

**Agency, Vulnerability and Citizenship of Semiautonomous Youth in Nicaragua:
Voices of Former Street Children**



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Brief Summary of the Argument.....	7
Research Trajectory.....	9
Methodology.....	10
Literature Review.....	12
Chapter 1: A Home Away From Home.....	28
The Beginnings of Street Outreach.....	28
La Asociación Los Quinchos.....	29
To be or not to be a Quincho? – Unpacking Callejización.....	32
The Project of Reconstituting Family Ties.....	43
Chapter 2: From Criminals to Revolutionaries, From War Orphans to the Streets.....	49
El Hombrecito Daniel.....	50
An Army of Little Ants in a War by Other Means.....	55
Children’s Rights in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua.....	58
Chapter 3: Impotencia y Poder.....	65
The Bigger Picture.....	67
The Implications.....	69
Ideal Children as Adults in the Making.....	69
Agencia y Libertad.....	72
Impotencia y Vulnerabilidad.....	77
Concluding Remarks.....	82
Conclusion.....	84
Bibliography.....	87
Appendix.....	91

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Abstract

This investigation draws on two summers of fieldwork with La Asociación Los Quinchos, a Nicaraguan non-profit organization dedicated to the empowerment of street children. The aim of this paper is to elucidate the various ways in which Nicaraguan history and political economy have both shaped and strained the family, and contributed to the rising number of children living in the streets. This historical trajectory marks shifting ideologies of childhood situated during times of dictatorial rule, civil war and socialist reform, and finally neoliberal political economy.

The second focus of this paper is the liminal position street children occupy between sites of agency and self-sufficiency on the one hand and extreme social vulnerability on the other. While recent developments in child-centered anthropology have called upon researchers, states and social institutions to see children as competent social actors and not just cultural beings in-the-making, this paper seeks to take a step back from this criticism and recall the various ways in which youth continue to inhabit deeply troubling power imbalances predicated on age. Insofar as street children represent a marginal population in Nicaragua, how do their testimonies point to the continued experience of vulnerability? In place of a strict dichotomy between agency and vulnerability, this paper calls for a more nuanced, ambivalent and porous view of youth agency/vulnerability. The argument here is that experiences of vulnerability do not preclude the fact that children are still competent social actors in their own right.

Introduction

“Carmen is restless and will face up to anyone...The older girls have trouble tolerating her confrontational attitude, and often react by beating her. Carmen’s disposition is perpetually on the defensive. She was once the youngest daughter of her mother. But with each of her mother’s new pregnancies and the arrival of new siblings, she continually feels displaced, rejected and abandoned. This is a huge emotional blow for her. She feels unloved and unwanted within her family. As a result, Carmen is always on the defensive side, but it is her way of dealing with her problems. She presents herself as self-sufficient. She remains alone, and will defend herself because she is alone. In this way she is confrontational with everyone. A few months ago when the girls had vacation from school, her mother never came. During the most recent vacation her mother failed to show up again. She [Carmen] feels rejected once more. But the older girls do not understand this, and continue to call her names “horrible girl, I don’t like you.” These verbal aggressions affect Carmen and her behavior. She faces up to the world, including the social workers. No one can tell her no. She remains silent and if she can defend herself physically, she will do it.” (Quote from interview with social worker Doña Coco, July 30th, 2012)

The preceding quote is a social worker’s account of Carmen, a seven-year-old girl and a member of La Asociación Los Quinchos, a Nicaraguan non-profit organization dedicated to the empowerment, reeducation and reintegration of at-risk youth. The organization was founded in June of 1991 in response to the growing number of children living and working in the streets of Managua. During the first years of its inception the organization worked exclusively with homeless street children addicted to sniffing glue. Overtime Los Quinchos has expanded its target groups to include youth who experience similar encounters with exploitation, abject poverty, abandonment, and violence, but who have not yet fallen into patterns of drug addiction and homelessness. This expansion occurred in recognition of the necessity for prevention work and in an effort to better serve the growing and diversifying needs of marginal youth populations in urban Nicaragua.

It was in the context of volunteering for Los Quinchos that I gained my initial exposure to the global issue of street children and began to unpack its relation to the historical, sociopolitical and economic realities of Nicaragua. I was continually

compelled to reconsider my assumptions about childhood and came to realize how something seemingly universal could in fact be socially constructed, culturally dependent and highly class-specific. Inherent in my preconceived notion of childhood were tropes of defenselessness, passivity, innocence, and ignorance. These assumptions were quickly shattered upon my arrival on site. Since then I have been able to observe that a young age does not necessarily connote innocence or lack of awareness, nor does it inhibit the possibility of developing creative means of survival and self-sustenance in the absence of adult care.

These on-site observations echo a burgeoning, interdisciplinary scholarship on childhood that calls upon researchers, states and social institutions to consider children as competent social actors as opposed to mere receptacles of socialization or ‘humans in-the-making’. Particularly within the field of anthropology there has been a shift in the last three decades to address the heretofore absence of children within ethnographic scholarship and to challenge the normative value of a pure, natural, universal and depoliticized childhood. These theoretical developments run parallel to an emerging global rights discourse that defies need-based, welfare approaches to children and instead calls for the reinstatement of youth as active, participating first-class citizens.

Nevertheless, street children in Nicaragua continue to experience considerable social vulnerability, and it is precisely this perpetual pendulum swing between sites of agency/competence on the one hand, and extreme vulnerability/impotence on the other, that drives the current investigation. Hence, the research queries here are three fold: (1) How has Nicaraguan history and political economy shaped cultural and legal constructions of childhood, and what are the implications for street children today? (2)

How do we account for the paradoxical and liminal position of street children as they are situated within sites of agency on the one hand and extreme vulnerability on the other?

(3) And finally, how does this dialectical relationship between agency and vulnerability speak to the push within anthropology and international rights discourses to consider children as competent social actors?

The aim here is by no means to attempt to resolve the complicated dialectic between agency and vulnerability, nor is this investigation based on the presumption that this paradox is unique to the experience of children. Perhaps the coexistence of agency and vulnerability appears logical and readily apparent. However, this thesis seeks to go beyond merely showing that street children experience vulnerability and agency, and instead analyzes *how* children may or may not be vulnerable and under what terms, ideologies and circumstances. Teasing out these complexities and contradictions is important and relevant to the project of situating children, particularly marginalized children, in larger legal, social, political and economic structures, and certainly has a great bearing on children's rights discourses.

A Brief Summary of the Argument

As the subsequent chapters will illustrate in greater detail, I have been able to answer the proposed research questions in the following ways. To begin, the ripple effects of the removal of the Somoza dictatorship, the subsequent Sandinista-Contra war and the current reality of neoliberal political economy have considerably shaped family structures in Nicaragua. Likewise, the advent of international children's rights discourses have transformed legal approaches to youth advocacy, while simultaneously demonstrating continuity with Sandinista social activism. Hence, a larger historical,

socioeconomic framework is necessary in order to understand the destabilization of family structures within poor communities of Nicaragua. An intrafamilial model is insufficient for understanding the circumstances that propel children to live on the street; it risks pathologizing individual family units rather than taking into account larger social and historical contexts that both shape and strain family life.

Finally, with respect to the question of agency and vulnerability, my ethnographic research challenges the dichotomous view of children in anthropology as either fully competent social agents or defenseless, needy ‘humans in the making’. Rather, much in the same way adults experience interdependency and simultaneously negotiate powerlessness and competence, my argument here is that children inhabit a much more fluid and porous boundary between agency and vulnerability, and these states are not necessarily mutually exclusive nor are they polar opposites. The coexistence of agency and vulnerability pervades throughout the testimonies of the youth and adult staff of Los Quinchos. Children who defy tropes of neediness and defenseless nevertheless continue to speak of themselves in terms of “adults-in-the-making,” while the social workers of Los Quinchos communicate a rhetoric that combines motifs of protection with the call for youth participation and youth action. The aim here is to complicate the recent push in anthropology and global children’s rights discourse to consider children as competent social actors. Yes, children are relevant in their own right, and have as much to contribute to social orders as their adult counterparts. However, their position as competent social actors does not make them immune to social vulnerability and troubling modalities of power based on age.

Research Trajectory

After my initial visit to Nicaragua in the summer of 2010, I applied my experiential learning experience to the classroom and began a more theoretical and academic examination of street children. The newly emerging scholarship on street children was particularly important in helping me to reconsider notions of agency and autonomy among street youth, and the problems associated with their social categorization. In particular the works of Catherine Panter-Brick and Philip Kilbride highlight the difficulties in ascribing an overriding term (street child) to a diverse set of experiences. Likewise these works demonstrate how insufficient terminology lends itself to the exclusion of certain youth in the realms of social work and humanitarian aid. In addition to these issues, I was particularly excited to further explore self-sufficiency and survival mechanisms of children living independently from family support or kinship ties. With these foci of research in mind I returned once more to Nicaragua the following year.

Through participant observation and interviews, however, the new assumptions I carried with me from my theoretical research were once again shattered. With regard to the debate surrounding the categorization of street children, I discovered that Los Quinchos already employs varied terminology to describe the populations of children they serve and their diverse circumstances. As a result, I encountered much less anxiety and contentious debate surrounding issues of social categories than I had anticipated. Additionally, while the members of Los Quinchos often exhibited a keen awareness of the oppressive structures in which they lived, and were certainly called upon to make life decisions at tender ages (such as deciding to return to the streets, or seeking help through institutionalized care), I also began to recognize the need to step back from the tendency

to romanticize the autonomy and self-sufficiency of current and former street children. Indeed, much of my exaggerated focus on the agency of street youth could not fully account for the continued realities of exploitation, abuse, neglect, social exclusion and social marginality. The question then became, how do we envision street children as competent social actors that are not merely defenseless, passive victims, all while taking into account the fact that they continue to be targets of exploitation and are caught up in deeply troubling power imbalances?

Hence, as a result of these discoveries I shifted my attention to the tenuous position street children occupy between the extremes of dependency and agency. The more I heard expressions of impotence and yearnings for family, protection and care, the more I came to realize that even children who defy tropes of innocence and neediness nevertheless experience considerable social vulnerability and aspire to ideals of a ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’ childhood.

Methodology

This investigation draws on two summers of service learning and research I conducted with Los Quinchos in San Marcos, Nicaragua. During my first visit to Los Quinchos in 2010 I worked as a volunteer for two months. I returned the following year for yet another two-month period in order to continue volunteer work and formally begin my ethnographic research. As a volunteer intern I tutored the members of Los Quinchos in math and Spanish and participated in their various recreational activities. Additionally, I was particularly active in Los Quinchos’ literacy project. During my first year I

renovated the girls' library and in my second year I organized daily reading activities at the girls' project.

Throughout these two summers I worked with boys and girls ranging from five to seventeen years of age. I lived in a home stay in San Marcos. Both my host mother and host brother were employees of Los Quinchos. I divided my time between the various subprojects of Los Quinchos, many of which are situated outside of San Marcos.¹ I also shadowed the street outreach process in Managua where I was able to interact with current street children and members of their surrounding community. This outreach took place both within the marketplaces of Managua as well as the city's municipal garbage dump. The organization mandated that I travel to these various sites of street outreach with an employee of Los Quinchos. It was prohibited for volunteers to enter into these communities alone due to safety concerns.

During the summer of 2011 I conducted formal interviews with five adolescent boys and five adolescent girls, all of whom were members of Los Quinchos. I also interviewed four adult staff members of the organization, and I consider my numerous casual conversations with the members of Los Quinchos as informal interviews. All of the volunteer work and research was conducted in Spanish and I did not rely on translators. However, one of the co-directors of the organization helped to review and edit my interview questions, and gave suggestions on which children to include in the formal interviews. The adult staff of Los Quinchos was very helpful in coordinating these interview sessions and together we explained the research process to the adolescent participants before asking for their consent. Additionally, I replaced the research

¹ For more information on the organizational structure of Los Quinchos and its varying subprojects, please refer to the appendix.

participants' names with pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Hence, this paper is a culmination of library research, on-site participant observation, both formal and informal interviews, and draws on two summers of service learning with Los Quinchos.

While I arrived in Nicaragua already fluent in Spanish, I was unfamiliar with the Nicaraguan accent and had never before been exposed to the slang used by the children of the organization. Many of the young members of Los Quinchos also imbued their speech with Escalinche, a language spoken uniquely by street children in Nicaragua. The adult staff was very helpful in aiding me to decipher the children's speech and in crosschecking my understanding of the interviews.

Childhood within Anthropology

Although the past three decades have been marked by considerable shifts in the ways anthropologists examine childhood, children have been a part of anthropological enquiry for much of the 20th century. (Montgomery 2009: 18). Moreover, in Britain the motif of the child already played a significant role as early as the 19th century (Montgomery 2009:18). As Heather Montgomery explains in her introduction to anthropological perspectives on childhood, early British anthropologists used the paradigm of the child to theorize human development (2009: 18). In particular, Edward Tylor, John Lubbock and C. Staniland Wake employed the image of the child to describe humans in their primitive, 'savage' state. Indeed, before fieldwork, children were the familiar 'others' anthropologists used to theorize those 'primitive' peoples in far off lands (Montgomery 2008:20). However, insofar as the paradigm of the child provided the framework for racial prejudice at the time, Franz Boas' deep criticism of Western

eugenics challenged the infantilization of non-Western peoples (Montgomery 2009). He rejected evolutionary frameworks within anthropology that placed European civilization at the high-end of progress, and children/primitives at the low-end. Likewise it was his study of children that allowed him to successfully deconstruct the presumed interconnectivity between biology and race. In particular, his research on immigrant children in the U.S. and their counterparts in Europe demonstrated the ways in which physiology is greatly affected by the environment. Boas' contributions mark a shift in American anthropology in which the theoretical focus departs from race hierarchies and instead is concerned with the ways in which social environments dictate differences between people (Montgomery 2009).

As a result of Boas' significant contributions to American anthropology, one of his students Margaret Mead would be the first to conduct an ethnography entirely dedicated to understanding and elucidating the social subjectivities of children in her work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) (Montgomery 2009: 20). Mead's cultural comparison of rebellion and adolescent self-actualization in the United States and Samoa was groundbreaking in dispelling cultural myths concerning the natural and universal 'essence' of childhood. Her work successfully demonstrated how social environments affect the ways in which adolescence is experienced and conceptualized. Additionally, Mead substantially challenged Western psychological and medical explanations for adolescent rebelliousness. Furthermore, her comparative approach set the stage for future developments in the study of children by successfully interrogating myths of the presumed universality of childhood. Mead would later become part of the Culture and Personality school of anthropology, which in part was largely concerned with how

children become adults (Montgomery 2009: 23). Her peers included Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir. Together these scholars helped to put children in the fore of ethnographic research. Their approach was predicated upon the notion that children are blank slates, and their socialization can reveal a great deal about a given community and the formation of a cultural being. Moreover, their colleagues collaborated across various disciplines, sharing research with psychologists who were equally engaged in examining the link between culture and personality. For Cora Du Bois in particular, children were an avenue through which to piece together “value-attitude systems” and the “basic personality” of a culture (Montgomery 2009: 24).

Contemporary scholars have since then attacked these approaches to children, claiming that they fail to view youth as cultural beings in and of themselves, and only find them useful in so far as they can elucidate something about adult life. Nancy Scheper-Hughes summarizes this recent criticism well, using the term of the ‘missing child’ within anthropology (Scheper Hughes 1998: 14). Insofar as children have often appeared in important ethnographies throughout the century, including the works of Malinowski and those of his students, there has been a failure up until recently to study children in their own right and not just in terms of what they will become (Montgomery 2009; James 2007; Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007). Even when children come into play, the view that is applied to them remains largely adult-centric (Nancy Scheper-Hughes 1998). Nevertheless, the efforts of Mead and her colleagues were important in their aim to both draw on and deconstruct universalist approaches to developmental psychology. As Mead’s influence waned, scholars John Whiting and Robert LeVine continued her legacy of cross-cultural comparison of child-rearing in their *Six Cultures*

project, which further helped to elucidate the social constructedness of childhood (Montgomery 2009:29).

In Britain the incorporation of children within the purview of anthropological study exhibits a very different historical trajectory. Under the influence of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's theories of structural functionalism, many British anthropologists maintained a certain distance from psychological approaches to studying children and instead focused on age-sets and kinship systems (Montgomery 2009: 36). It was as a result of this distrust of psychological lenses that British anthropologists remained largely disengaged from American scholarship on children. The influence of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism in the 1960s only helped to further entrench this reluctance to appropriate psychological approaches to children (Montgomery 2009: 36). Indeed, despite early British scholarship on children, it was not until the 1970s that British scholars began to join their American counterparts in the study of children.

