sandino." Despite his alleged love for his new wife and accounts of their perfect romance, Sandino also kept as his mistress the previously mentioned Villatoro, a Salvadoran nurse who was described in a U.S. intelligence report as a woman who "would be rather good-looking except that she now has no front teeth and bears a scar on the forehead from a wound received at Chipote" (Reagan 2009). Villatoro's son, Santiago, was believed by many to be Sandino's child.

Whisnant (1995) does not mention Carmen Sobalvarro, but several literary histories state that her cachet was largely derived from the fact that she was publicly known as Sandino's platonic girlfriend. The Nicaraguan literary historian Jorge Eduardo Arellano (1994, 99) writes that by 1929, "ya había declarado su amor platónico al General Augusto C. Sandino, a quien enviaba poemas y cartas." He cites the poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra's memory of her as "la melancólica enamorada de Sandino" (Arellano 1994, 99). The Nicaraguan poet and journalist Helena Ramos (2005, 5) states that Sobalvarro was "enamorada platónicamente"

1. Whisnant (1995) documents the history of Sandino's love affairs as a way to examine the extent to which the power of his myth has distorted what is known as the "real" Sandino. I argue that, in Sandino's day, rumors of his philandering contributed to his masculinization as a national hero.

with Sandino. Likewise, the Nicaraguan Web site Dariana states in Sobalvarro's biography: "Mantuvo correspondencia con Sandino, de quien se dijo se enamoró platónicamente" (Blanco 2010). This Web site also quotes the journalist Ignacio Briones Torres, "En forma individual y desde Honduras se alzó la voz de la poeta Carmen Sobalvarro que escribía poemas pro-sandinistas y enviaba cartas de amor platónico al hombre consagrado a redimir a la Patria" (Blanco 2010). According to Arellano, who wrote from interviews with Cuadra and other members of the Nicaraguan vanguard group with which Sobalvarro was affiliated, the point at which and the way in which Sobalvarro came to be known as Sandino's girlfriend are unknown (personal interview, Managua, July 31, 2007). It is possible that the poet herself publicized her status as the hero's girlfriend as a kind of marketing tool to gain notoriety among Central American readers.

Although repeatedly used to describe Sobalvarro's love for Sandino, the term *platonic* is never qualified or explained. With respect to Sobalvarro and Sandino's relationship, it is unknown exactly what was meant by the word or where the term originated. An editorial in the Guatemalan women's magazine *Nosotras: La revista del hogar* suggests that Sobalvarro's relationship with Sandino was not known until after the hero's death: "La muerte de Sandino nos desvela otro romance, digno de este gran romántico del fusil y la ametralladora. Sandino deja una novia. Es una poetisa sutil y comprensiva. Carmen Sobalvarro llora la desaparición del Lempira del Chipote" (*Nosotras* 1934). Known as early as 1929 as an activist for Sandino with the Comité Central Republicano de Tegucigalpa (*El Gráfico* 1929), Sobalvarro published her famous poem "Estoy triste," dedicated to Sandino following his death in 1934. Using the verb *desvelar* (to reveal), the *Nosotras* article suggests that this romance was unknown (or not publicly conjectured about) until after Sandino's death and the publication of "Estoy triste." The article also describes Sobalvarro as Sandino's *novia* and portrays their relationship as a *romance*, with no mention of whether it was platonic. It is possible, then, that both *platonic* and *girlfriend* were assigned to Sobalvarro posthumously to Sandino to reinforce the martyred Sandino as a romantic fairy-tale hero worthy of adoration by female followers. The anecdotal platonic, courtly nature of this love casts Sobalvarro in a virginal light, thus contributing to a sanitized hagiography of Sandino as an honorable man who protects Nicaragua and its women.

This virginal attribute of Sandino's women can be seen in the poet Salomón de la Selva's account, retold by Whisnant (1995), of General Moncada's offering Sandino a virgin girl to entice him into his fold. Sandino allegedly refused to take her, telling Moncada, "This girl is the embodiment of Nicaragua. She shall not be yours or any man's to violate or give away." Like a chivalric knight, Sandino then "put the girl on his horse and rode off into the darkness" (Whisnant 1995, 353). The platonic version of the Sobalvarro romance can be seen as doing the same cultural work as this story in that both posit Sandino as the great defender of virgins, an honorable champion of Nicaragua and its people. The discursive need for Sandino to be considered a protector of women can also be seen in the treatment of rape in the Sandinista army. In his dissertation on Sandino's army, Grossman (1996) examines the punishment of rape by execution as a way of reinforcing the soldiers' image as honorable men defending their sisters, daughters, and mothers—indeed,

the *madre patria*—against the aggression of U.S. foreign occupation and the treacherous Guardia Civil. According to the Sandinistas, Grossman (1996, 703) writes, only the Marines and the Guardia would rape women in a barbaric display of force; “on the other hand, the members of [Sandino’s army] were ‘real men.’ They defended the honor of their families and their extended family, Nicaragua.” This nationalist, paternalist rhetoric around rape was extended to characterize the U.S. Marines and Guardia as less masculine and, therefore, less virtuous and deserving of popular support.

Grossman (1996, 707) explains that *vendepatrias*—the Sandinista term for the Guardia Civil and members of the elite class who betrayed the homeland by allying with the imperialists—were widely regarded as cuckolds, or husbands who had stood silent and complicit as their country and its women were taken. The Marines, who were (discursively, if not literally) raping Nicaragua and its women, were viewed as brutes, or machos. Grossman (1996, 702) writes that “the use of the word *macho* here is not the modern usage but a more archaic, and peasant usage. The macho was a mule, a strong animal but incapable of reproduction. . . . For some [peasants] *macho* was only a brute, while for others it was someone who was ignorant of their language (and hence of their customs).” The Marines were thus considered illegitimate, infertile brutes and foreigners who were damaging to women and their welfare, whereas Sandinistas portrayed themselves as legitimate, virile, family men whose honor was determined by the fact that they defended the women of the national family. To this end, Grossman (1996, 2006, 2008) argues that one of the public images that Sandino promoted was of himself as a protective patriarch of his army and the national family. His soldiers viewed him as a father figure and themselves as brothers in a fight to defend their mother, Nicaragua, as well as their sisters and wives.

Although rape was forbidden among the Sandinistas, displays of male virility seemed to be celebrated, as can be implied from Sandino’s allegations of the willingness of peasant women to have sex with his men (whether for pleasure or for profit is unknown). For example, one colonel described the indigenous women near his camp as so willing to engage in sexual activity that “el sexo aquí es como comer, defecar, nacer o morir” (Román 1983, 102). Sandino seemed to corroborate this perspective, reporting that rape—a strictly forbidden act that was punishable by death in Sandino’s army—was not a problem among his soldiers: “como abundan las indias y campesinas, realmente no hay problemas” (Román 1983, 86). Román also quotes Sandino’s positive appraisal of the heterosexual libido of his camp: “De homosexualidad no se ha registrado ni un solo caso durante toda la guerra.” This affirmative appraisal of male Sandinistas’ sexual conquests of women points to the cultural importance in 1920s Nicaragua of emphasizing vigorous heterosexual masculinity as an essential trait in leaders.

