

Radio of Flesh and Bone: Community Radio in the Authoritarian and Patriarchal Context of Today's Nicaragua

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Abstract In *A Passion for Radio: Training of Trainers* José Ignacio López Vigil asserts that community radio “is (made) of flesh and bone” (2015, p. 25). In the context of authoritarianism and patriarchy in today's Nicaragua these words suggest at least three meanings. One recalls threats to the lives and livelihoods of Nicaraguans that work for Nicaragua's surviving independent media, including community radio, particularly following the political and humanitarian crisis that began in April 2018. Community radio as “flesh and bone” also relates to the bodies of its listening public and is examined in this paper through the prism of the feminist community radio station, Radio Vos (Radio You 101.7 FM). Radio as “flesh and bone” also serves as a metaphor for community radio's material and operational existence, a body that functions via multiple interworking parts and systems. In discussing the challenges facing community radio in Nicaragua, this essay incorporates excerpts from an interview with Argentina Olivas, the director of *Radio Vos*.

Keywords Authoritarianism, Community Radio, Feminism, Nicaragua, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

“They can turn off the radio, but they can't turn off our voices”
Argentina Olivas, journalist and director of *Radio Vos* (2022)^{1 2}

In *A Passion for Radio: Training of Trainers* (2015)³ theologian and coordinator for the Association of Passionate (Female and Male) Radio Broadcasters⁴ José Ignacio López Vigil explores intersections between the ideals and praxis of community radio and liberation theology. According to López Vigil, the defining characteristics of transformative radio communication are that it is participatory, anti-hierarchical, and testimonial/experiential. Articulated in the language and tenor of oral prophecy in the *Book of Jeremiah*, he asserts:

Radio is made of flesh and bone. Woe to the radio host that remains secluded in the booth, that doesn't go out to do interviews in the market, that doesn't record in the plaza. Woe to radio that doesn't wander the street. Routine will consume their (male and female) hosts. Little by little their programs will get dusty. (Because) blood, creativity, and surprise in radio programming is found in the outside world. And if people call the radio station?

1 English translations of Spanish language quotations appear in the body of the essay. Original Spanish language quotations are included in footnotes.

2 “Pueden apagar la radio, pero nunca van a callar nuestra voz” (*ConfidencialTV*, 2022).

3 *Pasión por la Radio: Capacitación de capacitadores* (López Vigil, 2015).

4 “La Asociación Radialistas Apasionadas y Apasionados” (<https://radialistas.net/>).

That is good. And if people come to the radio station? *That is better.* And *what is even better*, to use the popular superlative, radio should go out to the people (p. 25).⁵

Following the Sandinista Revolution (1979), Nicaragua's government led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and under the leadership of Daniel Ortega, supported efforts to establish community radio and celebrated these initiatives hosting the third World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters' (AMARC) international conference in Managua in 1988 (Crabtree, 1996, para. 50). Decades later, in 2007, Ortega again assumed the presidency of Nicaragua in what would be the first of four consecutive administrations (2007-present). Today Ortega's name and that of his wife, Rosario Murillo, declared vice-president of Nicaragua in 2017, are identified by critics and human rights organizations as the Ortega-Murillo regime or dictatorship. The ability of community radio stations to engage with their audiences has become increasingly precarious under their leadership. For individuals that work/volunteer for stations viewed by the Ortega-Murillo government as "oppositional," the act of leaving the radio booth, going "out to the people" in the market, plaza, street, or bus station to approach Nicaraguans to request that they be interviewed for a radio broadcast can be a dangerous and nearly impossible endeavor. The staff and volunteers of community radio stations, potential sources and interviewees, businesses and organizations that buy advertising, and others perceived by the Ortega-Murillo government to support contestatory media entities face a statistically superlative probability of intimidation, threats, and other forms of reprisal—physical, legal, economic, and professional. Community radio networks also endure legal and extralegal threats to their economic viability, legal standing, and the security of their property.

This paper explores the significance of López Vigil's assertion that community radio "is (made) of flesh and bone" (2015, p. 25) in the context of authoritarianism and patriarchy in today's Nicaragua where the string of words, "radio," "flesh," and "bone" suggest at least three meanings. One recalls threats to the lives and livelihoods of Nicaraguans that work for Nicaragua's surviving independent media, including community radio, particularly following the political and humanitarian crisis that began in April 2018. Community radio as "flesh and bone" also relates to the bodies of its listening public and is examined in this paper through the prism of the feminist community radio station, *Radio Vos* (Radio You 101.7 FM) that since 2004 has engaged with its audience to confront intersecting forms of marginalization and violence exacted on the bodies of women, adolescents, and children. Early in and throughout Ortega's 21st century presidential administrations, feminist individuals and organizations, including *Radio Vos*, and individuals and organizations representing people of gender and sexual diversity have called attention to the increasing authoritarian and patriarchal character of his leadership. As a feminist radio station that is affiliated and collaborates with feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations and "questions and denounces any kind of governmental policy that hurts and threatens the rights of its (male and female) citizens" (*Radio Vos*, "Nosotras," n.d.),⁶ *Radio Vos* often articulates ideas that conflict with those of the Ortega-Murillo government. Radio as "flesh and bone" also serves as a metaphor for community radio's material and operational existence, a body that functions via multiple interworking parts and systems. To broadcast to their listeners, community radio stations need access to computers, electricity, the internet, microphones, location(s) to conduct work, funding sources to support their operations, among other resources. In

5 "La radio es de carne y hueso. Pobre del radialista que se queda enconchado en la cabina, que no sale a entrevistar en el mercado, que no graba en la plaza. Pobre de la radio que no es callejera. A sus locutores y locutoras se los comerá la rutina. Sus programas se irán empolvando. Porque la sangre, la creatividad, la sorpresa de la parrilla de programación se encuentra puertas afuera. ¿Que la gente llame a la radio? Está bueno. ¿Qué la gente venga a la radio? Está mejor. Y más mejor, utilizando el superlativo popular, que la radio vaya a la gente" (López Vigil, 2015, p. 25).