In light of this divergent historical trajectory, it is altogether quite striking that the cry for studying children in their own right came from British anthropologists and not American circles where there was already far more scholarship on children (Montgomery 2009: 37; James 2007: 263). In 1973 Charlotte Hardman brought forward her groundbreaking work that called upon anthropologists to consider childhood as a social, rather than a developmental, category (Montgomery 2009: 37). As Allison James explains in her work "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials," the contributions of British anthropologists in childhood studies were likely propelled by various dissenting voices across diverse academic fields in Europe (2007). As a result of British intervention, the 1970s mark a significant turn in the

way anthropologists view children. The new lens was grounded upon the social constructedness of childhood and involved “the twin research foci of childhood as a sociocultural space and children’s own perspectives as social actors” (James 2007: 263).

This theoretical shift both draws on and conflicts with developments in feminist theory at the time. As both James and Montgomery have carefully indicated in their reviews of the literature on childhood, feminist theory provides helpful tools for undergoing the project of deuniversalizing, denaturalizing, and politicizing social categories that have heretofore maintained a marginal status in academic enquiry. Drawing on Edwin Ardener’s concept of ‘muted voices,’ anthropologists have ardently undergone the process of bringing children and women to the fore of ethnographic study, thus challenging the adult, male-centric view of competent social actors (Montgomery 2009: 37). Yet at the same time, both James and Montgomery have indicated the various ways in which feminist approaches to anthropology have in fact further contributed to the muting of children’s voices. Indeed, in the effort to dislocate women from their roles as mothers, and establish a distinction between children and women, youth continue to be pushed on the wayside.

As a result of fairly recent developments in anthropological study of children, there is now a well-established child-centered anthropology that insists upon the social competence of children. Here the fact that the social category of childhood is impermanent and temporal does not detract from its importance. Contrary to the more conventional approaches to childhood in the first half of the 20th century, childhood has become relevant and appropriate in its own right, and not just in terms of what it can reveal about adult realities. Central to this burgeoning child-centered anthropology is the

aim to dispel the myth of innocent, passive and dependent ‘unfinished specimens’ (Montgomery 2007: 44). While the rhetoric of powerlessness continues to dominate popular conceptions of childhood, and consequently affects the ways in which children view themselves, anthropologists studying youth now insist upon challenging these tropes of incompleteness and incompetence. According to Alan Prout, Allison James, and several other anthropologists spear-heading the study of children, “children possess agency and they can influence their own lives, the lives of their peers, and that of the wider community around them” (Montgomery 2009: 45). Likewise, in her work Helen Schwartzman asserts, “children are critical, active and strategic agents involved in the construction and interpretation of their own world and lives in the present...They are both constrained by structure and agents acting and upon structures” (2001: 7).

The most notable manifestation of this new ideology has been the participation of children in anthropological research (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007; James 2007). Their participation has become tantamount to the investigative process and the project of integrating voices that have been ignored up until now. Specifically, Myra Bluebond-Langner’s research on children in American hospices incorporated the testimonies of children and effectively demonstrated the ways in which youth perform innocence in order to protect their parents and preserve the ideal of an innocent child, though they are in fact well aware of the terminality of their illnesses (Mongtomery 2009: 45).

Nevertheless, insofar as research participation has been one of the most tangible manifestations of the ideology of child-centered anthropology, Allison James is careful to point out issues of authenticity and representation. She approaches these issues with a sense of urgency, reminding her readers that without addressing the problematics

involved we risk compromising the field of childhood studies. She agrees that we must approach children as “knowing subjects,” and fight against the grain that has up until now silenced children’s voices within anthropological research and the public sphere (James 2007).

The many lessons learned from a long history of studying ‘others’ have a lot to teach us about how to go about characterizing representations of children as authentic and true. In her analysis James draws on Clifford Geertz’ notion of ethnographic ventriloquism, warning against the tendency to present ethnography as truth merely because it incorporates the direct quotes of children. James likewise recalls the contributions of James Clifford in this debate to remind scholars that quotations are staged and always situated in a larger text by the author. The vague distinctions between children’s voices and the ethnographer’s voice further add to the confusion surrounding authenticity, and a clearer distinction is needed. Likewise, if children’s voices are not readily accessed, James insists that we must interrogate how their voices are being reached, by whom and for what purposes, reminding anthropologists that all research is a process of representation. Moreover, James is wary of the grouping together of various voices under the category of child, which only further mutes voices in preventing the expression of a diverse set of experiences. Finally, with respect to children’s participation in the research process not just as informants but also as researchers themselves, James maintains a critical eye, claiming that research carried out by children “does not necessarily represent a more accurate or authentic account of children’s issues” (James 2007: 263). Authenticity is cannot be merely reduced to the equation “it takes one to know one” (James 2007: 263).

This historical framework provides a helpful backdrop for understanding the theoretical lens of child-centered anthropology. The following section will elucidate how these shifts in anthropological enquiry coincide with changing global children's rights discourses.

The Emergence of a Global Children's Rights Discourse

Several of the authors cited in the section above, including Allison James, Heather Montgomery, Helen Schwartzman and Jilly Krobin, examine issues pertaining to childhood studies in tandem with international children's rights discourse. In her volume *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes charts the emergence of global children's rights discourses largely based on neoliberal ideology and Western notions of personhood and the good life. She draws from Sharon Stephens' *The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (1995) in her illustration of the ways in which children affect and are affected by local and global political economies. Scheper-Hughes' charting of the advent of international children's rights discourse represents both agreement and conflict with anthropological study of children's lives.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified in 1990 in New York City at the World Summit for Children. It remains the most globally ratified documents of the United Nations (Scheper-Hughes 1998:7). The introduction of these universal documents was met with reservations on the part of anthropologists who were hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace a rights rhetoric that "could serve as a screen for the transfer of Western values and economic practices dependent on a neoliberal conception of independent and rights-bearing 'individuals' as opposed to ideas of social personhood

embedded in, and subordinate to, larger social units” (Scheper-Hughes 1998: 7). Indeed, non-Western and more “traditional” social formations present different understandings of rights and good society, cultural ideas that may not find compatibility with “advanced capitalism in the global economy” (Scheper-Hughes 1998:7). As Scheper-Hughes argues, global capitalism needs independent and mobile workers who are not tied down to place and kinship obligations.

In certain ways these observations resonate with Lauren Leve’s work “‘Failed Development’ and Rural Revolution in Nepal: Rethinking Subaltern Consciousness and Women’s Empowerment” (2007). Situated in rural Nepal, Leve’s ethnography examines women’s involvement in Maoist insurrection. Her work reveals how local understandings of agency and women’s empowerment contrast with Freiren and neoliberal models of development, where notions of duty, obligation and communal ties are wrapped up in how many Nepalese women envision agency and freedom. These debates concerning individualism and duty are important to development and rights discourses, and anthropologists have been concerned with tracking Eurocentric hegemony in these debates.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ analysis is helpful in terms of maintaining a critical eye on global rights discourses that purport to empower marginalized populations. She is careful to point out the ways in which human rights rhetoric acts as a disciplining force of so-called ‘backward’ countries, dictating and working alongside economic sanctions. The moral rhetoric opposing child labor for example fails to take into account a contradiction between the mandates of global rights discourse and the demands of a competitive global economy (Scheper-Hughes 1998:8). And yet, although it is always important to take note

of the cultural particularity of seemingly universal categories (such as child, adult, woman and mother), Scheper-Hughes is also careful to remember that “most local societies are at least as much influenced today by what goes on outside their borders as within them” (Scheper-Hughes 1998: 10). Insofar as a globalized rights discourse is in question here, it is necessary to also take into account the growing permeability of borders and the limits in attaching cultural understanding to fixed and compartmentalized notions of space. (Comaroff and Comaroff: 2000; Ferguson and Gupta: 1992; Appadurai: 1996).

Understanding the emergence of a rights discourse on children must also be understood in terms of modern constructions of childhood and their relation to capitalism. In her work Scheper-Hughes describes how children have come to be seen as consumers rather than agents of the labor force and are relegated to the sphere of family and welfare, claiming that “modern children may have gained their childhoods but have lost considerable power and status” (Scheper-Hughes 1998:11). These notions of being in need, dependent and innocent emerge with modernity, but at the same history shows how these constructions apply most to the social elite and later bourgeois classes of society (Zelizer 2011). The children of the proletariat and the poor continue to endure exploitation for their labor, and this fact enters into tension and conflict with the implementation of child labor laws in the United States and Europe (Zelizer 2011).

There seems to be ambivalence in Scheper-Hughes’ work. On the one hand she illustrates modernity’s notion of children as welfare recipients. On the other hand, she explores how “neoliberal individualism and its accompanying rights discourse grant premature autonomy to very young children” (Scheper-Hughes 1998:13). She explains

the problematic of rights discourses in transforming children into socially competent adult actors. She gives examples of mounting cases involving young children prosecuted as adults in response to violent murders in the United States and the United Kingdom. In this sense, child-centered discourses that purport to empower are in fact adult-centric, where children are viewed as social actors in purely ‘adult’ terms. The divide between adult and child has therefore not been entirely restructured nor challenged, but rather reinforced.

That being said, as Scheper-Hughes describes the “missing child” in anthropological writing, she stresses the need to include children in the research process, a move that is one of the main tenets of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child. Her work also contrasts with Guadalupe Salazar’s (2009) examination of street youth in Chile. Both contextualize their work in terms of neoliberal policy and structural violence. However, the specific history of Chile where neoliberal reform was coupled with a violent, authoritarian police-state reveals a different historical trajectory. Here the state absolved itself of responsibility towards its citizens (in its neoliberal spirit), and basic needs had to be met independently of government aid, subsidies or public access to education or health care (Salazar 2009:173). This created a transfer from rights discourse to notions of charity. The question remains, therefore, whether or not neoliberal policy negates or accompanies notions of individualistic citizenship rights.

The Social Categorization of Street Children

Most of the literature in this section is concerned with teasing out the complexities of the term ‘street child,’ its particular meanings in a specific social context,

and the difficulty in assigning an overarching social category to a diverse group of marginalized youth. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1998) reveals important domains of contestation and ambiguity. She shows how different cultural understandings of childhood affect the use of the term 'street child.' Indeed, in Brazil the term is largely employed by the middle-class living in the modernized city when referring to impoverished youth occupying the streets, and is indicative of a larger, societal anxiety surrounding the proper place of poor and what is often perceived as 'delinquent' youth. Communities living within the favelas never use the term *menino de rua*, or street child, though bourgeois society uses this term to describe the youth living there.

Given these differences in articulating identity, it is important to take into account what local and transnational forces are involved in the construction of the social category of street children, why certain vocabularies gain dominance over others in spheres of development, and the positions of the social actors involved in the construction and use of these different terminologies.

In her work "Street Children, Human Rights, and Public Health: A Critique and Future Directions" Catherine Panter-Brick elucidates the many problems associated with the term street child and argues for compelling ways to rethink common conceptions of this social category. She cites the following official definition adopted by the United Nations in order to illustrate the dominant vocabulary that has been used to describe street children:

"any boy or girl who has not reached adulthood for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, directed and supervised by responsible adults" (Panter-Brick 149).

This official definition relies upon a specific conception of what is considered to be a 'normal' childhood. It fails to recognize that those who become regularly categorized as street children in fact represent an extremely diverse set of experiences and living conditions, all of which are part of realities that may challenge the ways in which development organizations and legislation conceptualize an ideal childhood. For example, an assumption that has become normalized and naturalized in Western rights discourses is the idea that protection and provision flow from the adult to the child. Drawing on a variety of ethnographies conducted in different regions of the world, Panter-Brick reveals how in many situations of significant poverty it has become common and expected for children to become dominant caretakers in their families. The same is true in Scheper-Hughes' analysis, where household money in the favelas often flows from child to parent (Scheper-Hughes 1998:363).

Hence, notions such as home, family, protection and responsible adulthood vary tremendously across cultures. As Panter-Brick argues, homelessness is imagined in different ways and not always conceptualized as lack of abode. In Spanish it is described as *desamparado* (defenseless, unprotected), in Japanese the term used is *furosha* (floating) and in Nepal the translation is *kahte*, or rag-picker (Panter-Brick 2002:150). In the favelas of Recife, "home, especially for male favela kids, is not so much a place to eat and sleep as an emotional space, the place where one comes from and to which one returns, at least periodically...In psychological terms, home for many of these kids is an important 'transitional object' (like a pacifier on a string) and not a permanent and dependable form of security" (Scheper-Hughes 1998:358;359). In this instance, home and

homelessness are fluid concepts that are precariously situated in the lives of street youth, carrying both symbolic and material meaning.

Other definitions have tried to include variation so as to not entirely generalize the experiences of youth in this social category. UNICEF has established the distinction of children “of the street” and children “on the street” to differentiate “street-based from home-based street children” (Panter-Brick 150). Nevertheless, these distinctions lack precision in that many children defy these sub-categories, finding refuge both in the streets and at home or even seeking shelter in institutions like orphanages.

A second criticism of the term is that it places excessive emphasis on the street itself and is far too unidimensional (Panter-Brick 151). While the street may be the main way development organizations attempt to understand the lives of street children, the reality is that their identities extend beyond this urban environment and cannot be characterized solely by it. Panter-Brick relies upon Hecht’s ethnography of street children in Brazil to support this last claim. In his work, Hecht discovers that many youth who lead what appear to be very similar lives on the street may not all necessarily identify as street children. They identify themselves less in terms of the street and more in terms of their relation to their family and the society at large. In the context in which Hecht was working, a child was not considered by his peers to be a street child unless he/she had lost all contact with his/her mother. Thus working or living permanently on the streets are not the only, let alone necessary conditions in order to identify as a ‘street child.’

The stakes are high in developing a classification for disadvantaged youth in urban environments. Indeed, the discourse on street children has a direct impact on public policy and development programs. The limitations of the social category of street

children defined by Inter-NGO programs lead to the exclusion of similarly marginalized youth who do not take to the streets. This includes children both in urban and rural environments as well as young girls who are more likely to find themselves confined to domestic settings. Indeed, as the work of Scanlon et al on street children in Latin America reveals, “girls form just 10-15% of street children, probably because of alternative strategies open to them such as mothering younger siblings, domestic employment, and prostitution” (Scanlon 1998:1592). Similarly, Scheper-Hughes reveals in her work on street children in Brazil that “from the age of seven or eight years, favela girls are assigned child tending and other domestic tasks that keep them close to home” (Scheper-Hughes 1998:359). Thus hunger and poverty as experienced by children living at home are equally pertinent but fail to be integrated into the label of street children.

This discussion recalls Deborah Mindry’s work entitled “Nongovernmental Organizations, ‘Grassroots,’ and the Politics of Virtue” (2001). Although she focuses on the issue of women’s empowerment in the developing world as opposed to street children, the implications of Mindry’s research are directly related. Indeed, she describes how foreign donors decide who is virtuous and worthy of aid. It is a crucial debate in development work where exclusion remains a prevalent problem.

In tandem with the anthropology of the childhood, the works of Panter-Brick and Kilbride insist upon the recognition of street children as active agents, as opposed to vulnerable and passive victims. Kilbride’s research in particular argues that street children are important actors in both national and global economies and urges readers to consider street children as members of the working poor. His ethnography stresses that

street children exhibit innovation and cunningness in the art of survival and have a keen awareness of the power structures in which they operate.

In addition to underscoring the autonomy and agency of street children, Panter-Brick argues for a language based on *rights* as opposed to *needs*. Here the advocacy of children is based on the state's responsibilities to uphold their rights rather than meeting their needs through charity. The United Nations Convention on the Child established policies that were later adopted by several countries, demanding the full recognition of citizenship rights of children. Here youth are no longer seen as mere dependents of their adult counterparts but as first-class citizens entitled to state protection of their inalienable rights.

The UN Convention on the Child also insists upon fostering child participation, in addition to protection and provision. Thus, it demands that “adults recognize that children have agency and manifest social competency (shaping their lives for themselves)” (Panter-Brick 156). Like Kilbride, Panter-Brick also places particular emphasis on children's “remarkable initiative and ingenuity in coping with difficult circumstances,” all of which are realities that defy the image of street children as helpless victims (156). This shift of emphasis on the rights discourse of children acts as an important driving force in research endeavors as well as development programs to include the voices and active participation of the very children they aim to empower. This relationship is demonstrated well in Kilbride's ethnography where children were hired as translators and actively participated in the research process.

