Transnational Solidarity Histories in International Service Learning: A Nicaraguan Case Study

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Abstract

Background: Critical literature examining international service learning does not examine the historical formations or expectations and experiences of hosts in depth. Most studies focus on either a critical examination of colonial or imperial history or a wide analysis of host perceptions without the same critical attention to history. Purpose: The research reported in this article focuses on the experiences and histories of Nicaraguan hosts in international service learning. Methodology: The research includes a qualitative case study and draws on in-depth interviews with 21 Nicaraguan hosts. The research was conducted in 2014 and 2015 as a part of a larger study which also included volunteers. Findings: Nicaraguans who participated in international service learning did so with intentional outcomes that are shaped through Nicaraguan histories of transnational solidarity. This intentional participation meant that programming was cultivated with the hopes for politicized learning outcomes. Implications: International service learning is a complex and problematic pedagogy as has been well documented in the literature. Seeking to understand, however, the motivations and expectations of hosts as contextualized in their own historical formations, cultures and desires can provide alternative frameworks and imagining for international service learning practices.

Keywords

solidarity, international service learning, nicaragua, global service learning, volunteer abroad

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While there is a diverse and critical field of literature about international service learning experiences, it has only been recently that studies have begun to examine the experiences of those who host volunteers while they travel (see Balusubramaniam, Hartman, McMillan & Paris, 2017; Collins, 2019; Ficarra, 2019; Grain et al. 2019; O’Sullivan et al. 2019; Heron 2011; 2015; Larsen 2015; Mogford & Lyons 2019; Mostafenezhad 2014; Reynolds 2014; Toms 2013). By hosts, I mean the communities and organizations who welcome the volunteers to contribute to their work, as well as the families that volunteers often live with. Much of the critical literature that examines international service learning argues that these programs must be situated as emerging from a variety of histories including, but not limited to, colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and imperialism (Heron, 2007; Mathers, 2011; Mostafenzhad, 2014; Vrasti & Montsion, 2014). While these histories are present in shaping programs, it is also important to consider the specific historical contexts in which they are occurring – these histories can help to shift perspectives on the possibilities of practices, as well as to complicate a homogenizing narrative of colonialism.

This study emerges from an in-depth qualitative case study of international service-learning experiences in Nicaragua including interviews with volunteers and hosts. This article, however, focuses only on interviews with Nicaraguan hosts and I argue that while historical and ongoing systems of oppression enable the very possibility to participate in international service learning, there are additional historical frameworks shaping encounters. I suggest that the rich and relatively recent history of international solidarity as a political strategy should be considered as a specific historical antecedent to international service learning in Nicaragua. Finally, I offer some thoughts on how this approach can open radical possibilities.

**Literature Review**

“International service learning” is a term that can encompass a wide range of different experiences and should be considered an industry. McGehee (2014) estimated that volunteers spend between 1.5 and 2.5 billion dollars Canadian a year. In this article I use the term international service learning to signal a variety of practices. While there is significant literature outlining differences between programming (Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Hartman et al., 2014), these differences are often in the pedagogical frameworks, and for hosts on the ground who work with multiple programs the difference in experience is negligible (Toms, 2013). Thus, for the purpose of this article I use international service learning to signal any practice where people spend time volunteering in a country which is not where they have citizenship with intentions that include, but may not be limited to, learning. What international service learning programs do have in common is that they offer the opportunity to learn by volunteering through an ‘immersive’ cultural experience through being with local people and communities.

The direction of international service learning travel follows international development trajectories, i.e. volunteers from the “developed” world travel to the “undeveloped” or “developing” world as well as enact colonial trajectories. As these types of
programs have been increasing in popularity, they have shifted from talking about their work as “development work” to framing international service learning as a self-making pedagogical project (Simpson, 2004). Thus, while international service learning programs increasingly emphasizes what volunteers will gain, through learning or transformation into a global citizen rather than the impact of the service.

