



Pesticide, Performance, Protest: Theatricality of flesh in Nicaragua

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Abstract

This paper explores affliction in the intersection between the human body, social violence and theatricality. It argues that in Nicaragua, 'victims' of pesticide contamination wield their suffering flesh as theatrical weapons. Banned in the USA as early as the 1970s, but used since in banana plantations by multinational companies in many developing nations, the pesticide *nemagón* has become the perfect metaphor for evoking structural violence in Nicaragua today. As a result of contact with the pesticide at least one thousand Nicaraguans have died to date. For several years now thousands of men and women, together with their families, have staged a number of public protests. Partaking in long highway marches of up to 140 kilometers from their communities in Northwestern Nicaragua to the capital Managua, setting up tent cities and performing other well-known spectacular protests, they have called attention to their social situation.

There are three bodies: the desert is the face of the first, the TERRITORIAL BODY that sweeps humanity in its cosmic course. The second is the SOCIAL BODY of the human race that engenders life. Lastly, there is the person who speaks, who willingly comes to life, the ANIMAL BODY of the person passing (Virilio 124).

The protestors' bodies are perceptibly at the threshold of death. As shadows of their former selves, they are the victims of global capitalism. Dramatic metaphors of social violence, they endure permanent headaches, bone pains, vision loss, fevers, hot flashes, anxiety, depression, liver damage, and kidney and stomach cancers. Afflicted by excessive weight loss, loss of fingernails and hair, they carry their pain vociferously and prominently. These hematoma-covered bodies are affected by *nemagón*, a virulent pesticide used in banana plantations in Nicaragua during more than two decades.

[2] For several years now, thousands of these *nemagón* sufferers with their families have staged a number of public protests in Nicaragua. They have partaken in several highway marches of up to 140 kilometers from their communities to the capital, Managua. In 2005 and in 2007, after two such long marches, they set up tent cities in front of the Nicaraguan Parliament to demand recognition and compensation for the violence done to them. In other public displays, they have carried out a hunger strike, symbolically buried themselves alive, and threatened to march naked on the streets of Managua to reveal what Virilio has called their experience of "gravitational collapse" (Virilio 125). For Virilio the process of "gravitational collapse"

destroys one's sense of place; it globalizes the territorial body into nothingness and the social body "gradually disintegrates into the concentration camps of the city" (125). The spectacular protests of *nemagón* victims in Nicaragua, in this new millennium, are an articulation of social violence.ⁱ By calling attention to their social exclusion, expressed in the dying flesh, their spectacles make visible the intersection between local and national social relations and global capitalism.

[3] Focusing on the sufferers' theatricalization of their distressed bodies, and the use of these as political weapons (Feldman), this paper proposes that these social performances are radical spectacles because they convey experiences that go beyond the narrow scope of a local, social protest. Former banana plantation workers and their families wield their violated flesh as mirrors of structures of global inequality, corporate indifference, and government inaction. Recasting the body as a powerful rhetorical tool, these spectacles have the potential to develop into a technique that facilitates the protestors' inclusion into a national and global social/political system from which they have been excluded (Goldstein 18). This "theatricality of flesh" manipulates public and national spaces to raise controversial questions and to deconstruct national and global dominant narratives in a post revolutionary, neo-liberal, global capitalist Nicaragua.

[4] Thus, buttressing a framework for social analysis, "Pesticide, Performance, Protest: Theatricality of Flesh in Nicaragua" deals with the intersection between the human body, theatricality, and social

violence. From Goffman's "dramaturgical standpoint", one can understand theatricality as the *form* of presenting a social situation. Examples of this would include political protests, nationalistic displays or political propaganda. Understood in this way, theatricality is shaped by the relationship between environments, audiences, actors and social contexts (Goffman). As in the conventions of the "theatre," the intentionality in theatricality is to activate audiences' actions in social relations in which characters, props, roles, supporting casts, scenes and audiences are involved.

[5] The theatricality of flesh also aims to highlight the non-verbal aspects of spectacle as important communicative spaces for displaying bodily experiences as political forms of action. An articulation of global systems of power that affect local social situations, the theatricality of dying flesh is a framework that seeks to understand and to contribute to the discussions of local and global social relations seen from a Nicaraguan embodied theatricalized perspective. A methodological strategy, theatricality of flesh makes visible the otherwise hidden structures of violence affecting marginalized groups in Nicaragua.

Contexts: Scripted Intentionality to Affect



Figure 1 Nemagón effects 2007

Banned in the USA as early as the 1970s, but used in banana plantations by Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita in Nicaragua and other developing nations during several decades, the pesticide *nemagón* affects over 100,000 Nicaraguans (<http://www.business-humanrights.org>). Some of the effects recorded over the years include serious long and short term health problems. As a result of contact with the pesticide, at least one thousand Nicaraguans have died to date (ibid).