The historian Michel Gobat (2005, 188) writes that such philandering behavior was also integral to establishing masculinity among Nicaragua’s conservative elite: “Elite men often boasted about their sexual ‘conquests.’ This was not surprising in a society as patriarchal as U.S.-occupied Nicaragua, where male adultery was legally condoned but female adultery harshly penalized.” Indeed, as historian Jeffrey Gould has shown for the northwestern region of Chinandega, the

ability of elite men to sexually coerce young, poorer women was a way for them to display their “class power.” In light of these observations, sexual conquests among Sandino’s men likely functioned to reaffirm and restage class power, of which peasant Sandinistas had little, through heterosexist displays of power.

This gendered displacement of a class-power struggle not only took the form of sexual conquests, but also, according to Gobat (2005, 188), worked against the image of the modern woman: “The erosion of this [class] power . . . led Conservative oligarchs to combat intensely the rise of the ‘modern woman.’” Gobat’s observation is significant to this study in that Sobalvarro, who (as is developed later) fashioned herself through appearance and political activities as a modern woman, arrived on the public stage as Sandino’s girlfriend at around the same time that the modern woman made her first appearances in Central America through mass media, such as periodicals and films. At this time, opposition to the modern woman—characterized around the world by her shortened hemlines, bobbed hair, cigarette smoking, careers outside the home, and outrageous dancing—was not unique to Nicaragua. The literary critic Rita Felski (1995, 3) writes about how modernization resulted in a gendered anxiety all over the world: “The figure of woman pervades the culture . . . as a powerful symbol of both the dangers and the promises of the modern age.” Newly mobile and highly visible in the public spheres of workplace and marketplace, the modern woman consumed new modes of transportation, communication, and imported goods indicative of a growing global economy.

The image of the modern woman in Nicaragua was a sign not only of the wearing down of traditional values, marked by a strong system of patriarchal control, but also of U.S. imperialism, which further undermined traditional political and economic structures that privileged male control. As is seen in the Nicaraguan literary vanguard’s poetic manifesto, “Prólogo solo,” she was viewed as a gendered aberration imported from North America: the group railed against the “falso modernismo extranjerizado con que las jóvenes pretenden ser modernas” (Cuadra and Rocha 1931/1978–1979, 28). As women gained more presence in the formerly male-dominated public sphere by working outside the home and taking part in sports and leisure activities, such as driving, shopping, and going to the movies, they were increasingly considered a threat to masculine hegemony. Because the modern woman’s short hair, noticeable legs, and seemingly unrestricted activities also blurred gender lines, social conservatives felt the need not only to put her back in her place but also to reestablish essentialist, hetero-normative traits of masculinity for men and femininity for women.

In addition to adopting the style of the modern woman, some Nicaraguan women also promoted a feminist agenda at the national and international levels. Notably, Josefa Toledo de Aguerri (1866–1962), referred to by the historian Victoria González as Nicaragua’s first feminist, edited two different women’s magazines, secured secular education for girls and other general education reform, lobbied for suffrage, and led several different national and international women’s organizations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Along with the Guatemalan women’s home magazine *Nosotras* (1932–1942), Toledo’s *Revista Femenina Ilustrada* (1918–1920) and *Mujer Nicaragüense* (1929–1930)



demonstrate the growing market of a female reading public in Central America at this time. These media outlets were significant in that they provided a transnational space in which Central American feminists could network with one another and with other feminist organizers throughout Latin America. The critic Francine Masiello (1990, 19) explains that such a space was important for Latin American feminists because it represented "a space where they could find mutual support from one another and publicize their agenda." Sobalvarro inhabited such a space as she traveled between Honduras and Nicaragua and appeared in Guatemalan print media in support of Sandino.

Latin American feminism has been similarly characterized by Masiello (1990, 19) and by historian Francesca Miller (1991, 108), respectively, as traditionally entailing "a position of dissent from the prevailing order [that] sought change" and an "insistence on issues of social justice and the preservation of the feminine." Not surprisingly, then, the articulation of Central American feminism in the 1920s grew alongside campaigns for Central American Unionism, Pan-Americanism, and social justice in the guise of anti-imperialism and campaigns for improved living and working conditions for disenfranchised workers, women, and children.<sup>2</sup> Feminists argued that women's access to higher education, better labor conditions, more wage-earning opportunities, and a voice in government were crucial to the successful development of civil society.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, according to Masiello (1990, 15), they used the inter-American conferences of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s to "insert feminist issues and matters of broad social reform into the program." She writes that challenging U.S. imperialist activities in Central America and the Caribbean—particularly in Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic—was repeatedly on feminist leaders' agendas at the conferences.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps because of its more international (as opposed to national) focus, early Central American feminism did not result in female suffrage until later, when the midcentury conservative governments conceded the vote to women in displays of concession to progressivism.

2. In their groundbreaking work on social networking in Central America at the beginning of the twentieth century, the sociologists Marta Elena Casauís Arzú and Teresa García Giráldez (2005) demonstrate the discursive and political ties among Central American Unionist groups, the theosophy movement, and the movements for women's and indigenous rights. On how these networks were articulated among Central American female writers, such as the schoolteachers and political reformers Carmen Lyra (Costa Rica, 1888–1949) and Prudencia Ayala (El Salvador, 1885–1936), as well as Guatemalans Angelina Acuña (1904–1905) and Magdalena Spínola (1897–1991), both of whom were very active in the Liga Internacional de Mujeres de la Paz y Libertad, see Finzer 2008.

3. Here a historical parallel can be drawn between first-wave and second-wave feminisms in Central America. Just as early twentieth-century Central American feminist platforms emerged with other politically radical campaigns, feminism of the 1970s developed as part of the political parties of the FSLN in Nicaragua and the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional in El Salvador. For this reason, the historian Lynn Stephen (1997, 13) writes that the development of Central American feminism was unique in Latin America.

4. One such conference was the Inter-American Commission of Women, which, Masiello (1990, 16) writes, was established in 1928 as "the first governmental organization in the world to be founded for the express purpose of working for the rights of women." The first meeting of the commission included representatives from Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, and a proxy for El Salvador (Masiello 1990, 17).

