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Una Vida Sin Palabras?: Disability, Subalternity and the Sandinista Revolution

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This paper offers an analysis of the documentary film, *Una Vida Sin Palabras* [*A life without words*] (2011). The film follows a short period in the lives of a *campesino* family living in a rural area of Nicaragua as a teacher of Nicaraguan sign language, working for a local NGO, endeavours to teach three deaf siblings how to sign. Bringing together the critical practices of Disability and Subaltern studies in the specific context of contemporary Nicaragua, the paper argues: (1) that the film ultimately re-inscribes and reinforces the subalternity of the disabled subjects it sets out to portray; and (2) that the hierarchy it produces between its object – the deaf family – and its implied educated, metropolitan audience replays some influential (but, we would argue, politically limited) critiques of the failure of the first Sandinista Government (1979-1990) and other broad based radical political movements to represent the national popular. In so doing, the paper also makes a case for the political and intellectual importance of bringing a Critical Disability Studies perspective to the field of Subaltern Studies, and argues that an engagement with the problems that are presented by this film at the level of both form and content raise some important questions for both fields of enquiry.

Keywords: disability; subalternity; documentary film; Nicaraguan sign language; Sandinista

Introduction

‘Suspended in another dimension’? Apropos the politics of representation once *again*…

There is a five minute section at the end of Adam Isenberg’s 2011 documentary *Una Vida Sin Palabras – A Life Without Words* - in which a deaf teacher of Nicaraguan sign language sheds tears over the difficulties she has experienced in her endeavour to teach signing to three deaf siblings living in a rural, relatively isolated community in Nicaragua. The camera stays – somewhat relentlessly – fixed on these tears and the repetitive movements she makes to wipe them away with her scarf. The camera moves from close ups to the middle distance and back again. At one point – and, notably, for the first time in the film – the image becomes blurred as if this moment, these tears, are significant enough to disrupt the film making itself. The

teacher addresses the family who stand around her, watching in a passive if uncomprehending manner. She says:

> The three of them I love them. That's how I feel. Yeah I'm crying thinking of them. Here in this house they can't learn. They should have gone to school. They know nothing. That's why I'm crying. They're smart […] They can learn […] (*Una Vida Sin Palabras*, 2011, 1:08:38 - 1:09:43)

This moment – which brings the film to its conclusion – condenses a number of elements that underpin the film's construction of the family at the centre of its narrative. It conveys the implied tragedy of lives which are presented as being 'without words' and the implicit blame that is meted out to the children's parents for the decision (that we are told about previously in the film) to take the children out of school earlier in their lives. There is a sense of failure here, in that the social programme to bring sign language to children in rural communities has not been successful in this instance. However, this assertion of failure is not straightforward. It conveys the pessimistic termination of the film's interest in this specific family but it also arguably affirms the aims of the educational programme in its endeavours to reach this kind of family and the authority of the teacher to make this judgement. That this judgement is one of implicit admonishment of a type that identifies an apparent personal failing on the part of the children's parents is of crucial importance. What we get here is an affirmation of the perspective of the formally educated outsider as the one who is authorised to speak about and speak for the needs of the children and their family. To a certain degree, the affirmation of the authority of the educated outsider is replicated at the level of the film's consumption, for the viewing audience are arguably interpellated in a way that aligns them with the structural position and perspective of the teacher: *Una Vida Sin Palabras* is a film *about* a *campesino* family, but one which is made *for* and consumed *by* an educated, urban audience.

In an interview posted on the film's website, the director, Adam Isenberg, comments on the origin of the film:

> I studied linguistics and remember from my studies the curious story of the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language. I wanted to make a documentary about that, so I started digging around online and came across the NGO 'Nicaraguan Sign Language Projects'. I corresponded with the NGO's director, then spent a few weeks travelling around Nicaragua meeting people from the Nicaraguan Deaf community. Along the way, through a friend of a friend, I was introduced to the family in the film. Dulce Maria and Francisco were like no one I'd ever met: adults who knew not a word of any language – not even their own names. They seemed suspended in another dimension, even a bit mystical, forgotten at the outer limits of our linguistically and socially constructed reality. Their life, and the predicament of countless others like them, became more important to me than the history of the local sign language. So the film became about them, and the sign-language teacher's efforts to reach them. (Isenberg, 2013)