6 "cuestionando y denunciando todo tipo de política gubernamental que lesione y ponga en peligro los derechos de los y las ciudadanas" (*Radio Vos*, "Nosotras," n.d.).

authoritarian environments, like Nicaragua, community radio stations may need to maintain security services and legal representation. Examined through the prism of *Radio Vos* and other community radio stations, the third part of this essay discusses measures the Ortega-Murillo government has taken to harm the material existence and organizational viability of community radio and the impact of these measures on community radio and its listeners. In discussing the challenges facing community radio in Nicaragua, this essay incorporates material from an interview with Argentina Olivas, the director of *Radio Vos*.

DEFINING COMMUNITY RADIO

In “Nicaraguan Community Radio: The Challenge of Survival”⁷ Periodista Multimedia echoes the assessment of other media scholars in noting that there is no single definition of community radio (2022). Indeed, articles and blogs about community radio often begin with qualifiers and caveats to define what it is and what it is not. Publications that address community radio in an international context add a layer to these discussions to parse out nomenclature. López Vigil (1995) explains that, while community radio stations in the Americas (North, Central, and South) share the common goal of democratizing communication, they go by different names: “In Canada it was named ‘community radio.’ In Latin America, its variety of names reveals a richness of experience: ‘free’ Brazil, ‘participatory’ in Nicaragua, ‘popular’ in Ecuador. The habit changes but not the monk. The challenge of these radio stations is similar: democratize the word to make this unjust society more democratic” (p. 51).⁸ Recognizing the diversity of terms and meanings associated with community radio internationally, in their mapping of Nicaraguan local and community radio stations in the departments of León, Granada, Matagalpa and the city of Bluefields, Nicaraguan scholars, Saballos et al. (2012) explain that they researched a “sea of definitions” to approximate a definition of community radio in Nicaragua. They cite C.M. Krohling Peruzzo’s “Radio comunitaria, educación y desarrollo social” [Community Radio, Educational Communication, and Social Development” (2006)] as a point of departure:

Community Radio is identified with a focus on the local community. Its programming concerns topics of social interest relevant to the local community; it is non-profit; it contributes to expanding citizenship, to democratizing information (...) It also allows for the active participation and empowerment of members of the community and representatives of social movements and other forms of collective organization in its programming, creative processes, planning, and managing the station (pp. 4-5).⁹

Saballos et al. also anchors their definition in descriptions articulated by Nicaraguan community radio practitioners and experts. They cite the late director of *Radio Tigre* (93.9 FM, Managua), Jesús Miguel Blandón, who described Nicaraguan community radio as “small and non-profit stations dedicated to addressing and solving community issues. They have a strong ethos to serve and are

7 “Radios comunitarias de Nicaragua: el reto de sobrevivir” (Periodista Multimedia, 2022).

8 “En Canadá nacieron con el nombre de radios comunitarias. En América Latina, la variedad de los apellidos da cuenta de la riqueza de las experiencias: ‘libres’ en Brasil, ‘participativas’ en Nicaragua, ‘populares’ en el Ecuador” (López Vigil, 1995, p. 51).

9 “Radio Comunitaria es aquella que se reconoce por su labor en el ámbito de su localidad. Su programación es de interés social vinculada a la realidad local, no tiene fines lucrativos, contribuye a ampliar la ciudadanía, a democratizar la información () Permite también la participación activa y autónoma de las personas residentes en la localidad y de representantes de movimientos sociales y de otras formas de organización colectiva en la programación, en los procesos de creación, en el planeamiento y en la gestión de la emisora” (Krohling Peruzzo, 2006, pp. 4-5).

generally non-profit organizations. They are often subsidized by NGOs or the community” (Saballos et al., 2012, p. 5).¹⁰ Periodista Multimedia explains that community radio’s “importance stems from [its] proximity to the people and principles that form the basis of [its] work. [Community radio] works to democratize communication ensuring that a diversity of voices and opinions can be heard” (2022).¹¹ Lawyer, journalist, director of *Radio Camoapa* (98.5 FM, Camoapa, Boaco), and Nicaraguan representative to AMARC, Juan Carlos Duarte Sequeira underscores community radio’s commitment to “citizen’s rights, fundamental rights, the protection of women, the environment and working with minority and marginalized groups to strengthen inclusive communication initiatives” (Periodista Multimedia, 2022).¹² Saballos et al. note that Nicaraguan community radio stations are established in places where other forms of media are absent or few. Rather than take advantage of these would-be “niche markets,” they focus on educating the community and its needs (Saballos et al., 2012, p. 5).

Beyond the diversity of names by which community radio is known internationally, in the political, economic, and cultural context of Latin America, particularly in Central America in the latter years of the Cold War and into the 21st century, the intersection of the words “community,” “democratic,” “participatory,” “popular,” and “justice” often register an imprint of discourses of feminism, liberation, anti-(neo)colonialism, anti-imperialism, and liberation theology. Bringing into the public sphere the voices of marginalized individuals and communities came to be associated with the act of “dar testimonio” (giving testimony), “dar voz” (giving voice), “testimoniar” (testifying), and the *testimonio*.¹³ In Latin America and beyond, community radio represents a platform where marginalized people articulate their experiences and ideas. In places across the world like Nicaragua where one finds direct and indirect forms of censorship, limitations to access to independent media platforms, a lack of reliable telecommunications and infrastructure, and obstacles to access to technology, particularly in rural areas, community radio represents a critical and democratic media platform where underrepresented voices find a home. As explained below, the capacity of community radio in Nicaragua to fulfill these objectives has become progressively difficult.

DANGERS FACING PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH COMMUNITY RADIO AND OTHER FORMS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN TODAY’S NICARAGUA

Depending on one’s positionality, the word “danger” in reference to community radio in 21st century Nicaragua suggests at least two meanings. For those that hold power or aspire to obtain it, the existence of community radio and other independent media that foster democratic and accessible media platforms may represent a threat to their political, economic, and media dominance. Of course, for people that work for or are affiliated with community radio and other independent

¹⁰ “una estación pequeña que se dedica a divulgar y resolver problemas de la comunidad. Tienen un gran espíritu de servicio y generalmente tienen ánimo de lucro. Generalmente son subsidiadas por ONG o la comunidad” (Saballos et al., 2012, p. 5).

¹¹ “son importantes debido a la cercanía que tienen con la gente y a los principios que sostienen su trabajo. Una radio trabaja por la democratización de la palabra, incidiendo para que las voces plurales y criterios puedan escucharse” (Periodista Multimedia, 2022).