Critical literature about international service learning engages in three broad areas of critique. The first focuses on the pedagogical faults of international service learning. For example, that many of the programs do not provide an in-depth pedagogical experience (Hartman & Kiely, 2014), that the pedagogical assumption is simplistic in assuming that an affective interaction with an other will produce transformation (Larsen, 2015; Mostafenezhad, 2011) and that volunteers often “lose” much of what they learn while in placement (Tiessen, 2012; Kiely, 2004). The second is that programming enacts and replicates colonial mentalities including the right to observe and learn from the lives of others (Chapman, 2016; Heron, 2007; Mathers, 2010). The final critique focuses on the need for reciprocity in international service learning programming between those who travel and those who host (see Lough & Oppenheim, 2017; Pluim & Jorgenson, 2012) while others (see Larsen, 2015) have critiqued the primacy of the volunteer experience over those of hosts both in the practice and scholarship of international service learning.

This article, and the broader research program, are situated in this critical literature, responding to the call to consider host experiences. My analysis focuses on international service learning pedagogical encounters, an examination as it happens. Much of the critical literature conducted research pre- and post-travel, rather than in situ. The concept of the “encounter” directs attention to the various aspects at stake when subjects meet each other, which is understood as the pedagogical crux for international service learning. Attending to the encounter also means attending to how subjects make meaning during encounters and what they take away from them. Babb (2010) suggests that the encounter “foregrounds the intimate relationship of those coming together from different cultures and societies and it does not already assume the outcome of any given engagement, granting agency to players who may be historically disadvantaged on the global stage” (p. 5). Crouch (1999), suggests that the encounter is … a process in which the subject actively plays an imaginative, reflexive role, not detached but semi-attached, socialised, crowded with contexts… This combination contains meanings of landscapes, fragments, spaces, whole and abstract places, abstractions of the city and the country, street, nation, gender, ethnicity, class, valley, arena and field, through which human feelings, love, care and their opposites may be refracted. (p. 12)

Encounters in international service learning are laden with a multiplicity of expectations and hopes participants (both volunteers and hosts) bring to their experiences. Consequently, meaning making is refracted through multiple frames. These frames include broad factors, such as culture, identity, theories of learning and stereotypes. However, while Crouch’s work on encounters in tourism (1999) remains focused on the experience of the tourist, my conceptualization of the encounter draws on Pratt’s
contact zone, and as such, it necessarily includes hosts. I have written about this approach in methodological contexts (MacDonald, 2020) and analyzing intimacy in international service learning (MacDonald, 2019).

The conceptualization of international service learning as a series of encounters draws attention to the other histories, cultures, feelings and expectations that emerge other than those of volunteers and colonialism. It is through this analysis that a history of transnational solidarity in Nicaragua emerged as a vital framework to understand international service learning.

**Study Methods**

In this article, I draw on research over two separate research trips to Nicaragua – one in the summer of 2014 and then one in the summer of 2015. This study was approved by the IRB at the University of Alberta. The first trip was one month long and the second was three months. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 19 volunteers and 21 hosts (both Nicaraguans who acted as host families and those who were facilitators). Each interview ranged from 45–120 min depending on the participants and conversation. For the purposes of this article, I draw only on interviews with Nicaraguan hosts. Participants provided informed consent either verbally or written and all names included are pseudonyms.

I connected with local staff at hostels and cafes to see if they could suggest participation in my research to people they knew. Finally, I connected with organizations that work with volunteers that I knew and Nicaraguan friends. From these participants I used snowball-sampling, asking participants to recommend others who might be interested in the work, or, at the least willing to be interviewed.

While I solicited interviews from any member of a Nicaraguan family who hosted international volunteers, it was largely women (host mothers) who participated either because they were the one who had made the decision to host, or they spent the most time with the volunteer. When I use interview excerpts, I indicate whether the participant was a host family or a facilitator. Host families had been hosting volunteers anywhere from 3 to 10 years. Facilitators had been working in the field of international service learning programs from 3 to 10 years. While facilitators often were involved in international service learning as a career (many of them having degrees in tourism, for example), host families found their way into this work through family members, being linked to community organizations, and were usually not actively recruited or seeking out hosting for a political purpose. Additionally, host families often participate in a variety of international service learning programs that vary in pedagogical aims, volunteer work and length of stay.