Summary of Succeeding Chapters

Chapter 1 will speak about the Quinchos community and the circumstances of ‘streetification’ that compel children to seek institutionalized care. This will also involve highlighting the ways in which Los Quinchos collaborates with the family. Chapter 2 will situate the circumstances of Quinchos members within a larger historical and political framework, charting the effects of the Somoza dictatorship, the Sandinista war and neoliberal economy on the Nicaraguan family, and the implications this has for street children today. Finally, Chapter 3 will delve into the ethnographic material to chart the liminal state of adolescent street children as they are positioned between sites of agency and vulnerability.

Chapter 1: A Home Away from Home

The Beginnings of Street Outreach

While Los Quinchos' staff members are all Nicaraguan, its co-founder Zelinda Roccia is of Italian origin. Zelinda visited Nicaragua several times throughout the 1980s, but in 1986 she lived an experience that she claims, "sent a huge blow to my head, my heart and my soul." It was during this visit to Nicaragua that Zelinda first encountered street children in Managua. As she was passing by the Intercontinental, a high-class hotel in Managua and a popular site for tourists, she encountered three children begging on the street. It was a rainy day and she told the young children to find shelter in their home. One girl explained to Zelinda that they had no home and that they were living on the streets. She proceeded to show Zelinda the makeshift shelter they had made of a large tire.

At this time Zelinda was already familiar with the presence of street youth in Guatemala and Mexico, but she had never before come across street children in Sandinista Nicaragua. War, poverty, strained families and orphans were all too common realities throughout the country during this time period. However, the presence of homeless and abandoned children living on the streets was an altogether new phenomenon in Nicaragua, especially at a time when the nascent socialist government was dedicating much of its energies to the rights, needs and participation of youth.

As a result of this encounter Zelinda left Nicaragua with the determination to return and dedicate her life path to working with street children. She arranged for an early retirement from her career as a secondary school teacher in Italy and rented out her house. With little knowledge of how to explain her decision to her mother, her loved ones

and her partner at the time, Zelinda returned to Nicaragua in 1991, arriving, she says, “with a suitcase packed more with dreams than realities.”

The main site where street children aggregated was, and continues to be, El Mercado Oriental in Managua and it was there that Zelinda began her outreach. At its onset, the process of integrating herself into the community of street children was long and arduous. Zelinda began visiting the market at nighttime when all of the stands were closed and the children were roaming the streets. These children lived both day and night in the market place, and resorted to sniffing industrial shoe glue in order to subdue hunger pains and fear. This hallucinogenic drug is cheap, abundant and readily available. Ironically, it is most often sold in recycled Gerber baby food jars. Although it is produced in the United States and sold in Nicaragua, its consumption is illegal in both countries.

Due to their life experiences the children of the streets were distrustful and wary of adults. The market sellers had little respect for them and most of Nicaraguan society equated street children with vagrants and delinquents. Moreover, violent relationships with adult family members were the primary reason many of these children had established life in the streets in the first place, where they were forced to resort to stealing, petty crime and sniffing glue in order to survive. As a result, Zelinda was far from welcome during her initial visits. Children would gather to throw stones in her direction, but she would nevertheless insist on her right to sit on the curb beside them and smoke her cigarette in peace, claiming that she had the same right as the prostitutes seated there to find a resting spot on the curbside. In recounting this story to me, Zelinda is careful to say that one should not be fooled by the children’s act of throwing stones. “Children of the streets are deeply sensitive: not one single stone actually hit me, and

they made sure of that” (Interview July 30th, 2012). When several nights had gone by with the children throwing stones, she came with her own bag of rocks and threatened to throw them back at the children if they tried their trick again. After this they let her be and grew accustomed to her daily presence. Zelinda always came alone and never brought a friend to protect her. She was not afraid of the children, and because of this they tolerated her. However, from the onset many proclaimed that they would not tell their personal histories to her; they remained wary of her presence and what she wanted from them. They did not want her pity nor were they in any rush to speak about their lives.

In the beginning Zelinda would recount classic tales of Snow White, Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel, or otherwise invent her own. These were doubtless stories that many of the children could relate to, though for most it was the first time they had ever heard them. Never mind that this was also one of the rare moments for any of these children that an adult had ever wanted to “lose time with them” (Interview July 30th, 2012). Even youth as old as 14 or 15 years old would eagerly gather around to listen. Despite their unsupervised life on the streets, they still yearned for these moments of complicity and tenderness with an adult.

Nevertheless, for Zelinda the work of integrating herself within the community remained difficult. The children continued to see Zelinda as an outsider and a gringa, despite her Italian nationality. This was a particularly significant obstacle given that most of these children identified with the Sandinista cause, and like many Nicaraguans, were disillusioned by U.S. involvement in the Contra war. Her adult status also remained an obstacle. If she raised her hand to embrace a child, his immediate reflex was to recoil in

an innate, bodily anticipation of a blow. It was not until the sudden occurrence of a police raid that Zelinda was able to establish a relationship of trust. In an abrupt and unanticipated roundup, the police arrived and started beating the children with their batons and threatening them at gun point. In a burst of rage Zelinda screamed at the police officers, barely realizing that she was speaking in Italian and not Spanish. The disgruntled police officers left and Zelinda was immediately enveloped in a crowd of hugs and kisses. Up until this moment no adult had stood up for these children; no one had ever attempted to interrupt the violence they suffered at the hands of other adults. From that point forward, Zelinda continued her visits to the market, bringing food and water to the children, and her project has grown to what it is today.

La Asociación Los Quinchos

The children seeking refuge and protection within Los Quinchos represent a variety of backgrounds and experiences. As a result the organization has broadened and diversified the terms used to describe its target populations, drawing on the very same vocabulary that Catherine Panter-Brick spells out in her work (2002). To begin, there are those children who live both day and night in the streets and have little to no contact with their family, otherwise known as children *of the streets* (*niños de la calle*). In Nicaragua children living permanently on the streets resort to sniffing industrial shoe glue. Los Quinchos' second target population consists of children *in the streets*, or those who work and spend a considerable amount of unsupervised time on the streets, but regularly return to a home at night. They work in the marketplaces and busy intersections selling various goods and foodstuffs. These youth are at-risk for becoming children *of the streets*, but

have yet to experience drug addiction or homelessness. Although these populations encounter distinct challenges, they share experiences of domestic violence, abuse, economic deprivation, exploitation and hunger.

In addition to these two target groups, Los Quinchos also serves children who remain within the domestic sphere but likewise encounter challenges similar to those of their counterparts on the streets. For example, one of Los Quinchos' most notable expansions was the inclusion of girls in 1999. Indeed, in Nicaragua (and much of Latin America) the majority of children living both day and night in the streets and resorting to glue for survival are boys; their female counterparts most often remain confined to the home or regularly return to a home at night. Hence Los Quinchos has broadened its work in an effort to preemptively tackle glue addiction but to also serve the varying needs of children coming from diverse, albeit deeply interrelated, circumstances. Where before Los Quinchos served uniquely children *of* the streets struggling with drug addiction, today only 20% of the current Quincho community was formerly addicted to glue.

In light of these diverse needs and circumstances, Los Quinchos staff employs vocabulary that is even more encompassing than the distinctions brought forward in Panter-Brick's article. This vocabulary includes *niños providendo de situaciones de calle* (children coming from 'situations of the street') or *niños en proceso de callejización* (children undergoing the process of 'streetification'). Thus, lack of adult supervision and exposure to drug addiction, gang violence, drug trafficking, sex work, domestic violence and so forth all represent possible 'situations of the street,' regardless of whether or not the child in question ever lived outside the home. Likewise, the term street is varied in its

applications, and can signify the marketplace, the garbage dump, or the busy intersections of Managua.

The adult staff of Los Quinchos also represents a variety of diverse backgrounds. The majority of employees were either members of the Sandinista military or participated in Sandinista social work and youth advocacy. Additionally, thirty percent of staff was former members of Los Quinchos. This younger generation of employees did not directly experience the Contra war, but their lives on the streets grant them an intimate understanding of the multitudinous subjectivities of street children. Whether as a result of war, or post-war hardship, many staff members share similar experiences of child labor, displacement and torn families.

The philosophy underpinning the work of Los Quinchos is multi-faceted in nature and seeks to accomplish the following goals: (1) modify the oppressive living conditions of at-risk, urban youth, (2) defend and promote the rights of children and adolescents (3) reintegrate street youth as fully-participating and dignified members of society (Los Quinchos Official Website). The organization places particular emphasis on the right to participation and decision-making in an effort to establish healthy development, improve self-esteem and build leadership potential (Los Quinchos Official Website). Additionally, Los Quinchos' vision strives for a society that recognizes and respects children as rights-bearing human beings. In the words of the mission itself, "The goal is to reinsert children in their own society offering them access to human rights they have been denied up to now: the right to a peaceful childhood and the knowledge of their rights and duties as future citizens" (Los Quinchos Official Website). These tenets reflect the ideology of the UNCRC and its three main principles of protection, provision and participation. In this

way, Los Quinchos explicitly draws on both the UNCRC and Nicaragua's Code of Childhood and Adolescence. These legal institutions call upon governments, social workers, and researchers to include children's voices in the public sphere, and encourage their participation in their own empowerment. Here child authorship is highly valorized.

In addition to providing food, shelter, and access to public education, Los Quinchos places significant attention and value on its recreational activities, which include arts and crafts, pottery, painting, theatre, dance, music and sports. Many of these cultural activities incorporate Nicaraguan folkloric traditions, heritage and history, and therefore function as part of the organization's goal to reintegrate marginalized youth within the greater fabric of Nicaraguan society. Additionally, the recreational activities bear special importance to the organization in that they are designed as integral parts of the healing process. According to the vision of Los Quinchos, these activities, coupled with psychotherapy and public schooling, function in an effort to combat low self-esteem and instill values of self-love, respect and personal growth. That being said, some of the artistic activities of Los Quinchos also extend to vocational training in carpentry and various artisan crafts. Throughout these trainings Quinchos members have learned how to make clay pots and ornaments, jewelry, hand-sewn dolls, and hammocks, thus attaining valuable skills for the job market. In this same vein, Los Quinchos has provided training in plumbing, car mechanics and electrical engineering in an effort to help develop the productive ability of its members and prepare them for adulthood.

Los Quinchos' mission statement includes a comprehensive list of values that epitomizes its work. According to this list, the pillars on which the organization stands

are solidarity, respect, democracy, love, equality (transparency and equity), tolerance (social sensitivity) and comradeship.

The main office of the organization is located in San Marcos, a small rural town situated forty minutes south of Managua. However, it is comprised of a variety of subprojects that are dispersed throughout the region. La Casa Filtro and La Chureca are part of the street outreach process in Managua, whereas La Finca and Las Yahoskas are residential projects for the young boys and girls of Los Quinchos in San Marcos. Casa Lago in Granada serves as a residential space for the teenage boys, and La Osteria in San Marcos serves as a community center, library, cyber café and restaurant that provide revenue for the organization.²

To be or not to be a Quincho? Unpacking 'Callejización'

“I will tell you the story of Manuel, one the first Quinchos members...He passed away. The street killed him. The young boy hung himself. He lived in León. Remember this story dates back 20 years, from when I first arrived to Nicaragua... Manuel’s mother was always with a different man and Manuel had many brothers and sisters. Most of his siblings had already been forced out of the house. He was the smallest and was still living with her. One day a man accompanied her home...This man was very arrogant and violent. He saw Manuel and said “No lo quiero ver nunca más aquí!” (I don’t want to see him ever again here!) Manuel was very small. He was five or six years old. His mother took him to his grandmother’s house in the countryside. But he escaped into the street and ran back to his home like a dog, knocking on the door, crying, begging his mother to take him in. His mother saw him and told him, “Tu padrastro te rechaza, tienes que irte” (Your stepfather has rejected you, you must leave). He hid himself behind the house, crying. He was a young boy, he did not know what to do, how to beg, where to go, nothing. And his mother threw him out. She threw him out on the second day as well. And on the third day she took him to the bus station and said: “Ve te! No te quiero ver nunca más! Nunca más me vas a encontrar en la calle!” (Go! I do not want to see you ever again! You will never see me again in the street!) She forced him on a bus, and he came to Managua...I knew him well. He was very smart. He did not have mental problems, he was a normal kid. If anything he was one step beyond normal children. Because I have always said that children of the streets have something more than normal children. How can he go back to a mom who threw him on the street? He put a cross on his mother. Never mind his stepfather. It was his mother who had given birth to him, who made him, but she had no pity for him...This is why I tell you that for children

² For a more detailed description of these projects, please refer to the appendix.

of the streets, their home is completely lost. Either their family has rejected them, or they have rejected their family.” (Interview with Zelinda, July 30th 2012)

This narrative provides an example of the various circumstances that bring Nicaraguan children to the streets of Managua. While Manuel’s story illustrates the family’s rejection of the child, it is also often the case that children opt for a life on the streets in an effort to escape abusive homes. Through recourse to ethnographic vignettes, the following section illustrates and underscores the diverse circumstances that compel children to seek refuge with Los Quinchos.

Raúl, a current member of Los Quinchos who spent a considerable amount of time on the streets, was left abandoned in a precipice as an infant. His adoptive kin was abusive and for this reason he chose a life on the streets. William was likewise abandoned and can barely recall his own mother. His grandmother first brought him to Managua from Bluefields, but she has since then passed away. Like Raúl, William also spent a substantial amount of time alone on the streets. Additionally, some Quinchos members have participated in youth gangs and drug trafficking: Adolfo escaped from his abusive father and joined a youth gang in Managua. He is now a staff member of the organization and assists in the street outreach process. Langston also initiated himself into drug trafficking. He worked as a mulero in an effort to financially support his family. He is thirteen now and continues to filter in and out of the care of Los Quinchos, fluctuating from his trafficking work in the streets to residing in San Marcos. He has never sniffed glue, nor has he been homeless.

In addition to the preceding narratives, most Quinchos members have performed some sort of wage-labor, either in the form of begging or manual work including construction, selling water at the market place, hauling goods, collecting and selling

recyclable material in the garbage dump, and so forth. Among the five adolescent boys I interviewed, only two were formerly children *of* the streets. Another two worked and/or begged in the streets but regularly returned to a home at night. The fifth male research participant claims that he has never lived on the streets and that he does not identify with the term ‘street child.’ He came to the organization because his alcoholic father tried to kill his mother. His older sister Meche also resides at Los Quinchos and she is among the five girls I interviewed. The latter case demonstrates an example of *situación de calle*, or situation of the street.

It is important to point out here that the overriding narratives are slightly different for the female members of Los Quinchos. As co-director Carlos Vidal explains it, “in Nicaragua, girls are silent martyrs.” Their suffering most often takes place in the home and only rarely do they opt for a permanent life on the streets. Unlike their male counterparts, girls do not encounter a network or community of female friends with which to seek protection when they are in the streets. As a result they are far more vulnerable to assault. Among the girls currently residing at Los Quinchos, 10% formerly lived both day and night on the streets (Interview with Doña Coco, July 29th 2012). As a result very few of the girls who come to Los Quinchos necessitate drug rehabilitation. These statistics corroborate the general demographics I witnessed on the street: over the past two years I have interacted with roughly twenty children of the streets. Of that number, only four were girls.

According to my interviews with several of the social workers, 99% of the girls currently living at Los Quinchos have experienced some form of sexual abuse, most often perpetrated by a family member. Among the total male population of Los Quinchos,

around half have experienced some form of sexual abuse. That being said, nearly all boys living both day and night on the streets have suffered some form of sexual violence as well. Indeed, among children *of the streets* the rate of sexual abuse is shared equally by both genders.

Like their male counterparts, the majority of girls living at Los Quinchos have assisted in supplying money and/or labor to the household, either through begging or selling in the marketplaces of Managua. Additionally, several female Quinchos members have participated in sex work, or were prostituted by their parents. The father of Magdalena, Amelia and Rosa, three sisters currently residing at Los Quinchos, used his daughters as vessels for trafficking drugs. He inserted drugs into their vaginas and forced them to carry out the transaction on their own. They were subsequently raped by the men who purchased the drugs.

Among the five adolescent girls I interviewed, only Josefina ever admitted to having spent a considerable amount on the streets. However, my interview with social worker Doña Coco confirmed that Patricia also spent her days unsupervised in the streets, and even performed sexual labor before coming to Los Quinchos. Magdalena and Amelia were among the girls I interviewed, and while they spoke about the work they did selling tomatoes in the marketplace, they never made mention of drug trafficking. Meche claimed that she has never lived nor worked in the streets, though she did concede that she never went to school and would idle in the streets during the daytime. She is the older sister of Mauricio, the fifth male adolescent I interviewed.