¹² “los derechos ciudadanos, los derechos fundamentales, la protección a la mujer, al medio ambiente y también se trabaja con los grupos minoritarios o excluidos tratando de consolidar propuestas de comunicación incluyentes” (Periodista Multimedia, 2022).

¹³ *El testimonio* is “[a] term popularized by John Beverley (1992) and George Yudice (1991) to describe narratives by genocide survivors of Guatemala, but first used by Elie Wiesel to describe narratives of concentration camp survivors, it is now a standard genre-marker for any kind of testimonial writing by victims of and witnesses to catastrophe and violence. The testimonio differs generically from the autobiography in that the autobiography is usually the life story of a successful individual who seeks to present her/ his life as an exemplar, while the testimonio is about the social order’s obstacles to an individual’s success or even society’s torture of the individual for her/his ethnic, class, gender and caste identity” (Nayar, 2015).

media, the word “danger” points to threats that are more material and existential. For community radio operators whose identity and ideas are broadcast across Nicaragua and beyond, it may call to memory the names of fellow radio operators and staff that have experienced intimidation and violence and have been forced to live in exile or exercise self-censorship. Indeed, in the authoritarian and patriarchal context of today’s Nicaragua, putting into practice the democratizing compass of community radio, striving to cut through censorship and manipulation, and making the realities in Nicaragua believable often mean putting one’s life and those of family and friends in danger.

Available statistics on efforts to inflict harm, weaken, or silence independent media platforms and the people that support them offer perspectives of some of the dangers facing people that seek to realize the ideal of the freedom of expression in Nicaragua. The international human rights organization, Article 19, explains that following the April 2018 crisis “[j]ournalists and outlets who were critical of the government during the violence now live and work under constant stigma, threats, harassment, and obstruction” (Article 19, 2019, n.p.). The organization states that “[t]wenty independent media journalists have disappeared under President Daniel Ortega [during his 21st century terms], and since the crackdown in 2018, when this new chapter of autocracy began, at least 120 journalists have fled into exile” (Article 19, 2022, p. 28). These 120 individuals are part of an exodus of over 260,000 Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers that have left their country between 2018 and June 2022 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023).. Reporters without Borders’ (RSF) 2022 World Press Freedom Index introduces its data on Nicaragua noting:

With President Daniel Ortega’s reelection in November 2021 for a fourth consecutive term, the independent media continue to endure a nightmare of censorship, intimidation and threats. Journalists are constantly stigmatised and subjected to harassment campaigns, arbitrary arrest and death threats. Many journalists have had to flee the country. [...] The media that continue to report on government abuses are digital, with most of its journalists in exile (RSF, 2022a).

Of the 180 countries included in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index, between 2021 and 2022, “Nicaragua (160th) recorded the biggest drop in rankings (- 39 places) and entered the Index’s red zone” (RSF, 2022b). Ranked at 160, Nicaragua is identified as the third least free country of the Americas following Cuba (173) and Honduras (165). A fourth Latin American country, Venezuela, is also included in the index’s “red zone” and ranked at 159 (RSF, 2022b).

In challenging narratives of the Ortega-Murillo government concerning human rights, environmental rights, international and domestic law, and the experiences and rights of marginalized populations, media entities like *Radio Vos*, face increased threats to the viability of their organizations and the security of their personnel and property. Argentina Olivas, the director of *Radio Vos*, details threats and violence against its staff:

Due to threats and harassment, three of our journalists currently live in exile, four if you include me. Just recently in January [2023] one of our journalists had to go into exile in Costa Rica because she had received death threats. These included threats saying that wherever they found her, they would rape and then kill her, and leave her in a place where no one would ever find her. In 2019 one of our journalists was beaten and robbed of his equipment because he was covering a protest ... Threats against the radio station and our personnel were constant on social media. However, after this attack against Jordy Estrada we took security and protective measures among the staff to prevent them from harming us (Personal communication, March 3, 2023).¹⁴

14 “... nosotras en el momento tenemos 3 periodistas exiliadas, conmigo cuatro, por las amenazas, por el asedio.

Olivas adds that when *Radio Vos's* staff approach people in Matagalpa and its surrounding communities to be interviewed, "they don't want to have their name cited in interviews, they don't want their face to be shown in our programming or talk about certain issues. In those cases we need to use a pseudonym and change their voices" (Personal communication, March 3, 2023).¹⁵ The experiences of the staff of *Radio Vos* are echoed in the 2022 annual report "Nicaragua: As Terror Is Imposed, Resistance Persists" ("Nicaragua: Se impone el Terror, persiste la Resistencia"), published by the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (El Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos [CENIDH]).¹⁶ Among the human rights violations detailed in its report, CENIDH documents "the violation of the freedom of expression and the press in Nicaragua, the forced closure of independent platforms and media associated with the Catholic Church, the persecution and threats to journalists and their families, many of whom have been forced to live in exile to protect their lives" (p. 6).¹⁷ CENIDH's report cites a July 15, 2022 press release from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' (IACHR) Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (SRFOE) that condemns "the escalating repression by authorities against journalists and media outlets in Nicaragua [and urges] the State to cease persecution, intimidation and harassment against the independent press that reports on matters of public interest, including the human rights crisis..." (IACHR, n.p.). Prior to issuing its press release the SRFOE had "received information about an increase in police raids on journalists' residences and media facilities, raids, confiscation of media outlets, seizure of work equipment, displacement and forced exile of journalists" (IACHR, n.p.). The SRFOE also noted "serious reports of an increase in the number of journalists and communicators in displacement and forced exile due to the growing fear of reprisals, which can range from police siege of their homes, threats to their families and even criminalization with exorbitant penalties" (IACHR, n.p.).