It is important to note that I am a white Canadian woman. While I have experience working and living in Nicaragua and conducted these interviews in Spanish, I am not Nicaraguan, and this informs my analysis and my approach. My privilege was carried with me into interviews and after them, when Nicaraguans I met would ask about potential partner organizations in Canada, for example. Understanding this privilege led me to engage in a methodology that required time in country and that attended
to the history and present in Nicaragua. I have reflected in depth elsewhere about this dynamic (MacDonald, 2020).

**Palimpsestic Analysis**

To consider the ways in which different ideologies and frameworks interact with one another, I draw on the idea of the palimpsest as outlined by Ella Shohat (1998) and Jacqui Alexander (2006). Drawing on the image of a palimpsest – a parchment where multiple things have been written and erased, but traces remain – Alexander (2006) argues for a view of time that foregrounds the ways in which the “here and now” and the “there and then” are scrambled to be the “here and then” and the “there and now.” This scrambling insists on the multiple ways the past is in the present. This palimpsestic view, Alexander (2006) says, is one which allows us “…to hold on to the historical specificity through which those various social relations are constituted at the same time that we examine the continuity and disjunctures of practice” (p. 191).

Reading palimpsestically, we see how colonial modes of relation enable international service learning. Several facets of colonial historical relations are evident in these encounters. As Kipp et al. (2021) demonstrate, volunteer tourism is feminized – women are four times more likely to participate than men. This embodied and feminized encounter can be read through the lens of what Heron (2007) calls the “helping imperative” – where the bourgeois subjectivity of white women is constituted through and reliant on the desire to help others. During colonization, white women found their mobility increased through the moral and educational imperatives (Heron, 2007). This mobility hinges on the ways in which racialized bodies are imagined as incompetent and in need of intervention and help which can only be found outside of their country (MacDonald, 2016; Briggs, 2003). This history does not need to be known or recognized in order to be evoked as bodies move through and take up space. This erasure of history works to maintain a white and neutral sense of self unconnected to colonial (both historical and ongoing) violence.

Certainly, the articulations of helping have shifted over time – colonial, moral, educational and democratic help are some examples of these shifting iterations that operate to justify the movement of bodies. These iterations are not discrete but rather have traffic between them. As Ahmed (2006) suggests in her discussion of queer phenomenology,

…bodies are shaped by colonialism, which makes the world “white” as a world that is inherited or already given. This is the familiar world, the world of whiteness, as a world we know implicitly. Colonialism makes the world “white,” which of course is a world “ready” for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface. (p. 111)
The world of international service learning is largely “white” and “ready” for volunteers. The tools to build schools, the capital to fund travel, and the time to volunteer are already available to white mostly middle-class young people. Conversely, the world is not “ready” for others to participate in the same sort of mobility because it does not match colonial imaginaries of need and ability. While the volunteers I interviewed may not speak to colonial histories or the colonial past of the U.S., yet, as Ahmed (2006) suggests, bodies remember these histories.

While this history is certainly important and central, the specificity of Nicaragua is crucial here to the palimpsestic surfacing of histories. Alexander (2006) suggests that the understanding of time as scrambled is not one which homogenizes, or suggests that everything is everywhere at all times, but rather one that attends to how practices of international service learning (in this case) “would have different effects that bear on the contextual arrangements in which they find themselves, which in turn shapes their capacity to travel, to overlap, and circulate within and among these [historical] formations” (p. 192).

Although colonial and imperial relations appear through the palimpsest of international service learning, the historical formations of solidarity and international collaboration central to Nicaraguan history also appear. Just because volunteers arrive not knowing these histories of solidarity, and rarely consciously align with them, this does not mean that these histories are not there. Accordingly, in the next section I ask what it might mean to read histories of solidarity as surfacing in encounters and specifically in host understandings of international service learning.

**Nicaragua’s Transnational History**

Nicaragua has a long history of international intervention. This long history of is one which hosts prioritized as something to teach volunteers about, but also one which I argue impacts how hosts conceived of international service learning programs and how they wanted to work with volunteers. As other scholars have demonstrated (Toms 2013; Reynolds 2014; O’Sullivan & Smaller 2019) host perceptions of successes, challenges and justifications of international service learning are often significantly different than those of sending institutions and students and are culturally and contextually specific.