When I questioned the adolescents why there are children living in the streets of Nicaragua, their responses were varied. Patricia explained that their mothers did not have

love for their children, or perhaps they did have love, but are unable to share it. She also reasoned that some mothers have *vicios* ('vices') that interest them more than their own children, such as drinking. Amelia, on the other hand, reasoned that some women cannot cope with the task of taking care of their families either because they do not have sufficient funds or because their children are the product of rape. Likewise, Magdalena and Josefina both attributed the rise of street children to unemployment and poverty. On the other hand, Raúl believed that children turned to the streets because their parents are irresponsible and incapable of fulfilling their familial duties. Meanwhile, Jaime voiced that there were children on the streets because of the allure of certain vices, such as drinking, smoking, sniffing glue, and petty crime. Mauricio also offered the same explanation, saying that those who pick up these vices do so because they are deprived of love and affection. While these explanations are insightful in the way they point to challenges facing impoverished families of Nicaragua, the following vignette seeks to complicate these discourses and further highlight the diversity of experiences that bring children and their families to Los Quinchos:

It has been nearly a year since my last visit to La Chureca, Managua's municipal garbage dump, and today marks my return. I traveled with Benjamin early in the morning from San Marcos, taking one of the yellow school buses into the city. Benjamin always took me along this route because the fare was cheaper, and he liked to show me the landscapes, coffee farms and old haciendas along the road. He has lived in San Marcos most of his life. When he was three years old his family fled from Managua to San Marcos following the massive earthquake in 1972. He had also been active in the Sandinista military during the Contra war and as we walked to the bus stop in San Marcos everyone called him by his various nicknames, including his war name "El Chocolate."

We eventually arrived in the Managua neighborhood of Acahualinca, and proceeded to walk to the main entrance of the garbage dump. Although it is rainy season, we were fortunate enough that it had not yet rained and could therefore avoid having to walk through knee-deep mud. The closer we drew to the dump, the more scattered and varied the debris around us became: old tires, broken dolls and toys, used hospital needles, gloves and facemasks. The smell of rot and burning plastic grew in intensity as we approached the dump. I spotted young boys and men with large sacks of waste on their backs hitching rides off the edge of garbage trucks. Meanwhile members of the community waved and greeted Berman as we passed by. In the distance I could see the silhouettes of people gathering recyclable material at the top of the

mounds of waste, as an oppressive crowd of black vultures circled in the sky above us. Berman and I walked past the homes of La Chureca community. A former Quincho member stood outside of his house made of plastic bags and scraps of tin metal and said hello as we headed toward the Quinchos project. Once we reached the canteen at the top of the hill I caught a view of the nearby ravine filled with green water and waste. This was the community's main source of water and it was here that people bathed and washed their clothes.

Once the children began arriving for lunchtime, I saw many familiar faces, and an equal amount of new ones. Two of the children who came to the canteen that day were had been residing in the Quinchos projects in San Marcos when I was volunteer the year before, but had since then decided to return to their families in La Chureca. I noticed that they had lost a considerable amount of weight. I also recognized some of the parents arriving to collect food for their families, leaving their bottle of shoe glue by the door before entering the project.

As per the usual routine, I helped the cook pass out food, collect used plates, and wash dishes. I noticed another woman helping in the kitchen, and I did not recognize her from the year before. She was shy and quiet, although very friendly and I assumed she was a new employee of the organization. When the tables had been cleared away we sat together and helped a four year old girl draw and identify different shapes and colors on a piece of paper. This woman introduced herself to me and explained that she was a mother of a new Quincho member. She pointed out her son among the crowd of children playing marbles on the concrete floor ahead of us. He was fourteen years old and this was his first visit to the Quinchos project in La Chureca. With her polished fingernails, jewelry and elegant outfit it was difficult for me to tell whether or not she lived within the dump or had come from a surrounding barrio of Managua.

Without any prompting on my part she began to narrate a bit of her family story and explain why she was placing her son in institutionalized care. The father of her children was physically abusive and struggled with alcoholism. A few years ago she decided to leave him and take her children with her. One of her daughters remained behind, however, and continues to take care of her father. The woman explained that her children resented her for this separation, and she expressed guilt that it caused such an emotional strain for them. At this point I permitted myself to interject and say that she was only doing what she thought was best for her children, and as painful as separation can be, sometimes it is necessary. She nodded her head in agreement. Over the years her children have grown more understanding of the separation. However, her oldest son who is now an adult has fallen into drinking, and she is concerned that his 14-year-old brother might follow this pattern. She cannot assure that her younger son is attending school, and she is worried that he spends too much time in the street with no role models that could help him avoid alcoholism or street life. Following our conversation I was able to speak with her son Vicente, and he proceeded to pepper me with questions about the next chapter in his life. I was with them when Vicente said his final goodbyes to his mother and walked with us to the Quinchos project in Managua. The goodbye was tenuous, but there seemed to be a tacit understanding that this change was for the better, and the mother appeared both torn and relieved, while her son tried to maintain a stoic and aloof stance.

In the end, Vicente only stayed with Los Quinchos for two weeks before escaping. No one could tell me for sure why he left, although one child explained to me that he was not happy because of the constant bullying.

As the case of Vicente clearly demonstrates, not all members of Los Quinchos come to the organization independently of their parents. Rather, many families insist upon admitting their children into institutionalized care. In the ethnographic vignette

above I make mention of two children I had known the year before. Mateo in particular never wanted to be a part of Los Quinchos, and only resided there at the insistence of his mother. He maintains a strong preference for living at home with his mother and family, even if it means forgoing his education. As I was able to see, living at La Chureca also cost him his health. The day of my visit he was being treated for deep cuts and infected wounds. He was barefoot and visibly malnourished. Nevertheless, he is only one of several Quinchos members who initially came to the organization as a result of the efforts of his mother. Josefina and Meche express immense gratitude that their mothers placed them in Los Quinchos. In their interviews they explain that the organization was necessary for their *superación* or social mobility, and without Los Quinchos they are not sure where they would be right now.

The majority of children I interviewed and interacted with these past two summers continue to maintain contact with their families. While Mateo would rather live with his mother, other Quinchos members concede that institutionalized care was necessary for their *superación* or upward social mobility. In particular, Meche and Josefina both know that they were placed in Los Quinchos in order to *superar* (rise above, overcome, uplift themselves) and they are very grateful for this in spite of the emotional strain of being separated from their families. Vicente's narrative is important because it challenges the overriding rhetoric on street children: the lived realities of Quinchos members are in fact more diverse and nuanced than what is typically portrayed in popular discourse and even in the interviews with Quinchos members. In the end, not all children coming to the organization leave behind unconcerned families.

The Project of Reconstituting Family Ties

The case of Vicente leads us to yet another very important and central element of the work of Los Quinchos, namely the process of reconstituting the family. Indeed, an integral aspect of Los Quinchos' mission is to reconnect street children with their families, or otherwise strengthen pre-existing ties. According to my interview with co-director Zelinda Rocchia, the majority of Quinchos members today have contact or are beginning to re-establish contact with their families. As several social workers at Los Quinchos described it, the street child goes to the street looking for what he does not have at home. Yet, even though he is able to form new relationships with other children living on the streets, he can never "construct a new family on the same terms" (Interview with Zelinda, July 30th 2012). He might formulate new kinship ties, but "what he is looking for is a *true* family with a mother and father" (Interview with Zelinda, July 30th 2012, *emphasis mine*).

Los Quinchos' engagement with families is varied. There are psychologists and social workers who provide couple's counseling, or are involved in helping to communicate the needs and desires of children to their parents. This type of work is especially crucial in households where there is domestic violence. Teresa is a six-year-old girl currently living at Los Quinchos and she has often witnessed her mother's abuse at home. The social workers see that Teresa's mother is covered in bruises and black eyes when she comes to visit. Teresa's inability to sleep at night and the anxieties she communicates to the social workers are a testament to how the abuse is manifest emotionally. As a result, Los Quinchos' staff continually resumes the work of family therapy and spreading awareness about domestic violence.

In cases where the child has lost all contact with his biological family, or was abandoned at too young of an age and cannot remember his parents, Los Quinchos has intervened and initiated investigations in order to locate the family and reunite the child with his biological kin. Additionally, Magdalena, Amelia and Rosa continue to maintain contact with their father in spite of the fact that he is now incarcerated. Social workers at Los Quinchos organize visits every two months to the prison in order for these sisters to reconnect with their father. That being said, not all members of Los Quinchos experience these frequent visits. The following vignette describes the case of Jimena and her longstanding separation from her family:

Jimena has been residing at Los Quinchos for the past seven years. Throughout this time she has never received a family visit. Likewise she is part of a minority of Quinchos members that never visit home during school vacations. Her mother is a sex worker in Callejón de la Muerte (Alley of Death), a brothel located in Managua's Mercado Oriental. Jimena's brothers are involved in drug trafficking and gang violence. Her father died serving time in prison, and her mother struggles with alcoholism. Before Jimena came to Los Quinchos her grandmother was beginning to prepare her for sex work in the brothel. The woman in charge of the brothel intervened and is responsible for admitting Jimena to Los Quinchos.

During my interview with Doña Coco, a social worker at Los Quinchos, I learned that Jimena was preparing for a long awaited visit to her mother who is currently dying of tuberculosis. Today I traveled to Managua to shadow the street outreach process. I informed one of the social workers in Managua of Jimena's current situation, and she took me to Callejón de la Muerte so I could meet both Jimena's grandmother and Doña Marlene, the owner of the brothel. I have never before traveled to Callejón de la Muerte. It turns out that Francisco, a Quincho promoter with whom I worked the year before, never showed me Callejón de la Muerte during our street outreach sessions because he was too embarrassed that we might come across his mother. He never liked going there and if he could avoid seeing his mother, he would.

On our way to the brothel, we passed by various sites of El Mercado Oriental where street children congregate, including the bus terminal³. Enthusiastic youth came running toward us as we arrived, covering us in hugs and affection. They held their bottles of shoe glue in their hands or had them carefully tucked underneath their shirt and positioned right below their mouths. I noticed two women sniffing glue at the bus terminal. One was visibly pregnant, and the other bore a striking resemblance to a Quincho member. I learned that she is the mother of Jesus, one of the youngest boys living at La Finca in San Marcos.

At the bus terminal I also recognized several boys from street outreach the year before, most notably Juan, Lázaro, and Gerardo. These three boys spent some time residing in Los Quinchos before deciding to return to the streets. In fact nearly all of the current street children I have met in Nicaragua were former members of Los Quinchos. Francisco, the Quincho promoter I mentioned earlier, once confessed to me that Lázaro and his entourage were most likely beyond

³ Please refer to the appendix for pictures.

recovery. According to Francisco, they have spent far too much time in the streets and there was little hope for reintegration. Nevertheless, up until he was fired from Los Quinchos on account of his own battle with crack addiction, Francisco insisted on working with even the most 'hopeless' cases, providing Lázaro and his friends food and healing their infected wounds.

I was not surprised to see that Lázaro still held his alpha position among the youth. Despite his small size it was clear that he stood in a position of power within the hierarchical structure of the group. Lázaro and Juan took me by the hand and proceeded to show me the way. The social worker with whom I had come lagged behind us, saying that she was in no mood to go walking as fast as we were. I struggled to keep up with the pace of the boys as we weaved ourselves through the labyrinth of market stalls. I had also forgotten how strong the fumes from the glue were, and I began to feel nauseous.

We finally arrived at Callejón de la Muerte, a narrow alleyway lined with shacks on either side. I spotted several women seated on the front porch of these makeshift homes⁴. They wore tight-fitted clothes and exaggerated make up, whistling to potential clients as they walked by. Doña Xiomara spoke to the women there to find the whereabouts of Jimena's grandmother. We proceeded to walk through the alley and took various winding turns for even smaller alleyways until we finally reached the house of Jimena's grandmother. We knocked on a wooden door and a small woman with long, pepper gray hair answered. Doña Xiomara introduced her to me and the two of them proceeded to talk in soft tones. On our way back to the bus terminal I met the owner of the brothel Doña Chila. She told me to send her regards to Jimena and to tell her that she has a bag of candy ready for her and would send it along with one of the social workers.

Jimena's case demonstrates the constant work of Los Quinchos to maintain some form of contact with the family, even in the most extreme cases. Here it was still possible for employees of the organization to travel to the communities of Quinchos members and speak on good terms with their families. Although Jimena had not heard from her mother in years, the fact that the organization arranged for Jimena to visit her mother on her deathbed indicates that some minimal contact was maintained for there to be any notification of her mother's illness.

Nevertheless, working with families can be tenuous and emotionally burdensome for both the children and the social workers involved. Moreover, it would be far-fetched to say that the relationships between social workers and parents are entirely free from any animosity or tension. For example, the mother I encountered on the street who bore a strong resemblance with a Quincho member had been in conflict with the organization

⁴ For pictures of Callejón de la Muerte, please refer to the appendix.

only a month before. She came to San Marcos with her partner to retrieve their son Jesus. The social worker on duty at the time resisted her request. He knew that Jesus' parents would exploit their son for labor and force him to beg on the streets. However, the social worker was forced to give in when the parents threatened him at knifepoint. They brought Jesus back to Managua where they kept him hidden from Los Quinchos for several weeks. Jesus eventually returned to La Finca, but I never knew if the conflict between his parents and the organization was ever resolved. A similar situation occurred with another family, only in this instance the organization hid the child from his own mother:

Cristofer has a very large family. He has twelve brothers and sisters, to be exact, many of whom have also resided in Los Quinchos. His oldest brother John Paul committed suicide in 2006. His death was a huge blow for the Quinchos community. Everyone was convinced that John Paul was destined for greatness and that he would eventually replace the co-directors of the organization after their retirement. He was a role model and a success story, a living proof of the effectiveness of Quinchos intervention. Yet all the hope he represented died with him when he took his life.

Cristofer's situation is quite distinct from other Quinchos members. He was found at a very young age and was adopted by Zelinda Roccia. He is the only Quincho member to have been adopted by the co-director. This certainly is the cause for much jealousy among his siblings and his peers at Los Quinchos. Even his second eldest brother Bernardo, who is now an adult and works for the Ministry of Family, still resents him for his privileged position. Bernardo and John Paul suffered a great deal at the hands of their mother; she tried to sell them to a Spanish couple that was seeking to adopt a Nicaraguan child. Bernardo and John Paul were the first in their family to opt for a life in the streets...

Cristofer's younger brother Ernesto has recently joined Los Quinchos, but he is not having the easiest time integrating himself within the organization. Since my time here Ernesto has already escaped once. He just returned last week and I saw him the day of his arrival. He was completely covered in mud and only had one shoe. Today was an especially peculiar day. I was at the office and I saw Ernesto's mother with a young girl who looked just like her. I recognized Ernesto's mother because I had met her before at the bus terminal of Diriamba..

Cristofer introduced me to his biological mother. Cristofer's mother was here today to take Ernesto back. She said to me that she was looking for her son. Fortunately I had been told to keep quiet. If I had not been informed of the organization's aim to keep Ernesto hidden, I might have caused some trouble.

As the cases of Jesus and Ernesto clearly demonstrate, Los Quinchos does not always see eye-to-eye with the children's parents, and there are even violent confrontations between both parties. It was puzzling for to see such an ambivalent

situation. On the one hand, the mothers of Jesus and Cristoger greeted the social workers with smiles and a warm embrace. On the other, each was involved in troubling conflict with Los Quinchos. Martín represents yet another example of conflict. He escaped and brought several other Quinchos members with him. When his parents were notified they were very upset that Los Quinchos could not account for the whereabouts of their child. They contacted various news sources and created a media scandal that drew a considerable amount of negative attention to the organization. It took months before Los Quinchos could repair the damage to its reputation.

