

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: NICARAGUA**

**Transcript of Martha Heriberta Valle  
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe  
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

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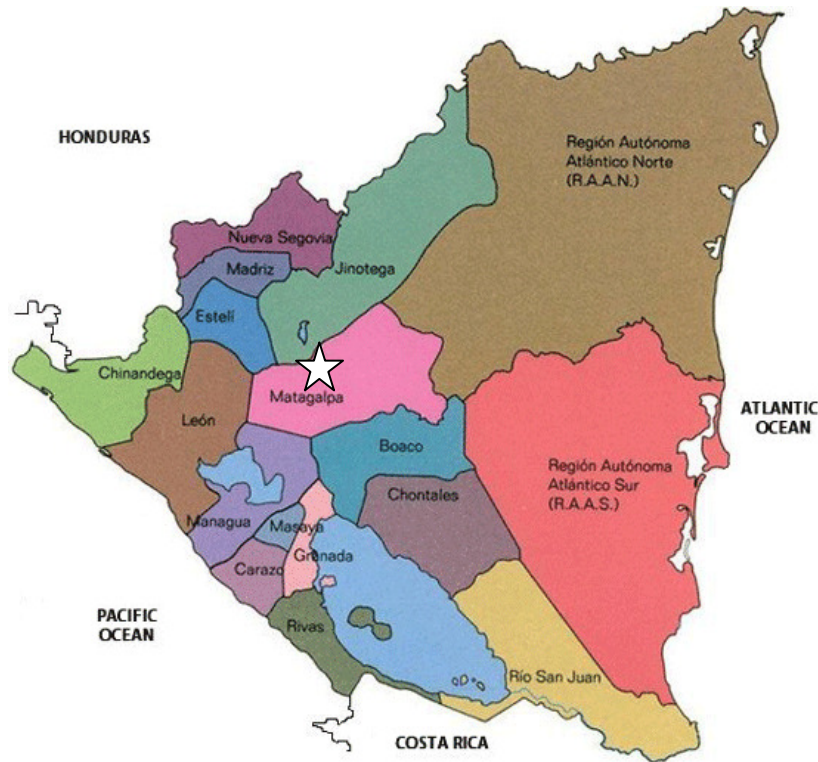
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**Martha Heriberta Valle** is an activist both in the Women's Movement and in the Cooperative Movement. She joined the Revolution at an early age, helping to transport revolutionary soldiers, and later moved to the mountains where she actively participated in organizing community meetings that collected food for guerrilla camps in the northern part of the country. When the Revolution triumphed in 1979 Valle joined the organization of women farmers. She has been an organizer of rural women, a former elected official of the National Assembly, and currently is president and founder of the Agricultural Cooperative Federation of Country Women Producers of Nicaragua (FEMUPROCAN).

**Shelly Grabe** is an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology, Feminist Studies, and Latino and Latin American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Shelly received her degree in clinical psychology with a minor in quantitative statistical methods. After completing her doctorate, she switched course and became a community organizer in Madison, WI involved primarily with CODEPINK and the then Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN). Through solidarity relationships with the women's social movement in Nicaragua (Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres), Grabe became learned in women of Color and "Third World" feminisms from a grassroots, decolonial perspective. She has since coupled her interest in structural inequities, gender, and globalization with her academic training to work with transnational women's social organizations in Nicaragua and Tanzania. As a scholar-activist, Shelly partners with women's organizations to test new areas of inquiry that can support positive social change for women. She joined the UCSC faculty in 2008 after a Visiting Position in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In California Shelly has partnered with the Santa Cruz County Women's Commission on efforts to ratify a local draft of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Walnut Avenue Women's Center to support youth outreach surrounding sexuality and violence against girls and women.

**Julia Baumgartner** holds a degree in Spanish and Sociology from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She works as coordinator of Farmer Relations and Delegations for Just Coffee Cooperative in Madison, WI and is currently living in Nicaragua coordinating a project with Fundación Entre Mujeres, a feminist organization working for the empowerment of rural women in northern Nicaragua.

## Interview with Martha Heriberta Valle



### *Childhood, Family, Work*

**Grabe:** Okay, Martha, I wanted to just start again by thanking you very much for agreeing to participate in the project today.

Valle: Thank you.

**Grabe:** So we'll talk for about an hour today and I'll start by asking you questions about your own personal history and then we'll end with some of the work that you're doing right now.

[side chatter]

**So, Martha, I know you're probably more used to talking about your organization but I'd actually like to start the interview today talking about you and asking you some questions about your own history.**

**So could you tell me something about your early years, your childhood, maybe what kind of family you're from. What kinds of things do you remember from when you were very young.**

Valle: Well, it's something so beautiful and in the first place I want to thank you, right. And in conversations a few minutes before, what I was telling you is that for me it was a big deal when Carmen Diana<sup>1</sup> also had this interest, there are times when talking about yourself is difficult, but I'm going to give it all I've got. I'm going to talk about successes and failures. I was born in a community that was around twenty communities or regions, there weren't schools. And my parents had fourteen children. Of them, I was the first daughter, the oldest daughter we say. So, we were producers of basic grains and livestock. We didn't have potable water, we didn't have electric lights, we would use oil lamps for light.

