

ANOTHER BIG DITCH: THE PROSPECT OF A NICARAGUA CANAL

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze the impacts of infrastructures that have been approved but are not yet constructed. Specifically, I show how the Nicaragua Canal – a mega-infrastructure project owned by a Chinese investment firm and pushed through by the Nicaraguan government – haunts resident peoples in both its non-present presence, and in its propensity to exhume a painful social past. In calling the Nicaragua Canal a “ghost,” a “chimera,” and a “smoke screen,” resident peoples communicate the illusory quality of infrastructures that remain stuck in the pre-construction phase. And yet the many ways in which the Nicaragua Canal is currently affecting resident peoples demonstrate the very real power it has, even when it does not yet exist in the material world. Given this, I engage Derrida’s concept of the specter to examine the impacts of infrastructures that are yet-to-be. With insights gained through fieldwork conducted in Nicaragua from May to August of 2016, I analyze what happens in the liminal spaces of infrastructural development – in the time lag between approval and construction – and especially how potentially affected peoples are experiencing the spectrality of the Nicaragua Canal.

Lay Summary

This thesis draws upon fieldwork in Nicaragua from May to August of 2016 to consider the impacts of the pending Nicaragua Canal project on resident people. Owned by a Chinese investment firm and pushed through by the Nicaraguan government, the Nicaragua Canal would be one of the largest development projects in history. However, since its approval in 2013, there has been little to no actual construction work completed on the project. Because of this, the Nicaragua Canal seems to be stuck in an in-between phase: it is not yet constructed, but it is also widely talked about as a possibility. In the following pages I explore the impacts of pending infrastructure projects by considering the haunting nature of the Nicaragua Canal, which is both hard to pin down conceptually and yet capable of eliciting very real fears in the people who deal with its potentiality.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Kendra Jewell. The fieldwork that underwrites it was approved by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board, under Certificate Number H16-00658.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| ERM | Environmental Resources Management |
| ESIA | Environmental and Social Impact Assessment |
| FSLN | Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front) |
| HKND | Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Group |
| RAAS | Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur (South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region) |

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A la gente que lucha en contra del canal: adelante.

Dedication

For Zoe.

Introduction

In June of 2013, President Daniel Ortega and the Nicaraguan government granted a renewable, 50-year, master concession to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Group (HKND), a privately held infrastructure investment firm headquartered in Hong Kong, to build an interoceanic canal through Nicaragua. In terms of earthmoving, HKND's canal would be the largest development project in history. Stretching 259 kilometers and with an average width of 255 meters, it would require the excavation of approximately 5,000 million cubic meters of material and cost an estimated fifty billion dollars. Its path through southern Nicaragua would bisect the autonomous indigenous territory of the Rama-Kriol peoples as well as the Mesoamerica Biodiversity Hotspot and Lake Nicaragua. British consulting firm ERM, which was hired to complete the project's Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), writes that "under normal situations [all of these] would be considered no-go areas" (ERM 2015:8) given their social, political and environmental significance. Further, ERM estimates that at least 30,000 people would be displaced.

Driven by a desire to understand how Nicaraguan peoples are experiencing HKND's plan to construct a Nicaragua Canal, I performed ethnographic research in Nicaragua from May to August of 2016. Geographically, I focused my investigation in towns and cities adjacent to Lake Nicaragua, which ERM lists as the canal project's *Key Issue #1*, and conducted my research primarily with a Nicaraguan family in their home near Lake Nicaragua's shores. Initially arranged by the school I attended to acclimate back into Spanish, I continued my stay with this family, on and off, until late July. Early on I communicated that I was an anthropology student researching the Nicaragua Canal, and the family were enthusiastic about participating in my project, often asking how they could assist me, or lending opinions, or calling excitedly up to my

room whenever a newscaster referenced HKND. For this and for their hospitality – for the way they welcomed me as family – I am incredibly grateful.

Every evening, after eating the dinner she had prepared for us, Doña María would beckon for me sit with her on one of four rocking chairs that her son, Daniel, had placed curbside. We would watch the sky turn orange and then dark as we chatted with each other, with neighbors and with passers-by, until we welcomed the shrill call of bats and the withdrawal of the mosquitoes.