In this same vein, the Quinchos projects in San Marcos were especially tense during family visits. I often witnessed mothers complaining to social workers that their children were not being taken care of properly, that they were dirty and their clothes had not been washed. These were always stressful moments for the social workers, and they complained to me about parental visits. One social worker in particular expressed frustration that some of these parents had the audacity to criticize the organization when they themselves could not provide for their own children. This tension became especially apparent to me during a particular visit. Dolores' mother frequently came to Las Yahoskas to visit her daughter and she would bring her youngest son along with her. This boy was frequently on the defensive and appeared to have many behavioral issues. He was usually angry or yelling. On one such occasion he was playing with a soccer ball and miscalculated his own strength. He kicked it too hard and it veered off in the direction of his mother. As soon as the ball hit the concrete floor the boy began to flinch and recoil in anticipation of a blow from his mother. He started crying and screaming, begging for his mother not to hit him. She ignored his pleas and began to slap his back. Nearly crawling

on all fours he tried to run away from his mother but she kept on. One of the girls watching initially flinched when the boy was being hit. Nevertheless she proceeded to laugh along with the other onlookers. It seemed as though the girls were laughing away their discomfort at the situation. The social workers were not comfortable with the situation, but they did nothing to address it. Afterward I noticed Domingo, one of the promoters and a former street child himself, approach the boy and begin talking with him. In addition to beating her son in front of the other girls at the project, Dolores' mother would complain about the state of her daughter's clothes, and would rummage through the rooms and drawers to make sure all of her daughter's belongings were accounted for. She was quick to assume that other girls had stolen her daughter's shirts or that the social workers did not do a sufficient job in keeping track of material belongings.

In light of these long-standing conflicts, some Quinchos members have decided to abandon any illusion of restoring relationships with their parents. As much as Quinchos' staff places substantial emphasis on the importance of the family, many also concede that it is sometimes healthier to leave the bridge broken. Two teenaged boys residing at Los Quinchos have actively decided not to appease their mothers' request to return home. They are well aware of the fact that they will be used for labor, and nothing more, and have elected institutionalized care over independence on the streets. This is all to say that understanding street children requires understanding their families. The next chapter will contextualize the family within the larger history and political economy of Nicaragua today.

Chapter 2: From Criminals to Revolutionaries, From War Orphans to the Streets

De la marimba de chavalos de la Tirsá
este tal Quincho se las gana a los demás
con sus diez años no cumplidos todavía
es hombre serio, como pocos en su edad.

– Carlos Mejía Godoy “Quincho Barrilete” –

The name “Quinchos” was the idea of one of the initial members of the organization, and it derives from a famous Nicaraguan song Quincho Barrilete. The song describes the trials and tribulations of Quincho Barrilete, a war orphan who makes and sells kites in the streets of Managua in order to support himself and his sister. Thus the children themselves were involved in finding the name of their group, and elected one with which they could identify at a personal level. That the song should describe the life obstacles of a war orphan points to a larger historical trajectory at play here. The previous chapter has already given a sense of the particular challenges that Quinchos members face, the factors that bring children to the streets in the first place, and the decision to either accept or reject institutionalized care. The following chapter will conceptualize these patterns of abuse, negligence, and abandonment within a larger social, political and economic backdrop.

While the Quinchos community is comprised of individuals coming from a variety of circumstances and situations, their life challenges are interrelated and cannot be reduced to pathological family units or discrete instances of abusive households. The recent emergence of street children in Nicaragua must also be understood in terms of larger social currents, state policies and nation-wide reconstruction (or lack thereof) in post-war era. Chapter 2 will draw from a plethora of authors in an effort to demonstrate the effects of the Somoza dictatorship and the ensuing Contra war, neoliberal policy and larger societal trends that have placed considerable strain on the Nicaraguan family.

El Hombrecito Daniel

In “Suffering Child: An Embodiment of War and Its Aftermath in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua,” James Quesada draws on his ethnographic account of ten-year old Daniel to illustrate how Nicaraguan youth experience the effects of war and its aftermath on an intimate, psychological and somatic level.

Daniel and his family live in a squatter settlement on a hill overlooking the northern town of Matagalpa. While his mother Maria recalls the Sandinista era as a glorious one, in which the state and its citizens were actively involved in social reform and solidarity initiatives, for her family the war also resulted in “repeated separations between parents and children, continuous shortages of food and goods, rampant inflation, faltering infrastructures, limited life options, and a state of chronic uncertainty” (Quesada 1998:56). Daniel’s narrative exemplifies how intimate and daily interactions with lack of food, dislocation and instability carry with them deep psychological and social effects.

In addition to the emotional and psychological strain of the omnipresence of warfare and the economic burden of crippling trade embargoes, considerable strife for Daniel’s family only continued to amplify following the electoral defeat of the Sandinista party in 1990 and the subsequent end to the Contra war. Indeed, in his work Quesada describes how dispossession, rampant unemployment and unprecedented levels of poverty marked Nicaragua’s transition from Sandinismo to neoliberalism. The Sandinista revolutionary rhetoric that so many Nicaraguans had grown attached to during times of psychological duress was beginning to dissolve and state power had already purged itself of this discourse. In its place, state benefits became privatized and land reforms were reversed. As a result, exiled elite from the Somoza era returned to Nicaragua to reclaim

their land, leaving Maria and her husband homeless and destitute. Campesinos nationwide experienced a similar plight, and were forced out of their homes at the hands of police brutality. Maria was fired from her job as a result of a “national neoliberal structural adjustment program that the Chamorro administration devised in conjunction with the IMF and the U.S. Agency for International Development” (Quesada 1998:54). Likewise her husband Pablo lost his job as part of the “internationally brokered mandatory military reduction plan” (Quesada 1998:54). The married couple became estranged and Pablo fell into drinking. His visits to the household dwindled and only on occasion did he provide money, food or help around the house (Quesada 1998:54).

At this time Maria found herself in desperate search for work. She even confided in Quesada that at times she had the desire to abandon her children. While she made a public performance of being a strong and assertive woman who was in control of her life, her private persona quickly revealed the insurmountable distress and vulnerability she experienced on a daily basis.

Without social support systems firmly in place to help youth surmount the daily toils of war and poverty, it becomes increasingly difficult to endure deprivation without also experiencing psychological consequences. While Daniel and other children in his circumstances exhibit remarkable resourcefulness, a quality their life conditions certainly demand, this self resourcefulness has its limits: “interviews with Nicaraguan mental health professionals and child care workers who served orphans, runaways and street kids often included references to the resourcefulness of youth that were in contrast to their sense of profound loneliness and abandonment” (Quesada 1998: 57). The fact that poverty had become routinized and to a certain degree normalized for this family did not

diminish the tremendous emotional pressure it placed upon Daniel and his family members. The aim here in analyzing Daniel's case and that of Quinchos members is to go beyond an intrafamilial model. Indeed "it is precisely the multiplicity of social, historical and political-economic factors that need to be explored if one is to grasp how social contexts shape the subjective experience of suffering and one's somatic sense of body" (Quesada 1998: 57).

The youth played a central role in the Sandinista revolution (Tully 2007; Quesada 1998). The repression of youth was a defining characteristic of the Somoza regime. A common saying during the rule of the dictatorship claimed, "it was a crime to be a child in Nicaragua" (Quesada 1998:58). Thus it is no mere consequence that the war of insurrection in 1979 is commonly referred to as the rise of *los muchachos*. As Quesada explains, "seventy-one percent of those killed during the insurrection were between 15 and 24 years of age, and students composed the largest sector of participants in the insurrection" (Quesada 1998:58). Following the insurrection youth continued to play an important role in state policy and social reform. The CDIs, or government-subsidized day-care centers, were one of many successful Sandinista programs. Youth were actively involved in the nation-wide literacy campaign, and the government directed its resources to areas "to help women who were both mothers and workers" (Quesada 1998:58). Thus to abstract youth from historical and politics currents fails to take into account the integral roles they played and continue to play in Nicaraguan society.

Sheila R. Tully's work "Scarcity and Surplus: Shifting regimes of childhood in Nicaragua" also accounts for the pivotal role children played in the 1979 armed insurrection. Much of her ethnographic research is centered on the work of various

organizations comprised of Nicaraguan mothers who lost children during the Sandinista war. Their historical recounting of the Somoza dictatorship, its demise and the ensuing contra war attest to the shifting role of children within Nicaragua. The mothers' stories demonstrate how children were specific targets of repressive Somoza rule, as this was the avenue through which the dictatorial regime intimidated its subjects and demoralized those who were mobilizing for action. The majority of youth involved in the insurrection were students fighting for their rights to education. In addition to spearheading the revolutionary movement, many youth were also responsible for mobilizing their parents and engaging older generations in the struggle to defeat Somoza rule.

Daniel's neighbors, family members and the surrounding community saw him as a very resourceful and independent boy, and would commonly refer to him as *hombrecito*, or little man (Quesada 1998:58). For Quesada this term of endearment is a marker of the ways in which Nicaraguan families come to ascribe adult responsibilities to their children during times of deprivation. However, these responsibilities do not come without added emotional strain and burden for the child involved. Indeed, in his conversations with Quesada, Daniel expresses a desire to take on roles of a provider and secure his family's welfare. However, his inability to do so elicits feelings of impotence, worthlessness and failure. Moreover, while Daniel and his counterparts never make direct reference to Sandinista rhetoric on the 'new man,' Quesada demonstrates how this discourse nevertheless has a profound impact on what Daniel and his community aspires to and idealizes in the adult, male protagonist. The 'new man' in Sandinista Nicaragua was a protector and defender of nation and home, a provider and nurturer (Quesada 1998:59). This rhetoric reverberated throughout schools, billboards and the media and

thus had a profound impact on how Nicaraguans visualized themselves within society. As the case of Daniel effectively demonstrates, these ideals of moral integrity prove to be sources of stress when they conflict with lived realities of war and adversity.

Furthermore, Daniel's persona of 'little man' and the psychological tensions it creates in a new, post-Sandinista system that is bereft of social benefits (and the moral rhetoric behind them) leads us to Quesada's key ethnographic encounter with Daniel. Through daily conversations, Daniel eventually reveals to Quesada his desire to die. He reasons that his death would liberate his family from having to feed another mouth, since he himself is incapable of resolving their economic plight. While he aspires to complete the duties a little man is responsible for, the social conditions in which he lives make it impossible. Given the situation, he considers himself to be more of a burden than anything else, and is guilty of having what he considers 'selfish' desires of running away. His body is overcome with the expectations and desires to fulfill his moral duties, and these duties become all the more stressful during the transition to a socially negligent government. In her work Sheila R. Tully likewise documents the case of a nine-year-old girl named Arlén, who attempted suicide due to the economic constraints of her family. A few weeks following Arlén's hospitalization, her mother poisoned the drinks she had prepared for herself and her family. However, her attempt at collective suicide was likewise thwarted when her partner caught her in the act and disposed of the juice before she had the chance to serve it to the family (Tully 2007: 371).

To be sure, the sacrifices that the Sandinista state called for created an immense amount of strain, and subsequently contributed to their electoral defeat in 1990. Committed as the people were to their own empowerment and an improved quality of

life, war had taken its toll on the minds and spirits of Nicaraguans. That being said, the added bitterness of defeat, does not alleviate but rather amplifies psychological strain, and so ‘peacetime’ is only marked by increased adversity, disillusionment and alienation. On the one hand, involvement in the war and the Sandinista cause had its limits, and so a tired people elected a new direction. On the other, the absence of a socially conscious government during times of psychological, social and economic distress only complicates the process of coping with adverse conditions. Tully’s work is particularly revealing in that it successfully charts shifting regimes of childhood following the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. In place of the collaboration and solidarity efforts that so heavily marked the period of Sandinista rule, the mothers in Tully’s work remark that post-war Nicaragua became increasingly egotistical and individualistic. This, coupled with a negligent state, had drastic effects on the Nicaraguan family: mothers during times of economic duress could no longer depend on their communities to share responsibilities of parenthood during times of scarcity. The pain of war was replaced by yet more suffering, and as the case of Arlén clearly demonstrates, these shifts in governmental rule and political economy had a huge impact on the way children live their lives (Tully 2007: 369).

An Army of Little Ants in a War by Other Means

“Wars don’t simply end. And wars don’t end simply” (Tully 2007: 355)

Daniel’s personal experiences and Quesada’s assessment of Nicaraguan history resonate well with the narrative of Los Quinchos co-founder Carlos Vidal Paladino. In my conversations and interviews with Carlos, I learned of his family history and his longtime commitment to children’s rights in Nicaragua. During the revolution he was

active in youth advocacy groups. Moreover, Carlos is an adoptive father to his eldest son, a war orphan. As both the cases of Daniel and Carlos demonstrate, systems were put in place during the war to extend childcare beyond the immediate parents and continue support even after children had been abandoned at the hands of violence and loss.

While Carlos' youth activism was largely reflective of the more promising and glorified aspects of Sandinista Nicaragua, there was also a darker side to his work in the 1980s; Carlos' involvement in the Sandinista military consisted of identifying the bodies of deceased soldiers and notifying their families. He worked in the very region where he grew up and was often confronted with having to identify his childhood friends and break the tragic news to the women who had been mother figures to him throughout his youth.

As a child Carlos worked in the marketplace with his mother, a woman who remains illiterate to this day. Along with his siblings he helped her harvest and sell fruits and vegetables in the town marketplace. His father struggled with alcoholism and was abusive. With a childhood marked by loss, deprivation, domestic violence, and laborious work, Carlos feels that he can relate to many of the experiences of Quinchos members. Nevertheless, in his retelling of the history of Nicaragua, Carlos emphasizes a stark and devastating transformation in Nicaraguan society following the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990. He characterizes the emergence of street children as a recent social phenomenon, where street children were altogether unheard of before 1990. In his view, and as historical accounts corroborate, the new capitalist and neoliberal policies of the governments that came to rise in the aftermath of the war are largely to blame. In his own words, Carlos proclaims, "the neoliberal system never has and never will contribute to bettering human life in the third world" (Interview, 29 July 2012). Dispossessed

campesinos led to a massive rural-urban migration. Nearly all of the men and women employed in the Sandinista military were dismissed from their jobs. Unemployment rates skyrocketed to exorbitantly high levels, reaching 52.3% in 1991 (Prevost 1991). It was at this time that families began to disintegrate and children were forced onto the streets. Carlos describes this sudden growth in street children as the arrival of a new army crowding urban centers like ants, an ironic image given that Nicaragua had allegedly entered into an era of peacetime. Thus, as much as Carlos is insistent upon marking a sudden change in Nicaragua's sociopolitical climate, he still refers to symbolic meanings from the Sandinista war. There is both historical rupture and continuity in the adversity that Nicaraguan children face.

In her work Sheila R. Tully also points out the continued language of war in peacetime Nicaragua, where Nicaraguan mothers describe the effects structural adjustment programs in post-revolutionary Nicaragua as "a war by other means" (Tully 2007: 366). In describing the political battleground surrounding education in post-Sandinista Nicaragua, one of Tully's interviewees proclaims: "They [the Contras] wanted to attack the best of the Revolution - to demoralize the people. That is what they wanted then, that is what they want now. It is the same old war" (Tully 2007:368). Much of the aspirations of Nicaraguan mothers for a time of peace, where children could access schools and clinics without the threat of war and violence, were instead replaced with the privatization and decentralization of education in Nicaragua. These structural and policy changes were a result of neoliberal initiatives to downsize public expenditure in response to tremendous debt. Thus, shifts in discourses and practices involving children's rights

have accompanied significant transformations in Nicaragua's political economy, but the notion of war reverberates throughout.

While Daniel is not a street child, and his personal encounters with the war make his narrative quite distinct from street children today, his story nevertheless highlights the importance of contextualizing experiences of trauma, abuse and broken families. His occasional desire to run away, and his mother's guilty confession of desiring the same, is analogous to feelings and choices that street children face in their own lives. What social factors compel mothers to abandon their children? What feeds children's desires to runaway from their families? Likewise, what social factors have weakened family ties and kinship units, so that children search for support outside of the home and the nuclear family unit? Displacement, economic strife, and daily encounters with violence are certainly not new to Nicaragua. However, the institutions and relationships in place to continue the care of children have witnessed immense transformations that must be taken into account here.

Children's Rights in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua

The historical and ethnographic accounts of Tully and Quesada provide fruitful avenues for understanding the psychological, emotional and social effects of war and its aftermath. Moreover, both authors have shown how Nicaraguan families, mothers and children encounter sociopolitical and economic strife brought about by the advent of neoliberal policy. Sandinista Nicaragua was one of the 170 signatories in the General Assembly to ratify the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Maclure and Sotelo 2003). Scheper-Hughes' work marks a moment of change and rupture with the

advent of neoliberal rights discourses. However, I would argue that in Nicaragua there is nevertheless continuity between Sandinista activism and post-Sandinista, neoliberal understandings of children's rights. Indeed, in the last year of the Sandinista regime there is already an engagement on the part of the Nicaraguan state to engage in global rhetoric on the rights of the child. Scheper-Hughes points out the Western, hegemonic underpinnings of 'universal' rights discourses. In the Nicaraguan context, however, we see that different localities appropriate these global discourses to accompany pre-existing and locally relevant human rights ideologies.