**Grabe: What part of the country were you born in?**

Valle: I was born in a community they called Las Pilas in the city of Darío, in the Department of Matagalpa. The whole family worked, there were 31 of us in the house. My two parents were illiterate and the whole family was illiterate. Later – for climate issues, it was a very dry zone – we had to go to a cold and rainy area that was called La Montaña.<sup>2</sup> In La Montaña we also had to go eight hours on mule for the coffee production, to arrive to sell in the Department of Matagalpa. In this world that surrounded us, men and women both worked. This is how we were able to be efficient producers of something and with some resources that helped us. But we never had shoes.

**Grabe: How old were you when you started working in the fields with your family?**

Valle: At age eight I was the tortilla maker and I went to the orchard to plant with a yoke of oxen. This work that we did together as a family – to fight to have nourishment and to have a better harvest – gave us the great virtue of being efficient, and at the same time it broke with the traditional structure. What are the traditional structures in the country? That the girls don't work. But my father said that all of us had to work so all of us could have goods. I—this virtue that God gave me and that my father taught, is one that gave me the strength to fight from the time I was very young until today. I want to turn sixty and then go back to farming.

*What [unclear]?*

To turn sixty and then go back to the finca,<sup>3</sup> to farming.

I didn't know how to read and so I would visit a young woman who had arrived from Managua and she had me read sections of the newspaper. I learned to read but not—not to add or subtract. With the triumph of the revolution, the first thing I did was study in adult education classes. And there I completed sixth grade, I began secondary school<sup>4</sup> and I completed an agronomy technical certificate. Already having three children.

**Grabe: And how old were you when you did that?**

Valle: I started at age 27. That's why I believe that humans aren't defeated when we have this desire to grow and to serve. And this allowed me to be a producer with a lot of knowledge from a

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Food and Resources Economics with the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. She has written several books on women and agriculture.

<sup>2</sup> The Mountain.

<sup>3</sup> Finca is most commonly used in reference to coffee plantations, but can also be used (in this instance) as farmland, estate, country.

<sup>4</sup> Like high school. Primary school is grades 1-6 and secondary school is grades 1-5 (corresponding to grade 7-11).

young age, to be able to work the land, to love it. I always looked for something to grow, introducing some technology, for better productivity. In our farm we had more than 14 items that we produced. We made soap, we had sugar cane and we made candy, syrup to flavor. This is what you call *rapadura*,<sup>5</sup> I think—it's a square candy. Right now I forget what it's called there. Eh you all know what it's like to have soap, candy, syrup to flavor drinks. We had coffee, we had twelve *manzanas*<sup>6</sup> of coffee. We planted about fifteen *manzanas* of basic grains, we had citrus, we had Musaceae<sup>7</sup> plants that were the plantains, the bananas, etcetera.

**Grabe: This was all on your family's farm?**

Valle: It was a diversified farm that was just our family's. There were 31 of us in the house. But we would ground twenty pounds of corn per meal. We all had to get up at two in the morning, we all prepared food: while I made tortillas, the guys ground the dough, my father got the corn to be made into cuttings for the next day. And at five in the morning, we all went to the fields to work. If there is something that I have always valued it's that my father didn't differentiate—despite not knowing the term feminism—the different gender roles. We did it out of real necessity, and he was proud because we—all us girls—produced results equal to those of the boys. When I was thirteen, my father told me, I had asked him for a horse that was very pretty, a beastly horse, and he told me, "I'll give it to you if you break him." That meant, *amansar*<sup>8</sup>—meaning that the animal is—the animal is spirited and, a *cimarrón*<sup>9</sup> is what we call it. It's about something that isn't used to having shoes or reins and when you ride this unbroken horse, it begins to jump. So I tell him, "He'll throw me off." "No," he tells me, "If you—look, I'll pull him—if you see that he's going to throw you, take this tamer, this bridle, and put it on, restrain him, because you aren't going to let yourself be hit by anybody." And this stuck with me, it stayed recorded in me because it was during my adolescence and I think this gave me a lot of strength.

So then when I began to read, I was the one who kept track of the coffee, I priced the cows, etcetera. And all of this was coming together to make me a woman who made a lot of decisions. When I was—I got married when I was sixteen, but I also started getting involved in movements that were about farming. And we began to work for the communities.

[12:29]

*Education, Activism*

**Grabe: During this time, had you gone to school before?**

Valle: I tell you, I only knew [to go to school] because I was so interested, and I had gone to that woman with the newspaper. I only read a few words. I always tried to read the newspaper at home, I started—I mean I felt a necessity, that allowed me to find options and to go looking for

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<sup>5</sup> *Rapadura*, also known as *panela* or *piloncillo*, is the leftover solid that remains after boiling sugar cane juice. It is used as a sweetener instead of sugar in many traditional sweets in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> A *manzana* is a unit of measurement (like a hectare or acre), it is unclear what one *manzana* is equivalent to.

<sup>7</sup> Flowering plants, banana trees are an example.

<sup>8</sup> In the previous sentence, *amansar* was translated as "to break."

<sup>9</sup> Meaning unbroken, a bit wild.

something to read. We said I read like Ancieto,<sup>10</sup> a comedian and singer that we have here, Ancieto Prieto, he's personified by Otto de la Rocha.<sup>11</sup> We would stammer, we'd go: buuu-zzzz-aaarrrr-dd! [laughter]. So that's how we read, like that, that was the way I read.