On one such evening, a few weeks into my stay, Doña María knew I had recently returned from a research interview. And so she asked me, “How did the interview go with the professor? Is he in agreement with the canal?” “No,” I answered, “it does not appear that he is.” Doña María nodded at that in silent understanding. She then told me that from her perspective, there are both good and bad things to come of the Nicaragua Canal. It would mean more jobs – something Nicaraguans badly need – but it may also mean another *piñata*,¹ akin to the re-appropriation of private property that the Nicaraguan government executed many years earlier. Doña María’s family, who have long been landholders in the conservative stronghold of Granada, were heavily impacted by a *piñata*. This was something she mentioned frequently.

We need more work Kendra, but not at their expense (potentially displaced peoples). Not at the expense of their land and their lives. Who’s going to benefit? Not Nicaraguans. Chinese people. They’re going to take their land and leave them with nothing. Imagine that, Kendra. Can you imagine? They would leave them with nothing.

Doña María broke eye contact, looked across the street and was silent for a moment, her eyes filling but not quite brimming over. I too was silent, within the atmosphere of her sudden and profound emotion. What exactly she was feeling in that moment, I cannot say. I can say that, as she pleaded with me to imagine an unimaginable future (*Imagine that, Kendra. Can you*

¹ *Piñatiar* (verb) is local slang for government appropriation of property.

imagine?) I felt her profound dis-ease with respect to the unknown future of the Nicaragua Canal, as well as an anxiety that stemmed from the possibility of the past repeating itself – from the possibility of another *piñata*. It was clear in this interaction, as it was in many others I would go on to have, that people are feeling the prospective Nicaragua Canal in very real ways – that people possess the capacity to be affected even by the mere potentiality of it. More than that, the prospective Nicaragua Canal was affecting people precisely *in* its potentiality. A physical canal would have had a very different set of affective characteristics, because a material infrastructure can be known or at least seen in ways a potential infrastructure cannot. In the case of the Nicaragua Canal, potentiality seems to be breeding a particular kind of fear, a particular kind of anxiety, which is inseparable from the canal's uncertain future.

Eventually, Doña María collected herself and continued:

Anyway it doesn't really matter, because I don't believe they're going to build it. It's been three years since they approved the canal, and where is it? It is not (here). There is no canal. It's a ghost canal. It's a ghost, Kendra. Do you understand me?

I told her that I did understand. But truthfully, it was not until much later that I began to appreciate her characterization of the Nicaragua Canal as *un fantasma*, as a ghost. Indeed, here she was grappling with the non-present presence of the canal, with the mismatch she felt between official discourses (the Nicaragua Canal project has been approved) and her physical reality (the Nicaragua Canal does not yet exist). *Where is the canal*, she asked me? *It has been three years since it has been approved, and where is it?* For it is *not here*. Not yet. Nonetheless, something was there in our conversation; the Nicaragua Canal was affecting Doña María despite its physical non-existence.

In the following thesis, I mobilize a series of ethnographic encounters in tandem with Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) to reflect upon how the Nicaragua Canal is a spectral

infrastructure, both in its physical (non)presence and in its power to invoke haunted historical imaginations.² In response to the critiques that suggest Derrida's analysis of the specter does not adequately account for space, I argue that the specters of the Nicaragua Canal are experienced within locally specific, affective atmospheres. I then engage critiques of the 'ruin' to consider how material remains of historical transit routes through Nicaragua might work to conjure away the anxieties that accompany HKND's plan to construct a Nicaragua Canal by disciplining the multiple and heterogeneous potentiality of the canal into a dead and more readily understandable entity. Finally, I reflect upon how the specter of the Nicaragua Canal is tied up and within the many ways in which Nicaraguan peoples are haunted by the violent legacies of colonial and imperial hegemony, and the broken promises of the Sandinista Revolution and the disappointment that accompanies the descent of the FSLN and Daniel Ortega into an authoritarian-populist regime. With insights gained through my fieldwork, I examine what happens in the liminal spaces of infrastructural development – in the time lag between approval and construction – and especially how potentially affected peoples are experiencing the spectrality of HKND's Nicaragua Canal.

² This differs in important ways from how Gregg Hetherington (2014) conceptualizes the experience of waiting for infrastructure. Instead of "being addressed by the infrastructural promise in a way that turn[s] them into political subjects" (208-209), my research participants are haunted by the prospect of an unwelcome future that harkens back to a painful social past.