Additionally, like Quesada and Tully, Maclure and Sotelo are also careful to incorporate Somozista history into their investigation. During the Somoza dictatorship the only legislation that addressed the needs of marginalized and impoverished youth was the Law for the Protection of Minors (Maclure 2003: 672). This legal code framed much of public policy and programs for youth throughout the Somoza dictatorship and was ideologically grounded in the doctrine of 'irregular situations' (Maclure 2003:672). This doctrine separated youth into categories of 'mainstream' children and those living in 'irregular' situations. Minors in the latter category consisted of unemployed, out-of-school youth deprived of family support. Governmental and popular sentiment at that time reflected anxieties surrounding what were deemed to be 'aimless' youth. Rather than address the "iniquitous socioeconomic" conditions of these populations, governmental policy instead focused on containing potentially deviant youths, their delinquent tendencies and the threats they posed to society (Maclure 2003:673). This governmental policy was certainly not unique to Nicaragua throughout the 20th century in Latin America; the ethnographic accounts of Scheper-Hughes in Brazil and Salazar in Chile

bear striking historical semblances. As these authors relate, repressive governments upheld policies that involved incarceration, criminalization and stigmatization of marginalized children. Tully's work has already successfully demonstrated how children were specific targets of repressive Somoza rule. However, Maclure and Sotelo explain specifically how youth were stratified within Nicaragua, and chart the ways in which the state further perpetuated the marginalization of impoverished youth.

Fortunately the insurrection of 1979 and the subsequent overthrow of the Somoza regime marks a significant departure from the Somocista "pejorative perspective of disadvantaged children" (Maclure and Sotelo 2003: 673). Like many other Latin American countries during this time period, Nicaragua witnessed a surge of social activism and progressive change, which particularly brought women, children and family to the forefront of social discourse, political action and legislation. The signing of the Convention of the rights of the child in 1989 (already near the end of a decade marked by social reform) proved to be a significant step forward in concretizing state obligations to children and ensuring the protection of their rights. The signing of this document required a commitment of all signatories to formally establish legislation that reflects the ideologies expressed in the UNCRC. While the legislation can vary from one state to the other the "common purpose must be to revoke traditional notions of children as objects dependent on discriminatory adult authority and instead foster the ideal of children as subjects entitled to special constitutionally guaranteed rights" (Maclure and Sotelo 2003: 671).

In addition to reallocating resources towards children's needs, the signatory states' duties set forth in the UNCRC involve engaging society groups and establishing

collaborative and co-operative efforts between state actors and their non-state counterparts. In accordance with the mandates of the UNCRC, the Nicaraguan government eventually enacted its own legislation in support of the rights of children in 1998. This new legislation took the form of the Code for Childhood and Adolescence (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) and placed particular emphasis on rights, as opposed to the utilitarian notion of basic needs of children (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:674).

Nevertheless, while Nicaraguan state policy demonstrates formal, legislative efforts to enact the principles of the UNCRC, in practice Maclure and Sotelo show that children's rights remain a residual social policy in Nicaragua. The factors that have situated children's rights at the periphery of Nicaraguan public policy are three fold: (1) a government weakened by economic crisis, structural adjustment programs and the imposition of stifling conditionalities by the IMF and World Bank, (2) resurgence of popular social conservatism with respect to marginalized youth and (3) reluctance on the part of elite government officials (and the state more generally) to forgo its power to the hands of critical and discontent NGO forces. Thus, fiscal weakness of the state is not the sole factor responsible for the state's failure to put into practice its own legal codes. There is also an attempt to maintain political legitimacy by satisfying the sentiments of an electoral population whose anxieties about marginalized youth echo the 'irregular situations' doctrine of the Somoza dictatorship. Furthermore, for Maclure and Sotelo, the integration of new legal codes with the Nicaraguan constitution is more indicative of what they call 'hegemonic adjustment' than of incremental democratization. In the end,

political will only goes so far as to serve the vested interests of political party members and those in positions of power.

The fact that changes in legislation have not actually led to improved living conditions for children in Nicaragua is most clearly exemplified in declining health conditions, increasingly limited access to healthcare and the volatile political battleground of education. Where before much of Sandinista activism was marked by the nation-wide literacy campaign and universal access to all levels of education, a down-sizing of state funding following the advent of neoliberal economy in 1990 marked significant changes in this arena. Education quickly became privatized, and “fee-for-services” was the new system in relation to any previously state-sponsored social benefits. Ironically, the years following the National Assembly’s ratification of the Code for Childhood and Adolescence in 1998 would exhibit an increase in the number of children no longer attending school (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:678). Similarly, “the Ministry of Family, a part of government largely responsible for the non-formal and vocational education of child laborers and the care of orphans and abused children has experienced steady reductions in its annual operating budget and corresponding decrease in full-time staff” (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:679). The same dynamic is true for the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Health. Maclure and Sotelo point out that in 2003, “40% of Nicaragua’s budgeted public sector expenditures have been derived from foreign aid. In The education sector, almost half the Ministry of Education’s budget is derived from foreign loans and donations” (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:679). Thus are the consequences of a fiscally weak state and the terms and conditions of structural adjustment programs.

Economic and political changes notwithstanding, however, Maclure and Sotelo argue that the dynamic of hegemonic adjustment is most apparent in the state's approach to organized youth violence and gang criminality in Managua. In an attempt to curb the rise of youth violence in urban centers the government implemented what was known as the Gang Plan, a series of measures that involved increased police crackdown on the activities of 'delinquent' youth. In direct violation of the UNCRC, police began arbitrarily rounding up youth under 15 years of age. "Rather than adopting an approach grounded in the principles of collaboration and sensitivity to socioeconomic context, the government has responded to popular concerns about youth gangs largely on the basis of traditional ideological impulses" (Maclure and Sotelo 2003: 680). While the Gang Plan made passing reference to the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, and promised to collaborate with local communities and NGOs, its aim was less involved in tackling the socioeconomic antecedents that have contributed to the rise in youth violence and instead sought to quell perceived threats to social order (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:680).

Similar dynamics exist in Nicaragua today, even as the government has witnessed a return to Sandinista power. Throughout my stay this past summer I was constantly confronted with the contentious national debate concerning the Nicaraguan code of childhood and adolescence. Following the brutal murder of a university student committed by a group of six 'delinquent' youth there was a public outcry to amend the legal codes in order to allow for full sentencing of the suspects. Ordinarily the Nicaraguan Code for Childhood and Adolescence mandates that a minor cannot be incarcerated for a term longer than six years. Nicaraguan university students throughout the country were demanding 20 years to life imprisonment for all of those involved in the

murder. The director of Los Quinchos remained adamantly opposed to these changes in the law, as they blatantly violated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, given that this debate came about during the election campaigns for presidency, the current government (under Ortega) is likely to bend to the demands of the large student populations in order to garner support and votes. Indeed, in a country where half of the population is under the age of eighteen, and many youth are expressing outrage at this incident, the voice of youth contains great leverage power in the upcoming elections. In this instance, however, the voices of street youth remain largely in the margins. Nevertheless, these six street youth captured the attention of the entire country and remain part of the electoral debate.

Maclure and Sotelo present a similar dynamic, where in the summer of 2001 a resurgence media attention to street crime entered the electoral debates. In an effort to address the concerns of distraught populations and their demands for greater state action in the face of increased gang violence, the ruling liberal alliance Party suddenly announced “an immediate injection of \$75,000 for six district [crime] prevention commission of Managua” (Maclure and Sotelo 2003:683). The popular demands for increased incarceration and a modification of the Code of Childhood and Adolescence is reflective of Maclure and Sotelo’s work and their observation of the resurgence of populist social conservatism. That the state is so willing to appease these demands in anticipation of elections is strikingly analogous to the case study in Maclure and Sotelo (2003).

Chapter 3: Impotencia y Poder

“Not too long ago, Laura saw her mother lying in the street, drunk with other drunkards. Her mother could not even lift herself up; she was far too inebriated. Laura came back to the project altered and wanting to fight. It is all of this that she has here [points to heart]; all of this creates a sense of frustration and impotence because how can she help her mother? She does not have the necessary tools to help her mother. Nevertheless, the last time she returned to the streets she went to look for her mother. Laura began selling ice water on the streets again so she could bring something to her mother, out of love and concern for her. But the mother was taking advantage of Laura. When Laura returned, she came with anger. She was punished for hitting a promoter, and it was then that she began speaking with the social workers about what she was feeling, what she had seen, and how much it had hurt her to see her mother drunk in the streets. She had decided to leave her mother there, and that act of abandonment kept bothering her here” [points to heart] (Quote from interview July 30th, 2012).

The preceding quote is Doña Coco’s account of a thirteen-year-old girl who struggles to fulfill certain responsibilities and duties to her kin. Laura yearns for her mother’s attention, care and well-being. She appears dedicated to supporting and helping her mother. Nevertheless for Laura, coming to terms with the inability to assist her mother brings about considerable emotional strain. It is not irrelevant that during this same interview Doña Coco revealed to me that Laura had recently broken into the pharmacy and swallowed a bottle’s worth of pills. Laura’s struggle to provide for an adult, and the emotional burden this produces resonates with the tribulations of Daniel and Arlén related by Quesada and Tully. As these authors’ works show, poverty and deprivation place considerable pressure on the Nicaraguan family, and compels young children to attempt suicide. On the one hand, an environment marked by scarcity calls upon children to play an active role in the survival of the family. On the other, youth continue to feel powerless in their attempts to carry out these responsibilities. Paradoxically, it is their empowered position as provider that underscores their vulnerability and their expressions of impotence. Laura is only one of several Quinchos members to have attempted suicide. Many others have succeeded, and self-mutilation is likewise all too common among Quinchos members and their counterparts living on the

streets. Given the deeply troubling repercussions that feelings of impotence engender, it is with a sense of urgency that I now explore the liminal position of street children as they are situated between sites of agency and power on the one hand, and extreme vulnerability and impotence on the other.

Throughout my hour-long interview with Doña Coco, I was particularly struck by her frequent recourse to the term *impotencia*. This theme of powerlessness reverberated throughout the various interviews I conducted with the adult staff and the adolescent Quinchos members. Thus it is this very notion of impotence that has provided a baseline from which to explore the various ways current and former street children simultaneously experience agency and vulnerability. The adult staff and adolescent interviewees characterized agency in terms of competence, the ability to work and participate in society, formulate one's own decisions, and contribute to the family. Some of these terms of ability and competence resonate with Giddens' view of agency, summarized succinctly by Julia Meredith Hess and Dianna Shandy: "Following Giddens, we define agency as intentional action that encompasses both intended and unintended consequences. Giddens' view entails a consideration of unconscious motivations and desires...agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their ability of doing things in the first place" (Hess and Shandy 2008:770).

However the ways in which the research participants articulated agency exhibit quite a bit of ambivalence: for several Quinchos community members, agency is caught up in conceptualizations of duty, responsibility and self-sacrifice. Yet it is also understood in terms of individual autonomy and independence, themes that resonate far more with neoliberal rights discourses and their Eurocentric understandings of

personhood (Scheper Hughes 1998). In contrast, the terms of vulnerability surfaced throughout the interviews via the language of impotence, permeability/susceptibility to the surrounding environment, and the need for protective care.

In addition to these nuanced and ambivalent views on agency and vulnerability, the ethnographic data likewise reveals varying ideals and ideologies of childhood. Here the trope of the defenseless, passive, innocent and ignorant “adult-in-the-making” still holds a strong presence, but it runs in tangent with a burgeoning international, neoliberal rights discourse that insists upon the social competence of children. Indeed, as we have already understood via the scholarship of Sharon Stephens and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the call within anthropology to see children as competent social actors and not mere receptacles of socialization has been accompanied by relatively new international rights discourses that seek to integrate children within the realm of rights-bearing citizens. Chapter 2 helped to elucidate the ways in which this discourse both shares and departs from Sandinista rights rhetoric, but the ethnographic data here reveals its presence within the work, philosophy and approach of Los Quinchos. Interestingly enough, Los Quinchos’ attempt to include children as participating, active agents does not erase their equal determination to assist children in returning to an “ideal” childhood, and provide them with the ‘protection’ they ‘need.’

Taking into account the bigger picture

Laura’s case is particularly revealing in that it illustrates varying levels of vulnerability and agency. On the one hand, like Daniel, she demonstrates remarkable self-resourcefulness and self-sufficiency. In a certain way the power imbalance between adult and child is reversed, and to be sure, children are not the sole proprietors of

impotence, nor is the complicated dialectic between agency and vulnerability unique to the experience of children. To a certain extent the interdependency between adult and child is mutual and reciprocal here, albeit hierarchical: the mother cannot provide for herself on her own, and must depend on her child's labor for self-sustenance. Likewise, as emotionally painful as it is for Laura to abandon her mother, she is still able to exercise her agency in making the decision to break ties with her mother. She could have continued to allow her mother to exploit her, but instead she made a choice, even if the circumstances were not of her own making. And yet, we see the pendulum swing once more toward vulnerability when the consequences of this decision are manifest. It remains a subject of debate whether suicide is a marker of vulnerability or agency, since there is some amount of choice involved. However, for the purposes of this investigation, I am using Laura's case to demonstrate the emotional toll that accompanies such a liminal and tenuous position between agency and vulnerability.

I concede the vastness of the dialectic between agency and vulnerability, and I recognize its impacts on all members of society. The adult staff and the children equally shared feelings of impotence, and the obstacles that adult family members encounter likewise point to moments of powerlessness and/or severely burdensome life circumstances. Nevertheless, it is not irrelevant that the 'children' I interviewed self-identified as adolescents, and they were careful to make this distinction. Thus there was recognition on both the part of adults and children of the particularly transitional and liminal stage of adolescents. Hence, a social hierarchy of competence based on age is still present here, and it is this particular axis of power imbalance that I am concerned with.

Of course, gender and economic deprivation play a part, but I am specifically concerned with power imbalances predicated upon age.

The Implications

In so far as current children's rights discourses in Nicaragua are involved with resisting a needs based, welfare approach to children's empowerment and instead seek to reinstate youth as active, first-class citizens entitled to the protection of their 'inalienable' rights, the continued marginality of street children and their expressions of social competence (or lack thereof) remain politically, socially and economically urgent. How can we understand the paradoxical situation of remarkable self-resourcefulness on the one hand, and the costly tolls of abuse, marginalization, and abject poverty on the other? Pointing out and describing the ambivalent position of children likewise speaks to anthropological scholarship: in what ways do we overlook deeply troubling power imbalances when we are too quick to over romanticize or exaggerate the agency of children, especially semiautonomous street children? As of yet, anthropologists such as Catherine Panter-Brick and Philip Kilbride who insist upon the social competence of children have yet to account for the ways youth continue to experience vulnerability (Abebe and Kjørholt 2009).

Ideal Children as Adults-in-the-making

To begin, both Quinchos staff and adolescent members communicate notions of childhood that resonate with the Western, middle-class ideals illustrated and charted in Zelizer's "The Valuation of Human Lives". The images of neediness, purity and vulnerability reverberate throughout this idealized conceptualization of childhood, and its presence in the rhetoric of Quinchos members (staff and children included) is abundant.

In his interview co-director Carlos Vidal describes children as “small birds (*pajaritos*) in need of protection, in need of someone to provide food and ensure their freedom.” Doña Coco contributes to this view in her description of children as innocent, sincere, and genuine in their displays of love and affection: “their affection never has malicious intent.” For her, adults are unable to give love that is equally sincere, or they are too caught up in their own tribulations to have any love to offer.

Doña Coco’s perspective also recalls a developmental view of childhood, where she contends that adolescents already begin to exhibit malicious intent in the same way adults do. She expresses far more skepticism of the affection an adolescent demonstrates than in the innately benign behavior and actions of children. Her perspective also supports ideals of a pure childhood; thus to develop, grow and transition into an adult is to somehow corrupt an originally pure state. Zelinda likewise establishes this binary between adults and child: the child is the one who suffers at the hands of adult brutality and violence, adult opportunism, and adult selfishness. In describing her initial street outreach, she recounts that when she lifted her hand to embrace a child, his reaction was to recoil in anticipation of a blow: “In that moment, she says, I was the adult, and they were the children.” Nevertheless Doña Coco concedes that the innocence of a child also depends on the amount of time he/she has spent on the street. Thus the process coined by many social workers in Nicaragua as “*callejización*,” or “streetification,” also appears to be one of moral decay and corruption, a process in which children are deprived of childhood and lead ‘adult’ lives. In the words of Zelinda: “Such is the life of a street child: he has been deprived of the most beautiful chapter of life: infancy. He has missed out on dreams, fantasy, love, imagination and play. Our work is to return him to his lost

childhood.” Social worker Don Pedro provides a more detailed description of returning children to their childhood, explaining that the reintegration of street children necessitates first a recuperation of a lost childhood and second, the internalization of new values, behaviors and attitudes, namely: respect, hard work ethic, honesty, integrity, purity of heart and mind, solidarity and so forth.