In seeking to capture the lives of a family he views as 'extraordinary', Isenberg's project is entirely in keeping with the provenance of documentary film making in both medical and ethnographic research as a mode of academic discourse that endeavours to represent difference. The place of documentary film in the development of anthropology as a discipline is well documented and demonstrated in the work of scholars such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead (Ellis and McLane, 2005). Likewise, medical researchers were swift to utilise the new technology of film to record and analyse atypical or pathological symptoms and behaviours. Some of the earliest documentary film footage was produced by the Romanian neurologist, Gheorghe Marinescu, who made several short films about the physiological effects of neurological impairments: *The walking troubles of organic hemiplegy* (1898), and *The walking troubles of organic paraplegies* (1899) amongst others. Documentary also developed as a genre in Britain as part of the mandate to educate the peoples of the British Empire by way of the work of the Empire Marketing Board. This imperial enterprise utilised the new technology of film to develop the visual history of empire that had its origins in the production of exotic images of otherness at the Great Exhibitions in the nineteenth century (see Constantine, 1986). In this respect, the genre develops alongside a plethora of academic and institutional endeavours predicated upon the identification, analysis and, in many instances, the exploitation of subaltern and disabled subjects for economic or intellectual gain. However, through the course of the twentieth century, documentary film-making is characterised by increasing degrees of self-reflexivity on the part of the film maker, manifest in the development of a visual rhetoric that seeks to acknowledge the construction of the film as text and/or the position of the film-maker with regards to his/her subject. This is demonstrated, for example, in the work of Nick Broomfield. This shift is something that occurs in tandem with the academic auto-critique of anthropology and ethnography in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of scholars such as James Clifford and George Marcus and with the history of anti-colonial and national liberation movements in their various guises. Indeed during this period Nicaragua was the setting for arguably one of the last examples of such a mass based movement of political and cultural change. We refer here to the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), a movement that overthrew the US backed Somoza dynasty in 1979 and ruled the country by democratic mandate until 1990. We will return to the case of the Sandinistas later in this paper.

It is important to note here that Isenberg's film is neither self-reflexive as far as the process of its own construction is concerned, nor does it acknowledge or problematize the position of the ethnographic gaze of the film-maker. The presence of the camera is evidenced by the eldest deaf sibling Dulce Maria's endeavours to evade its presence in her life (though her resistance and discomfort is ignored), but it is not acknowledged in the overarching narrative of the film and nor are we provided in the film with an account of the origins of its own development. In other words, we are not told *why* Isenberg chooses to place this particular ('a-typical') family at the centre of its narrative. It is true that this context is provided by the director on the film's web page and it is possible that the expectation is that the informed

viewer will seek out this contextualising information. However, the film itself provides no historical information about the development of sign language in Nicaragua, nothing by way of an account of the emergence of specific educational programmes in the country and no geographical information that would enable the audience to locate the family in geographical, historical or properly social terms. To make sense of the life of this family arguably requires a broader historical understanding of the recent history of Nicaragua and the period of revolutionary struggle in Latin America in the latter half of the twentieth century. This history, and attendant debates about dependency theory and uneven development, would provide an important insight into structural and systemic causes for such socio-economic and educational divisions within Nicaraguan society itself (see Frank, 1967, 1969; Laclau, 1979; Dunkerley, 1988; Vilas, 1989; Hale, 1994, Beverley, 1999).

The decision to present the family's encounter with the teacher without providing any contextualising information or narration thus clearly reinforces the notion of the 'mystical', 'other worldliness' of this apparently 'wordless' family. The film provides no information about the passage of time – either in terms of the duration of the events depicted or the process of film making in the community itself. In fact, although it appears that the visits of the teacher are filmed chronologically, her dress in the climatic final scene is identical to her dress in an earlier depiction of her sessions with the siblings. This suggests that the outburst of emotion with which the film concludes may not be the result of the culmination of her engagement with the family, but rather the result of the representation that the film-maker wishes to make of this encounter. The narrative arc that Isenberg constructs is one that requires a tragic denouement: the children who 'cannot learn', the family that 'cannot change', the community that 'cannot develop'. The effects of this representational stance are entirely in keeping with the characteristics of colonial and orientalist discourses as described by Edward Said (1978, 1993); the depictions of the countryside and of its rural populace are denied the modernity that underpins the viewing position of the audience. There are numerous shots of mountains and an undeveloped landscape, juxtaposed with the religious songs of Dulce Maria's aunt, shots of the sons chopping wood and of Dulce Maria fortifying the walls of the kitchen with mud, all of which together present a timeless and 'mythified' image of rural life. It is as if this family exists outside the temporality, modernity and movement that is associated with the urban spaces in the film. It is worth noting that the teacher is characterised from the outset in terms of travel (catching buses from one location to another), her engagement with technology (picking up messages on her mobile phone) and wearing a variety of fashionable outfits (in contrast to the clothes of Dulce Maria and her siblings). In other words, the teacher is associated with change, movement and 'development'.

