

2018 CLAG Field Study Award Final Report
Nicaragua: Continuity and Change
Danielle Langworthy
University of Denver

In April of 2018, just a month before I would arrive in the field, Nicaraguans took to the streets to protest president Daniel Ortega's decision to cut social security benefits. While the protests began as a student-led marches in support of elderly Nicaraguans reliant upon these benefits, it was clear Ortega had ignited something, as even after he acquiesced and abandoned his plans, the protests continued and spread. Soon marchers called for Ortega and his vice president and wife, Rosarillo Murillo, as well as for the members of the Nicaraguan congress, to step down, and to hold early elections.

The Catholic Church attempted to facilitate talks between protest organizers and government officials, but resolution was elusive. Protestors set up road blockades (*tranques*) throughout the more heavily developed Pan American corridor and Pacific side of the country, slowing the movement of goods and people throughout the region and creating ideal conditions for robberies and interrogations regarding loyalties. National police and paramilitary groups apparently armed by the police responded with force, and protestors answered with homemade mortars. Daily news reports showed the most recent clashes and death tolls. Over the course of the summer, over 400 people would die in these fracasas, and reportedly over 600 people are still held as political prisoners for their participation in the marches, or in the case of journalists, for reporting on the events.

I arrived in Nicaragua in late May and stayed through late July, and during this period the situation steadily worsened, though I was fortunate to be in a region removed from the protests and violence – the southern, Pacific region of the country, close to the Costa Rican border, in the department of Rivas, municipality of Tola, pueblo of Gigante. The impacts were evident, however, even in this tranquil location. My hosts and neighbors warned against unnecessary travel beyond the department to avoid the *tranques*. Food prices increased as delivery trucks struggled to traverse long lines of vehicles waiting to pass through, and people in the community spoke of the inability to afford particular items (see Figure 3). Gasoline was also scarce, and many people who had grown accustomed to the convenience of motorcycles over the past few years started taking busses (see Figures 1 and 2). When those stopped running, people walked, rode bicycles, or pooled resources and shared rides. This of course impacted fishermen, who had to conserve gasoline to preserve their trade, and I was lucky enough to see one man's stash in his home – shocking at the time as I had heard even fishermen were out of gas in the area. This scarcity also meant that my intention of exploring Nicaragua, spreading out beyond just the municipality of Tola, was waylaid. At times I was even warned against going into the nearest city due to the *tranques* and associated activities taking place there.

The closest I came to viewing these activities firsthand was in the pueblo of Tola, where a group of young men set up a *tranque* in front of the town meeting hall, on the public square. They later piled into the back of a pickup truck, armed with homemade mortars, and sped off somewhere, seemingly replicating scenes I had viewed in the national news. Their *tranque* was largely symbolic, however, as its placement could hardly have interrupted commerce. The

national police also stationed themselves along the square, a reminder to us all that the government was watching.

One of my goals for this foray into the field was to determine the feasibility of fieldwork investigating how land tenure systems have been impacted by tourism, especially the large-scale, luxury resorts in this particular region. What I watched unfold instead was the annihilation of Nicaragua's burgeoning tourism industry. Between news stories and the U.S. State Department issuing a travel warning, the flow of tourists slowed to a trickle. A few backpackers and surfers still came through, but the presence of foreigners declined precipitously. North American lifestyle migrants living in the area began leaving as well, either concerned about the situation deteriorating further, or unable to sustain their businesses given the conditions. Then even the large, luxury resorts started to close their doors. Nicaraguans lost jobs, putting a further strain on businesses catering to locals rather than tourists.

Needless to say, these events altered my focus. Even after establishing sufficient rapport through repeated interactions and visits, interviews mostly found their way to current events and the latest news reports. Many expressed disbelief that the country could find itself in such a position again, that such a history could be repeated after how much suffering war had exacted upon Nicaraguans. Despite this trend in topic, I was indeed able to learn some of the history of land ownership in the area and how certain plots had changed hands.

I had also intended to carry out archival research and analysis based on the title and cadastral registries in the department of Rivas. While I found that despite the fact that cadastral maps are open to the public, I was unable to access them without land owners' permissions. I was, however, still able to gather some general information regarding land transfer processes and legality of sale in certain areas.

All of these interactions were made possible by my other goal: Spanish proficiency. During the first four weeks of my time in Gigante, I attended one-on-one Spanish lessons at the Pie de Gigante Spanish school. These language sessions, at four hours a day, five days a week, were incredibly helpful in building my Spanish skills, as they were more conversational rather than simple repetition of grammar rules and vocabulary, and set the stage for interacting with people in the community with greater confidence. I also had the support and aid of local people in this process, and some interactions would never have taken place without them.

I am truly grateful to CLAG for the opportunity to make this initial trip. As I move forward, I intend to continue to investigate the history of land tenure in this area, but also turn my attention to the phenomenon I watch unfold during the summer – people clearcutting and moving onto government land to make a living now that many jobs in tourism have evaporated. I will return in December of 2018 and again in May of 2019. It was CLAG's support, through the Field Study Award, that made this exploratory trip possible. I used the funds to pay for the Spanish classes, and the rest toward room and board, facilitating the length of my stay and setting the foundation for what I hope will be a lifetime relationship with Nicaragua and the people there.



Figures 1 and 2. Lines of motorcycles and cars waiting their turn at the gas station once gasoline returned.



Figure 3. Empty shelves at a local grocery store.