RADIO VOS: COMMUNITY RADIO, PARTICIPATION, AND THE BODIES OF WOMEN, ADOLESCENTS, AND CHILDREN

In 2012 the feminist community radio station *Radio Vos* operating out of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, collaborated with members of local feminist organizations in a ludic expression of performance art and public engagement titled, "Red Cards against Street Harassment" ("Tarjeta roja al acoso callejero"). As incognito football/soccer "referees" with whistles and penalty cards in their pockets, members of Venancia Group, Matagalpa Women's Network, and Matagalpa Women's Collective casually walked along the sidewalks of Matagalpa. When men addressed them with catcalls, "referees" handed out yellow or red cards depending on the severity of the offense. Reporting live from the streets of Matagalpa, "referees" communicated with *Radio Vos* staff by cellphone that broadcast

Incluso ahorita en enero una de nuestras periodistas tuvo que exiliarse en Costa Rica porque le mandaron amenazas de muerte inclusive le decían que la donde la hallaran la iba a violar y que después la iban a matar y que la iban a dejar en un lugar en un lugar donde nadie la encontrara. A uno de nuestros periodistas en el 2018 lo golpearon y le robaron sus equipos porque andaban cubriendo una marcha. Las amenazas por las redes sociales para la radio y el personal pues eran constantes. Sin embargo, nosotras lo que hacíamos era tomar medidas de seguridad, no, de protección entre el equipo para evitar que nos hicieran daño, ¿no? después de ese contra atentado contra Jordy Estada, uno de nuestros periodistas" (A. Olivas, personal communication, March 3, 2023).
 15 "la gente no quiere dar su nombre para dar entrevistas, no quiere dar la cara para salir en los programas y hablar de diferentes temas, entonces tenemos que poner seudónimo, tenemos que cambiar las voces" (A. Olivas, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

16 CENIDH was established in 1990 at the end of the Contra/Civil War and is a member of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). It investigates and responds to allegations of individual human rights violations according to Nicaragua's Constitution and laws as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (CENIDH, ¿Quiénes somos?).

17 "las violaciones a la libertad de expresión y prensa en Nicaragua, el cierre de medios de comunicación independientes o vinculados a la Iglesia Católica, la persecución y amenazas a periodistas y sus familias, muchos obligados a exiliarse para salvaguardar sus vidas" (CENIDH, 2022, p. 6).

commentary on why yellow and red cards had been issued (Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa [RMM], personal communication, December 5, 2022). “Red Cards against Street Harassment” represents just one of *Radio Vos*’s initiatives to reach beyond its material core and the intangibility of radio waves to resonate in the ears, minds, and hearts of its audience.

The mission, programming, and operations of *Radio Vos* intersect with key characteristics of definitions of Nicaraguan community radio outlined above. Its radio handle, “*Radio Vos*: where your voice is heard” (“Radio Vos: donde tu voz se escucha”) affirms a commitment to providing a media platform that invites the participation of marginalized voices. The handle centers on the homophones of *vos* (“you” informal) and *voz* (“voice”) to identify its relationship with listeners as one of solidarity and familiarity (“vos”) and to listening to the voice (“voz”) of its audience. From 2004 through August 2022 *Radio Vos* communicated from and to the people in the city of Matagalpa and its surrounding communities in the coffee-growing region in the northern highlands via analogue radio. *Radio Vos*’s audio shorts and social media posts center on providing a platform “where your VOICE is heard,” and “emerged to give a voice to the majority of people that need it, like women, children, and adolescents,” and programming that reflects a commitment to offer the poorest and most excluded populations in Matagalpa and its surrounding communities an accessible and participatory media platform (*Radio Vos*, “Nosotras,” n.d.).¹⁸ Although women and children represent well over half of Nicaragua’s population, they are often referred to as a “minority” for possessing disproportionately less power than the male population. Calibrating the usage of the words “majority” and “minority” to accurately reflect the demographic composition of Nicaragua’s majority population, *Radio Vos* identifies its listening audience—poor Nicaraguan women, children, and adolescents—as Nicaragua’s majority. Across its audio, visual, and social media platforms, *Radio Vos*’s programming is guided by “the defense and promotion of the rights of humanity, a non-sexist culture and, opting for social change that is just, it promotes and defends and upholds (principles) of non-discrimination (race, sexual orientation, culture, religion, gender or social and economic class” (*Radio Vos*, “Nosotras,” n.d.).¹⁹

Addressing the diverse forms and manifestations of violence and marginalization to the bodies of women, adolescents, and children and their communities represents a cornerstone of *Radio Vos*’s programming. Olivás explains:

... the right to live free from violence is at the core of our work. In Nicaragua there is a lot of violence against women and against girls and boys, and we have always articulated the campaign, “I want to live without violence.” ... So, for us, living without violence is an on-going campaign and is not limited to the month of November. So, we always address these subjects in our different programs (Personal communication, March 3, 2023).²⁰

Since its beginnings the station has explored the interrelated and systemic consequences of patriarchy, (neo)colonialism, and the power of the conservative branch of the Catholic Church and Pentecostal churches and has worked to raise consciousness and provide resources to listeners

¹⁸ “Radio Vos ‘donde tu VOZ se escucha’, es una emisora que nació para dar voz a la mayoría de las personas que la necesitan como las mujeres, la niñez y la adolescencia” (Radio Vos, Nosotras, n.d.).

¹⁹ “la defensa y promoción de los Derechos de la humanidad, una cultura no sexista y apostando por el cambio social justo, Promueve y defiende la no discriminación (raza, opción sexual, cultura, religión, género o estrato social y económico” (Radio Vos, “Nosotras,” n.d.).

²⁰ “nuestros ejes temáticos son el derecho a vivir libre de violencia, ¿no? En Nicaragua existe mucha violencia hacia las mujeres y hacia las niñas y los niños, y nosotras siempre hemos mantenido una campaña de quiero vivir sin violencia. Entonces, para nosotras el vivir sin violencia es una campaña permanente, del mes de noviembre. Entonces siempre estamos abordando esas temáticas en los diferentes programas” (A. Olivás, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

concerning femicide, multiple forms of domestic abuse, hate crimes against people of sexual and gender diversity, incest, and other forms of sexual violence. Expanding the definition of violence, its programming addresses the economic, political, and social consequences of the marginalization, invisibility, and exclusion of women. Titles and subtitles from audio segments and articles posted to *Radio Vos's* website from the latter half of 2022 offer a glimpse of this aspect of its programming. The 35-minute audio program, "Let's Break the Silence: Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness,"²¹ and its accompanying digital article, "Sexual Abuse Against Children: A Crime Not to be Forgiven or Justified,"²² explain how the patriarchal underpinnings of family and governmental institutions of justice as well as the discourse of forgiveness by Catholic and Pentecostal institutions contribute to an expectation that victims of abuse forgive their abusers (2022). Human rights defenders have long critiqued Nicaraguan police and the justice system for ignoring and diminishing acts of violence against women, including femicide and attempted femicide. The subtext of the post, "Feminist Organization Condemns Attempted Femicide in Rosita and Calls for the Arrest of the Perpetrator," is a call for the justice system to uphold the law and prosecute perpetrators of violence against women. The post includes a quote from Venancia Group that points to femicide as "an example of how some men assume that women 'belong to them'" (2022).²³