In contrast to this, the boys in the family are only ever depicted in the immediate vicinity of their home, and Dulce Maria's only journey is to the local church. There is a sense of circularity and repetition in the depiction of their lives; a well-worn representation of rural life as unchanging, cyclical and predictable. It is precisely this notion of rural life that

underpins the kind of libidinal investment in contemporary notions of an 'escape' from the neoliberal rat race on the part of affluent western tourists desperately seeking an authentic holiday experience in the apparently 'untouched' spaces of the global south. However, as Raymond Williams (1973) has argued, this kind of evocation of the 'country' is profoundly ideological and founded upon the occlusion of its complex social and economic relationships to metropolitan centres of power. Writing of the epistemological and political limitations of the reductive exportation of Western theoretical and conceptual paradigms to the 'Global South space and its people', Shaun Grech (2014: 51) notes the 'inordinate homogenising' that characterises this kind of critical practice and its failure to address the complexity, dynamism and heterogeneity of rural communities in Latin America. With its depiction of Nicaraguan rural life as static, timeless and, in the director's own words, at the 'outer reaches of […] socially constructed reality', we would argue that the film remains caught within the ideologically reductive parameters rightly criticised by postcolonial and materialist scholars.

If we can read the visual rhetoric of the film via postcolonial theory, then we can also do this in relation to the critique of ableist discourse we find in Disability Studies. Isenberg's aim is to present his audience with something extraordinary that they, like him, have never before encountered. His curiosity at these figures he presents as inhabiting the very limits of our 'reality' is effectively a form of enfreakment wherein the family become the passive objects of Isenberg's half-fascinated, half-horrified gaze (Garland-Thomson, 1996; Hevey, 2006). As his account of the genesis of the film indicates, they are to be looked upon as if 'suspended in another dimension'. In what follows, we want to consider the usefulness of the concept of subalternity (Spivak, 1988a; Beverley, 1999) as a way of thinking through the political implications of the film in the specific context of the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language, the educational project of the first Sandinista government (1979-1990) and the perceived failings of this revolutionary project. Focusing particularly upon the representation of the eldest sibling Dulce Maria, the overall aim of this discussion is to open up some questions about the ways in which postcolonial theory and disability studies intersect and about the political project of disability studies itself.

The absent centre? Contextualising the narrative: a brief history of Nicaraguan Sign Language and the Sandinista Literacy Crusade

In the interview in which he describes the development of the film, Isenberg states that his initial aim was to conduct academic research into the history and development of Nicaraguan Sign Language. However, Isenberg's original aim changes as the research for his film making proceeds. What Isenberg sees as the 'mystical' world of the deaf siblings and 'the predicament of countless others like them, became more important […] than the history of the local sign language'. Beyond a brief captioned reference in the opening credits to the development of what is now officially known as, *Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua* (ISN) or Nicaraguan Sign Language, no further reference or contextualisation of 'the history of this

local sign language' is provided by the film. What Isenberg calls the 'curious story of Nicaraguan sign language', does, however, play a prominent role in debates in contemporary linguistics regarding language acquisition (see Kegl, 1994; Senghas, 1995; Tomasello, 2005). Furthermore, the history of ISN is, we would argue, also of crucial importance to a critical understanding of the film itself and its wider relation to the debates about political representation that emerged out of the Sandinista revolution. Before an analysis of these issues and their intersection with critical disability studies and subaltern studies is undertaken, we would like to situate the film within the context of the history of ISN.

Revolutionary Transformations

The first school for deaf children in Nicaragua was created in 1977 in the last years of the Somoza dictatorship. This was a small school with limited places located in the capital city Managua and thus inaccessible to the majority of the population living outside the city. Following the victory of the Sandinistas in 1979, the new left wing government embarked on what was termed a 'new literacy crusade' led by the new Minister for Education, the liberation theologian, Fernando Cardenal. Prior to the revolution, Nicaragua was identified as having one of the lowest levels of literacy in the world. The Sandinista Literacy Crusade– based upon the successful model from the Cuban Revolution – aimed to challenge this form of structural inequality. Representing an even broader mobilisation of direct participants than that of the Sandinista insurgency itself, the Literacy Crusade mobilised 80,000 workers, the majority of whom were volunteers forming 'popular educational collectives' (CEPs) (Villas, 1986: 216-218; Beverley and Zimmerman, 1990: 95). The CEPs travelled from the cities to the countryside to educate and work with peasant communities, focusing on the education of both the young and old. As part of this 'crusade', Cardenal's Ministry for Education began to develop and extend provision for deaf children in Nicaragua. More specialist schools were built but once again, these were only located in the urban centres and in the capital Managua. Outlying and isolated rural areas did not receive similar services, although some children were brought or bussed in to the urban areas from outlying zones in order to attend the schools.