Context and Background

The Canal as a Modern Infrastructure Project

HKND's concession agreement, Law 840 (titled *Special Law for the Development of Infrastructure and Transport Pertaining to The Nicaragua Canal, Free Trade Zones and Associated Infrastructures*),³ contains the permissions for an interoceanic canal as well as the permissions for numerous sub-projects, including a railway line, a highway, an oil pipeline, artificial lakes, two deep-water ports, airports and a free trade zone. ERM estimates that canal construction and associated land conversion would result in the loss of 120,600 hectares of land, including approximately 93,800 hectares of terrestrial habitat, 23,600 hectares of Lake Nicaragua, 3,200 hectares of marine habitat, and 1,650 river kilometers of freshwater and estuarine habitats. According to ERM, 30% of these 120,600 hectares can be characterized as "high quality habitat" (2015:41). Construction in Lake Nicaragua, the largest freshwater reserve in Central America, would require the dredging of 715 million square meters of hyper-fine lake sediments, which have the propensity to scatter and travel great distances when disturbed. Of particular concern in Lake Nicaragua sediment are mercury, arsenic and chlordane epoxide (a pesticide), all of which exceed acceptable water quality screening concentrations in sediment (ERM 2015). Though HKND would implement a hydraulic vacuum to capture the majority of disturbed sediments, it is not feasible to expect 100% containment. Dredged and recaptured material would be primarily disposed of on three artificial islands to be constructed within Lake Nicaragua. Total anticipated surface area for these disposal islands is 166 square kilometers. Additional environmental risks for Lake Nicaragua include salinization, a changing nutrient load

³ Original: *Ley Especial para el Desarrollo de Infraestructura y Transporte Nicaragüense Atingente a El Canal, Zonas de Libre Comercio e Infraestructuras Asociadas*

leading to eutrophication, and hydrocarbon contamination from accidents and spills both during construction and once the canal is in operation.

In recent years, El Niño conditions have caused widespread drought throughout the Dry Corridor of Central America. The UN classifies El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras as most heavily impacted, but Nicaragua is also taking a hit. Centro Humboldt, a Managua-based environmental NGO, indicates that since 2013 precipitation in Nicaragua has fallen 35% (490mm) annually (Centro Humboldt 2016). This is significant, because drought forewarns against the practicality of a canal that would require an unbelievable amount of fresh water to function. Assuming HKND's projected daily average of 14 ship transits by 2050, ERM estimates that the Nicaragua Canal would have an annual average daily water demand of 59.2 cubic meters per second, taking into account provisional water savings, and not including the use of flushing water for salinity management. This corresponds to 5,114,880 cubic meters, or 1.35 billion gallons, of fresh water per day.⁴

Largely because of the recent drought, ERM cautions, “water availability is a critical concern for the Project, particularly with the uncertainties associated with climate change” (2015:34). Functionally, the Nicaragua Canal would be equipped with two lock systems: the Brito Lock, just east of the Pacific Coast, and the Camillo Lock, just west of the Caribbean Coast. These locks would be the largest of their kind ever constructed. ERM writes they are engineered such that they would “capture flow from much of the Río Punta Gorda watershed that would otherwise flow to the Caribbean” and, “have no net use of Lago de Nicaragua water” (2015:12). As protection against dry rain years, HKND proposes the building of numerous reservoirs, one of which would also function as a hydroelectric plant. Still, ERM predicts that,

⁴ For comparison, 1.35 billion gallons corresponds to roughly 2,044 Olympic-size swimming pools.

“during extended dry periods, additional water may be needed to augment this stored water” (2015:19). Where this water will come from is not immediately obvious, though Lake Nicaragua seems a likely source.

Reflections on the implications of a dynamic natural landscape on the feasibility of the Nicaragua Canal make palpable, in Nicaragua, Ashley Carse’s observation that the Panama Canal is an “infrastructure embedded in the landscape” (Carse 2014:7). Though often conceived of as outside of nature, infrastructures are utterly reliant upon, and inseparable from, the natural landscapes they share space with. This is perhaps especially the case for canals, given the massive amount of water they require to function. Because of this, Carse argues for nature to be conceived of as infrastructure, or for the management and organization of natural landscapes as part and parcel of the development of space that allows for the free flow of matter. Speaking specifically to the political evolution of watersheds into infrastructure, he writes, “the watershed – [formerly] conceptualized as a geo-hydrological unit, rather than a political space – was the concern of hydrologists and engineers. This changed in the late 20th century, when watershed forests were reimagined as a living support system for the [Panama] canal” (2012:548). Analogously, the health and productivity of the Río Punta Gorda watershed in Nicaragua will have direct impacts on the functionality of the Nicaragua Canal as an infrastructure – for without massive amounts of water, nothing will move. It is also important to note that historically water has been a notoriously difficult substance to measure and predict. In the context of her work with residents of the Colorado River Delta, Shaylih Muehlmann writes, “water engineering, which is foundational to the design of dams, bridges, canals, and levees, is particularly complex because water is a notoriously difficult substance to measure accurately” and, “the estimated amount of water in the Colorado, an estimate on which an entire legal apparatus of water law was built, was