But when I began to work, I met a coworker. So clearly, I was a woman with many abilities, productive, I was a woman who left her mark on the house. I also drove vehicles. So then this gave you strength. Then this, the colleague who worked with me, one day said that I couldn't continue there, because I was more illiterate than—he wanted to look for people who had at least finished school. I am talking about when we were already working with [inaudible, lots of background noise]. So then I kept doing samples with the colleagues whom I had, and trying to learn to read better. And I was developing in reading, right, and with that I kept working.

**Grabe: How did you get involved in the Front?**

Valle: Well, one of my fights was that I was a woman who, by nature—I felt the need of being a woman who easily could have learned to read and write, and everyone around me didn't know to read and write either, and the twenty communities around me didn't know to read and write either. So then I dreamt that human beings could also have a school. They are notions that come out and when the fight with the FSLN<sup>12</sup> began, I joined in '74, but I joined the community groups in their struggles. This meant community organizing, looking for productive options, okay. I mean I began to do work from another angle, but that doesn't mean that, the government that we had was a 50-year old government, leading the country. There was a ton of violence. It was sometimes forbidden for youth to go out at six in the afternoon, young people were forbidden from going out in the street. Anything that was young was seen as bad. So then we began to work in the community groups. Later we did begin to get involved and logistically we began to act as couriers for the groups in the case of the banana camps. We were the ones who got the food, others took it, right. There was also a line that would take *compañeros* from here, from Managua, to the south, to Rivas, Tola, Carazo.

[17:01]

**Grabe: What kind of strategies were you using at the time to organize people in rural areas?**

Valle: Well, in the first place, someone has to motivate you—peers come to you and they tell you that things aren't going well, things you're feeling too. In that moment, it wasn't just anyone who risked doing that. There was a death sentence then, right. But the reality is that we saw that the country work, worked with an attitude as if we were animal, they went by and if they knew that there was a guerilla there, then they would sweep the area, the area would be bombed and there wasn't, I mean where to go, this doesn't, then this was hurting from the inside and then

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<sup>10</sup> Otto Benjamín de la Rocha López was a famous singer, composer, actor and comedian in Nicaragua. One of the characters he was famous for was Ancieto Prieto.

<sup>11</sup> Otto de la Rocha, singer and comedian from Jinotega, Nicaragua created many radio program fictional characters, Ancieto Prieto being one the most beloved among Nicaraguans.

<sup>12</sup> FSLN-Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, English: The Sandinista Front for National Liberation. In 1979, became the only guerrilla movement to overthrow a Latin American government since the Cuban Revolution. (Wright, Thomas C. *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. New York. 2007. pp. 31) The FSLN maintained control of the government until 1990.

with those notions you began—you began getting involved in activities because you don't became a guerilla member overnight. You have to start by collaborating and you begin entering into the process. Then we were, we worked in the logistics, the courier and well mainly I liked it because it was a struggle and more than the motto that we had, it was only workers and peasants that made it to the end, right.

But the dream that I had was that one day the country would have light, would have water. Because we would pull a cart to get water seven kilometers away, my whole life since I was a child. So then these feelings, we would think: one day—if the people win, we will some day have water, light, just like they have in the city. But also, those challenges come from—once when I was an adolescent, when I was an adolescent I got on a bus with my grandmother. I was already about fourteen, almost a young lady, right, but I was carrying a sack, this is where you carry the hens' eggs, the milk curds, to sell in the city, right. But I got on the bus. I don't know how you call them, trucks, or whatever. I got on and when I got on there was a woman with nice glasses, and she looked at me again, she covered her nose and I began to cry. Right, because dirty peasants had gotten on, right, and so then she did that and I just cried. I grabbed my grandmother, but I told her, "I promise you, I promise you that I am going to fight so that one day I can be in power and transform,"—I didn't say transform because peasants don't say transform, but I said this: "One day I will change this so they don't look at us like animals." And since then, this is my principle, because I cried and cried and cried until I got off the bus because the woman covered herself and I felt coldness, pain.

So then, battles don't come so easily, but they come within these feelings, right. So that was one. And later, when people tell you, this one doesn't know how to read. But the reality, the reality is that at a natural level, we're also thinkers. I was a woman who applied the best techniques and I didn't know how to read well. So then what is it to only create values of hard work, of a vision, where are you going to focus? We didn't say vision, we only said this, "We want to live well, have food, that we have enough food, never to worry about shoes." I put on shoes when I was fourteen years old. But my dream was one day to do something and lead a municipality, a department. But I didn't only achieve this. When the Revolution happened, I began to study, I finished sixth grade, I finished secondary school. And I began to study for a technical degree in agronomy that I did best because I'm a producer. I already had children. I completed it at age 36, right. A two or three year degree. But, well, I am a good producer, and an efficient one. Then this complimented technical aspects. This gave me strength and I was able to do the first movement that happened here in Nicaragua in the decade of '79, the peasant movement, I'm part of it at the—at the regional level.