## CARMEN SOBALVARRO AND STRATEGIC SENTIMENTALISM

There is no indication in existing archival materials as to whether Carmen Sobalvarro ever self-identified as a feminist or brought feminist issues to the Sandino Committee, although Ramos (2005, 6) writes that she collaborated in *Mujer Nicaragüense*, which suggests some identification with Toledo's feminism.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, as a female who campaigned internationally for Sandino's cause and occupied the public spheres of literature and politics, she played a visible part in what political scientist Sonia Álvarez has theorized as a "social movement web" of progressive political activism, which included feminism, in 1920s and 1930s Central America.<sup>6</sup> According to Álvarez (1998, 2), the significance of social movements lies not so much in their ability to affect public policy but more in the fact that they struggle "to resignify the very meanings of received notions of citizenship, political representation and participation, and, as a consequence, democracy itself." Seen in this light, Sobalvarro's activism took part in the cultural politics of her day, specifically in terms of gender. More than just campaigning on behalf of Sandino, Sobalvarro served as a role model of how a woman can participate in revolutionary politics without completely abandoning her femininity. Although she defied historical and social norms of femininity by transgressing the traditionally masculine spaces of politics and literature, she also reinscribed her femininity in her sentimental poetry. Accordingly, she was able to challenge the existing power relations between men and women by creating a unique style in which women could participate in the public sphere.

A gendered anxiety surrounding the contestation of patriarchal order can be seen in both progressive and conservative cultural production of the era, including in the gendered representation (discursive and political) of Sobalvarro herself. For example, the apparently modern and revolutionary Sobalvarro reinforces traditional gendered stereotypes of femininity through her verse, which is characterized by overt sentimentality, melodrama, and girlish tropes of fairy tales. Her sweet verse serves as a heterosexual complement to the notions of virile, autochthonous literary and political movements embodied by the Nicaraguan intellectual community and General Sandino. Through her public personae as poet, activist, and Sandino's girlfriend, Sobalvarro poses a contradictory and illuminating case study as to how early twentieth-century female writers negotiated their newfound roles in public life and print media by trying to balance both old-fashioned and newfangled stereotypes of femininity. This performance of essentialist femininity also functions on a tactical level: instead of simply reinforcing hegemonic notions of gender, it can be used to mask or divert attention from Sobalvarro's more gender-transgressive activities, which challenged contemporary cultural politics. As James C. Scott (1985, 331) points out, "subordinate classes are likely to be more radical at the level of ideology than at the level of behavior."

5. Ramos (2005) cites no empirical evidence, and I have been unable to find any of Sobalvarro's contributions to the magazine.

6. It should be noted that Nicaraguan feminists also participated in conservative politics. González (2002, 63) tells us that in the 1930s there tended to be an affiliation of feminists and suffragists with liberal campaigns.



Thus, Sobalvarro's strategic sentimentalism, to play on Spivak's (1987) strategic essentialism, can be considered one of Scott's weapons of the weak or critic Josefina Ludmer's (1985) *tretas del débil*.

Judging from her photograph in Managua's daily newspaper *El Gráfico*, and from what little is known of her biography, Sobalvarro outwardly fashioned herself as a modern woman. She wore her hair bobbed and accentuated her eyes with makeup. Like many other modern women throughout the Americas, she worked tirelessly for the pro-Sandinista Comité Central Republicano in Honduras (*El Gráfico* 1929, 5).<sup>7</sup> Known internationally after Sandino's death as the hero's girlfriend, Sobalvarro also plays a significant role in literary history. Although there were other female writers in Nicaragua—some of whom, such as María de la Selva (née Aura Rostand, 1905–1959) and María Teresa Sánchez (1918–1994), were leading colorful bohemian lives and publishing exceptionally original and experimental texts—Sobalvarro was the only official female member of the Nicaraguan vanguard group (for biographies of these female poets and analyses of their writing, such as Rostand, Sánchez, and Olga Solari, see Ramos 2006; Finzer 2008). This group of young men, representative of the most influential families of the colonial city of Granada, began meeting in 1927 with the goal of creating a truly “indigenous,” or autochthonous, national literature. They recognized themselves as *the* Nicaraguan vanguard movement in 1929 at the end of the decade that saw literary and artistic avant-garde groups define themselves around the globe. In 1931, they wrote and signed their first manifesto, the “Ligera exposición y proclama de la Anti-Academia nicaragüense.” Among the fifteen original members to sign the proclamation was Sobalvarro, possibly the only woman ever to be formally included in a vanguard movement.<sup>8</sup> Despite her signing the manifesto, however, Sobalvarro has never been anthologized with the rest of the vanguard group and, until recently, has been practically forgotten.

Sobalvarro's omission from Nicaraguan literary history is likely due in part to what Ramos has called “sexist literary criticism” (personal interview, Managua, July 30, 2007). To that reason, I add another theory: her erasure is also explained by the fact that, once Sandino announced he was a communist and the U.S. Marines left the country, the Anti-Academia began to support Somoza, a more politically opportune candidate.<sup>9</sup> Sobalvarro, the only member among the group to continue

7. Conrad's edition of Sandino's writings (Ramírez 1990, 118, 142, 263) includes letters exchanged between Sandino and female supporters who volunteered in pro-Sandinista organizations in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. Guatemala's *El Imparcial* ran a photo in 1929 of a female Sandino supporter in the United States (*El Imparcial* 1929). This woman, like the modern Sobalvarro, wears her hair in a bob and sports a short skirt.

8. The literary historian Susan Suleiman (1990, 29) notes that in Europe “between 1924 and 1933, during the most dynamic and ‘ascendant’ period of the movement, not a single woman was included as an official member.” Although the copy of the “Primer manifesto” that appears in *El Pez y la Serpiente* (22–23) does not include Sobalvarro's name, the timeline of the Anti-Academia that introduces the issue includes Sobalvarro and several others whose names are omitted in the journal's copy (Cuadra and Rocha 1931/1978–1979, 8). This discrepancy suggests that the original manifesto included all of the names listed in the chronology.

9. Sandino, a practicing theosophist, was not a communist in the Soviet sense and even broke ranks with the Soviet party. His often misunderstood “rational communism” referred to the teachings of the Escuela Magnético-Espiritual de la Comuna Universal, a theosophist school with which Sandino was

supporting Sandino, left Nicaragua in protest for Honduras, where she lived until she died. Thus, in addition to possible sexism, I argue that the group intentionally left Sobalvarro out of their anthologies and later criticism because of their political differences. Because Sobalvarro had relocated to Honduras, she also was not physically present to remind them of her contributions to the movement.