Radio Vos's programming also examines less visible manifestations of the marginalization of and violence to the bodies of women, adolescents, and children. Confronting gendered notions that classify the work that women do as minor or supplementary, audio broadcasts and posts to its website redefine and relocate women's economic contributions to their families and society from the periphery to the center. For people unfamiliar with the legacy of patriarchy in Nicaragua the following titles of broadcasts from 2022 may ring unremarkable: "Women continue to undertake their own businesses" and "Nicaraguan women make significant contributions to family income" (November 7, 2022).²⁴ In the context of Nicaragua, however, these phrases stand out and underscore to *Radio Vos's* listening audience—comprised of women and men—the value and skill of the work women do. *Radio Vos* also broadcasts commodity updates on coffee, dairy products, flowers, meat, and vegetables, spheres of Nicaragua's economy often associated with women. During COVID-19 lockdowns the station reported on an increase in domestic abuse and the gendered economic impact of the pandemic when women could not leave home to work. *Radio Vos* has also chronicled the exodus of Nicaraguans to other countries, particularly since 2018. A recent program, "Migration Also Occurs Due to Persecution and Death Threats: It's Not All About the Economic Crisis," identifies Nicaragua's political crisis, gender-based violence, and human rights abuses as contributing factors to the country's 21st century diaspora (2022).²⁵

As noted above, *Radio Vos's* identity as a feminist radio station that is affiliated with other media outlets and human rights organizations that challenge "any kind of governmental policy that hurts and threatens the rights of its (male and female) citizens" (*Radio Vos*, "Nosotras," n.d.)²⁶ has put it at odds with the Ortega-Murillo government. The repercussions of its programming were concrete and severe in 2022. As explored in more detail below, on August 2, 2022, the Nicaraguan government revoked *Radio Vos's* legal status, making it one of more than 2,000 domestic and international organizations "including women's, religious, international aid, and medical groups"

21 "Rompamos el silencio: Abuso sexual y perdón" (Radio Vos, 2022).

22 "Abuso sexual hacia la niñez un delito para no perdonar ni justificar" (Radio Vos, 2022).

23 "Organización feminista denuncia femicidio frustrado en Rosita y exige captura del responsable;" "un ejemplo de cómo algunos hombres asumen que las mujeres les "pertenecen"" (Radio Vos, 2022).

24 "Mujeres continúan emprendiendo sus propios negocios" and "Mujeres nicaragüenses brindan un gran aporte a la economía familiar" (Radio Vos, 2022).

25 "La migración también se da por persecución y amenazas de muerte, no todo es crisis económica" (Radio Vos, 2022).

26 See footnote 6 for original quote in Spanish.

whose legal status was cancelled in 2022 (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023, n.p.). In 2022, the Nicaraguan government “did not publish figures on femicides and other forms of violence against women” (HRW, 2023, n.p.). The absence of these figures in combination with the cancellation of *Radio Vos*’s legal status and that of other organizations that previously had access to, monitored, and/or disseminated information concerning violence against women, adolescents, and children have resulted in a need to respond to this void. The task of monitoring and reporting data on violence to these populations is now conducted on a grassroots level and data is published on social media and via other forms of communication. RMM, *La Lupa Feminista*, and other organizations collaborate in this work (RMM, personal communication, February 11, 2023).

VIOLENCE TO THE STRUCTURAL, LOGISTICAL, AND LEGAL CORE OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN NICARAGUA

In “Conversando sobre la tierra” [“Talking about Land”] (1931) Latin America’s first Nobel Prize winner, diplomat, educator, essayist poet, and human-rights advocate, Gabriela Mistral identifies the critical role of *tierra*—land, earth, ground, soil, and dirt—in providing an anchor and foundation for material and intangible human experiences. Mistral observes that all things visible and invisible—iron, music, coffee, and philosophy—stem from the material structure that earth/soil provides (pp. 172-173).²⁷ Parting from Mistral’s assertion that “land sustains all things,” this portion of the essay explores the technical, financial, infrastructural, and legal core of community radio in 21st century Nicaragua. In addition to the “flesh and bone” of radio personnel and listeners, community radio relies on access to certain physical structures, equipment, infrastructure, operational systems, and legal status—a skeleton, muscle, and connective tissue—to exist as a platform to offer programming and invite the participation of its listening public. Employees and volunteers need access to a space—physical and digital—to conduct their work. Operations need money for salaries, equipment, and other expenses (legal, utilities, travel, outreach, and publicity). Securing and maintaining legal representation is critical to confront increasing legislative and extralegal efforts to diminish, undermine, and eradicate community radio and other independent media platforms. To protect the security of radio personnel, sources, data, and facilities, community radio stations have established safety protocols and contingency plans.

Recent articles and media posts about the status of community radio and the freedom of the press in today’s Nicaragua frame the Ortega-Murillo government’s actions against community radio and independent media in language that recalls violence to or death of the body. Lacayo and Sánchez (2021) in “Government commits media genocide in 12 of the country’s departments” explain that between 2014 and 2020 the Ortega government ordered the closure of 20 independent media organizations, the majority of which were community radio stations and local channels.²⁸ Periodista Multimedia asserts that the “2018 Crisis ‘buried’ the future of community radio” noting that community radio experienced financial pressures due to drops in revenue and security concerns and that, after the crisis, funding was cut from the federal budget (2022).²⁹ Responding to TELCOR’s revocation of the legal status of *Radio Vos*, eight Catholic radio stations, and the independent television channel RB3 on August 2, 2022, the Nicaraguan Journalists and Social Communicators movement (PCIN) declared it “a veritable massacre of the freedom of information that left scores

²⁷ “La tierra es el sostén de todas las cosas y no hemos creado todavía otra mesa que soporte nuestros bienes. Las cosas visibles y las invisibles descansan sobre ella, desde la más pesada, como el metal vulgar que es el hierro, hasta la fina como la canción regional; la santa nutridora hace salir de ella lo mismo el clásico café que el pensamiento de Hostos” (Mistral, 1931).