[22:35]

### *Activism, Work*

**Grabe: Can you tell us a little bit about what you were doing right after the Revolution?**

Valle: The whole time I was dedicated to strengthening peasant organizations. I started at the ATC,<sup>13</sup> the organization where we worked, it was underground work, and I started with the

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<sup>13</sup> ATC (Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo) in English: Association of Rural Workers.

triumph, that's where we began to organize. And we started. And I belong to the National Council of the ATC but when we are in it, leading the north, Matagalpa and Jinotega. When—

**Grabe: Tell us a little bit about the ATC first.**

Valle: Sure, the ATC was an underground organization that worked with the revolutionary movement of the Sandinista Front. It started because when the workers organized, their rights were violated, they couldn't have an organization here, right, there were only clandestine organizations here. And it was—the ATC was from the workers in the unions. But that's where we plugged ourselves in. When the triumph happens, we see the contradictions that the ATC defended the unions and the workers. But we belong to the producers so then we began a peasant movement. The first meeting was December 14 of 1979. In '81 we created the peasant organization that is called the National Farmers and Ranchers Union.<sup>14</sup> But the people from the ATC as well as the people from UNAG were comrades in the struggle. So then I became the first provincial president of this *campesina* movement. They elected me. I don't know why.

**Grabe: As a woman.**

Valle: Yes, but this woman had won, like I said—what my father left me, he didn't leave me an inheritance. He left me strength, this vision that we also could, right. I have been strengthening that, those are other things, with better techniques but he told me that he was teaching me so that a man or my husband wouldn't hit me. You have to be strong. And he told me a very important slogan. He told me: The poor and women cross the same paths. But when we see them, he tells me, among those who have money and those who don't, at the end everyone ends up in the same bag, but the women suffer more, he tells me. The majority of men hit women. You have to defend yourself because you're my daughter and I adore you, you are going to defend yourself. That's why I swore to him, I'm going to marry someone whom I can dominate. I think I accomplished that. [laughter] I think I accomplished that. Yes, that's it. My husband didn't drink, or smoke. Actually, I was the smoker. [laughter]

Right, that's it. Life is so deep that one—and the other is that I paid attention a lot. I don't know if it was because of my nature, my grandfather named me *la adivinica*.<sup>15</sup> My grandfather said that, but I was ten years old. I told him, look, don't let that cow out to pasture, it's going to—or this many will die. And they died. And so he said—he never said that I had tact because this is a question of having tact but the reality is that they called me *adivinadora*. So I had something natural in my life.

Sometimes I have looked at it like this, like this is what I had. My nerves, they almost didn't exist. I was never afraid, and this was a dilemma. And I think also that I raised very good children; I think that many people who know them admire them. They said how did I dedicate time to my children if I was working day and night. I told them that it's the—it's not the hours but the quality and that's important. That's important. So then I think it has been a tough fight. I've worked since I was eight. I was a girl who went behind a yoke of oxen planting beans and corn. So then this has given me strength. When do you think it is that one finds her weaknesses?

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<sup>14</sup> In Spanish: la Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos, also called UNAG.

<sup>15</sup> Foreteller, future reader.



When one wants to make a small jump, then you find the idiocracy of the small towns, and that's when things begin to move.

So then I, when I was regionally elected in the organization, there were guys who said, but if this woman is almost illiterate, she doesn't have a—she didn't finish secondary school, we need technicians. So we created an all-around technical assistance, technicians to tend to the production, technicians for the procedures. So then once I said well, I've done it all but the women, I've left them behind. I worked until '84 only with—with 27,000 men organized in the organization that I coordinated. There were also colleagues there who were on the regional directorate board, but I was the coordinator. Later I became vice president but I never became president from vice president. I never went to work so that the others would give it to me, I didn't need it because I'm not an office woman. I'm a woman who—I operated in the countryside. So then—

[30:03]

**Grabe: Were you treated differently as a woman working for this organization?**

Valle: Yes, of course. When the elements of work contradict those of the culture. What are they? While we were together as a movement, the only struggle that existed was the power of the presidency. But when I saw this—there was a colleague with a lot of passion and knowledge about production, he was elected. Well, they say he won, but well the truth is that I had two more votes than him, but the agreement was, you go. I want the vice-presidency because I want to work on a topic that I haven't worked on, and that was to work with *campesina* women because in the 27,000 people we had, we had 819 women. And these women only participated—but not actively—it was like “oh we need to have women” so they would bring women. And sometimes they didn't even know why they were there. Then, my struggle was to change these work roles and we started—then we couldn't figure out how to work it because they would say to me: “So? We have women here, there are women and men here in the organization.” “Yes but the women don't make decisions, they don't plan, and they sure aren't the presidents of the cooperative. They are the wives of the members. And when they bring them, that's when we have women. What we have are 819 women and only 102 are secretaries. They always make them secretaries because we women are more efficient, right. Then that is where we have to make our fight. Then—

[32:23]

### *Activism*

**Grabe: Can you tell me briefly what—thinking back to what you were doing in the '80s, how did you get from where you were in the mid-'80s to what you're doing now here at this organization?**

Valle: Well, that is the circle I'm working on. I'm organizing, right, trying to micro-synthesize all of the aspects, life is harder. You cry, you sing and the truth is hard. When you had to fight and I really do consider that things are cultural because we women are the ones who have the boys, our sons are men, we raise them and I think from age one to five is when the boys figure out the story of their lives. And that's where I say, well we also have failed to teach because outside society gives you that role. So then when it comes from outside, you at least fight part of

it within. I can't have a child and make him sweep outside because others go by and shout "Hey *cochón!*"<sup>16</sup> Right, so then you have to convince this boy that it's not like that, you have to explain that to him. So, I was the regional president of the National Farmers Union and I broadened the national council, I very respectfully directed the mid-sized producers. I think that in that period there were only two of us who could—that attracted even mid-sized producers because they recognized that we were skilled people.