In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front overthrew the Somoza dynasty who had led a dictatorship in Nicaragua since 1936. Following this victory, the Sandinistas had to continue to battle the U.S. supported Contras for control of Nicaragua leading up to and during the 1979 revolution and the ten-year Contra war (1979–1989), the Sandinista National Liberation Front, often called the Sandinistas, rallied international solidarity in order to bring attention to their cause. This came in the form of international recognition of the Sandinistas as a ruling party, of financial support, of arms and goods (often from the USSR or Cuba), and with international brigades that traveled to Nicaragua. These brigades were often understood as observers to the war (in order to prove the involvement of the United States) but also at times participated in fighting, and other tasks such as bike assemblage or medical help. This
history of the revolution and Contra war is still present and vivid for many Nicaraguans, most of whom can name family members who died in the struggle for independence. One of the participants told me “In one form or another we are [still] living the Sandinista revolution. We lost fathers, uncles, grandfathers who were revolutionaries or guards, or a mother. So, in many ways we are living it still.” This host demonstrates the ways in which the Sandinista revolution remained significant at the time of the research in the lives and experiences of hosts.

As recent scholars have pointed out, one of the gaps in analysis about this period of internationalism is the political acumen of the Sandinistas in their cultivation of transnational solidarity (Helm, 2014). The Sandinistas provided rules for brigades that were to come, generated propaganda for people to share and sent members of the Sandinistas to visit other countries (Helm, 2014). As Van Ommen (2016) points out, it is important to note that the themes of these campaigns [outside of Nicaragua] were not solely the result of the ‘creativity’ of the [local] Nicaragua committees. Rather, they were part of truly global campaigns that were undertaken in response to instructions from the Nicaraguan government. Solidarity campaigns in the Netherlands were usually an extension of the domestic policy of the new Sandinista government. (p. 11)

Thus, it is not only important to note the role of transnational organizing and international brigades, but to appreciate the role of the Sandinistas in identifying the possibilities created through this mobilization including, but not limited to, financial support, construction work, and spreading information abroad about the work of the Sandinistas.

The scope of international travel to Nicaragua during the revolution and Contra war is significant. Rerrie (2016) references the Canadian Action for Nicaragua group which included a significant commitment in Canada to mobilizing varied support, but also hundreds of people who traveled to work in coffee-picking brigades, to teach English and to observe elections. Helm (2014) estimates that 15,000 people from West Germany traveled in solidarity to Nicaragua during that time period. This is in addition to people who traveled from other countries including the United States, Russia, Cuba, and the Netherlands for example. This history indicates both the presence of foreigners for the purpose of solidarity and highlights the intentional frameworks for this travel as shaped by the Sandinistas.

Nicaraguans as Intentional Pedagogues

While Toms (2013) found that finances were a main motivator for host participation in international service learning in Costa Rica, I found that for Nicaraguans there was an articulated political investment in the pedagogy of international service learning. This is supported in O’Sullivan and Smaller’s (2019) important work documenting the decision of a host community in Nicaragua to stop participating in international service learning programs, and in Reynold’s work (2014) in Nicaragua where community participants talked about the need to centre community outcomes. In my research, both
Host families and facilitators emphasized that teaching and learning were the main reasons they were involved in international service learning programming - they spoke about wanting to teach young volunteers about the reality of Nicaragua, historical and contemporary Nicaraguan politics as well as international relations. For example, Marcia a host mother told me that she thought volunteers should,

know a lot about our history. But not a history, not that we are poor, that we are people who don’t have anything because some groups that come are so surprised, they thought that [the city] was a place where there wouldn’t be shops, where there would be nothing. So, to know about the reality of our country, that it is complicated. Yes, we are a poor country, and we have a difficult economic situation, but we are also rich. We have a lot, we have culture, we have a lot of values, because there are people who don’t think we have values [but] we are a country of people who fight. It is a history of incredible struggle. We are people who care much for others, we fight for others, not just for ourselves, we do a lot for the community.

Here, we can see Marcia highlighting both the assumptions that volunteer arrive with as well as the importance of a history of collective struggle. For many Nicaraguans that I spoke to, the often stated goal of international service learning to open volunteers’ minds was echoed in their desire to complicate representations of Nicaragua. At the same time, this shift to what some call “asset-based” approach (Sossou & Dubus, 2013), was politicized to not only be about the reality and strengths of Nicaraguans, but also the relationship between volunteers and that reality.