²⁸ “Gobierno ejecutó genocidio mediático en 12 departamentos del país” (Lacayo & Sánchez, 2021).

²⁹ “Crisis del 2018 ‘enterró’ el futuro de las emisoras comunitarias” (Periodista Multimedia, 2022).

of people unemployed and thousands without access to information of interest” (Infobae, 2022).³⁰ López Vigil situates the Ortega-Murillo government’s consolidation and monopolization of media and attacks against independent media in a post/anticolonial framework. Referencing forms of violence inflicted against the bodies of indigenous peoples at the time of the Iberian conquest of the Americas, he asserts that “[t]he Ortega Murillo dictatorship is writing one of the most shameful pages in the history of Latin American communication. Their actions recall the nefarious colonial period’s cutting off tongues and orders to silence diverse voices” (Lacayo & Sánchez, 2020).³¹

The material and symbolic violence against the community radio station, *Radio Yapti Tasba Baikra* [“Voice of our Mother Earth”] and its staff in 2017 suggests parallels with language employed in the above articles to describe instances of repression against community radio in Nicaragua. Operating out of Bilwi in Nicaragua’s South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, the station “primarily serves the Miskitu Indigenous population, however, some programs are aimed at the Mayagna, Ulwa, Tuhaka Indigenous Peoples and the Afro-descendant population” (Coleman, 2021). The *Yapti Tasba* radio network was “born in a context of violence, assassinations, and kidnappings suffered by members of the YATAMA³² Indigenous communities [and] aim[s] to provide space for community members to raise their voices in their own mother tongue and denounce the attacks they suffer” (Coleman, 2021). Hobson Herlihy (2018) explains that following the 2017 municipal elections “paramilitary Sandinista *turbas* (youth gangs) burned Yatama headquarters and radio Yapti Tasba to the ground, toppled the Indian statue in the town center, subverted the green Yatama flag with a black and red FSLN flag, and attempted to shoot Yatama leader Brooklyn Rivera, who escaped.” While this was happening, “the police and riot police (*antimotines*) stood by watching” (2018).

Voces del Sur (Southern Voices) is a Latin American network of civil society organizations dedicated to protecting and monitoring the freedom of expression in Latin America. Its 2022 annual report on Nicaragua articulates concern regarding “the abusive use of state power that led to the massive closure of Catholic and community media in 2022” stating that in that year 31 media outlets and two television cable stations were closed and “another 8 newscasts and/or opinion programs ceased broadcasting” (“Año 2022,” p. 16).³³ The government tasked the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (*TELCOR*) “as the main state agency to carry out the closure of independent media.” *Voces del Sur* reports that “cancellation notifications issued by *TELCOR* lack valid technical criteria and contradict legal provisions of the Telecommunications and Postal Services Regulation Act” (“Año 2022,” p. 16). *Voces del Sur* explains that in September 2022 *TELCOR* ceased issuing printed letters to notify owners of media outlets of the cancellation of their broadcast license. Subsequently, cancellation notifications were made over the phone by cable companies and, in some cases, the government “utilized local public officials (affiliated with the governing party) with making notifications” (“Año 2022,” p. 17).³⁴

30 “Es una verdadera masacre a la libertad informativa, que ha dejado a decenas sin empleo y a miles sin acceso a informaciones de su interés” (Infobae, 2022).

31 “La dictadura Ortega y Murillo está escribiendo una de las páginas más vergonzosas en la historia de la comunicación latinoamericana. Actúan a la par de la nefasta colonización que cortaba lenguas y mandaba a silenciar las voces diversas” (Lacayo & Sánchez, 2020).

32 Hobson Herlihy (2017) explains that “Yatama (Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka/Children of the Mother Earth) [is] the largest and only grassroots Indigenous and Afro-descendant organization on the Caribbean Coast. Founded in 1987, Yatama became a political party in 1990.”

33 “el uso abusivo del poder estatal que desembocó en el cierre masivo de medios de comunicación católicos y comunitarios. se clausuraron 31 medios de comunicación y fueron sacaron de la parrilla de televisión por cable a 2 medios, así mismo 8 noticieros y/o programas de opinión dejaron de transmitir, la mayoría de ellos no se pronunciaron para evitar represalias” (“Año 2022,” p. 16).

34 “El gobierno de Nicaragua implicó a *TELCOR*, como principal órgano estatal para consumir los cierres de medios de comunicación independientes. De hecho, las notificaciones expedidas por *TELCOR* carecen de

As noted briefly above, the Ortega-Murillo government has inflicted violence on the legal and operational body of *Radio Vos*. In a public statement *Radio Vos* announced that on August 2, 2022, a group of TELCOR officials accompanied by members of the National Police conducted an inspection of its facilities and transmission equipment. *Radio Vos's* public statement explains that, following the inspection, TELCOR notified the station "that its broadcast license for 101.7 FM had been cancelled." *Radio Vos's* public statement incorporates language from the statute identified by TELCOR officials as the basis for the cancellation of the license:

According to TELCOR we do not comply with article 41 of Law 200, of the Telecommunication and Postal Services Act,³⁵ "radio stations cannot suspend broadcasts, except in the case of an act of God or *force majeure*, the license holder must report the suspension, and you must indicate the reasons (for suspending broadcasts) and when service will be normalized". Consequently we can no longer transmit on FM radio (*Radio Vos*, 2022, August 2).³⁶