So while I was there, I come and I plant the idea that it's necessary to organize women in collectives. They tell me, "you're crazy, that's divisive." I tell them, but this isn't a big deal—it's so that they identify [with the organization] and learn to be coordinators, presidents, secretaries and it's very important. So then they say, well, you'll have to take it to UNAG's national conference. We proposed, it was four—eight women who brought this up, right. These women proposed that it was necessary that the organization's planning and statutes state that women should also participate in the cooperative movement. I never will forget the paragraph that says—the participation—it said participation of *campesina* women in UNAG—that was it, the rest was a document like this, but that's all it said. So we held on to that and we wanted—we tried to open a women's section. And it actually develops in the department I'm from. So they tell me I'm crazy. They tell me, "Now you screwed up," a colleague tells me, Alciro Rodríguez is his name. He says, you screwed up, now you're going to be with women. But let me, if they don't want to be there then yes, I'll give up, right. So then they come and say to me, one of them says, "C'mon let her do that," but I tell them, okay so now there is a president and I am the vice president. The vice president doesn't have a role so then I am going to make a role with the women.

So I had my first meeting in a co-op that is called Oscar Fabricio and I talk with the president of the co-op and I tell him, I want to have a meeting with the women because we want to organize them. We call them together and we get to a school to meet and a colleague from the executive committee of the cooperative tells me, "You already screwed it up, Martha." *Cagar* means you already screwed up like, "You already messed up, Martha."<sup>17</sup> He said it like that. Then he told me, "First you organize us, now you came to organize the women and you come saying that we have the same rights." We're talking about 1982. Then he comes and he says, "How is it that women have the same rights? A woman doesn't have the right to pass out drunk in the street." "They'll grab her, tipsy, drunk with liquor." So I tell him, "You don't even have the right to pass out drunk in the street either because"—look, I used a vulgar word but it's because they respected me and I told him, "If you pass out, and some ass goes by and rapes you and is that a right? That's not a right. And it's also not a right for a woman to pass out in the street. Rights are different. Rights," I told them, "are that the woman works equally or that you work equally with her or that she works equally to you, and you work together for the legacy of the *finca* that you have." I had to use techniques they would understand, I tell him, "For example, if you die tomorrow, and this woman doesn't know how to work in the *finca*, what does she have to do? Look for another man? Do you want another man to ride your horse? [laughter] That's it, "would you like someone to ride your horse?" "Of course not," they tell me. But I was using a double-entendre, right, about the woman. So he said, "of course not!" Well that's what we want, that

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<sup>16</sup> Nicaraguan slang, loosely translates to queer, fag and often used in a derogatory manner.

<sup>17</sup> *Cagar* is translated as screwed up in this and previous instances. *Cagar* is a fairly vulgar word. Martha is explaining the meaning of the word to the translator in this case.

now you and your wife both manage. She can decide when she'll enter into a relationship, but she's not going to decide to do it because she's ignorant of how to manage the *finca*. "You're right." So, these were the methods that I started using because in the countryside you couldn't openly have a confrontation.

So after doing the visits, we selected a group of—a group of women, of 63 women. Because they still weren't accepting the concept of my work on a national level. So I go on and I make a group and I ask them if we are willing to launch a rebellion. And we were going to do it while working. So then they tell me yes. So I arm the 63 convinced women and go to make the proposal at the regional council of UNAG. They start to tell me that I'm a woman, you're crazy. *Campesina* women aren't going to leave their houses, not going to spend one month away from home. So I tell them, why don't you let me do the work to see if I can convince them, just like I became a contributor to this organization that allowed us to have a *campesino* and *campesina* movement. But *campesina* movements are not men's movements; they are men's and women's movements. So a member of the executive board stood up and said, "Let her do it." But this meant let her do it without resources. Without resources.

So I began to visit a women's collective in Matagalpa, directing it at the time I think was Magaly Quintana and Gloria Ordoño. I would have liked them if they had stayed. They were women that—they had another idea, it was confrontation. But the reality is that they were also fighting, right. I said that we had to be tactful to continue and also to have economic power. So they contradicted me, they said that I was fighting for economic reasons. But I was fighting because my sector, if it remained dependent, it couldn't make decisions. If you don't work, you're in your house, you have four children, five children, eight children, how are you going to make a decision? Are you going to grab the eight children and leave? Because in everything else, you don't have rights, there are no jointly-owned deeds, no jointly-owned lands. So then the woman has to grab the eight children and leave. Who would give her shelter? Nobody with eight youngsters and everything, nobody is going to give her shelter. And worse if she's illiterate, where is she going to go? Will she head to a city? Is she going to get a house job while she has eight kids and doesn't have anyone to leave them with? Then these are the terms that are important for understanding a situation in which one could decide to have more participation.

[43:13]

Then they tell me, "Let her do it." Then they say to me, "but the ones you are going to take are workers<sup>18</sup> because *campesinas* aren't going to go." "Let me do it." So, I'm talking about 1983 and I put a brigade that was called—the first group was María Castilblanco, after a *campesina* who was killed by the Guardia, while pregnant. I gave it the name and I went to visit the women's collective. Two groups, or three—people like you—came to visit us from Holland, from Switzerland, from Spain, from everywhere. So we asked for their collaboration, not money. We asked if they could provide—some were, I think they were medical brigades, if they could provide us with some necessary everyday medical products and they offered us a few boxes but I asked them to visit us as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Obreras, translated as workers, refers to lower-class workers or laborers, but not usually to farmworkers or peasants.