Despite the good intentions of the government then, the Sandinista educational programme for the deaf in the 1980s was not a direct or immediate success. With low levels of resources, the endeavour to teach deaf children basic sign language via finger spelling and Spanish lip reading with the support of linguists and educators from the Soviet Union and eastern Bloc was relatively unsuccessful. What did happen, however, was that the children and young people who attended these schools began to develop their own sign language during their interactions in the playgrounds and on the buses going to and from school. The teachers were unable to understand this language and at first did not recognise it as a 'real' form of communication or complete language that amounted to a development beyond home sign. However, in 1986, the Ministry for Education called for help from US linguists, in particular

Judy Kegl a sign language expert from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). These linguists were able to identify that the children, especially younger children, often referred to as the 'second generation' of students attending the new schools, had indeed developed their own 'creole' language with relatively sophisticated grammatical conventions. It was this increasingly complex and grammatically structured language that became known as *Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua* (ISN) or Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL).

The development of Nicaraguan Sign Language arguably constitutes a key example of what Carlos Vilas (1986: 216-218) describes as a 'gigantic process of self-education' led by the 'popular classes themselves.' While emerging in and around the space of a state educational programme and institution, the first point to note here is that the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language develops in the first instance from the collective agency of the children. Yet as the discussion above reveals, this form of agency and self-representation on the part of the young Nicaraguan deaf community was then taken up and supported by the post-revolutionary state in tandem with politically sympathetic academics. To make this point in slightly different terms, the relation of the linguistic experts from MIT to the language developed by the deaf children is not so much a question of an encounter between distinct social positions wherein privileged, formally educated first world subjects impose particular linguistic models upon 'third world' deaf children in the global south, but rather a process by which these positions are articulated together in the development of common programme. In this instance, this is an initiative that developed out of, and was led by, the deaf children themselves.

It is interesting to note here that at the very moment of the entrance of the MIT experts, the ability of the Sandinistas and the state to represent the broad masses of the Nicaraguan population, a process that George Black (1981) calls the 'triumph of the people', was fatally undercut by a series of conjunctural and contradictory developments. During the process of national reconstruction that followed the revolutionary war, the Sandinistas' alignment with socio-economically progressive forces in the Church, an alignment that had been so vital to building popular support amongst the masses during the revolution, began to contradict the progressive demands for abortion and birth control as expressed by the party's female wing. Another contradiction emerged in relation to the questions of ethnicity. The national-popular project of Sandinismo drew upon the signifier of Augusto Sandino, the emblematic figure of Spanish speaking mestizo opposition to North American imperialism during the 1920s. One problem with this type of construction of nation was that it symbolically alienated the English speaking Afro-Caribbean population and the Indigenous Miskitus of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast (Hale, 1994: 34-5; Beverley, 1999: 94-5). While these internal contradictions were, on the one hand, an opportunity for redress and reconstitution, especially in the subsequent attempts of the Government to inaugurate a new pluri-ethnic vision of Sandinista Nicaragua that would fully engage the different ethnicities and cultural traditions of the nation, they were on the other, also exacerbated by the political and socio-economic consequences of the US backed 'Contra War' which raged in the Nicaraguan countryside. Originally made up of

former members of the Somoza's National Guard and operating out of neighbouring countries such as Honduras and Costa Rica, the Contras terrorized the Nicaraguan population, attacking schools, health centres, co-operatives developed by Sandinista social programmes (see Chomsky, 1991). The Contra War and a US led trade embargo thus had a devastating effect on both the economy and national politics. In order to defend the gains of the revolution, one of the responses of the Sandinista government was the declaration of a state of exception. However, this arguably contradicted some of the democratic aims that had made the Sandinista movement such a popular alternative to the authoritarian rule of the Somoza regime. As the US orchestrated counter-offensive intensified and the economy spiralled into decline, the internal divisions within the Sandinista project were exacerbated and the Party's ability to represent 'the nation' was fatally undermined. The Sandinistas lost the election in February 1990. When placed in this context then, it is important to recognise that the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language and the ability of the state to represent and build upon the popular agency of deaf children arguably marks a key political success, especially when the Sandinistas' status as a broad-based national popular movement was challenged by the contra war. While an ableist approach to politics may view NSL as a marginal development within the history of the revolutionary period, it is significant that the collective agency of the deaf children and the articulation of their linguistic innovation in relation to a wider collective constituted by the state, traditional intellectuals and the lower classes, actually parallels the earlier and successful mobilisation of a national popular front by the Sandinistas themselves during the revolutionary struggle of the late 1970s.

A narrative of revolutionary reversal?