[7] A wide variety of health problems are attributed to the main component of *nemagón* called DBCP or *debromochloropropane*. Male victims suffer from reduced, impaired, or completely decimated sperm counts. According to recent studies sixty-seven percent of male banana workers in Nicaragua are believed to be permanently sterile. Female victims experience menstrual disruptions, discoloration of the skin, and repeated miscarriages. Uterine and breast cancers are common occurrences among them. All victims suffer from chronic bone and muscle pains, skin and blood cancers, sensations of burning, migraines, and loss of motor control. Many experience chronic renal failure (Meléndez Aguirre, Centro Humboldt 2005).

The march of over 1000 people afflicted by nemagón, accompanied by their families, moves slowly along the side of the highway to the capital. Covered in dust and tired they narrate with their bodies a continuous theatricality of flesh. They penetrate the city space and the unconscious space of its citizens. What do they want? Who are they?

[8] In April 2005 there were 5000 *nemagón* sufferers living in makeshift black tents in Managua's Central Park. These protestors, within sight of the four star Intercontinental Hotel, narrated their bodies as witnesses to the effects of corporate greed and government inaction to passerbyes and journalists. The protestors' first goal was to put pressure on the banana multinational companies to acknowledge that they knowingly exposed the workers to the pesticide after it was banned in the U.S.A (Centro Humboldt 2005). Their second goal was to embarrass the government into defending workers' rights by amending the constitution and attending to the workers' immediate health needs (ibid.). For three painful months, the protestors and their families presented these claims by exposing their pain in public. The idea was to stay in the camp until their demands were met (Envío, Number 287, Junio 2005). Unfortunately, both the administration of the day (Bolaños' Presidency) and the subsequent Sandinista government neglected or ignored the issue. When I visited Managua in December of 2007 about 1000 of these protestors had marched once more from Northwestern Nicaragua and were once again occupying the same park in front of parliament.

[9] In some instances, particularly for socially and marginalized groups with historically limited access to public discourse and social power, theatricality becomes an effective and innovative vehicle to elicit responses to social demands. This history of marginality is predominantly acute for rural day laborers. Their social condition is in many ways connected to a social structure of indifference, exploitation and economic/political inequality. For many years after colonization, the governments and the social elites of Central America depended on foreign interests and the absolute control of the land to maintain power. During several decades half of the rural populations of Central America earned their living in tiny plots of land. However, the expansion of agro-agriculture in the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties (cotton, sugar cane, banana) and rapid capital-intensive industrialization, as well as rising rents, meant large numbers of peasants were forced out of these plots of land. They could no longer produce their own food and depended on seasonal work in large coffee, banana and cotton plantations. To maximise profits for landowners the agricultural laborers received only subsistence wages, which contributed to the peasants' lower standard of living (Booth 33-73, Seligson 140-157). These *nemagón* sufferers' theatricalized protests articulate this history as local, national and global economic politics aimed at creating favorable opportunities for global capitalism.

Doña Francisca, a woman in her sixties who worked in a banana plantation for many years shows her permanently enlarged feet and then points to different parts of her ailing flesh, she explains: "I am dying silently, little by little. You know, I lost my ovaries due to this poison and I suffer from kidney infections almost all the time".

Gesturing towards her head she says: "I suffer from mental complications, I tend to forget everything, and my nervous system is not working any more, we are all dying here. We need a resolution". (Interview, December 2007, Managua).

[10] The protestors' performance of flesh in distress becomes an embodied critique of structural violence. If we see the effect of *nemagón* on the bodies of the sufferers as violence, violence then becomes a phenomenon that goes beyond the suffering body. As anthropologists Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois have conveyed: violence encompasses "all forms of controlling processes that assault basic human freedoms and survival" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 21). Violence therefore needs to be understood within its own particular cultural, social and historical context. The displaying of the protestors' suffering bodies is first of all a powerful symbol of the vulnerability, malleability and fragility of the "ANIMAL BODY", the flesh (Virilio 124). These actions are deliberately and rhetorically framed within a "theatricality of violence."

[11] If we understand the body in the Foucauldian sense as a site of socio-cultural inscription, then we can assert that social control is reflected not only in the way the body is made social, but also in the circumstances and contexts in which it performs social relations. It follows that reclaiming the body through self-intervention, as in radical body modifications, and using it as an instrument for political mobilization can negate society's normative structuring and thus contradict individualistic or dominant social rules. Reclaiming the body through self-intervention, including radical body modification, can

restore a sense of personal control over a body normalized by dominant ideologies.