So we made a plan for the logistics for the different—the different *compañeras* who were going to help us and I asked the women’s collective to come and give presentations of the abuse. Then when we met them, since they had said one thing to me, they had said, “the women you will take will be workers because you’ll never get *campesinas* to go.” So I decided, I picked another goal: I’m going to recruit mid-sized producers. So I went and recruited three mid-sized producers—these women with their resources in their houses. And I take the women from the cooperatives. Then we made the brigade and we left. But the war was happening and there were already pockets of war.

So then we were carefully going, the brigade arrived, we cut coffee, they paid us and this payment that the woman had, I told her to save it because we would take care of the food, medicine, and those things. After fifteen days we took them to the city in a bus, also with the collaboration of people, so that they could buy what they had one day dreamed of having. Then one said that what she had dreamed of having was an electric iron because she ironed with one that was put over the fire, made out of cast iron. So she said “I want an electric iron.” Another said that she had dreamed of having a set of eye shadow to wear make-up. Another said it was a cot, so she bought herself a cot. And we took all of this to where we were staying. We were in the mountains. We got wet every day, we didn’t sleep, we had sentry posts. But there we were. Then, another said that she dreamed of buying—where she was the one who paid—a change of clothes for her man. We bought it.

Later we called—aided by our colleagues who were promoters—we called all of the husbands for a get-together, we were making lunch in the mountain. We made it easy for everyone to get there. Then she lined up the cot, she says, I bought this cot, take it with you. The other says, look how I bought these dishes for the kitchen, this iron, take them for me and here is some money for you to buy me eggs from that other hen, because you told me ours are brooding. You understand? Then we made a movement with action and reflection. So, and another would say, “Look, I bought you this wallet,” but at the same time, the majority of what she bought was what she had dreamed of. And we continued. In the road we took, we made silos to teach what a silo was. It didn’t exist in Nicaragua yet. Then we made a ramp with leaves, with everything and there we left it because there were thirty—almost thirty-two children because the women who had children said, “I’m interested in going. I have the will to go but I have a child.” “We’ll take him.” So then two people stayed there to care for the children and the others went to pick coffee. The next day another woman stayed to care for them and the others went to pick. But the brigade was playing an organizational role, teaching and every day, we gave each squad a president, we gave it the name of a cooperative. So then there were women who said, “Shit, being president is hard. That woman lost the soap and now I have to go find soap. It’s hard!” “Ah, it’s tough, right, but we must learn.”

[48:28]

Then, that’s where we were going, engaging in workshops. Every day we had a different executive board. The objective was to rotate and build unity, right. Then we went to another *finca*, with a cooperative and we went deeper into the mountains. So then they come—

**Grabe: Martha, can I ask you to jump forward—**

Valle: I only want to finish this little bit. Then I tell the *compañeras* who were in the city, “Get the media, we’re going to finish.” We had already been there since November, we were already in December and we hadn’t left [the mountain]. “Get the media.” And they got the media and the local media came out with big headlines: “The María Castilblanco Women’s Brigade refuses to leave [the mountains] until the National Farmers’ Union approves the line for women’s work.” We are already doing what is called playing reality. So then by now, by now the women who came from the collectives, we all got into contact with Silvia Torres, a woman who is a researcher and at that time she was a journalist with Barricada. Another one worked for the press. And we got them together and they got great headlines of the women cutting coffee, the women caring for the children, and us making our food, other giving them shots because they were sick. But it was that the movement, the National Committee for the Sandinista Front immediately says they are going to go see those women. And like four members go. At that time, you know that when a chief, a president concedes—even the regional, national, the national organizations—we felt so big that not even a tree was as tall. And that’s there where they promise to have a line and section for women.

So we made it with a little work but with a lot of effort. And we did it, at the same time, we wrote a book about everything we sang about. For me ever since I was like an eight year old girl, I fit it all into stones, sticks, natural poetry always motivated me, with the trees, with the stones, with the earth. I can’t write a love poem. Let’s see if you can explain that.

### ***What is it?***

That I climbed trees, stones—and I always liked poetry. Poet, but very natural, right. But the earth, water, trees inspire me. I really love them. I talk to them because I know they have a surreal energy. Sometimes humans are more dangerous. That is nature for me: it’s life that has been destroyed a lot.