hugely exaggerated” (2012:341), an error which ultimately and severely impacts communities on the Mexican-side of the Colorado River Delta. In a time of increasing environmental uncertainty, historical precipitation charts and hydrological models can only go so far in predicting the functionality of infrastructures like the Nicaragua Canal. Here the possibility of the Nicaragua Canal itself is haunted by climate change – by the potential of the natural environment to exercise its own power, at any moment.

In terms of direct human impact, ERM estimates that the Nicaragua Canal would physically displace at least 30,000 people. Under Law 840, neither the Nicaraguan state nor HKND seem to have an explicit obligation to resettle them. Given its wording with respect to displaced peoples, ERM finds that Law 840 is “not consistent with international standards in respect to compensation and by limiting the rights of property owners to contest many aspects of the expropriation process” (2015:52). Specifically, Article 12 allows HKND to expropriate any property that is considered reasonably necessary for the project – be it private or communal – even if it forms part of an Autonomous Region or other government entity (Ley No. 840).⁵ This provision is likely in conflict with Nicaragua Law 28 (The Autonomy Statute for the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, effected in 1987) and Nicaragua Law 445 (Law of Communal Property Regime of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, effected in 2003). Activists also point to the improper or otherwise illegal manner in which HKND has (not) consulted with affected indigenous communities. Accordingly, resistance groups have filed several lawsuits with the Nicaraguan Supreme Court

⁵ Original: “Es de interés público del pueblo de la República de Nicaragua la expropiación de cualquier bien inmueble o derecho sobre un bien inmueble que sea razonablemente necesario para efectuar todo o una parte de El Proyecto, en adelante ‘Propiedad Requerida’, ya sea propiedad privada, propiedad comunal de las Regiones Autónomas o de las comunidades indígenas o propiedad que tenga cualquier Entidad Gubernamental.” Pp. 4978.

for violation of the Nicaraguan Constitution, Law 28, Law 445, as well as international law. As of May 2017, all lawsuits have been unsuccessful.

Given the immensity of its potential impacts, HKND's Nicaragua Canal is eerily quiet. Aside from the few one-off pieces of journalism that have shown up in publications like the New Yorker (March 10, 2014), the New York Times (April 2, 2016), and Al Jazeera (April 6, 2015), information on the canal project's progress is difficult to find. Consistent with this, many academic publications have stressed a lack of transparency or otherwise inadequate assessment of risk provided by HKND and/or the Nicaraguan government (see, for example, Gross 2014, Huete-Perez et al 2015, IISS 2015, Laursen 2015, Meyer and Huete-Perez 2014, Wunderlich 2014). These qualms were only slightly allayed by ERM's ESIA (dated June 2015, well after the ratification of Law 840), which ultimately recommends further impact assessment and the implementation of staunch mitigation protocols prior to moving forward with construction.

Numerous grassroots resistance movements have cropped up in opposition to the canal, most notably El Consejo Nacional En Defensa De Nuestra Tierra Lago y Soberanía, Nicaragua Sin Heridas, and Popol Na. These organizations have coordinated anti-canal rallies and protest marches throughout the country, many of which are met with government resistance and police brutality.⁶ In their own words, "The objective [of El Consejo Nacional] is clear: firstly, to repeal Law 840. Peacefully. To do this we are establishing a dialogue with the government, because we want to avoid a bloodbath in Nicaragua. We do not want any more war. We do not want any

⁶ The movement's 87th anti-canal rally, scheduled to correspond with Earth Day on April 21, 2017, was largely thwarted by the National Police which enforced checkpoints and roadblocks specifically designed to prevent people from travelling to Juigalpa, where the rally was to be held (Confidencial, 23 April 2017).

more violence. Because the fight over the canal, that's what it's going to mean. People are going to fight and people are going to arm themselves. Yes. We are going to fight.”⁷