In 2003 Ramos wrote the poem “Nadie recuerda a Carmen Sobalvarro,” which laments not only that Sobalvarro has been forgotten but also the difficulty of recuperating her work given the poor state of archives in Central America and the fact that many of her contemporaries are dead.<sup>10</sup> Ramos (2005, 7) also wrote:

[S]i era tan insignificante, ¿cómo esta joven pueblerina logró impresionar a los vanguardistas, que eran iconoclastas, altivos y excluyentes? *Off the record*, se ofrece una explicación que no tiene nada que ver con la literatura: Carmen Sobalvarro era hermosa, tenía unos ojos inolvidables [ . . . ] Entonces, la catalogan como una suerte de “novia” del grupo, lo cual no corresponde a la verdad histórica. Ella era una persona reservada, seria, nada decorativa; fue admitida a la agrupación gracias a sus méritos literarios.

Wanting to defend Sobalvarro after years of critical neglect, Ramos vindicates Sobalvarro on the basis of her personality (“reservada, seria, nada decorativa”), but she fails to provide any empirical evidence to this end.<sup>11</sup> Referring to a “verdad histórica,” Ramos also contends that Sobalvarro’s literary merits were the reason for her acceptance by the vanguards, but Sobalvarro’s existing seven poems—of which only five were known to Ramos—offer nothing of the experimentalism valued by the Anti-Academia. Instead, with the exception of “La indita de Nicaragua,” all of her known poetry exudes romantic and *modernista* imagery, which the group regularly criticized as outdated. Sánchez (1948, 292), who was the first to anthologize Sobalvarro in her *Poesía nicaragüense*, described her poems as frivolous but qualified her sentimentalism by suggesting that its merit lie in her predilect theme, which was championing the fallen cause of Sandino: “Algunos temas aparentemente frívolos [ . . . ] trascienden siempre por la forma, con gracia y acierto. Su modernidad consiste en la extraña sensación que sufre ante los temas tratados y la virtuosidad para transmitir al lector esas mismas sensaciones.”<sup>12</sup> The suffering that Sobalvarro conveyed over Sandino’s death, however, would have been written in 1934, some three years after she signed the “Ligera exposición.”

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affiliated in Mexico and that inspired Sandino to begin a peasant cooperative in the Segovias after driving the Marines out of Nicaragua (Grossman 1996; Gobat 2005).

10. Arellano (1994, 99) lists both an active and a passive bibliography of the poet in his *Diccionario de autores nicaragüenses*. In a personal interview with the author, he explained that much of this bibliography has been lost, however, as a result of the neglect of and damage to archives under the Somoza dictatorships, natural disasters, and the civil wars (personal interview, Managua, July 31, 2007).

11. Nowhere in my archival research, which includes all those sources available to Ramos, have I found such descriptors of Sobalvarro’s personality. Only in *El Gráfico* (1929) is she described as “distinguida y culta.”

12. Following Sánchez’s line of thought, it is not too far fetched to interpret some of Sobalvarro’s poetry as a kind of early testimonial verse, which emphasizes once more the pivotal position of Sobalvarro in Nicaragua’s poetic tradition insofar as testimonial poetry—particularly women’s testimonial poetry—would play a significant role in articulating the experiences of Sandinista guerrillas in the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s. As did Zamora, Belli, Murillo, and Najlis, Sobalvarro combined national politics with a personal subjectivity that cast the story of Sandinista struggle in emotional terms.

Her nationalist poem "La indita de Nicaragua" was apparently first published the same year, thus leaving open the question of her being admitted to the Anti-Academia based on literary merit and originality alone.<sup>13</sup>

Despite her having been included among Nicaragua's literary vanguard, which made a name for itself based on its break with the tradition of *rubendarismo* (poetry entrenched in the early aesthetic of national icon, modernista poet Rubén Darío), Sobalvarro's verse is steeped in sentimentalism and old-fashioned imagery borrowed precisely from Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and from Darío. Her poetry offers none of the irreverent innovation in imagery and form that made her colleagues in the Anti-Academia so infamous. Of her seven known surviving poems, two are *romances* (ballads, a form made popular throughout Latin America by Spain's Federico García Lorca), two are free verse, and one is a prose poem. Thematically, they are dominated by butterflies; sparrows; and flowers, especially the rose. By reveling in trite, effeminate poetic metaphors, Sobalvarro's verse does not appear to give us any insight into the speaker's subjectivity, except for that of a demure *poetisa* (the term, now considered belittling, that was still used for female poets in the 1920s and 1930s). For example, in "Cómo me llegó su libro," the poetic voice describes how a talking butterfly magically dropped Manuel Rosales's book of modernista short stories into her hands one afternoon:

—Y sonrió la picarona  
mariposa, alas de oro . . .  
y me dijo—"Soy princesa  
de un castillo encantador,  
donde hay príncipes y musas  
que tienen por privilegio,  
'voces de terciopelo  
Y de cristal.'" (Sobalvarro 1930, ll. 11–20)

The modernista fantasy in this poem borders on childishness and certainly does not reflect the virulent anti-rubendarismo of the Anti-Academia's "Primer manifiesto," which Sobalvarro signed.

Ironically, it is precisely the fairy tale content in some of Sobalvarro's poems that can be read as revolutionary. Analyzing fairy tales in the Argentine context, the critic Fiona Mackintosh (2004, 152) writes that in her literary journal *Sur*, Victoria Ocampo, Sobalvarro's Argentine contemporary, holds "the view that even such 'humble' things as fairy stories are valid as grist to the mill of her great American project, her testimony as a vigorously youthful America." According to Mackintosh (2004, 152), Ocampo firmly believed that America needed "to invent its own fairy stories" as part of the *volk* in a popular project of reclaiming national culture and identity. Sobalvarro's poems about Sandino and his Indo-Hispanic nationalism contribute in this way to his cult of heroism. For example, in "Estoy triste," little animals and birds act as her spies or emissaries to go find

13. Although I disagree with Ramos about the stand-alone literary merit of Sobalvarro's poetry, I emphasize that Nicaraguan women's literary history is indebted to Ramos—who is not a trained historian but a fine poet and journalist—for her initiative in recovering the memory of many neglected female authors. I am also grateful to Ramos for having shared with me her many sources and knowledge.

the missing revolutionary. Despite this interpretation, however, Sobalvarro's Disneyesque poetic continues to reinscribe femininity with conventional gendered stereotypes. In this way, they extend the association of femininity with popular culture, thus correlating masculinity with high, avant-garde expression and reinforcing a power differential not only between men and women but also between elite and popular cultures.