Although *Una Vida Sin Palabras* is set at least two decades after the fall of the first Sandinista government in February 1990, the discussion of the historical context for the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language allows us to outline certain tensions within Isenberg's film. The first thing to note here is that the film itself contains a similar series of social participants that made up the educational programmes of the 1980s – we see a group of deaf children, an isolated and relatively un-educated peasant family and a linguistic expert in the form of the teacher. Unlike the experience of the Sandinista Literacy Crusade and the deaf schools in Managua in the 1980s, what we see in the film is a type of reversal of the earlier trend. Instead of a sense of collective agency on the part of the deaf community to represent themselves and successfully articulate this representation within a broader social front, the film offers a depiction of deaf children with very little agency. They are constructed as victims of a world that they cannot apparently control. They are, as the film suggests, 'without words'; in the words of their father, they are 'incomplete (*son incompletos*). As such, the emphasis of the film is at odds with the agency and self- realisation that characterised the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language as the linguistic expression of a self-creating group. In contrast to this, the film suggests that the three siblings lack this capacity and can only be understood or decoded by and through the expertise of the teacher, and, by extension,

the film maker and the viewer. Throughout the film, the deaf siblings are frequently denied agency, particularly the right to refuse to be the subject of Isenberg's documentary. This is particularly apparent in the case of Dulce Maria whose discomfort at the presence of the camera and various injunctions to perform is apparent from the outset of the film. There is no sustained attempt on the part of Isenberg to engage with the siblings on their own terms, they are simply spoken about and for by those around them.

This leads us to a concept that is at the centre of postcolonial theory, Gramscian Marxism and also a number of analyses of the failings of Nicaraguan Revolution itself – that of the subaltern. This concept has not featured prominently in disability studies although it has evident affinities with endeavours to think through the structural oppression and silencing of the voices of disabled people.

'A general attribute of subordination': the subaltern and subaltern studies

In the famous words of Ranajit Guha (1988a:35), subalternity is a general 'attribute of subordination', articulated 'in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office.' This concept of subalternity emerged as a prominent feature in late twentieth century debates regarding problematic social developments within postcolonial states. First popularised by Guha's Indian Subaltern Studies Group, debates on what became known as the 'historic failure of the nation to come into its own' (Guha, 1988b: 43) set out to explore the reversals or betrayals of the emancipatory aims of the decolonisation process by postcolonial elites. Alongside such historical concerns, subaltern studies also took aim at new forms of postcolonial subjugation: the persistence of racial and class inequalities, internal colonization, and neo-colonial socio-economic practices in the context of what is now called neoliberal globalization (see Guha and Spivak, 1988; Beverley, 1999; Coronil, 2000). We do not have the time or space here to attend to the complexity and fields of debate that circumscribe the concept of subalternity in *toto*. However, in terms of the concerns that animate this paper, we will provide a brief account of two of its most influential formulations that emerged in response to the opening inaugurated by Guha: the work of the postcolonial critic and former member of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group, Gayatri Spivak, and that of the Latin American scholar John Beverley.

Although the subaltern is now commonly associated with postcolonial theory, it is important to note that the concept has its origins in the work of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Pre-figuring its later adoption in the context of postcolonial India by Guha, Gramsci's use of the subaltern sought to account for the failure of the newly unified Italian state to embody a national popular will. Gramsci tied this to the inability of the nineteenth century liberal bourgeois leadership of the Italian Risorgimento to encompass or embody the political will of the majority of the populace, specifically the peasantry in the primarily agricultural economy of the South of the country (1971: 53). Gramsci argued that one of the major reasons for the subsequent weakness of the Italian nation state, most notable in the

long-standing divide between the affluent industrial North and the agrarian and relatively impoverished South, emerged from the failure of liberal elites to promote radical agrarian reform. In Gramsci's analysis, such populist reforms, akin to those undertaken by the French Jacobins, would arguably have engaged the southern peasantry in the process of the Risorgimento in a much more active manner. Gramsci's diagnosis of the Risorgimento as a passive revolution, a top-down model without mass participation, thus constituted a central part of his critique of the structural weaknesses that he believed aided the rise of fascism and its reactionary project of national unity in Italy during the 1930s. In the process, he developed the concept of subalternity to describe those groups – most notably the southern peasantry – whose interests and self- representations do not achieve hegemony; in other words, groups whose interests and identity are not encompassed by the dominant political concept of the people or the national popular. As we will discuss later, Gramsci's concept of the national popular was also crucially built upon cultural concerns, such as the need for the formation of centralised national language and new artistic and literary forms that could represent the new social formation and demographic plurality of the modern Italian nation state. The subaltern thus designates a historical identity that demarcates a position of social subordination. It is the identity of someone whose own agency is erased or ignored in political processes and whose self-representations do not attain cultural authority.