So, we achieved this and we went back the 8th of January after having started the 8th of November. We were mobilized from November until January 8th. Not a single woman left, we fought but with the support of the ATC, with the women from the ATC, the women from AMNLAE,<sup>19</sup> the women from the women’s collective, the women’s movements and women from other countries, from Europe and from other places. I lost contact with all of them because email didn’t exist then, it didn’t exist, only telephone, right. Why did we lose contact with Elena, Esperanza, um...Rita, from Suiza, from the United States. On one of these occasions Diana Deere also came. Then we had Diana from ‘80 when she had her first visits. Then this beauty—we have very little contact now with these great women who, if some have died or if they’re alive, they’re going to have something to tell because they are women who in some way have fought and have helped. I never was able to pressure in order to achieve a goal but the goal should progress flexibly and should continue developing. That’s why there are times that I have contradictions with some organizations because I don’t think that because I set a goal in a plan, then because there are five thousand dollars, then we have transformed the women. Right. This is

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<sup>19</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza, English: Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. The original Sandinista women’s movement. Due to its close links to the FSLN, feminist issues such as abortion and women’s rights were pushed aside to organize around FSLN issues. (Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity and Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2001. pp 22)

a process that you enter into. Sometimes, women still advocate the fight for their space as women, and sometimes those women are still abused. So it's necessary, I think that those women, I would say, who fought because in Nicaragua and in parts of Central American women participated in national politics up until '53, '60—so that's a brutal step backwards and we are still fighting. I would say that those who fought, those who fought in the '60s or in the '70s, it's just that every moment with a different style, a methodology, a vision.

[54:33]

### *Activism*

**Grabe: What is the vision now? What strategies are you using now?**

Valle: Well, first we have to value the context. We can't continue to value—if for some reason we are, I think that this is because we have intensified the different decades that we have crossed in the life of this work, right. One is that—well, at the beginning the fight was to make a federation within the organization, you lost the nicest part because this was the hardest part of life. When I express this, and another group of women like Matilde, me, Morena Díaz, Berta Vargas, um—I don't want to forget anyone, but I forget, it was a small group like uh—Rosa Emilia Reyes, a small group of women—but not too small, Guillermina, we were about twenty women and we now had a section, we began to fight. We asked the National Farmers' Union why they had allowed the men to make a men's federation, but then why didn't they want our women's movement—that had almost 12,000 women—to make an incorporated women's federation. They told us that this was divisive. So we said, we don't think we'll do them harm. We made them a proposal, that the UNAG was a confederation and that we would become a federation. They told us no. So then I—with all respect, which is difficult, but I was heading the entire movement, because I was the only director. The rest were sec—responsible for the women's section that paid them and I was the president, and the vice president of the Union. So then started the ups and downs part. Look, there are people who came just to manipulate. I was accused of being, that I was what is called, that I was sexually harassing one of the secretaries of the national organization. Right, that's the first thing they did. At that time, I swear, I never heard it, I didn't imagine it, I didn't feel it. Right, and that's it. Then the woman says she's going to take me. Then I made a determination; this is why I talk about wisdom and tact. I tell her, “Look, it's none of this. I know that they gave you a nice car, they gave you five thousand dollars but I am going to tell you something, as I haven't done this and I'm going to give a sworn declaration, I'm going to say it's true.” She backed off and that this would humiliate me—and that I was—that this was going to make me give up my participation in the movement, from making a women's movement or a federation. [long pause before the interpreter begins] You didn't get it? I mean, so that I wouldn't have this—this adrenaline, this energy, they gave me an obstacle, and barrier saying that I was sexually harassing my colleague. Then this means that I desisted from continuing the work with the women and that I would step aside and leave it at that, but no, I decided to face this head on. “It's not [true], but I'm going to do it. I'm going to say it is [true].” So, in this way I defeated this professional woman. So, we were all even. And we continued, we continued working.

**Grabe: And that's how you started this organization?**

Valle: So we continued working and it was a tip that helps grassroots women, a tip that helps any woman, to have tact. So then we get started, and they tell us, “go ahead, create your federation.” But they cut off all of our resources, they cut off the projects from our section, they cut off our vehicles, they cut off everything and they left us—they left the women who supported us unemployed, Matilde, Morena, Berta, all of them, they all end up unemployed. And they took our access to vehicles. They took everything. So we ended up with nothing. So then, I aim for something different, I aim to launch myself into politics. While the others continue the struggle and I launch myself and I win at the national level, I win second place of all the deputies in this country. And within the Assembly, right. I win with a percentage of—almost half a million votes, a deputy needs that many—a deputy only needs 23 right, so I am a choice deputy. This makes me, that my salary is injected into this federation so that women can go on with that, and we negotiate.

[1:00:55]

Then the people from the UNAG want—they come—the time for elections comes up and the people want to get rid of everyone. And Daniel Núñez<sup>20</sup> tells me, Núñez is the name of the president. Alvaro Fiel, “Look, let’s negotiate. If you give the vote to us, we will support the federation.” I mean we’ll make a sworn declaration with a lawyer and we made the sworn declaration with a lawyer. So then if you can see this is a struggle and we’ve achieved this. But now, look, we declare the federation, but do you think the organizations give money to something that doesn’t exist? Just because we say that we are a federation, with what I made in the Assembly, we rented a house, I bought a car, I bought an air conditioning unit, a computer, and I put it in. I’m saying it clearly because sometimes people don’t know it because we don’t say it. And finally, a little help for the *compañeras* to mobilize. I invested it all in that.

I’m a deputy who left [the Assembly] with the same shoes, but I was able to become a deputy. But later I set out to be the director of the party and I was able to get into the leadership of the Assembly. I passed but I passed quickly, with a time as Deputy, I was a member of *Parlatino*,<sup>21</sup> from Parlatino Senate—I was a deputy. I was able to become part of the management and the day that the Sandinista Front won here, that I said, “Now you’ve got it, you have more people than you need, I don’t want to work here because I’m still with the *campesinos*.” You can imagine nine years or sixteen years working in the opposition. The day that you have power and they get it and you say, no, I don’t want anything because I needed to understand policy. Nobody can defend themselves if they don’t understand the policies. Nobody can defend themselves if they don’t know how the economy works. But being a political intriguer is bad. If not because they se—

[1:03:29]

### *Feminism*

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<sup>20</sup> President of UNAG.