The prose poem "Yo quisiera ser . . ." reinscribes this strategically essentialized femininity. Just as the polite *quisiera* lacks the assertiveness of *quiero*, the poetic subjectivity promised by the *yo* of the title proves only a series of delicate clichés:

Yo quisiera ser gotita de rocío; fresca, fresca . . . y que los rayos del sol no quisieran consumirla, por lo linda y cristalina. ¡Qué bonito! Vivir entre los rosales; saber qué dicen los lirios a las blancas margaritas, y saber . . . qué les dicen los jazmines a las rosas, cuando pasan los gorriones mañaneros y las besan. (Sobalvarro 1929b ll. 1–4)

Despite Ramos's attempts to remember Sobalvarro as a great vanguard poet, her poems exemplify a poetisa aesthetic, mixing together the three popular bourgeois modes of the 1930s—*romanticismo*, *modernismo*, and *posmodernismo*—which continued to be prevalent throughout the 1930s and represented what were regarded as feminine aesthetics, even though conventional literary history suggests that the avant-garde replaced them (see Jrade 1998; Unruh 1994, 2006; Phillips 1975; Irwin 2003; Finzer 2008). Although literary value was often debated in gendered terms at this time, the poetisa aesthetic can also be considered a strategy used by female poets to curry an initial reading public before turning to more risky, experimental verse.

In her poem "Divagando," Sobalvarro plays on an Orientalist image more typical of modernismo than *vanguardismo*. She marries the image of a Chinese peasant with her favorite images of flowers and birds:

Din, din, din, don . . .  
 qué lindo son  
 Fli, fli, fli, fli . . .  
 ¿no oyes trinar un pajarillo aquí?

De alegre rima soy cantarina,  
 óyeme tú,  
 lo que vengo a decir:  
 que a un mandarín de la China  
 quiere pedir  
 un kiosko de bambú  
 para tener la orquesta de la floresta. (Sobalvarro 1934a, ll. 1–11)

The onomatopoeia and forced rhyme here give the poem a nursery-rhyme beat that is reinforced by the nonsense of the images of the next stanzas, which feature happy singing lilies (ll. 14–19), a lush grove that smells like wine and looks like a rancher in a pine hat (ll. 29–34), and a smiling star that takes away the speaker's song at the end (ll. 37–40). Sharing this aesthetic, Sobalvarro's other surviving poems reveal little more about her poetic persona than an adherence to a prescrip-

tive, gendered sentimentality and, in the case of "La indita de Nicaragua," to Sandino's Indo-Hispanic nationalism. Perhaps her lost poetry has more avant-garde expressions of subjectivity; at present, however, her poetry continues to guard the mystery of the forgotten female figure in the Anti-Academia and Sandino's girlfriend.

Because her poetry does not readily suggest that Sobalvarro was included in the Anti-Academia for her poetic innovation, the more likely "verdad histórica" (that I, like Ramos, would like to be empowering to women) is that she was something akin to the group's muse, a role not requiring literary genius. Cuadra remembers Sobalvarro's arrival in Granada, for which she had left her home in Ocotal to meet the members of the literary group (Quite a voyage for a young woman to make for the sake of literature!). He writes, "De pronto apareció una muchacha de bellísimos ojos y aire campesino. Nos llevaba unos romances tan bellos y frescos como los ocotales del Norte. Era Carmen Sobalvarro, la melancólica enamorada de Sandino" (quoted in Arellano 1994, 99). Thus, the young men of the Anti-Academia fell in love with the beautiful poet, whose Segovian provincialism represented the "authentic" Nicaraguan expression that they valued, which included *indigenismo*, *folklorismo*, and *sandinismo*.

It appears that Sobalvarro was embraced not only as a novia and muse of the Anti-Academia but also as a muse of the people. Quoted in Managua's *El Gráfico*, the Honduran press adoringly praises Sobalvarro's work with the Comité Central Republicano by using the poet's own flowery language: "La distinguida y culta señorita Carmen Sobalvarro, nuestra colaboradora [ . . . ] puso punto final, el día de ayer, que fue el día de Carmen, a una de sus radiantes primaveras, y empieza a deshojar hoy otra más, siempre sonriente, como quien deshoja una blanca margarita" (*El Gráfico* 1929, 5). Sobalvarro's persona as a charming poetisa thus carried over from the literary to the political field, yielding little more than her poetry as a clue about her roles as activist and artist. In her role as muse, Sobalvarro did not have to make art: for the Nicaraguan vanguards, she already was art, both inspiration and masterpiece. Because she was pretty, the young men also made her their novia, a feminine complement to their fraternity and a sentimental embodiment of nationalism and life before modernization, Yankee imperialism, and resulting bourgeois values.

Even though the biographical Sobalvarro shows signs of a modern woman, her beauty must have made her quintessentially feminine for the group, and therefore nostalgically premodern. In her study on representations of gender and modern anxiety, Felski (1995, 38) writes about how women symbolically represent the premodern: "nostalgia and the feminine come together in the representation of a mythic plentitude against which is etched an overarching narrative of masculine development as self-division and existential loss." As it did with Sandino, the image of Sobalvarro-as-novia thus would have reinforced the virility and potency of the Anti-Academia's artistic project, which aesthetically embraced the existentialism of modernity despite the group's pronounced disgust of foreign models of modernization. In this way and in spite of her bobbed hair, makeup, frequent travels to Granada and Honduras, and political activity, Sobalvarro's presence in the movement underlines a heterosexist ideology that aimed to deflect the chang-

ing realities of gender and economic power that were often equated with modernization and U.S. imperialism in Nicaragua. The young men, sons of Granada's conservative elite, thus capitalized on her presence to negotiate how to be both modern and resolutely Nicaraguan (their class-inflected, self-consciously political nationalist identity).

Gobat (2005) elaborates on the gendered anxiety that resulted in Nicaragua as a result of both U.S. imperialism and rapid modernization on the isthmus. He notes the ironic alliance, based on their shared anti-imperialist ideology, between Sandino and Nicaraguan conservatives, who publicly lambasted the modern woman. Gobat explains that, unlike Sandino, who was the illegitimate son of a Masaya landowner and indigenous woman, the conservatives were landholding elite, principally from Granada, who held tight to a Catholic, corporatist ideology. They viewed the consumer goods and leisure activities brought by the rapid modernization of the 1920s and 1930s as symptomatic of both a general decline in morality and U.S. cultural and economic influence in Nicaragua (Gobat 2005, 184–185).

The image of the modern woman, whose newfound liberty threatened patriarchal order and the old way of life, came to embody for conservatives the ultimate insult of cultural imperialism. To little success, these men sought to restrain the influence of the modern woman by attempting to control not only their wives' and daughters' behavior but also their appearance. Thus, as Gobat (2005, 185) explains, "They were not just waging a moral crusade; they feared the decline of power. This equation was most apparent in the campaign [they] waged against the 'modern woman.'" This campaign was conducted largely through literature. For example, the Granadan conservative Pedro Joaquín Cuadra Chamorro published several novels that served as comportment manuals for elite young women. His relative Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Zelaya wrote a best-selling novel—described by Gobat (2005, 196) as one of Nicaragua's "foundational fictions"—that extolled the principled masculinity of cowboy (*campisto*) landowners whose colonialist dealings with the poor signified paternalist honor and patriarchal order.<sup>14</sup> Gobat writes that this novel, *Entre dos filos*, gives form to a crisis of patriarchy taking place in Nicaragua at the time.