It is the definition of subalternity as a problem of representation that underpins Gayatri Spivak's (1988a) famous claim that 'the subaltern cannot speak'. What Spivak means here is that the subaltern cannot speak in a way that would carry any sort of significance for those in positions of privilege without fundamentally transforming the manifold constructions of power – cultural, political, socio-economic – that constitute the subject positions of subaltern and elite in the first instance. Subaltern theory is thus intimately related to questions of politics and political economy but also to those of academic and cultural power. One of the aims of subaltern studies is not simply to represent the subaltern as such, but rather to investigate and challenge the ways subalternity is produced and perpetuated within academic and cultural discourse itself. In doing so it tries, like the critical turn within anthropology mentioned earlier, to think reflexively about its own structural position in social relations of power. Indeed, as the leading figure in the Latin American Subaltern Studies group John Beverley (1993, 1999) has repeatedly argued, subaltern theory must also refer to the role of educated, literate figures within the educational and academic state apparatus and the production of structural relation of domination that emerge from cultural practices such as education, literature and art. As we outline above, these issues are intimately tied to historical developments such as the rise of Nicaraguan Sign Language under the Sandinista regime in the 1980s. It is no surprise then that in recent times, subaltern studies has focused on the experiences and critiques of national liberation movements and popular political mobilisations such as the Sandinistas as paradigms through which people have attempted to contest forms of structural power in its various forms.

Since the fall of the Sandinista government in 1990, Latin American subaltern studies have

thus tried to examine why the concepts of the 'people' and the 'nation' that functioned as the subject of the national liberation struggles of the 20th century had created a certain narrative of community or national identity that ultimately could not encompass or adequately represent all the class or group components that made up this national community. Even in left nationalist movements such as Cuba or Nicaragua which sought to base themselves on a broad popular appeal to both the working classes and peasantry alongside other marginalised identities – the unemployed, students, women, children, 'patriotic' and 'progressive' landowners and small scale capitalists – there emerged deep problems in the relation between the hegemonic nationalist discourse and 'the people' (Beverley, 1999: 94-97). Despite such a broad appeal, the contradictions among the people inevitably produced a subaltern remainder or excess that could not be represented within these national projects. This is certainly the case in relation to the conceptualisation of the national popular in Nicaragua during the Sandinista period.

As we noted above, the Sandinistas organized a multi-class 'front'. However, in the process of national reconstruction following the revolution and under pressure from structural problems stemming from combined and uneven development and the US-led contra war, the front began to fall apart. This became increasingly apparent after 1985 when economic stabilisation plans negatively impacted upon the standard of living of the poor, the primary constituency of the Sandinista movement. As Beverley (1998: 308-9) notes, under such conditions, the concept of the people and the view of the Sandinistas as representative of the national popular became increasingly incoherent. Beyond issues directly related to class, this 'unravelling' of Sandinista hegemony also took place via contradictions emerging in relation to religion, gender and ethnicity (Beverley, 1998). One of the key ways of mobilising the overwhelmingly Catholic population during the revolution had been to develop an idea of the people's church. This was led by the poet and liberation theologian, Ernesto Cardenal, who later served, like his brother in Education, as the Sandinista Minister for Culture from 1979-1987. However, this alliance with a radical catholic church also led to Sandinista support for the church's position on abortion and birth control. The official Sandinista women's group, AMNLAE, was expected to go along with such decisions and express a position of national unity, a position which was seen as essential in light of the aggression from the US and their Contra proxies. Yet the base support group of AMNLAE – a doubly subalternised group marked by class and gender – saw their concerns thus marginalised by the demands of the party leadership (Beverley, 1999: 95-6). Similarly, in terms of ethnicity and national identity, for indigenous Miskitu communities and English speaking creoles on the Atlantic coast, the Sandinista national popular signifier of Sandino whose struggle against US occupation in the 1930s represented the opposition of a Spanish speaking culture to US imperialism, did not function in the same way as it did for the Spanish speaking majority. In light of this disaffection – and the US attempt to destabilise the Atlantic coast in the Contra war – the Sandinistas first attempted to repress and then to refine the national project to one that was pluri-linguistic.