Argentina Olivas, the director of *Radio Vos* explains that prior to inspecting the station's facilities, TELCOR had already written up the official cancellation notice that was brought to the station. She adds that the government based the cancellation of *Radio Vos's* license on "technical matters". She views this rationale as a "pretext" to close the station because the radio was in full operating condition when TELCOR arrived. She adds that due to the station's continued denunciation of the violation of human rights and Nicaraguan law, *Radio Vos* has been under constant scrutiny by the Ortega government, particularly since 2018. To avoid potential bureaucratic irregularities that might lead to the loss of its license, *Radio Vos* made a practice of regularly inspecting its equipment and submitting government forms and making payments a month in advance of deadlines. Following the cancellation of its license, the government did not provide *Radio Vos* an opportunity to address the "technical matters" cited in TELCOR's notice to come into compliance (Personal communication, March 3, 2023). The week when *Radio Vos's* license was cancelled, the "government, through TELCOR, ... shut down eight other local radio stations and a private television channel" (Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders [WHRD], 2022). IAPA president Jorge Canahuati reflects on these actions: "In one fell swoop, the Nicaraguan government has created a new information desert in the country's interior, where the closed stations were providing a valuable community service to thousands of people. It is obvious that the aim is to wipe out all remnants of an independent press" (CIVICUS, August 23, 2022).

criterios técnicos válidos y contraponen las disposiciones jurídicas de la Ley General de Telecomunicaciones y Servicios Postales. [] Ante esta situación es importante recalcar que, desde septiembre de 2022, TELCOR dejó de notificar la cancelación de las licencias de transmisión a través de la 'inefable y famosa' carta membretada, luego fueron las cableras quienes asumieron el aviso vía telefónica a los propietarios de los medios, conocimos algunos casos que utilizaban a secretarios políticos (del partido de gobierno) de las localidades para realizar las notificaciones" ("Año 2022," pp. 16-17).

35 The original Spanish language text from article 41 of Nicaragua's Telecommunications and Postal Services Act reads: "Las Estaciones no podrán suspender sus transmisiones, salvo caso fortuito o fuerza mayor. / El titular de la Licencia o del Permiso deberá informar a TELCOR: / a) De la suspensión del servicio, con indicación de las causas; / b) De que utilizará, en su caso, un equipo de emergencia mientras dure la eventualidad que origine la suspensión; c) De la normalización del servicio. / Los avisos a que se refieren los incisos anteriores se darán en cada caso en un término de veinticuatro horas a partir de la suspensión o normalización del servicio" (1995).

36 "Para TELCOR no cumplimos con el artículo 41 de la Ley General de Telecomunicaciones y Servicios Postales, que establece que 'las estaciones de radio no podrán suspender sus transmisiones, salvo caso fortuito o fuerza mayor, debiendo informar el titular de la licencia sobre la suspensión, indicando usted las causas y la normalización del servicio,' por ende ya no podemos transmitir en frecuencia modulada", señaló la emisora" (*Radio Vos*, 2022, August 2).

In a public statement issued on September 6, 2022, *Radio Vos* announced that Nicaraguan authorities “arbitrarily and without notice” raided and expropriated *Radio Vos’s* facilities in the early hours of that day (September 6, 2022). *Voces del Sur* describes the expropriation of the property of *Radio Vos* as an “abuse of state power by the Sandinista government.”³⁷ Calling attention to “raids and appropriation of the property by police officials of 6 media outlets” (“Año 2022, p. 18”),³⁸ *Voces del Sur* notes that Article 44 of the Nicaraguan constitution recognizes “the right to moveable and immovable private property as well as tools and means of production, and prohibits the confiscation of assets” (“Año 2022,” p. 19).³⁹ The property of the Matagalpa Women’s Collective [Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa, (CMM)] and Venancia Group, which work in close collaboration with *Radio Vos*, were confiscated on September 1, 2022 and January 8, 2023, respectively (CMM, 2022; Venancia Group, 2023). On “El muro de la denuncia” (“The Wall of Shame”) on the foundational exterior wall of CMM’s building, for years *Radio Vos* and CMM painted the names of men that continued to live in impunity for not paying child support or committing violent crimes such as domestic abuse, incest, rape, or femicide. After confiscating CMM’s property, the wall has been repainted. Reflective of the persistence of both feminist organizations, after multiple coats of paint, the names are still visible (A. Olivas, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

The Ortega-Murillo government’s repression of independent media has prompted some radio stations to transition to digital platforms. Prior to the revocation of its legal status and the appropriation of its facilities in August 2022, *Radio Vos* had initiated this transition. In collaboration with AMARC’s Latin America and the Caribbean division (AMARC ALC) and BIG Radio, *Radio Vos* quickly moved to digital radio in October 2022 on *radiovos.org* and is accessible on Facebook, Instagram, SoundCloud, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. With its operations beyond the material and legal reach of the Ortega-Murillo government, *Radio Vos* has gained a degree of freedom. Argentina Olivas, director of *Radio Vos*, observes that now the station can broadcast “from anywhere,” and it can reach a global audience with access to digital media. Reflecting on *Radio Vos’s* recent transition to a digital platform, Oscar Pérez, regional coordinator for AMARC ALC, observes: “Those that sought to silence it were mistaken” (AMARC, October 5, 2022).⁴⁰

While not a community radio station, the story of *Radio Dario’s* relationship with Nicaragua’s dictatorships provides context to its recent move—and that of other radio stations—to a digital format. Established in 1949, *Radio Dario* (89.3 FM) was forcibly closed in August 2022. *Radio Dario* persisted and survived some of the most violent moments of Nicaragua’s modern history—the Somoza dictatorship, the Contra War, and the 2018 political and humanitarian crisis. During its analog years, *Radio Dario’s* station was “destroyed six times for defending the freedom of the press, the freedom of expression, and human rights” (Radio Dario, “Sobre Radio Dario,” n.d.).⁴¹ A recent attack occurred on April 20, 2018, when a pro-Ortega group set fire to the station nearly killing its staff. *Radio Dario* now transmits online and its director and owner, Anibal Toruño, lives in the United States. Reflecting on *Radio Dario’s* history, Toruño underscores the freedom that a digital platform affords: “Dictators always make the same mistake. By closing a radio, they think they stop the fight for a free press. While there still exists a computer, while there exists a telephone or any digital device which allows us to practice journalism, we will carry on doing so” (Keeley, 2022). While Toruño sees repetitions in history he identifies this moment as one of change: “It has been one dictator

37 “abuso del poder estatal del gobierno sandinista” (“Año 2022,” p. 18).

38 “Hasta diciembre de 2022 la cifra de medios confiscados y allanados por efectivos policiales asciende a 6...” (“Año 2022,” p. 18).