The Anti-Academia fanned the literary expression of this crisis with their "Prólogo solo," in which they berated young women who "pretenden ser modernas con el falso modernismo extranjerizado; esperen las nuevas rutas que deberá tomar la verdadera mujer nicaragüense" and implored young men to think about "si son o no son burguesatos," suggesting that, like the "verdadera mujer nicaragüense," a real Nicaraguan man should also shun imported traps of modernity (Cuadra and Rocha 1931/1978–1979, 28). Thus, despite her modern traits, Sobalvarro's sweet verse represented a lovely, traditional young woman from the

14. The conservative Chamorro family exercised considerable control over the Nicaraguan government during the U.S. Marines' occupation, with three presidents between 1917 and 1926. Chamorro Zelaya was the father of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, whose assassination in 1978 galvanized the Sandinista movement and whose wife, Doña Violeta, would be elected president of Nicaragua in 1990, thus putting an end to a decade of civil war and national Sandinista governance. The influential Chamorro family also continues to own the country's most influential newspaper, *La Prensa*.



rural north in keeping with “true” Nicaraguan womanhood. In this play of strategic essentialism, she reinforced her political and literary comrades’ views of themselves as inherently masculine, dominant, and nationalist figures. Moreover, in line with the historical concern of Latin American feminists not to be viewed as antifeminine, she demonstrated her ability to participate in vanguard politics and literary movements, traditionally considered men’s spheres, while shoring up her femininity.

These gendered expressions of nationality recall the critic Robert McKee Irwin’s (2003) landmark study of the great Mexican debates of virile and effeminate literature, and his work has influenced me here. He writes, “Postrevolutionary Mexican society, in its rejection of positivism, *modernismo* and everything that recalls the *porfiriato*, is clearly receptive to a masculinist discourse that reinforces traditional stereotypes of masculinity as sharp, powerful, active, honorable, moral and working class” (Irwin 2003, 123). Nicaraguan society, whose intellectual elite identified strongly with the intellectuals of the Mexican Revolution, embraced a very similar discourse in both political and literary terms.<sup>15</sup> Although explicitly rejecting effeminate literature for its discursive implications, the entities nevertheless made use of nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse to make sense of the tensions of the gendered debate of modernity, aesthetics, and politics.

#### SANDINO'S GIRLFRIEND AND NATIONALIST ROMANCE

In addition to her lyric fantasies, Sobalvarro also used her poetic calling to advance her political commitment to Sandino’s anti-imperialist cause. In her poem, “La indita de Nicaragua,” which was published in Guatemala, we see the influence of Sandino’s Indo-Hispanic nationalism: “Yancecito de buen color / no me pidas amor . . . / porque india soy / y con un indio me voy” (Sobalvarro 1934b, ll. 1–4). Here Sobalvarro’s poetic voice answers to the nationalist outcry against Nicaraguan women who associated with U.S. military men, whose “buen color” in the poem mockingly echoes discourses of racial whitening. Gobat (2005, 254) writes that these men “represented a direct challenge to [Nicaraguans’] patriarchal authority.” The “indio” with whom she goes out could be Sandino or one of his men, who self-identified as *indohispanos*, Sandino’s term for *mestizo*.<sup>16</sup> Further placing herself in solidarity with the racialized identity of the Sandinistas, the speaker in the poem also challenges imported fashion by dressing herself in typical indigenous *traje*: “vestida de manta gruesa / con mi piedra de moler en la cabeza; / En la cintura mi rebozo colorado / y un peloncito a mi lado” (Sobalvarro 1934b,

15. In the January 1938 edition of *Repertorio Americano*, the Costa Rican weekly that circulated throughout the Spanish-speaking world, Rostand called for the unification of the Central American republics with Mexico, citing a shared culture and shared revolutionary principles among her reasons. Peruvian Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, founder of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, responded enthusiastically to her editorial the following week, which prompted an ongoing conversation between the two in the journal’s editorial columns.

16. Unlike *mestizo*, however, the term *indohispano* plays on indigenous difference by placing the *indo* before the *hispano*. This racial difference worked to distinguish Nicaraguans from European and Anglo culture and served as a symbol of cultural uniqueness and autonomy.

ll. 15–18). This picturesque, maternal representation of an indigenous woman counters that of the potentially threatening, gun-slinging juanas among Sandino's ranks and conjures a feminine image worthy of defending against U.S. imperial aggression. It also challenges the image of the modern woman who courts Yankee men and fashion, both threatening to social conservatives in Nicaragua.

The cultural work of Sobalvarro's poetry not only reinforced the Sandinista project's faculties for love and war but also allowed others to grieve the death of Sandino through the sentimentalism of her poem "Estoy triste."<sup>17</sup> Dedicated to "A.C.S." in the year Sandino was assassinated, the poem evokes a flat, bare sadness with its refrain: "Toda / estoy / triste / porque él se fue" (ll. 1–4, 23–26). Echoes of romanticism, however, disrupt the possibility of a grief so gloomy as to be prosaic:

A mi ventana  
 los gorrioncitos vienen diciendo:  
 "lo hemos buscado  
 por todos lados de la montaña,  
 ¿dónde estará?" (Sobalvarro 1992b, ll. 5–9)

In this poem, sparrows and butterflies, along with the wind and water, act as the brokenhearted speaker's agents or spies: they go out in search of the lover and report back to her that there are no signs of him. Reminiscent of the helper animals in so many fairy tales, these critters extend the agency of the feminine speaker, unable to search on her own, perhaps because of paralyzing grief, social constraints, or the political propriety not to implicate herself.<sup>18</sup>

The sparrows (evocative of the lyric *golondrinas*, or swallows, of Bécquer and Oscar Wilde) and the terminal verb conjugated in the future tense inscribe the poem with Bécquerian cliché, understood by the Spanish-speaking public of this time period as the language of melancholy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it was possibly this shared lyric code that made Sobalvarro's poem so popular: it was a familiar, even comforting, mode for expressing grief and love. In the medieval tradition of courtly love poetry—a nostalgic, premodern poetic mode—this love poem idolizes the lost hero, ennobling Sandino and Sobalvarro's love for him to a spiritual realm. Her poetry thus gave aesthetic form to the grief felt by Sandino's admirers throughout Central America. Regarding the Bécquerian aesthetic, the Spanish literary critic Noel Valis (2002, 127) explains that this poetic was ideal for articulating individual subjectivity, especially for women, as they often envision and address a female listener. She writes that Bécquer "continually plays with the notion of women as poetry, an image that both flatters and flattens women within the patriarchal scheme of things" (Valis 2002, 129). The Bécquerian lyric thus lent

17. I have been unable to find any archival copy of "Estoy triste"; for years it has been the only anthologized poem of Sobalvarro's.