Such developments can and have been taken up and analysed through the 'deconstructive' model of subaltern studies. As the case of the Sandinistas highlights, subaltern politics has traditionally been tied to the idea of the nation or national popular via a notion of class. We see an attempted alliance of the working class, peasant class and even the middle strata. However, in the work of figures such as Spivak and much postcolonial discourse, the subaltern signifies something other than a politicized working class, counter-hegemonic projects for national unity, or an organized political project (Spivak, 1990: 90-1). Thus in the case of Spivak, the subaltern is the figure of extreme marginalisation or Derridean excess which interrupts any claim to unity or meaning on the part of such organised political projects and bodies of knowledge. Her famous example is, of course, the abolition of *Sati,* or widow sacrifice by the British in India (1988a). Here Spivak draws attention to the cultural and political erasure of the subaltern female as a result of both 'native' patriarchal practices and also the 'humanistic' concerns of the British, whose actions can also be read as serving to disavow the fact of their central position in the structural violence of colonial rule. In terms of the example of the first Sandinista government, a Spivakian focus would centre on the case of the repressed demands for women's rights over birth control and the alienation of Miskitu groups. In the first case, the demands for birth control were compromised by the incorporation of the Catholic Church in the project of national unity. Similarly, the self-representations and cultural identities of the Miskitu population were also marginalised by the emergent form of creole Spanish nationalism signified by the image of Sandino. As these examples make clear, Spivak's subaltern figure interrupts the constitution of the people as a unified bloc or as a subject of history. It is no surprise then that Spivak herself is at constant pains to point out the provisionality and uncertainty of any such claim to representation and knowledge either by elite discourses and practices but also by sympathetic academics and organised oppositional political movements. In so doing, Spivakian subaltern studies, as Beverley (1998: 309) astutely observes, becomes a metaphor for the act of deconstruction itself.

Spivak's work constitutes a powerful and influential contribution not only to the field of subaltern studies but also to various other related political and cultural practices, such as Marxism and feminism, that are engaged in questions of power, representation and the struggles for social justice. However, one consequence of Spivak's focus on deconstruction is that politics in her work only appears in a brief moment that disappears into continual deferral and displacement. For example, Spivak's work is characterised by a series of collaborations between traditional intellectuals such as herself and a subaltern or organic intellectuals of the subaltern masses. Thus Spivak works with Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer and social activist. However, the potential for unity or a collective between the intellectual and the subaltern is constantly displaced. In Spivak's analysis, it is not Devi but subsequently the 'even more' subaltern characters of Devi's own stories that are configured by Spivak as potential examples of subaltern subjectivity or negation (see Spivak, 1988b). The space for politics and collective engagement is constantly deferred and despite Spivak's

injunctions to be wary of potential forms of epistemic violence practised from the academy, the role of intellectual to produce these encounters remains central.

As John Beverley (1998: 310) notes, Spivak's position could be seen as a 'principled extension of Lenin's injunction that revolutionary politics should always seek out the most oppressed strata of the population' (see Lenin, 1917). However, Beverley's work and arguably his broader point vis-à-vis Spivak here is to argue that this type of deconstruction precludes any real political engagement. One can identify resistance but it can never be harnessed to a programme of political transformation.

'Romantic Anti-Capitalism': disability studies, subalternity and the question of the state

If we were to think of this in relation to *Una Vida Sin Palabras*, Spivak's grassroots rebellion would be located in Dulce Maria's acts of resistance. Our references here are not limited to her initial refusal to participate in the pedagogic programme, but moreover to her response to the intrusive gaze of the camera which Dulce Maria greets with a combination of embarrassment, irritation and, at times, significant distress, constantly walking or turning away from it. There is resistance here – one which is difficult to watch at times, particularly when the desire of her aunt to behave politely in front of the camera prompts her to demand responses from Dulce Maria which then prompt her to make sense of her niece's refusal to play along. A Spivakian reading would enable us to account for Dulce Maria's actions as a form of subaltern resistance and would also preclude any endeavour to make sense of them in a language and discourse from which she is excluded. This position would both celebrate Dulce Maria's position and condemn the endeavour of the film maker to impose a particular meaning upon her actions and to contain her difference in an evaluative framework that is entirely urban and educated in provenance.

To take such a stance is compatible with a strand of Disability Studies that sets out to problematize and critique the ethnocentricity of established Disability Studies positions, rooted as they are in a Western, Enlightenment discourse of rights and individual autonomy (see Grech, 2014, 2015). This is an important and powerful development within the field that has problematized many untested assumptions about the multifaceted and polyvalent nature of disabled communities across the world. However, there are potential dangers in any stance that seeks to celebrate difference in non-Western communities as if this always offers a radical and preferable alternative to Western, rights based models. Firstly, this is because this can sometimes simply invert the attribution of political and ethical superiority without attending to the structural relations of power and subordination within particular rural communities such as the gendered division of labour we witness in Isenberg's film. It is important to recognise the complex ways in which semi-feudal and non-capitalist modes of production such as the *campesino* labour shown in the film exist side by side with capitalism in countries such as Nicaragua and to address this in the context of combined and uneven