39 “el derecho a la propiedad privada de los bienes muebles e inmuebles y de los instrumentos y medios de producción, así como la prohibición de la confiscación de bienes” (“Año 2022,” p. 19).

40 “Los que pretendieron callarla se equivocaron” (AMARC, 2022, October 5).

41 “destruida en seis ocasiones por la defensa de los derechos a la libertad de prensa, libertad de expresión y los derechos humanos” (Radio Dario, “Sobre Radio Dario,” n.d.).

after another, but we will survive. It is the end of a chapter of traditional radio. But people can still listen to us via the website” (Keeley, 2022). Nevertheless, for some listeners, particularly those in rural Nicaragua, the transition from analog to digital radio results in less access to information and obstacles to their ability to engage with the station. Abigail Hernández, a member of PCIN, identifies gaps among people living within Nicaragua’s borders in accessing community radio on a digital platform: “People can get access to YouTube or the internet to find independent news but it costs \$1 for a few hours. The connection is not good in many parts of the country. ... For much of Nicaragua, the radio is still the traditional way to find out what is going on and that has been silenced” (Keeley, 2022).

REFLECTIONS

During Ortega’s 21st century administrations, the phrase “history repeats itself” has appeared in media reports, academic journals, and popular culture in reference to the dizzying repetitions of authoritarianism and its consequences in Nicaragua. Perhaps the most biting commentary on these repetitions was chanted by protesters in 2018. Playing on the alliteration of the chant’s words in Spanish, protesters critiqued Ortega’s evolution from “former revolutionary ... into a would-be-dictator” shouting “*Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa*” (“Ortega and Somoza are the same thing”) (Morris, 2018).

The story of Nicaraguan community radio also registers repetitions. In uncanny ways, the positionality, logistics, and dangers facing people affiliated with community radio stations like *Radio Vos* recall FSLN’s underground radio station *Radio Sandino* in the 1970’s. Amador Rodríguez (2020) explains that from 1977-1979, the Somoza dictatorship conducted a “psychological war” that included censorship and propaganda to “contro[ll] the flow of information and contro[ll] thought.” *Radio Sandino* constituted one of the Sandinista’s “communication tools” to “influence society to end the dictatorship of the Somoza dynasty” (33). Prior to becoming Vice Minister of Culture following the Sandinista defeat of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, poet Daisy Zamora was the director and an announcer for *Radio Sandino*. In this position, Zamora provided listeners in and beyond Nicaragua with updates of FSLN’s final military offensive. *Radio Sandino*’s security protocols required its staff to move between secure locations to record programs and relocate elsewhere to broadcast prerecorded material. It also regularly modified its frequency— “moved the dial” as Zamora explains—to elude the Somoza dictatorship’s jamming of signals (Gross, 1995). Zamora’s 1988 poem “Radio Sandino”⁴² highlights the twofold impact of the station during the revolution; the station broadcast updates on Sandinista military offensives and its voices traveled invisible pathways to bring hope to people living in and beyond Nicaragua:

--THIS IS Radio Sandino!
 Voice of Nicaragua’s liberation
 Official voice of the FSLN
 transmitting by short wave
 on the International
 41 meter band
 from somewhere in Nicaragua
 throughout the country until 11 p.m.
 My great aunt must be glued to her radio.
 My mother and brothers in Honduras

⁴² “Radio Sandino” was published in *En limpio se escribe la vida* (1988). Its English translation was published in *Clean Slate: New and Selected Poems* (Zamora et al., 1993).

glued to our voice
 our voices
 this voice that comes in clandestinely
 every night
 broadcasting 'til dawn.
 Reaching perhaps as far as a building in Mexico City,
 to those who wait in exile:
 the dial's amber light
 glancing off expectant worried faces.
 One more voice in the family group
 attentive to this voice, this hope
 that filters through cracks in windows,
 in doors,
 crosses streets, bridges, rushing water ... (p. 93)⁴³

No longer operating clandestinely to contest authoritarianism under the Somoza dictatorship, today's *Radio Sandino* forms part of the Ortega-Murillo government's communications portfolio (www.lasandino.com.ni/). Perhaps akin to *Radio Sandino's* "moving the dial" in the late 1970's, some community radio stations like *Radio Vos* have moved from analog to digital transmissions. Like *Radio Sandino's* perilous cross-border operations in the 1970's, as Nicaraguan journalist Cindy Regidor explains, community radio and other independent media rely on sources living in Nicaragua that "put themselves at considerable risk to speak to journalists forced into exile" (Keeley, 2022).

This looping of history would seem to suggest the inability of contestatory media to interrupt the circularity of authoritarianism and the repression of the freedom of expression in Nicaragua in the present and future. Defying these repetitions and the potential futility of their efforts, *Radio Vos* and Nicaragua's surviving independent media persist. They persist in the face of death threats, accusations of exaggeration and radicalism, the destruction and confiscation of property, the cancelation of legal status, and the necessity to operate in exile. Working across borders and engaging with listeners on multiple media platforms, Nicaragua's resilient independent media continues to "move the dial" to democratize communication and address community needs. Echoing the work of *Radio Sandino* in the 1970's, stations like *Radio Vos* seek to make believable information that has been silenced or contests narratives promoted by the Ortega-Murillo government. Community radio also perseveres in the intangible realm of hope where its voice "filters through cracks in windows, / in doors, / crosses streets, bridges, rushing water" (Zamora, 1993, p. 93) across the world in the 21st century.

43 "¡ESTA ES Radio Sandino! / Voz de la Liberación de Nicaragua / Voz oficial del Frente Sandinista / que transmite en la Onda Corta / Banda Internacional / de los 41 metros / desde algún lugar en Nicaragua. / Mi tía-abuela debe estar apegada al aparato. / Mi mamá y mis hermanos en Honduras, / pegados a nuestra voz, / a nuestras voces / a esta voz que va entrando a escondidas / cada noche / espaciándose hasta la madrugada. / Subiéndose quizás hasta algún edificio de México, / acercándose a los exiliados: / la luz amarilla del dial / rebotando en rostros expectantes y penumbrosos; / Otra voz entre las voces del grupo familiar / atentos a la voz, a esta esperanza / que se cuela por las rendijas de las ventanas, / de las puertas, / que atraviesa calles, puentes, cauces ..." (Zamora, 1993, p. 92).

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