18. I thank my colleagues at the University of Utah for calling to my attention Sobalvarro's use of fairy-tale motifs.

19. My thinking here has been influenced by the critic Joan Shelley Rubin's (2007, 13) concept of the emotional work of poetry.

Sobalvarro an intimate style with which to write about herself by giving her an interior textual space that did not entail transgressing gendered boundaries into public space. In this way, Sobalvarro's romantic poetic voice also could serve as a mask, in that its sentimentality protects as it overshadows an otherwise vulnerable expression of subjectivity and grief.

Sobalvarro is not the only poet in Latin America to eulogize the fallen Sandino: Arellano (1972) has anthologized more than fifty poems dedicated to Sandino. Nevertheless, Sobalvarro is the only one who became widely known as *la novia de Sandino*.<sup>20</sup> An article about Sandino's death in the Guatemalan women's magazine *Nosotras* suggests that "Estoy triste" by Sobalvarro was widely circulated throughout Central America and that it was especially popular among women. The article bears the long, provocative title: "Sandino el Romántico de la Libertad: ¿Cuántas mujeres se sentirán tristes con Carmen Sobalvarro? ¿Cuántas habrían sido novias quiméricas del bandolero de Estrellas Libertarias?" (*Nosotras* 1934, n.p.). The article goes on to suggest that women throughout Central America pined for Sandino as a romantic, political celebrity: "[Sandino] ha tenido adoradores en multitudes de mujeres, que se sienten arrebatadas por los caballeros generosos y romanescos. Sandino, perteneciendo a una edad heroica, enciende la novela y la leyenda . . . Esos suspiros, esas añoranzas y las lágrimas furtivas quizá sean la mejor corona de gloria a que el maravilloso guerrillero pueda haber aspirado." Described in the article as a "caballero en el juicio del dios de la libertad," Sandino is eulogized—and thereby mythicized—as a gentleman whose ideals and heroism attracted the admiration and romance of women across Central America. In this way, Sandino—who was dubbed a "bandit" by U.S. propaganda and Nicaraguan conservatives—was also legitimized by the growing female sector of the literary community as a cavalier champion of national sovereignty.

By casting the indigenous outlaw as a romantic hero, Sobalvarro's representation of Sandinismo underlines the flux and anxiety that characterize the cultural adaptation to social changes wrought by rapid modernization and imperialist conflict. She smoothes out his rough edges, demonstrating that he is a man capable of loving and being loved. Injecting his image with sentimental romance, she legitimizes the bandit for new political life by civilizing him, making him palatable (if not desirable) both to women and to bourgeois men threatened by what was viewed as a challenge by modernity—equated with Yankee imperialism—to conventional social roles. The heterosexual nature of this love affair once again emphasizes the manliness and virility of Sandino's cadre and its capability to defend and protect Nicaragua against foreign intervention.

Not only could Central American women employ Sobalvarro's poetry to imagine a romance with Sandino; they could also use her story as it was presented by the international press. The *Nosotras* article, for example, states, "En la correspondencia que se ha descubierto, la poetisa con clarividencia de toda pitonisa de las

20. Another female poet, María Loucel (El Salvador, 1899–1957), also commemorates Sandino and curses his assassins in her poem "Augusto Sandino" (1936), but she did not gain the reputation as the hero's girlfriend. Other female poets also likely eulogized him.

musas, le aconseja a Sandino que se vaya con su gloria a Europa o a Sud América donde se le admira. Le aconseja que no se mezcle en política, que su misión está completa" (*Nosotras* 1934, n.p.). It would be hard to imagine a more perfect romance: national hero in love with poetess, who preordains hero's death. Exercising the fair art of lyricism, Sobalvarro's femininity is overstated here as delicate, compassionate, even clairvoyant (which would have been a desirable trait for Sandino, the theosophist).<sup>21</sup> She is the perfect match to Sandino's gallant masculinity. As the legendary sweetheart of the cavalier Sandino, Sobalvarro is invested with a romantic melancholy that resonates with a public that feels bereft by its hero's death. Just as she served the Anti-Academia with a premodern ideal of femininity, for Sandino supporters she also came to embody the nostalgia for the movement and the promise of utopia from when Sandino still lived. In this way, Sobalvarro crafts—both through her poetry and through her habitus—a new Nicaraguan national romance (to use Sommer's [1991] term) that models gender-appropriate ways for men and women to participate in the modern nationalist project. For women in particular, Sobalvarro imagines a charming, yet passive, role in which they pine lovingly for their male heroes, whose political action—although it may result in martyrdom—engenders a loyal, devoted following and even revolution. Many bourgeois women, for whom the life of a *guerrillera* would have been unthinkable, could relate to the attractive Sobalvarro and thus imagine quietly engaging in politics in similar ways of aesthetic expression, romantic involvement, or community organizing.<sup>22</sup>

Curiously, the *Nosotras* article, which cites Sobalvarro and her sadness in "Estoy triste" in its title, does not include the poem itself. Instead, it features another poem, "A Sandino muerto" by León Aguilera, and this poem has little to do with romance in the heterosexual sense. Why was Sobalvarro's famous poem not printed here? Did the editors of the magazine not have the text available, or did Sobalvarro refuse to give them permission to print it? Whatever the reason, by referring to Sobalvarro's poem without also providing the text suggests that the poem was so widely circulated and well known that the magazine did not need to reprint the text for readers to know to which poem it was referring. Whether circulated in serial periodicals or broadsheet, or declaimed over the radio, the poem was a commonplace throughout Central America and possibly beyond.<sup>23</sup>

The poem's isthmian popularity speaks to the centrality of Sandino's anti-imperialism in the Central American Unionist and Pan-American movements: his influence reached well outside of Nicaragua's borders. Its mention in a Guate-

21. Interestingly, before mentioning Sobalvarro's relationship with Sandino, the article also eulogizes Sandino's fallen wife, Blanca, who died in childbirth after trying to negotiate the 1933 armistice. Stating that Blanca, too, should be remembered as a national hero, the writer describes her as "purísima," "bella y enérgica" (*Nosotras* 1934, n.p.). Like Sobalvarro, she is imbued with superlative femininity.