The Canal as a Trope

Because of the relatively narrow distance separating the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea in Nicaragua, along with the presence of Lake Nicaragua and the San Juan River (which naturally connect the center of Nicaragua directly to the Caribbean Coast), the prospect of a Nicaragua Canal has fascinated world powers since at least the early colonial era. Among hundreds of examples, Spain conducted surveys for a Nicaragua Canal as early as the mid-sixteenth century, Napoleon III wrote of its feasibility in the early nineteenth century, and the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 between the United States and Britain provided, without proper consultation with the Nicaraguan government, for joint U.S.-British control of a Nicaragua Canal. Throughout the nineteenth century the United States continued to favor a canal route through Nicaragua, losing interest only after purchasing French rights to the Panama Canal in 1904 (Brodhead 2012, Hill 1948). Attempts by José Santos Zelaya, then president of Nicaragua, to garner support for a Nicaragua Canal from Japan and Germany were thwarted by his U.S.-backed overthrow in 1909. In 1914, the year the Panama Canal opened for operation, Nicaraguan President Emiliano Chamorro Vargas signed the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, which granted the United States exclusive and interminable rights to build a Nicaragua Canal. The terms of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty are quite clear: “The Government of Nicaragua grants in perpetuity to the Government of the United States, forever free from all taxation or other public charge, the exclusive property rights necessary and convenient for the construction, operation and maintenance of an interoceanic

⁷ Personal communication with Octavio Ortega Arana, member-coordinator of El Consejo Nacional (22 June, 2016).

canal” (cited in Booth 1982:34).⁸ Subsequent negotiations with the United States and the presence of U.S. troops in Nicaragua instigated a series of anti-interventionist uprisings led by Augusto Sandino, which resulted in the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Nicaragua in 1933 and the installation of Anastasio Somoza García as head of the Nicaraguan National Guard. The capture and assassination of Sandino in 1934 by Somoza’s forces sparked the brutal Somoza dictatorship that would endure in Nicaragua until the revolution that overthrew it in 1979. The Somoza dynasty enjoyed official U.S. support throughout its reign.

Beginning in the 1960s, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) led a successful socialist uprising against Somoza. In their own words, the FSLN “arose out of the Nicaraguan people’s need to have a ‘vanguard organization’ capable of taking political power through direct struggle against its enemies and establishing a social system that wipes out exploitation and poverty that [Nicaraguan] people have been subjected to” and as a reaction to the, “fascist clique imposed by Yankee imperialism” (FSLN, as quoted in Rosset & Vandermeer 1983:139). Daniel Ortega rose to power during the aftermath of the revolution and was elected president in 1984, a position he held until the U.S.-backed center-right National Opposition Union party was elected to power in 1990. From then until 2007, a series of neoliberal reforms by conservative governments rolled back the socialist policies put in place by Ortega and the FSLN but did not wholly eradicate their ideological commitment to nationalized industry and social reform. Ortega and the FSLN were reelected to power in 2006 and 2011. In 2014, the Supreme Court of Nicaragua approved amendments to the constitution that would allow Ortega to serve a fourth term. In 2016, the FSLN and Ortega won the presidency with 72% of the vote. This election

⁸ This ensured a U.S. monopoly of an interoceanic canal route through Central America. Many believe Chamorro agreed to the unfavorable terms of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty in order to gain U.S. support in the presidential campaign of 1916, which he won.

gained international attention for being closed to external review. I was in Nicaragua during the lead-up to the 2016 election, and dissenting voices were almost entirely absent, expressed only in hushed tones among trusted friends. “Look, Kendra, it’s just known that Ortega’s going to win,” a friend told me months before the election, “it’s just known.”

Notes on Method

In addition to the fieldwork I was able to perform in towns adjacent to Lake Nicaragua, I also participated in canal resistance meetings and conducted interviews with Nicaraguan resistance and political leaders, including a coordinator of El Consejo Nacional and a council member for the city of Granada. I did not conduct research in FSLN-heavy areas such as León or Estelí. Because these areas are traditionally Ortega strongholds, and because they are located well north of Lake Nicaragua and the canal-zone, opinions on the Nicaragua Canal would likely depart from those I offer here. I also did not conduct research in the Autonomous Indigenous Regions, which would be disproportionately affected by the canal, for those reasons related to government surveillance and researcher safety that I expound below.