<sup>21</sup> Parlatino (Parlamento Latinoamericano), The Latin American Parliament (*Parlatino*), is a regional, permanent organization composed by the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is a consultative assembly similar to the early European Parliament. Currently the institution is being considered to become the legislative organ of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. (Wikipedia)

**Grabe: Disculpe pero I wish—as you say, I wish we had four hours to speak but I fear we only have merely five minutes left.**

Valle: Well, I think that you have enough material to get your examples.

**Grabe: I'd like to ask you another question.**

Valle: What I do want to make clear is that when we are women with goals, women are more persistent. We are able to give birth and work the next day. We are able to have a child, care for him, and sometimes even make his food. Yes, there's a reason they say our brain is radiated but we need to know to make the best use of it. We are capable. And I think, they say that men don't respect us. How is that? When you are taking power, you are respected and this is important.

**Grabe: Can you tell me a little bit about your definition of feminism in your work?**

Valle: Look, I think that the processes, the processes—it's that there is some confusion here. Here, when people hear about feminism, they think you're a lesbian, that you're—well they say everything, bisexual, that you're this, that you're that. I interpret feminism as my fight, as an ideology in defense of women, with the different expression that everyone has decided to make theirs.

**Grabe: Do you call yourself a feminist?**

Valle: I do call myself a feminist because I'm fighting and I think that it's part of my fight and it's part of the principle and that each person, as they say, can play with the ball they want.

**Grabe: I have one last question. You've talked a lot about situations in Nicaragua, in your opinion, are there any international policies or international economic policies that impact women in Nicaragua?**

Valle: I think that talking—talking about gender politics, what has happened is that the focus that it had in one decade, the focus it had in another decade, what has changed is the language at the political, economic, and family level. But there is still a lot of underestimation of the role and what we are capable of doing as women. I'm going to explain why. You can be a great professional but you are always confused with something. There are men who don't understand a thing, but they have an efficient secretary, but they are morons. So then there is still a lot to fight for. There is a lot in this real, real space, this real space for women's expression, both at the organizational level and at the personal level, her decisions. And we still lack the application of so many laws that we have that aren't being applied in real life. And global policies are still bound to the media. Here when they talk about women, they talk about the environment—of going to plant a tree. The programs are for vegetable gardening, you understand. They're not of much significance. We must have programs of greater significance or scope, since we women are the ones who drive the world economy. And you ask me why. Because you say that the economy is driven by a corporation, a bank corporation. But that's not how it is, the ones who make the products, all of us little people, that when we come together, we become a corporation.

[1:08:34]



Let's not kid ourselves—I don't think it's a rice corporation that plants the rice, it's planted by many families and then together it's a corporation. Then there are some left, the roles—there are still roles to be played. There are many women who are secretaries, or they are executives. But they aren't the directors of universities, in the United States, for example, or in other countries. There's only a few of them, you need tweezers to find them, and ask Carmen Diana about it.

**Grabe: Can you tell me a little bit about the relationship between scholarship like Carmen Diana's and the activist work you're doing?**

Valle: Look, Carmen Diana has always had a focus on women's struggle for land acquisition, for women to become empowered and that is something that I really admire. She's a great woman. She's a woman who I think with her profession, I think she's the only female director of a university in the United States. If I'm not mistaken, I think she is the last one, right. She came to share with us here in the country, in the departments. She has come to share her ideas with us. And we have shared with her because a professional also has to get feedback from the product in order to be a good professional and it's the informative part. And we give feedback for those concepts that they are focusing on in the world. Then we think that it's a great role and to tell Carmen Diana, I hope a thousand women come out with her thinking. And there are also a lot of very smart women here and I think the Revolution gave us a lot of space. It gave us space that we take advantage of, but not very much. Here even though we had the Revolution,<sup>22</sup> hardly 13 percent of people obtained land. Right, we didn't accomplish everything. We have to keep fighting, yes.

**Grabe: Martha, I wanted to thank you very much for your time and for sharing so much of your story with us today.**

Valle: I want to tell you that I'm not perfect and I have made mistakes too. Just by walking, you make mistakes, he who doesn't work doesn't fail. Right, or yes, he who doesn't work never has faults. He who works always finds problems and sometimes makes a lot of mistakes but the good part is to never give up. And I think that my whole youth went by in this fight with a lot of hits and a lot of misses. So then—

**Grabe: I appreciate your sharing your struggle with us. We can learn from you.**

Valle: I say that, well, we are telling it quickly because the reality is that in a forty-year process you've had tough, difficult battles that you can only win with great effort. I hope that the coming generations follow us like we have followed other women who had already struggled. I read Domitila Luz, I read about women in the free trade zones from the United States, I love documentaries that—so every one of them is one of us even though they are no longer living.

**Grabe: Muchísimas gracias, Martha.**

Valle: Thanks to all of you.

[End.]

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<sup>22</sup> This is common rhetoric used by socialist revolutions. The revolution is not considered complete until all of the ideals and demands of the revolution are implemented, even then there are ways to improve and make the revolution better. The persistence of the revolution implies an eternal goal of improvement.