22. Many bourgeois women did participate in Sandino's struggles, especially as spies (see Román 1983).

23. In my archival research of 1934 issues of *Nosotras* (Guatemala), *El Imparcial* (Guatemala), and *Repertorio Americano* (Costa Rica), I have been unable to find any trace of "Estoy triste" beyond the *Nosotras* article analyzed here. Nicaraguan archives also seem to contain no mention of it. Although more archival research remains to be done, the difficulty of finding an original copy of the poem supports the hypothesis that it was circulated by broadsheet or radio, both difficult media to preserve.

malan periodical is equally significant in that it reveals another use of Sandino's girlfriends by the Central American media: a seemingly innocent way in which to introduce political content in a highly censored press. Especially in the 1930s under the rule of dictator Jorge Ubico, the Guatemalan state censored the press so harshly that scarcely any political news or editorials were published. The historians Silvia Trujillo, Patricia Borrayo, and Wendy Santa Cruz (2006, 46) describe the "limitación casi permanente de la libertad de prensa" in Guatemala. By way of direct censorship and promoting a culture of fear, the state repressed and persecuted free speech. Trujillo and colleagues (2006, 46) write that, "no obstante, alguna prensa supo encontrar la forma de hacer de sus páginas medio-interesantes aunque no pudieran denunciar los abusos de los gobiernos." This creativity led to particularly intriguing cultural pages, such as page 3 of *El Imparcial*, which inadvertently served as space for a growing number of female writers, who were perceived as insignificant, and therefore benign, commentators on social happenings.<sup>24</sup> Given this veil of gendered stereotypes, female contributors were sometimes able to incorporate political content into their columns, as was the case with the *Nosotras* article. Censors were unlikely to look closely at the women's home magazine for illicit material, and if they did, the romantic, even *cursi* eulogy afforded Sandino would have overshadowed the subversive nature of the piece, for to report on Sandino in a positive manner at all indicated his popular international appeal, even among bourgeois women.

Although Sandino was understood throughout Latin America to stand for national autonomy, Ubico's government interpreted him as a political dissident for associating with the likes of Farabundo Martí in El Salvador. It is possibly for this reason that there exist few mentions of Sandino or his death in Guatemalan periodicals of the 1920s and 1930s. Viewed in this light, the fact that *Nosotras*—a women's home magazine that tended to feature articles on fashion, homemaking, national tourism, and poetry by women—ran any article at all on Sandino is noteworthy. By couching its focus on the revolutionary in romantic terms and emphasizing his relationship with Sobalvarro, the editor, Luz Valle, would have evaded issues of censorship for making a political statement.<sup>25</sup> Here Sobalvarro's sentimental expression of her love for Sandino functioned as a cover for deeper political feelings that were shared among her readers. Dismissed by censors as feminine frivolity, Sobalvarro and her poetry served as gendered decoys that allowed readers—especially female readers—an appropriate medium through which to mourn the loss not only of a handsome hero but also of a political leader and sage.

Because of her sentimental verse, Sobalvarro has been remembered in history as Sandino's girlfriend and the Anti-Academia's muse, but her poetry and the story of her romance performed important cultural and emotional work in Nicaragua. As Sandino's girlfriend, a fact communicated to the world via her verse, Sobalvarro legitimized and romanticized the revolutionary as a civilized, chi-

24. It was on page 3 of *El Imparcial* that "Divagando" and "La indita de Nicaragua" were published after Sandino's death in 1934.

25. The article also does not attribute authorship, thereby protecting the individual(s) who wrote it.

valric national hero. As Sánchez (1948) indicates, the political commitment that Sobalvarro expressed through her poetry gave her writing an edge that—along with her beauty—gained her entry into the Anti-Academia and fame throughout the Central American isthmus. Her popularity as a poet also made her political activities newsworthy, as she campaigned for Sandino both in Nicaragua and in Honduras. By emphasizing feminine charm in her public persona, Sobalvarro was able to maintain a foothold in literary and political spheres at the same time that conservative elites—including, by birthright, many members of the Anti-Academia—were summarily trying to drive the modern woman out of Nicaragua and radical politics out of Central America. Consequently, Sobalvarro avoided being branded as a modern woman *vendepatrias* who was overstepping gendered boundaries and disrupting patriarchal control. She also embodied a visible role model of both the modern woman and the “verdadera mujer nicaragüense” and assuaged anxieties of masculinity stemming from the perceived threat of women’s increased liberties.

In that she served as a viable image of the modern woman in 1930s Nicaragua, Sobalvarro effectively contributed to an increasingly politicized citizenship—a prerequisite to a true women’s movement—among many Central American women. Poet-guerrilleras, such as Zamora and Belli, may eclipse Sobalvarro in terms of revolutionary political activity, women’s liberation, and poetic expression, but Sobalvarro nonetheless marks an important point on the trajectory of Nicaraguan women’s and literary histories. She encompasses both the limitations and the promises that the figure of the modern woman held for Nicaraguan women of her day. To be sure, Sobalvarro was not as militant or influential as some of Sandino’s other girlfriends or as the women interviewed in *Sandino’s Daughters* (Randall 1995), but her role in Nicaraguan cultural production under U.S. imperialist rule allows us to see the finesse with which women in the arts and politics had to negotiate a very heterosexist discourse of nationalism that revolved around masculine activity and notions of virility. It is this same early twentieth-century discourse—historically rooted as deeply as the injustices against which Sandino struggled—that often continues to place women in the second-rate positions of girlfriends and daughters in the Sandinista movement.<sup>26</sup>

Despite her international recognition in the wake of Sandino’s murder, Sobalvarro’s romantic story meets a tragic end. When Somoza seized the Nicaraguan presidency in 1936, Sobalvarro left Nicaragua for Honduras and was essentially lost to the public record. Arellano (1994, 99) states, “Al parecer, se marchó a

26. As something of a sequel to the 1981 *Sandino’s Daughters*, Randall’s (1992) *Gathering Rage* explores the inability of Latin American revolutionary movements to develop feminist agendas. Dealing specifically with the historical struggle for women’s equality, Kampwirth (1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006) has documented not only the challenges that women faced in the Sandinista guerrilla and government but also the antifeminist movement in Nicaragua that coincided with the Chamorro and Alemán presidencies. As recently as 2007 the Asamblea Legislativa criminalized abortion, representing another setback to women’s rights and the full participation of women in public life (*El País* 2007). Influenced by the Catholic and evangelical churches, deputies from the FSLN and other political parties rejected efforts by feminist groups and the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista to block the passage of this new law.



Honduras, donde fallecería, no sin escribir poesía de reivindicación. Tal fue la que circuló en hoja suelta y con un grabado de Federico Céspedes Zepeda, a finales de los años 30 y cuyo tema era el General Sandino." Very little remains of her written work, and even the exact year of her death is unknown.

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