Echoing Doña Coco’s developmental view, social worker and psychologist Don Pedro likewise speaks of children and adolescents as adults-in-the-making, undergoing processes of socialization that transform their original state. He draws on his experience with psychotherapy and describes adolescents as having greater personality formation than children. In his view, adolescents have already begun to transition into adulthood; they begin to develop reasoning and establish life goals. He is careful to point out that it is not that children have no mental reasoning; rather their level of reasoning is in need of development, which necessitates experience. Furthermore, in Don Pedro’s view, children are more susceptible to change, and are more permeable to their environment. Indeed, Don Pedro refers to his experience in saying that it is harder to rehabilitate adolescents from drug addiction, behavioral issues and trauma than it is to reintegrate children.

Finally, Zelinda and Don Pedro both associate dreams, fantasy, imagination and play with children, again emphasizing that children think through their ‘heart’, while adults use reason. These ideals of innocence and purity, as well as developmental immaturity are certainly not the only ways in which the aforementioned social workers define childhood. However, these tropes nevertheless are abundant, and moreover resonate with the testimonies of youth themselves.

Yet the theme of moral corruption does not end here, as it was equally communicated by the youth I interviewed through the language of *vicio* or vice. The children I spoke with explained that life on the streets is marked by vices: drinking, smoking, vagrancy, delinquency and so forth. While they characterize the lives of street children this way, the notion of innocence nevertheless comes through. As Patricia describes it, adults know what they are doing; they understand the consequences of their actions. Meanwhile, children do not. When I asked Jaime why he thought certain youth decide to escape from Los Quinchos he responded that it was because “they want to smoke and in the center it is prohibited.” However, when I later asked him what he thought the difference was between an adult and a child, his response was that “adults smoke and drink, while children do not.” This contradiction is striking; on the one hand the ideologies of pure childhood and corrupt adulthood run throughout the testimonies of Quinchos staff and its adolescent members. Moreover, many children, including Patricia, Mauricio, William and Josefina describe children through images of innocence and the need for protection. On the other hand, there is a simultaneous recognition that street children, and streetification, defy conceptualizations of a normal childhood. Thus, as a result of lack of protection and vice, street children lead adult lives.

Agencia y Libertad

At the same time that social workers of Los Quinchos continue to uphold conventional views of children needing protection and support, the philosophy behind the work of the organization also borrows from neoliberal rights discourses and a long tradition of youth activism in Sandinista Nicaragua to encourage the participation of

children in society, politics and culture. As Carlos Vidal explains it, “Adults insist upon imposing their adult-centric criteria, their “adultist” attitudes. The work we try to do is to co-facilitate the child’s development, so that he can participate in his own development. We can learn a lot from children. They teach us.” He argues for child authorship, something that underscores agency and competence. In this vision youth have something to contribute to society, and in the case of street youth, they are urged to dictate the form of their own empowerment. In Carlos’ view, to disallow youth participation is to trespass their rights and freedom. Doña Coco also corroborated this claim, insisting specifically upon children’s participation in the government and the Ministry of the Family. However, she was careful to point out that street children cannot *superar* (overcome, uplift themselves) without help and without the guidance of adults. Thus *superación* is a collaborative partnership, a mutually shared and dynamic process between adult and child.

With respect to the children’s perspectives, however, agency and freedom surfaced in relation to discipline. When questioned about why children escape from Los Quinchos, many explained that it was due to the disciplinary and corrective measures imposed by the organization. Those who escape refuse to adjust to a system of institutionalized care that requires rules and regulation. The allure of the street is the sense of freedom it provides, and many youth will elect life on the streets (even if this means more hunger, no education, and more violence), over permanent residence with Los Quinchos. While recounting her narrative Zelinda explained that one of the greatest challenges in street outreach is to make Los Quinchos a home, and not a prison. For many street children, youth centers like Los Quinchos resonate with incarceration. Here there is

active defiance of an ideology of reintegration, of internalizing this ideology, and accepting hierarchical structures of obedience and authority.

As much as the situations of street children are limited, and they are positioned within deeply troubling power imbalances of exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence, it is still possible to see youth making decisions on their own and refusing to “return to a normal childhood.” It is also particularly revealing that most of the street children I interviewed mentioned very few people they turned to for help, and several even indicated that they preferred not asking for help. There is an overriding theme of self-sufficiency here. The following vignette and excerpt from an interview exemplifies issues of agency, discipline and freedom, but will also segue into the discussion of impotence and vulnerability as it simultaneously repudiates this discourse of agency:

Casa Lago (House on the Lake) is Los Quinchos’ project for adolescent boys. It is situated outside of the town of Granada on the shore of the Lake Cocibolca, and lies at the foot of the Mombacho volcano. It is nestled in a deeply forested area that rises at a steep incline from the water’s edge.

Santiago is thirteen years old and he is one of the residents of Casa Lago. He is very shy and quiet and prefers to keep to himself. He does not like to participate in the other boys’ teasing and exuberant rough housing. He was always more comfortable if he participated of his own volition than when someone else tried to encourage him.

Santiago was the fourth person I interviewed during my time at Los Quinchos. My host brother helped me set up a quiet and private space for the interviews. Unfortunately the space he chose was an empty storage room with metal grates for doors. It was not exactly the most inviting space, and when I had asked the first interviewee Raúl if he had been interviewed before he said, “Yes, by the police.” I wonder if perhaps the setting in anyway recalled that experience...

The storage room was situated at the top of the hill underneath a dense canopy of trees. In the background were the sounds of birds and the echoing, haunting cries of howler monkeys resonating from across the Cocibolca Lake. In a nearby room the other boys were playing a reggaeton track on the radio while doing their chores. In retrospect I realize that we could have perched ourselves outside in a much more informal setting, and this would have provided a more welcoming environment for an interview session.

Despite our shyness, and the austere setting, Santiago took his time to understand the questions and answered them very thoughtfully. He had a lot to say:

Where were you born?

Managua

Have you always lived there?

Yes, in Ciudad Sandino.

You were born in Ciudad Sandino?

No in another neighborhood, but my mom separated herself from my dad because he drank a lot, so we moved to Ciudad Sandino.

...

Have you ever lived on the streets?

No

Have you worked before?

Yes, helping my mom.

What kind of work were you doing?

I would go sweep.

Where?

The marketplace. And various places. I would also help my aunt who worked in the marketplace. I would ask my mom for permission to work with my aunt.

Did someone pay you for this work?

Yes.

Who paid you?

Um, a man would pay me.

Did you do it in order to eat or survive? Or because you were forced?

No.

Did you like this work?

Of course I did. [mumbling]. But sometimes I didn't. And that's why I was brought to Los Quinchos.

Because you were working?

Si...because I wasn't paying attention to my mom.

Who brought you here to Los Quinchos?

My mom...I had a brother that used to work here in the projects. [Los Quinchos]. His name was Nelson.

Where is he now?

He has his girlfriend now, he lives in La Concha. [Nelson was fired from Los Quinchos because he would come to work drunk. He also struggles with alcoholism. As a child he was a member of Los Quinchos].

What do you miss about your life before coming to Los Quinchos?

Nothing.

Do you sometimes think about leaving Los Quinchos?

Yes.

Why?

I am bored.

Where would you go if you decided to leave?

If I leave Los Quinchos? I would be with my mom.

Do you know someone from Los Quinchos that decided to leave or return to his house or the street?

Yes. His name was Norman. He lived a block away from where I used to live.

Why do think some decide to leave?

For whatever reason. They don't like it here. Sometimes the scolding. Norman felt bad because of the scolding, and he left.

...

Who do you trust? Who do you go to when you need advice or counseling?

Me advice? You mean to ask for help?

Yes.

I don't like that. I don't like to ask for help. Sometimes you have to go to the psychologist to ask him what to do.

Why don't you like asking for help?

I don't like that.

Do you sometimes ask the psychologist for help?

No.

...

How have you overcome your obstacles? How do you overcome difficult times?

Behaving myself well.

What do you do when you feel angry, frustrated or sad?

I go to sleep or I rest so I can think about what to do.

What do you do to control your anger, frustration?

Nothing. I get angry. I don't like it when I am scolded. It makes me feel bad. And I get angry.

...

For you, what's the difference between an adult and a child?

I don't know.

How do you know when someone is no longer a child?

Because one feels big. One can look for a job and work. Whereas the small ones, there is nothing they can do.

For you is it better to be a child or an adult?

An adult.

Why?

Because I can look for a job. Because, when mom won't be here anymore, if she dies now, I won't be able to do anything. I will have to look for something to do. [Santiago started to rock back and forth ever so slightly while he was talking. He was having trouble maintaining eye contact and I could sense he was getting emotional. His voice faltered and his eyes became watery].

On the one hand this interview illustrates the ways in which projects like Los Quinchos come to represent a prison. Santiago is bored, and is most frustrated when he is scolded. Likewise, his friend Norman left on account of scolding. And yet, Santiago concedes that it is through good behavior (*portandome bien*) or following the exigencies demanded of him in Los Quinchos or of his mother, that he can *superar*, or overcome obstacles in life. Moreover, Santiago was not alone in pointing out the importance of good behavior. His counterparts agreed that good behavior is what helps them surmount difficult times. Thus, there is a reluctance to accept rules, and yet there is recognition that these rules are necessary for success and self-improvement. However, what is perhaps most striking and revealing in this excerpt are Santiago's expressions of impotence and vulnerability. Not unlike the other adolescents I interviewed, Santiago expressed a

preference for adulthood, and distinguished adults from children in their ability to work, provide for the family and achieve self-sustenance. The following section will elaborate on these issues and complicate the preceding rhetoric of agency and freedom.

Impotencia y Vulnerabilidad

It is particularly striking that Santiago expresses a desire to be an adult, because of what this allows him to do. The majority of the children I interviewed answered this question in the same way: they aspire to be adults because they will have the ability to work and provide for their family. Nevertheless, Magdalena and Josefina expressed desires to return to childhood, because this meant greater care and protection. Likewise, Mauricio expressed that he only had the desire to be a child again when he saw other children living well. But in the end he expressed a preference for adulthood, stating that children can't work, the most they can do is beg. In this same vein William expressed a preference for being an adolescent over a child, because, he says "I have more strength, more abilities than I did as a child, so I can help and I can work." These narratives attest to an overall rhetoric that ascribes impotence to children.

The reflections of social workers on childhood have already emphasized the more vulnerable positionality of children. However, the direct reflections of children themselves have as much to say about this. First of all, running parallel, and underlying the discourses of freedom, are the notions of family, affection and love. For every indication that the reason behind escaping Los Quinchos is freedom, there was also a commentary on the fact that what children miss most in Los Quinchos is their family. Moreover, as Mauricio pointed out, the reason many children pick up vices is as a result of the fact that they lack affection, care and love. In the descriptions of glue sniffing, the

social workers explained that the psychoactive drug is a way for children on the streets to feel powerful and protected on the streets. In the words of Zelinda: “The high of the glue makes them feel strong, powerful and invincible, even though they are emaciated. When they wake up from the high, they see themselves as they are, and they are afraid.”

William also explained to me that the hardest thing about living on the streets was seeking protection at night and having to be careful about being attacked by older youth or what he called ‘vagrants.’

There is contradiction and ambivalence here; on the one hand vices represent corruption of childhood, and yet they reinscribe notions of vulnerability and impotence, highlighting street children’s susceptibility to hunger and violence. Only glue can provide any feeling of security on the streets: while sniffing glue is seen as vice that runs counter to the ideal of a pure childhood, children living on the streets cannot live without it. In fact, their position as children requires it.

Additionally, for those children returning to the streets, there is the aspiration to reconnect with the family, or otherwise return to an alternative street family, a new set of kinship ties that were created in the absence of biological ones. Yet as the social workers contend, the family that every street child seeks and yearns for is the nuclear family. Not being able to be a part of this is a tremendous source of frustration and pain for members of Los Quinchos. When I asked the adolescents what they missed most about their life before coming to Los Quinchos all ten of them claimed that they missed their family most. Likewise, when I asked them what we should do for kids that live in the streets today, they unanimously responded that love, support and protection are what they need most. Thus self-sufficiency, self-reliance *and* profound interdependence are all at play

here. The following are a few excerpts from Josefina's journal, and they express this deep yearning for family unity:

July 31, 2012: I write on this white paper to express my feelings that sometimes are never realized...I have two brothers in la Finca and my family in Managua that I love very much. I love my sister and my niece most of all; they are the two people that make me happy...They say that dreams can become reality but part of me does not believe this because I have always dreamed that I would never be separated from my family but we were separated because of some familial problems...

August 1, 2012: It is incredible to start a new live with a new family and new friends that give you their unconditional support... In school I have two girlfriends that make me laugh and they make me feel confident about myself, like a person of flesh and bone and not like an animal, not like the way the boys treat me in Managua...In school, the strictest teacher congratulated me today because of my good behavior in the class, but she asked me where I lived and when I explained to her that I live at Los Quinchos, she was surprised.

August 2nd, 2012: The mornings are sad when I do not see my two brothers because I only see them on Saturdays and Sundays in La Finca. I miss my niece and my sister most. I have not seen them in two months and I miss them too much. *Without these four people I would die...* (emphasis mine)

August 5th, 2012: Each day is important and one has to know how to lose and win in life...There are things one has to learn, no one is born learned without examples for learning. Some are lucky and others have bad luck. Learning is the future...They say that bad habits can be overcome and I say yes because I have overcome (*he superado*) in the Yahoska project...I now know what my mother's worry was...but now that I have overcome I am thankful to mother Zelinda and my own mother who did me the favor of placing me in Los Quinchos...Things in life can be costly, from lies, to scolding to shame, to sadness, and happiness only lasts a short while. It is strange but it is true and one has to overcome...

In these journal entries Josefina expresses strong feelings for her family (“without these four people I would die”), but reasons that this separation was necessary for her own *superación*, or social uplifting. Likewise, she understands the importance of discipline and good behavior and the role these play in helping her overcome life obstacles. Here agency goes beyond family duty. It is also striking that she should mention that no one is born learned: she explains that it is only through experience that one can learn, thus echoing the developmental view expressed earlier by the social workers.

Additionally, Josefina's commentary with regard to the way "the boys in Managua" make her feel about her body points to issues of gender and the particular challenges girls face with respect to issues of agency and vulnerability. During our interview, social worker Doña Coco proclaimed: "it is easier for me to work with boys. Boys are stronger when they face their problems. Girls absorb far more from their environment, and are easily affected emotionally." I was puzzled by this observation. It seemed as though an added layer of impotence and vulnerability was being placed upon girls in terms of how they coped with life obstacles. My interview with 16-year-old Meche was quite revealing in terms of what she thought of agency and her particular position as a girl:

Do you ever think about leaving Los Quinchos?

Sometimes yes, but if I leave this place my life will be different from when I was a child. As they say here in Nicaragua, a woman has to look for a man. And what I want for myself is to *superarme* (overcome). For that reason I won't leave. I want to *superarme y mi familia*. I would like to help my mom and work. But what I have to do first is finish my studies. I can't afford to idle in the street.

Is this process of overcoming difficult for you?

Yes, sometimes it is difficult. I am bored here. But on the other hand I start to think about what I would do without this. This gives me strength, more encouragement to move forward and continue my studies.

Who/what helps you move forward?

The advice we receive in school and at Los Quinchos. Some of my friends also support me, and my friends at school.

Are you a Quincho?

Yes, with pride. If this project didn't exist I don't know what would have become of me. I would have been another person and I would not be thinking the way I do now.

Here individual autonomy and agency conflict with duties to the family. Nevertheless, both individualist pursuits and obligations toward kin exhibit social competence, whereby children participate in wage labor and contribute to the sustenance of the family. Additionally, Meche expresses the desire to study so that she can ultimately help her family overcome, or achieve upward social mobility. Having children would not only put a hold on her own life goals, but would also prevent her from significantly

changing her family's circumstances. Hence, even as familial duties are put on hold, this is done in order to safeguard *superación* for the family in the long run.