Rolando, a facilitator told me that because of the very present memorialization of the revolution across the country “many of them only want to know about the revolution, because they think that all of the history of Nicaragua and the United States is about the revolution. So, I tell them that the history begins many years before, 120 years before is about the history of Nicaragua and United States.” In both responses, we can see that hosts take on the role of teaching specific histories of Nicaragua. As Reynolds and Gasparini (2015) highlight from their experiences working in Nicaragua, it is central in ethical partnerships to acknowledge complicity, unlearn privilege and learn from below. These calls to ethical engagement are echoed in host calls for the specificity of learning about histories and relationality between their lives and histories and those of volunteers.

Central to the histories that hosts I spoke with wanted to highlight was a sense of collective struggle and an attention to relation between nations. For example, Carlita, a host mother told me that if they do not want to learn about Nicaraguan’s history and culture “they shouldn’t live here.” Similarly, Isabella, a facilitator told me that she thought volunteers should,

… know about cultural differences, the things such as personal space that will change while they are here, they should know about our government and that we used to have a dictator, that is important, they should also know the personality of Nicaragua. If it is a program with young people from the U.S., they should really do something very
focused on the relationship between the two countries. Then the young Canadians should know about mining. But they should know too, about Nicaragua broadly.

One of the facilitators told me that the volunteer work was not crucial. In fact, she suggested that local people could be paid to accomplish the work quicker and better, thereby confirming the critiques often levied against international volunteer programs that volunteer labour is useless (Vrasti, 2014). However, to the hosts and facilitators it was the learning that was important.

We can read in these excerpts that hosts are very engaged in the pedagogical framework of volunteer abroad programs and have clearly articulated learning outcomes. These learning outcomes centre volunteers learning about the politics and reality of Nicaragua as well as its history and relationship to the volunteer country of origin. For these hosts, it is integral that volunteers come with this orientation and willingness to learn and as a consequence, be transformed.

**Convivienca and “Living With” as Solidarity**

The hosts I interviewed talked about *conviviencia* – or living with – as central to transformation. By taking a closer look at how hosts talk about *conviviencia* we can see how histories of solidarity and international support are present in these narratives and thus in encounters, alongside with (and not unconnected to) colonial and imperial frames. Hosts saw international service learning as an opportunity for fostering international solidarity.

Nicaraguans often talked to me about the beauty of being able to share their lives and stories and wanting the volunteers to both live *like* them *alongside* of them. This call was a call for being in “profound relation” - Nicaraguans talked about wanting to be connected to volunteers in ways that were meaningful and had lasting impact. The relationships hosts talked about forming with volunteers were very important to them, and this relationship building, for them, was key to solidarity. To get to know families and to live in their struggle was a way for volunteers to act in solidarity. For one host mother I interviewed, she told me that when a past volunteers came back to Nicaragua to visit it was especially meaningful to her because it signified to her that “they had meant as much to her, as she had meant to them”. This importance placed on relationship building is echoed in other research in Nicaragua (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2015; Reynolds & Gasparini, 2015).

One of the facilitators I interviewed said that in her work with volunteers the most meaningful aspect was seeing the transformation of students. For her, this transformation emerged from living alongside of Nicaraguans – particularly in host families. She said,

I think that it is living alongside of others every day. *Conviviencia* because for example, in their work, in whatever work they end up doing, it is with people, they have to talk to them and get to know them and they need to know how these people think about different things
and then they go home to live with their families, and they talk with them and discuss with them. Being close to people and talking with them changes mentalities.

For this facilitator, the learning with and being close to people is crucial for changing ‘mentalities’ by which she meant the transformation of volunteers into politicized citizens attentive to relationality. This facilitator saw the close-ness with a host family as creating subjects with new frameworks that would be explicitly political and attentive to historical and contemporary relation. This facilitator saw this experience as shifting a mindset from individual savior complex (I see this problem and I can solve it) to solidarity thinking (I can work on this work others who are already leading this). Here again we see the emphasis on collectivity and transformation through being with others. This emphasis was present in the revolutionary tourism facilitated by the Sandinistas during the revolution, and in the interviews I conducted with hosts.