[12] For example, performance artists Orlan and Stelarc explore Western standards of beauty by experimenting on their own bodies with surgery and prosthetics to generate a “marginal identity.” This “marginal identity” negates “normative identity” categories and contradicts social normatives by blurring the boundaries of what is socially acceptable and socially marginal (Rosenblatt 316). Thus, the act of cutting and reshaping one’s own body can be considered empowering because cutting and reshaping the flesh in one’s own terms implies controlling the act of violence. Reshaping one’s own body can be considered a recuperation of self; at another level (i.e. gender relations) this may be also seen as reclaiming women’s appropriated bodies back from the media (316).

[13] In Nicaragua the *nemagón* protestors make similar gestures utilizing their bodies, not necessarily by doing violence to themselves, but by exposing the violence done to them in a theatricalized protest. Contrary to the marginality exposed by body modification, the *nemagón* victims do not reshape their bodies through their own volition. Their novelty does not reside in reclaiming agency by doing violence to their bodies, but by exposing the violence done to them as depicted in their violated flesh. The radical in these protests resides in the presentation or exposure of the grotesqueness of structural violence. The *nemagón* victims thus take control of their bodies in the

reconceptualization of society's violence committed against the physical/social bodies of the working poor majority of Nicaraguans.



Figure 2 *Nemagón* protestors' Tent City 2007

[14] As a social communicator, this form of theatricalization of the body in distress is effective in reminding Nicaraguans of the oppressiveness of structural violence and the urgency of the victims' plight. The *nemagón* victims' protests, though these have yet to achieve the specific goals enunciated by the group to the government (acknowledging corporate culpability and access to specialized health care), have mobilized segments of the Nicaraguan population to denounce the condition of the *nemagón* sufferers. A report entitled "The March Without Return," made public in the year 2005 by the Centro Humboldt, documented the immense support the *nemagón* sufferers received from intellectuals, citizens, and political figures around the world. From worker unions in South America and environmentalists in Europe to church groups in Central America and ordinary Nicaraguans, many were moved to act. Some expressed their solidarity with letters that denounced the social violence that made the

ex-banana workers' victimization possible. These public letters were made available in the international media (Meléndez Aguirre, Centro Humboldt 2005). Individuals and groups from far and near made their way to the camp bringing with them food and economic help, always in short supply in the Tent City. Sometimes the camp protestors were able to survive thanks to the generosity of the lower class inhabitants of the neighborhood where the park, the heart of their protest, is located. These neighbors regularly supplied protestors with food, water and other everyday necessities. In the summer of 2005, the Nicaraguan poet and theologian Michelle Najlis publicly exhorted:

The *nemagón* victims have taught us not to succumb to the idea that nothing can be done about the dire situation in Nicaragua, or in the world. With their ailing bodies, they have called on us to challenge impotence and renounce our comfort. Each of their lean-tos — in this city that they have all built from sticks, hammocks and black plastic — has been a prophetic cry, screaming out to Nicaragua to change. We can quote Isaiah, who said, 'by your wounds, we were healed' of our selfishness (Envío, Number 287, Junio 2005)

[15] Understanding the effectiveness of the *nemagóns* spectacularized suffering requires attending to the wider political, economic and social context. The *nemagón* protests respond to broader problems linked to and exacerbated by neo-liberal policies introduced by the post-revolutionary Nicaraguan governments of the 1990s. In 1979, a nationalistic and anti imperialist revolution led by the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*) put an end to the long and corrupt Somoza dynasty. With the participation of a great majority of Nicaraguans, the Sandinistas introduced progressive new

policies, programs, and laws. These initiatives aimed at redistributing social, political, and economic powers to the vast majority that had been neglected by the dictatorship. Universal health care, agrarian reform, and public education became government priorities. Women and children's rights were legally expanded during the 1980s (Babb). In spite of many errors noted by some critics in and out of Nicaragua the Sandinista regime did endeavor towards an ideal of social justice, national dignity and social inclusion (Chavez; Field; Lancaster; Babb).

[16] The social/economic project of neo-liberalism is a model that seeks to achieve conditions for the total mobility of capital, the elimination of state intervention, and structural adjustments. Neo-liberalism thus sharply contrasts with the values and gains of the Sandinista revolution. The *nemagón* protests link neo-liberal ideological changes and economic adjustments performed in Nicaragua today with its social/political consequences on those marginalized in the process. Refusing to accept their silent disintegration as inevitable or private, the *nemagón* protestors linked the establishment of a dominant new social/cultural attitude in the country with brutal sensory consequences on socially and politically excluded Nicaraguans. The recasting of the afflicted flesh, in the context of the politics of government neglect and multinational companies' disregard for workers' well-being becomes thus a symbol of the dying "SOCIAL BODY" (Virilio 124). Their protests show the underbelly of neo-liberal "progress".

Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, has a new flashy face: McDonald's, casinos, new pastel-colored hotels and freshly

paved highways. But occupying a park in what used to be the heart of the old Managua, devastated by the earthquake of 1972, more than one thousand people live in plastic tents. This space covers a few city blocks, is filled with eucalyptus trees, black plastic, anger, human misery and waste. This is a tent city. A banner: "Nemagón kills. We want social justice".

Public Spaces, Protest, and Theatricality



Figure 3 Downtown Managua 2007

Like all performances, what performances do and how they are meaningful is contingent on their contexts. In Nicaragua the context is a post-revolutionary, neo-liberal era. The main *nemagón* protests have taken place in Managua, the seat of national power. The theatricalized interventions manipulate public spaces in order to give new meaning to ideas of popular nationalism and revolutionary justice. In the contemporary context of neo-liberalism and the expansion of globalizing capitalism, Nicaragua, like many other nation-states, confronts the inability to fulfill promises of prosperity and social peace. Since 1990, neoliberal capitalism has meant, besides the push for a new ideology of *laissez-faire* economics, a number of visual

renovations to Managua's landscape after the revolutionary Sandinista government lost power. The post-revolutionary governments' initial modifications to the capital focused on destroying revolutionary art and renaming public spaces (Guevara and Nouvet 108). The building up of a new landscape reflecting the priorities and politics of post-revolutionary regimes followed these actions. For example, President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1996), who ran on a platform of peace as God's will, ensured the construction of a new and massive Cathedral in Managua. Funded almost entirely by the owner of Domino Pizza, Thomas Monaghan, and designed by architect Ricardo Legorreta renowned for his futurist style, this multi-domed concrete structure is one that definitely expresses desire to break from the past and embrace the future (Ibid).

[18] The reinvention of the *Plaza de la Revolución*, officially renamed *Plaza de la Republica*,ⁱⁱ constitutes one of the most dramatic and symbolic transformations of public space that has occurred in the capital since 1990. On this site where a huge majority of Nicaraguans flocked to celebrate the triumph of 1979, a new box-like Presidential Palace has been erected with its own musical fountain. But after 20 years of renovation the dream of prosperity and social peace has not materialized.

[19] It is within this context of ideological and spatial remodeling that the articulation of the violence suffered by the banana workers, in public spaces such as the Tent City in front of the national parliament becomes significant and radical. The ex-banana workers theatricalized

suffering is not only a symptom of the failure of global capitalism in the form of neo-liberalism but also a spectacular response to that violence (Goldstein 21). The performances of the dying flesh presented by these workers make visible global corporate unaccountability and the local government's inability to protect its citizens. These spectacles act, as Goldstein puts it referring to spectacularized violence in Bolivia, "as a moral complaint against state inadequacy, redefining ideas about justice, citizenship and the law (Goldstein 28). And as all protestors I spoke to articulated it, their protests are about human rights, social justice, and social inclusion.



Figure 4 Sandinista flag wall graffiti 2007

[20] Tapping into a nationalist and revolutionary discourse of social justice, the protestors use their public performances to make visible the links between their violated bodies and the individual, historical, and social cultural contexts of their emergence. They use the symbols of the revolution such as the red and black Sandinista flag. They invoke Sandino and Carlos Fonseca, the heroes of the revolution, and they display the blue and white national flag in all of their protests as calculated rhetorical intentionality. Such visual and aural rhetoric

evokes revolutionary ideologies of social fairness, social and economic equality, anti imperialism, nationalism, and justice.

Volunteering an explanation of her participation in the tent city, Doña Lupe who worked cleaning and packing bananas for eight years, wants to expose her suffering body to visitors. "We don't sleep at all," she said touching her visually weak body. "We suffer from insomnia, our bones and our bodies are always in pain: "Aay" she cries "we are afflicted by every ailment known: vision loss, headaches, kidney failure, bone deformation. It is hell to live like this. What we want is justice." She continues: "We feel abandoned and alone and that is not right. From the time we walked here from our villages, seven months ago, we have had many deaths. We made a wake under that tree for one of us who died just five months ago. Our suffering is enormous. We are going to die here, but our position is firm: we are not leaving until our problems are resolved. We want medicine. We want to be respected" (Interview, December 2007, Managua).