Putting the self before the family is not always an easy process, as the case of Laura and Meche demonstrate. Children who opt for living on the streets demonstrate the capacity of making this decision on their own, independently of the intervention of social institutions like Los Quinchos. However, residential life in centers like Los Quinchos contribute to changing attitudes in children regarding their place in society, their life goals, and their duties to the family.

Similar to Meche, Amelia underlined how the expectations for girls affect their entrance into adulthood:

What is the difference between a boy and an adult? What is the difference between a girl and an adult?

They are very different, the boy and the girl. The boy likes to play games that are more...I don't know...wild, whereas girls play with dolls. An adult might like to play but she has to work and worry about her studies. If she has a boyfriend she has to preoccupy herself over that too. Maybe the adolescent girl plays with dolls too. But when she falls in love, she stops playing those games.

In Amelia's view adulthood begins for girls when they fall in love. It is at this stage in a girl's life that she must forgo dolls, a significant marker of childhood. Indeed, in my interviews with the adolescent girls, all five mentioned that the distinction between girls and adults is that girls play with dolls. Sexual maturation, and the eventuality of motherhood, runs counter to these girls' notions of children. Yet again we see another instance in which the definitions of adult and child show the ways in which 'streetification' forces children to live 'adult' lives, whether through vice, crime or sexual labor.

Additionally, in speaking about girls who live on the street, Amelia explained that they face greater risks than boys: according to Amelia girls are more often the targets of

sexual abuse, and even though boys are also raped on the streets, girls face the particular consequence of pregnancy. Gloria, a former member of Los Quinchos, represents a case that exemplifies well the added complexity of bearing children. After leaving Los Quinchos at the age of 16 she had nowhere to go and no family who could support her. She lived with her boyfriend Marco, himself a former Quincho member and employee of the organization. However when he started beating her she left him. Marco's half brother offered her a place to stay, and he is now the father of her first child. Gloria claims that she is still in love with Marco, and that she has no feelings for the father of her child. Marco's brother does not want to financially support Gloria in her studies, and has made it clear to her that he does not approve of her going to school. Impotence and vulnerability, as well as interdependence and limited ability to make choices, are thus factors that are not just contingent upon age, but upon gender as well.

Concluding remarks

Although Tatek Abebe and Anne Trine Kjørholt based their ethnographic research in rural communities of Ethiopia's south, their exploration of the combined social competence and vulnerability of working children speaks to the current debate at hand. Their article "Social Actors and Victims of Exploitation: Working children in the cash economy of Ethiopia's South" challenges the insistence within anthropology to consider children as fully competent social agents. The authors remain critical of a dichotomous view of children that either views them as needy, defenseless and passive, or fully independent, autonomous beings. The approach of Abebe and Kjørholt embraces the more fluid and liminal position of rural poor children in Ethiopia, arguing that agency, dependence and vulnerability are situated within 'structures' that can be either enabling

or constraining and that “children tend to experience *interdependent* rather than independent social relations” (Abebe and Kjørholt 2009: 16). Similar to the ways in which children living at Los Quinchos situate themselves in relation to family and duty, Abebe and Kjørholt show children exercising agency through their participation in work, care, consumption and production, yet these social transactions also occur in congruence with obligations toward the family. As my ethnography likewise demonstrates, the children Abebe and Kjørholt interviewed throughout their ethnographic research acted as “*contributing* ‘beings,’ [yet] their life-aspirations and reflections about the future suggest[ed] that they are ‘human becomings’”. Thus, even as children inhabit the permeable and fluid boundary between agency and vulnerability, their ways of articulating their place in society is still heavily marked by a dichotomy of full acting agents and dependent adults-in-the-making.

I stand with Abebe and Kjørholt in arguing that children’s agency and vulnerability are not opposite “irreconcilable attributes” (Abebe and Kjørholt 2009: 191). In fact, as we observe competing notions of agency that are often caught up in self-sacrifice and duty (as we see in Lauren Leve’s work), it is possible to observe that agency and vulnerability are in fact not mutually exclusive but instead coexist in complicated ways.

Conclusion

The aim of this investigation has been three fold: (1) to chart the various ways in which Nicaraguan history and political economy have shaped family life, and therefore the life of the child, (2) elucidate the liminal-paradoxical situation street children occupy between sites of agency and vulnerability and (3) argue for a more nuanced approach to envisioning the cultural competence of children, both as it relates to anthropological enquiry as well as international rights discourses.

Where before children were specific targets of repressive Somocista rule, youth played an important political role in the Sandinista militant struggle. Moreover, the protection, provision and participation of youth constituted central tenets of the Sandinista socialist cause. However, the transition to a right wing, neoliberal government following the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 marks a significant shift once more to governmental rule that absolved itself of responsibility to its citizens, and left the tasks of post-war reconstruction and economic development within the hands of civil society. This shift has been caused both by a lack of political will as well as the economic constraints of structural readjustment programs and IMF conditionalities. With social benefits privatized and a reversal of most of the Sandinista social reforms, the Nicaraguan family encountered once more considerable strain. Although a ceasefire had been establish, a “war by other means” was in effect, placing emotional and psychological burdens on the family and propelling children to begin a life in the streets. Moreover, relapse to popular conservatism meant that the solidarity that so marked the times of Sandinista rule did not extend to street children. Today children living in the streets are

heavily stigmatized and marginalized: much remains to be done in order to integrate street youth within the larger collectivity of Nicaraguan society.

Nevertheless, the advent of neoliberal policy in Nicaragua was also marked by the influx of international human rights discourses, most notably the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, and the ensuing enactment of the Nicaraguan Code of Childhood and Adolescence. While these burgeoning rights discourses are predicated upon Western understandings of personhood, citizenship and the good life, they nonetheless find resonance with pre-existing rights discourses in Nicaragua and a long tradition of youth advocacy. Thus there is both rupture and continuity here, as discourses on ideal childhood and children's rights encounter both transformation and reaffirmation. To understand street children in Nicaragua today, and begin to grasp the various social factors that have led to the deterioration of impoverished families, it is necessary to contextualize family life within larger historical and political frameworks. Intrafamilial approaches to addressing the phenomenon of street children in Nicaragua pathologize individual family units as pathological and problematic, without taking into account the larger context.

Finally, with regard to how anthropologists now approach the study of children, this paper seeks illustrate the liminal position street children occupy between agency and vulnerability, and argues for a more nuanced approach to characterizing the social competence of children. The binary between defenseless victims and remarkably self-resourceful entrepreneurs fails to take into account the more fluid and ambiguous positionality of street children and their adult counterparts. Recognizing the limitations of this binary are relevant and urgent in so far as they place an emotional strain on children.

Anthropologists and social workers alike would benefit from understanding and highlighting the interdependencies between agency and vulnerability, and the various ways in which children navigate such a permeable boundary. The task remains to build a new, more nuanced theoretical framework for addressing the social competence of children.

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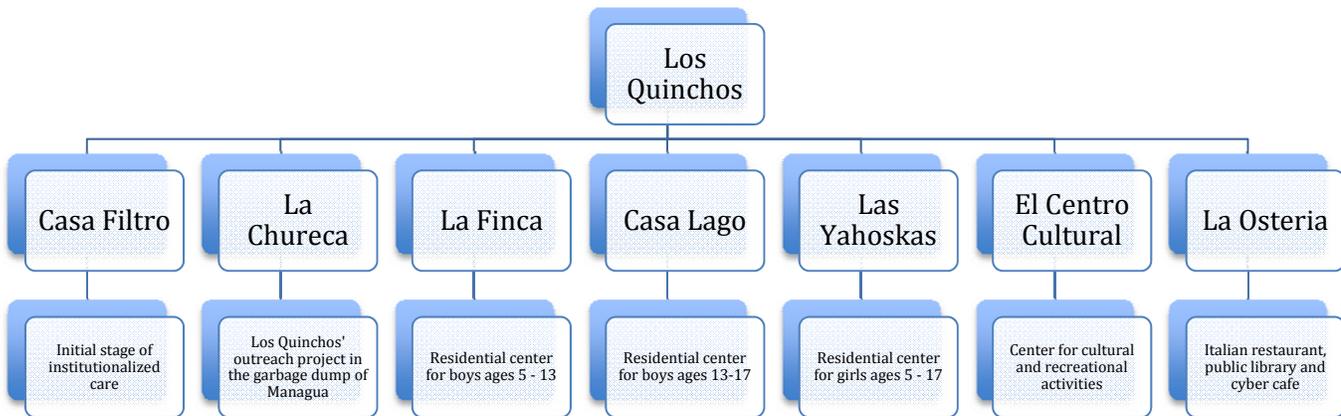
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The Organizational Structure of Los Quinchos

The best way to obtain a clearer grasp of the work of Los Quinchos is to breakdown its structure into its various subprojects: Casa Filtro, La Chureca, La Finca, Las Yahoskas, Casa Lago, La Ostería and El Centro Cultural.



Casa Filtro, Managua

While the main office of Los Quinchos is located in the small rural town of San Marcos, the majority of street outreach takes place in various neighborhood of Managua. Special emphasis is placed on El Mercado Oriental, Central America's largest open-air market and home to many street children. It is also the workplace of countless youth and is a bustling crossroads of narco-trafficking, human trafficking, and organized crime. Situated near El Mercado Oriental, La Casa Filtro serves as a place for new members of Los Quinchos to become accustomed to communal living and institutionalized care. It is also here that drug rehabilitation takes place. Here the boys attend public school on a daily basis and participate in recreational activities. During the weekends they travel to San Marcos to participate in shared activities with the subprojects located there. It is important to point out that this transitional stage only exists for the boys. Girls who are newly integrated into the Quinchos community move directly to the girls' center in San Marcos, otherwise known as Las Yahoskas.

La Chureca, Managua

There is a community of around 400 families that lives within the garbage dump of Managua. The livelihood of this community consists of collecting and selling recyclable materials. Thousands more families in surrounding neighborhoods of Managua also depend on the dump as a source of livelihood. Crime, prostitution, domestic violence and drug trafficking heavily mark the lived realities of people living here. The communities within and without the garbage dump have also become hard hit with the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. Children regularly encounter malnutrition, neglect and abuse. La Chureca project of Los Quinchos consists of a canteen, a bathroom and a play area that serves sixty boys and girls living and working in Managua's garbage dump. Here the

children obtain school uniforms and a hot meal on a quotidian basis. Participants receive academic support and are able to participate in recreational activities, including sports, games and arts and crafts. La Chureca is also part of the organization's street outreach. Those who are interested in receiving more care and protection from Los Quinchos are recruited to the Casa Filtro, or are taken to Las Yahoskas. Of the current Quincho community, roughly 20% were formerly living in La Chureca. Here it is important to recognize that the term 'street' can take on various meanings, such as garbage dump, market place, and other urban centers.

In recent years the climate of the situation in Managua's garbage dump has changed significantly. In 2010 a Spanish NGO implemented a program to clean up the waste and in its place construct fifty homes for the families living within the dump. The plan also involved the construction of a recycling plant in an effort to provide employment and income to the impoverished community and its surrounding neighbors. However the project was met by a significant amount of resistance on the part of Los Quinchos. The Spanish initiative neglected to address issues of drug addiction and crime, and could not account for the countless other families who would soon be rendered homeless and without a source of livelihood. Since then severe flooding has slowed the project and its management has been handed over to Nicaraguan actors, both governmental and nongovernmental. The changes occurring in La Chureca remain quite controversial and unresolved.

La Finca, San Marcos

After completing their adaptation period in the filter house, boys between the ages of 5 and 13 migrate to La Finca. This subproject is located in San Marcos, a small rural town situated forty minutes south of the capital city. All boys living at La Finca attend public school and pursue workshops in woodworking, artisan crafts, music, dance and theater. Outlets for creative expression abound here. The boys learn to perform tasks in the farm and assist in the raising of farm animals. However, most of the farm (referred to as La Granja) is managed and maintained by the adult staff. Many of these employees are former Quinchos themselves, and the products of the farm provide food, revenue and sustainability for the organization.





Casa Lago, Granada

Casa Lago provides hospitality to boys between the ages of 13 to 17. Located on the shore of the Cocibolca Lake and near the foot of one of Nicaragua's numerous volcanoes, the House on the Lake provides teen boys with access to education and workshops in crafts. By learning skills in craftsmanship the boys are able to find meditation and healing through art, and can also develop important skills for when they enter the job market. After Casa Lago many of the boys continue secondary education or begin technical training. Some move on to higher education, while others have even received scholarships to study in Cuba. Currently Cuba is the only foreign country that has opened its arms to the street children of Nicaragua. Everywhere else Los Quinchos participants have been declared "beyond



Las Yahoskas

Located in San Marcos, Las Yahoskas was first incorporated into Los Quinchos in 1999. The project receives girls between the ages of 5 and 17. All of its members attend public school and participate in lectures that address women and girl’s rights. The residents of Las Yahoskas also play in the Quinchos musical band and share cultural, social and recreational activities with the other subprojects of the organization. In more recent years, the adolescent members of Las Yahoskas have been spending their weekdays at Día Nova, a nearby organization that caters specifically to the needs of teenage girls. However, all return to Las Yahoskas on weekends, and most express deeper ties with Los Quinchos than with the partner organization Día Nova.



El Centro Cultural Chechio Bum Bum

The main cultural center of Los Quinchos is located in San Marcos and is the site of numerous and diverse recreational activities. Here the children receive instruction in folkloric and modern dance, traditional musical instruments such as the marimba, and theater. The children are also part of a musical band and perform publicly during parades and town-wide festivities.

La Osteria Italiana

Not too far from the cultural center, La Osteria consists of an Italian restaurant, a public library and a cyber café. All three components act as sources of revenue for the organization and are popular sites among residents of San Marcos. In addition to providing sustainable revenue for the organization, La Osteria provides employment for recently graduated Quinchos members. Currently 30% of staff members were ex-Quinchos themselves. These young adults serve as role models for the younger generations, acting as sources of love and brotherhood.



Photos

The following photographs are from Henrik Saxgren's *Solomon's House: The Lost Children of Nicaragua*.

Saxgren, Henrik. 2000. *Solomon's House: The Lost Children of Nicaragua*. New York: Aperture Foundation.

Callejón de la Muerte







Doña Chila, the owner of the brothel.



This girl is carrying a jar of shoe glue in her left hand.



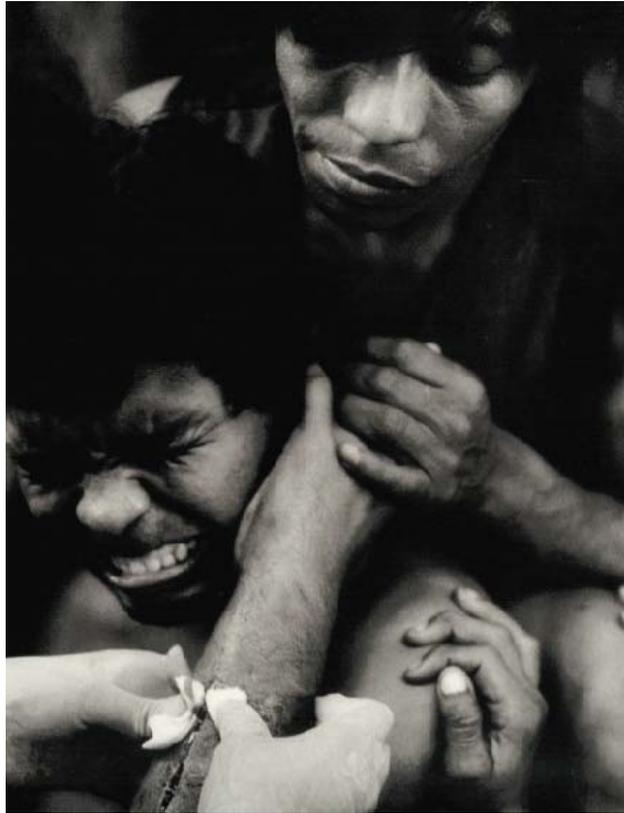
La Calle



A knife wound from a street fight that will not heal



Self-mutilation



Street outreach often begins by providing medical care to street children. This individual is being treated for an infected wound.



Jan Sochor Photography
<http://www.jansochor.com/photo-blog/glue-sniffing-boys-nicaragua.jpg>



Jan Sochor Photography
<http://www.jansochor.com>

La Chureca



Seth Barnes Jr.

<http://sethbarnesjr.theworldrace.org>



Brian Shumway Pohtography

<http://www.brianshumway.com/fine-art-prints/product/la-chureca/young-boy-works-trash-dump-collecting-recyclables-plastic-metal-sell-la-chureca-managua-nicaragua/>



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