While facilitators had a perspective of what living alongside of meant in the larger view of programming and in the choices they were making in their work with volunteers, host families also echoed this need for closeness, seeing living with and transformation as tied together. One host mother, Gloria, told me,

…what I have seen that really makes an impression on the youth is that they can live alongside of people, and that they can do this in the same conditions as the family, they can share with the family and live alongside of them. That there isn’t just a Nicaraguan who cares for them, but that they would be aware of being their companion, of spending time with them, that they are human.

We can hear in this description that living alongside is differently articulated from that of volunteers. It is crucial for Gloria that volunteers live in the same conditions as Nicaraguans – an aspect of solidarity tourism that was highlighted during the revolution.

Living with and like Nicaraguans is not just to learn about their culture, but also to see them as specific humans who are companions rather than caregivers. For many of the host families that I spoke with, it was when volunteers lived in the same conditions as the family that they felt conviviencia. In a rural community where I interviewed a cooperative that hosted volunteers, members talked about being nervous the first time they hosted. They knew the conditions of their house were not “as good” as what volunteers would be used to. They came to appreciate seeing students live like and with them. Similarly, during the brigades hosted by the Sandinistas, they were very intentional about telling those traveling to be aware of the conditions that they would be living in, and that this would be central to their experience (Helm, 2014). Living alongside and in the same conditions was a way of expressing commonality, solidarity and to build relationships. At the same time, it was a way to break down some of the assumptions that volunteers may bring with them about Nicaraguan families, culture, context as well as some of the internalized and embedded assumptions of benevolence superiority in volunteer abroad (Andreotti, 2014; Jefferess, 2008).
Despite this hope for a transformation, many of the hosts and facilitators I spoke with were skeptical whether a transformation could happen without deeper understanding of politics informed through formal pedagogical components (such as reading or lectures or workshops). In other words, close-ness alone was not enough to create changed mentalities. A significant barrier identified by hosts was the lack of shared language. Many people talked about language barriers as the most significant challenge in their day-to-day life with volunteers. One facilitator said that while host families are important, she believes that close-ness is not sufficient on its own for political transformative learning. When I asked if she thought staying with a host family made a difference for learning, she said,

Really, I think that participants who want to live with families are looking for something more [than tourism]. Ideally, I think they need more though. I think they need a program that tells them about themes that explains about poverty, or about history, or education, that you can’t just come as a tourist and just live with a family. There is much less of a chance to learn about the things that are important to learn and that programs can teach.

For this facilitator, teaching the context to help students to understand their everyday experiences, the reality of life in Nicaragua, and the connection to broader themes is crucial to volunteer learning. It is clear that the folks that I talked to had thought deeply about the pedagogical approaches to volunteer abroad – as people with years of experience with a variety of program models, these perspectives should be seen as expert opinions.

The above interview excerpts demonstrate the close-ness facilitated through international service learning is understood within ideological frames of solidarity. Hosts see this close-ness as a “good tool” for political transformation, but as one that must be accompanied by other learning in order to facilitate learning that can result in solidarity. As evidenced in the previous section, many hosts take on this labour of teaching despite language barriers.

The collective struggle for liberation was a central history for many Nicaraguans that I spoke with, and it frames how they see their work. When I asked Michel, a facilitator, about why they participate in international service learning programming, they told me,

We need to know our past to know our future and the Sandinista revolution wasn’t liberation, it wasn’t education, it wasn’t about vacation. It was about brotherhood with people, with cities, with countries. Like people who come from countries that were in solidarity.

Michel explicitly references this history as a reason to participate in international service learning and ensuring that is meaningful.

**Conclusion**

International service learning encompasses many different types of programs and has provoked a significant body of literature. Critical literature in this field often challenges
the pedagogical outcomes for students as well as questions the benefits for those who are hosting. Of the critical literature, there is a significant gap in the consideration of hosts – those on the ground who live and work with volunteers. Much of this critical work has demonstrated the ways in which colonialism, capitalism and development are frameworks which enable a particular relation through international service learning – one which mobilizes young people in the Global North to spend time in the Global South with the intention of giving labour. In this article, I have suggested that while these frameworks are operating in international service learning programming, the experience of international solidarity in Nicaragua is another framework which must be considered.