[21] In this case, theatricality serves as a device to restructure patterns of inclusion. It is "a technique through which the marginalized insist on their own incorporation within national structures and systems from which they have previously been excluded" (Goldstein 19). The *nemagón* performances are part of these workers' intentional process of asserting a new type of citizenship, of values and priorities that move away from the neo-liberal models of exclusion that leave groups like themselves living literally and figuratively in places of social abandonment.

[22] The exposure of an afflicted body can work to reclaim protestors' bodies in a symbolic public ritual. Alan Feldman, referring to the 1982

IRA (Irish Republican Army) prisoners' hunger strike, points out that the performance of these inmates staged "the abuse and violence of the other in the eviscerated flesh of the dying prisoners" (236). Violence in this case is self-directed and indexical pointing to the institutional violence of the state. By doing violence to their bodies, these prisoners were aiming "to achieve a new type of violence that would put an end to all violence" A form of agency, their violence intentionally tried to take control of their bodies albeit with some restrictions:

They could chose to die and the jailers could do nothing. The Hunger strike was an epic act of emancipation. Yet no other action more eloquently demonstrated the condition and image of the human body infested with the state apparatus (Feldman 236).

[23] In Feldman's research, the hunger strike was a type of sacrificial ritual that aimed to convert populations outside prison to mass protest. The intentionality of the strike was to assume the sympathetic magic of mimesis. "The idea was that the strike would translate into generalized societal eschatology" (Feldman 256). With a self-directed violence against their bodies, the prisoners wanted to stage the abuse and violence of the state against their flesh. Each dying prisoner would come to signify the mirror of the oppressiveness of the sate. "The dead hunger striker was a mimetic part of the state, it was the state itself in a concentrated form that had been ejected from prison" (Feldman 236).

[24] As in the Irish case articulated by Feldman, the Nicaraguan *nemagón* protestors and their families repeated theatricalization of

suffering through their exposure of their dying and afflicted flesh aimed to signify and reassert a social/political position:

[25] By showing their troubled in this theatricalized form, the victims of *nemagón* reclaim their bodies. They insist that these should matter to their co-citizens, their government and the corporations. While one cannot predict the outcome of performances, spectacles like these aim to transform a social order. "They are locations of communication that convey participants into versions of social order in a relative coherent ways..." (Handelman in Goldstein 17).

Nicolas Mercado is a man in his sixties who worked for many years in banana plantations in northwestern Nicaragua. Slowly he makes his way to a group of visitors in front of a tent flying the Nicaraguan and Sandinista flags. As he approaches, he points to the numerous black and white dots on his arms and upper chest: "This is how the poison starts to show its effects, this is the sign," he says. "These spots will eventually make my entire body go whitish..." He says calmly. Señor Mercado takes off his shirt to show with more precision the advanced state of skin discoloration in his chest and back. "It is a slow and ugly death", he posits with some kind of resolve (Interview, 2007, Managua).

Conclusion



Figure 5 *Toxic chemicals – Justice Now sign, Tent City 2007*

The experiences that are presented through the *nemagón* sufferers' performances, as a theatricality of the dying, intentionally utilize the power of theatricality to affect a wide audience: local, national, and global. As a method for transmitting selective histories of social change, capitalist exploitation and social abandonment, the theatricality of contaminated flesh is not a neutral bystander of history. It is, in this instance, an intentional collective response to social violence and social trauma. These performances embody social testimonials that speak for the experiences of many others who share a cultural, social, economic and/or political marginality. The body is presented as an agent for mobilization and change. The spectacles of dying bodies express embodied memories, as "the cumulative and collective nature of trauma suffered by illiterate and literate

communities alike, transmitted through embodied performances” (Taylor 193). Thus the *nemagón* performances use the body as a powerful sign of collective history whose social and political intentionality goes far beyond local social concerns. By looking at these performances as intersubjective dialogues, we can place them into wider social, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Taylor 271). Embodying the effects of global capitalism, these theatricalized response to social inequity “enact embodied memory”, that articulate the multinationals constant denial of responsibility for the protestors suffering, the government’s inability to protect its citizens and the links of these to a legacy of structural violence encompassed by a history of revolution, imperialism and social exploitations of the weak in Nicaragua. These acts articulate a history representative of a collectivity, positioning individuals within a national and global political process. Performance for the afflicted, in the form of theatricalized flesh and as an expression of agency, becomes a way of being visible, audible and present in the world.

ⁱ Violence in this case, should be seen as a figurative, ideological and physical embodiment of social/historical conflicts (Coronil and Skurski 1991).

ⁱⁱ This plaza not surprisingly went back to its revolutionary name Plaza de la Revolución when the Sandinistas came back to power in 2007.

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