development. It is certainly the case that one of the most powerful – and important – historical narratives in literary and cultural disability studies, Lennard Davis's account of the production of normalcy in the first chapter of 'Enforcing Normalcy' (1995), constructs a historical analysis of the emergence of the social relations of disability under capitalism that implicitly favours pre-capitalist formations in which the 'hegemony of normalcy' was not operative (24). We can see how this kind of historical analysis (compelling though it is) gives rise to what Michael Löwy (1987), albeit in a different context, terms 'romantic anticapitalism'. For Löwy, this position is characterised by an imaginative investment in a period before the transformations associated with the emergence of industrial capitalism. It is a position we can identify in work as diverse as Mathew Arnold's 'Culture and Anarchy' (1869) and Michel Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish' (1977). In the work of Lennard Davis, this moment before the productions of relations of dis/ability in the nineteenth century, is presented as a space in which perfection could only inhere within the aesthetic realm whilst human diversity was accepted as fact of life. Davis' argument is of crucial importance in outlining the historicity of disability as a concept. However, the tendency to depict earlier historical formations as lacking the kind of stratification or violence that we associate with the treatment of disabled people in industrialised contexts is also problematic. This is because such an approach fails to recognise that some biopolitical developments of modernity offer significant and positive transformations as far as access to technological, educational and medical support is concerned. In addition, it also fails to acknowledge that the places that we may associate today with pre-capitalist formations in fact exist in a complex relationship to them.

Whilst it is important to challenge the liberal ethos that appears to underpin the film's construction of the children as 'without words', it appears equally problematic to envisage Dulce Maria's silence as a meaningful political challenge to the values and structural relations that isolate and constitute her as different, disabled and subaltern in the first place. The underlying Spivakian notion that "We can't speak for them" occurs then at the expense of a thorough ongoing critique of the structural relations that place Dulce Maria in a position that enables the label "without words" to be adopted by Isenberg. To imagine that a meaningful engagement with the politics of resistance starts and ends with her silence, does not address the fundamental question of the aim of subaltern politics: to change the structural relations that constitute one as subaltern in first place. This is to say that no real engagement with relations of social deprivation can simply be solved at level of immediate grass-roots resistance, or an extension of this potentially depoliticizing logic in recent social movements (see Sader, 2008: 14-19).

In this context, the central issue raised by the film is whether or not we perceive the children to be without language and if so what we understand by the very concept of a language in relation to individual development and the aims of any educational project. In Gramsci's early discussions of hegemony and subaltern identity, he outlines the fact that if Italian working-class and peasant children, who were dialect speakers, were denied access to the

culturally dominant languages, then their equal participation in the development of the nation would be precluded (see Gramsci, 1985: 180-181). Gramsci's discussions of normative grammar and education here were not thought of as ways to coerce subaltern figures to speak in a particular way. Indeed, the tardy recognition of the need to develop a pluri-linguistic basis for Sandinista politics at the end of the 1980s following the disaffection of the Miskitu and non-Spanish speakers during the Contra war testifies to the ways in which such an option would be politically and socially irresponsible. This then opens up our discussion to the questions involved in John Beverley's (1998: 310; 1999: 152-155) attempt to reconstitute a Gramscian form of subaltern politics around the idea of a 'post-modernist form of the Popular Front' that would be driven by a democratic, egalitarian and heterogeneous understanding of 'the people', or what Gramsci calls 'the national-popular'.

What this would mean is to try to develop a new form of hegemony, using among other things the critical resources opened up by postcolonial and critical disability studies to both build upon the successes of popular liberation movements such as the Sandinistas, as well as to address their failures. Indeed, the recent leftward swing in Latin American politics known as *la marea rosada*, or pink tide, arguably signalled a movement in this direction. *La marea rosada* demarcates a new type of socialism or leftist politics wherein subaltern groups previously marginalised or excluded from the realm of traditional politics, such as indigenous groups and peasant coca farmers in Bolivia, have, to some extent, become a hegemonic force within the nation state (Laclau, 2006; Sader, 2008; Beverley 2011; Bosteels, 2011: 225-268). The impact of these developments demands much greater attention for both progressive politics and the academic fields within which this paper intervenes. As our discussion of the historical development of Nicaraguan Sign Language makes clear, the possibility for a successful democratic and egalitarian alliance of different sectors of the people in a post-revolutionary process of reconstruction was already signposted in spite of the pessimistic conjuncture of the Contra war and contradictory developments of the Sandinista project. However, to envisage the development of sign language as meaningful in ways that would allow Dulce Maria and her brothers to participate as equal agents in such a movement today, necessitates imagining a form of social change that would render the acquisition of this sign language meaningful within a wider social framework. Learning the language that the teacher brings is hardly meaningful unless that language is shared and enables the formation of relationships and opportunities beyond her immediate family. Sign Language must stand and be practised alongside Spanish and the Miskitu languages as part of the linguistic make-up of the Nicaraguan people. In other words, the social transformations demanded by a new heterogeneous concept of the people or the 'national popular' require a similar transformation of the linguistic, cultural and educational paradigms that exist within the country and also within subaltern and disability studies themselves.

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