During the revolution and Contra war, many people from other countries traveled to Nicaragua to participate in a variety of programs and brigades as an expression of solidarity with Nicaraguans fighting for freedom from the Somoza dictatorship and from imperialism. These trips can be understood as political strategy led by the Sandinistas. Reading this history as a framework of international service learning and drawing on the narratives of Nicaraguans working in international service learning, I suggest that this experience and history surfaces in encounters, and that this is significant for understanding international service learning experiences as they happen and can shift approaches to programming.

Many hosts told me that they hoped that their work in international service learning would impact the political life that volunteers lead in the future - whether that means supporting companies that are against the destructive mining that is happening in Nicaragua under the leadership of foreign companies or voting differently. Hosts saw this politicized outcome as one created through mutual learning, living reciprocally and learning about the history and context of Nicaragua. This learning that they wanted volunteers to take home was also often specific to the countries that they were from – for Canadians to learn about mining, those from the United States to learn about free trade agreements and their international policies, and for Germans to learn about the importance that having young people funded to volunteer for a full year has made to social service sector in Nicaragua. Thus, the pedagogical understanding of solidarity for hosts is specific to the lives of volunteers – it is not enough to buy fair trade, for example, but rather volunteers are called to have a specific understanding about the relationship between their country and Nicaragua.

Hosts envision Nicaraguans as companions and pedagogues rather than caregivers, and in this different mode of relationship, histories of solidarity and cooperation differently orient bodies to one another. Although histories of solidarity do not carry the same force as imperial and colonial frames in structuring the present, we can see how hosts call this history forth. Importantly, hosts complicate immersion as the tool for transformation, to the need for context and connection. This learning was generally framed as an exchange between volunteers and hosts, in which hosts learned, too. It is clear through these narratives of host attention to the learning of participants that it is not simply about cross-cultural learning (a goal often cited in international service learning programming), but rather a specific mode of learning that is rooted in Nicaragua’s specificity. Like the intentional programming of revolutionary tourism in the 70s and 80s, this
pedagogical orientation is to generate a different understanding of the context and reality of Nicaragua in relation to a volunteer’s home country.

It is through these articulations that I suggest we read palimpsestically – to not only observe the ways in which colonialism and capitalism facilitate mobility for volunteers to Nicaragua, but also how international solidarity emerges as an additional historical formation. What might it mean to look at these interview excerpts and consider how successful and important solidarity campaigns are also surfacing in international service learning? This reframing of encounters illuminates that hosts are bringing with them a different historical formation and set of practices that are designed to facilitate solidarity.

This analysis situates hosts and host context as central and important to understanding the pedagogy and experiences of international service learning. Experiential education programming should attend to these histories, cultures and expectations which emerge in encounters through host participation. Through attending to the specificity of the Nicaraguan experience, we see that hosts participate with a multiplicity of desires and that these are shaped by local historical formations as well as other histories. These historical formations situate Nicaraguans as intentional pedagogues in international service learning rather than simply a place to stay. The very present revolutionary history for Nicaraguans shapes how they encounter volunteers and how they see the potential outcomes of these programs. Scholarship on the multiplicity of international service learning programs should not only attend to the experiences and desires of hosts, but also to those historical formations which may not be as formidable as colonialism, but that nevertheless shape encounters on the ground. While much of the critical literature attends to the specific histories of student-volunteers (for example histories of colonialism or imperialism) and their desires, even those that include hosts have paid little attention to the historical formations shaping their experiences. This in-depth analysis is central to understanding motivations, expectations and to forming reciprocal partnerships.

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1. Here I provide an extremely brief history of Nicaragua with attention to international solidarity, for more in-depth history and analysis of Nicaragua see Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule by Michel Gobat (2005), Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua by Stephen Kinzer (1991), The History of Nicaragua by Clifford L. Staten (2010), Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua by Roger N. Lancaster (1992), Sandinos Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua by Margaret Randall (1994), After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua by Florence Babb (2001), The Country Under my Skin by Gioconda Belli (2000).

2. While it is important to note that recent political events may have impacted how Nicaraguans understand and feel about the Sandinista party, the memory of solidarity persists.

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