Throughout the course of my research, I was and am guided by Juanita Sundberg’s observation that as, “scholars trained in the Global North, we are always already marinated in and complicit with geopolitical relations and institutional knowledge that bear traces of imperial histories” (2015:120). As a white woman with U.S. citizenship studying at a Canadian university, I am acutely aware that I was not, and am not, abstracted from the complex historical and geopolitical relations I found myself within as a researcher in Nicaragua. Inevitably, the many aspects of my position have bearing on the following reflections in both content and form. This is especially the case considering the prospect of a Nicaragua Canal is inseparable from a long history of settler-colonialism, anti-U.S.-imperialist sensitivity and stressed U.S.-Nicaragua

relations more generally. Rather than shy away from these complexities, I accept Richa Nagar's call to "figur[e] out how to productively engage with and participate in mutually beneficial knowledge production" (2002:181) with and for the people who have chosen to participate in this project. In this write-up, as in my research, I begin to do so by both admitting the position of privilege I operate from and committing myself to decentering that privilege – to understanding myself, this project, and my friends and research participants as within a complex web of geopolitical and interpersonal relations that bears on this work in ways I can anticipate, as well as in ways I cannot. This is a messy, organic work, of people, haunted by the ghosts of many pasts – my own included. It is inherently so, and no worse for acknowledging it; feminist theorists have been telling us this, rightly, for decades. Derrida, whose theory directs many of the following thoughts, writes that *we should learn to live with ghosts* – we should find firm ground in uncertainty, and not be conned by fetishized knowledge.

These pages are not discrete. They are not hermetic. They could never be, and suggesting otherwise would be a great injustice to the friends who shared their stories with me, who trust me to tell them with candor and respect. And so here I share a few stories, which are not mine, but which nevertheless show traces of me and of how storytellers and anthropologists, and friends and listeners, have been trained to interact with each other within a disparate, intimately connected world.

Section I: Encountering the Specter



Figure 1: Hell is empty. The demons are here. Photo by author, Granada, Nicaragua.

Doña María was hardly alone her consideration of the Nicaragua Canal as *ghostly*. Throughout the course of my research, many people articulated a similar sentiment with respect to the Nicaragua Canal, calling it on separate occasions, a “ghost,” a “chimera,” and a “smoke screen.” In casual conversation, most people in and around my primary field site flat-out denied the canal’s viability, one going so far as to call it, on several occasions, *La Gran Farsa* (The Great Lie). These representations speak to the Nicaragua Canal as an almost mythical entity that is not, and never has been, strictly real. They are also exceedingly rational metaphors for a canal project that has not only failed hundreds of times in the past, but is also in a state of liminality today. Though the canal received approval in 2013, HKND has repeatedly delayed construction. Initial estimates had construction beginning in 2014 and finishing by 2019. A recent report in *La Prensa* (dated September 13, 2016) writes that, according to an HKND official, construction is now set to begin in two more years (2018). In response to this, a member of El Consejo Nacional

posted the question, “and what will they say in two more years?” on Facebook, communicating both frustration with the project’s delayed timeline and an awareness of its perpetual liminality – of how it somehow remains stuck between approval and construction. He received an outpouring of public support. And even though a March 30, 2017 article in *Confidencial* writes, “the presence of HKND has been gradually declining,” Ortega continues to champion the Nicaragua Canal in popular discourse. Analogies like *ghost* or *chimera* pick up on this – they try to make sense of an infrastructure that, for all its hype, remains to be seen.

Many scholars have argued for the inherent invisibility of infrastructures, which are so deeply embedded within the background of social understanding that they only “become visible upon breakdown” (Star 1999:382).⁹ This way of conceptualizing infrastructure sees it as substrate, as a set of background systems that enables the movement of matter and people but that is not, in itself, really noticed. Star gets something right here with respect to functioning infrastructures: the banality of washing dishes belies an unconscious neglect of the complex systems that enable running water in the first place. Often only when the water stops flowing does someone consider the broken pipes, or the sewer backup – often only upon breakdown do they truly notice the water’s infrastructure. Of course, assuming that infrastructures operate smoothly, as a rule, is flawed. As Paul Edwards points out, “this notion of infrastructure as an invisible, smooth-functioning background ‘works’ only in the developed world. In the global South (for lack of a better term), norms for infrastructure can be considerably different” (2003:188). Though his generalization of infrastructures in the “global South” is problematic (since there are many infrastructures in the global South that function smoothly, and many in the global North that are crumbling), here Edwards draws attention to the fact that shortages,

⁹ Of course, this language is ultimately figurative: even when taken for granted, the road, and the bridge, and the telephone pole are all, literally, visible.

outages, washouts and general signs of infrastructural “breakdown” are expected and typical all over the world (see also Harvey 2005, Campbell 2012). Such circumstances lend themselves poorly to infrastructural “invisibility” because people must see the varied, complex and dynamic materialities of infrastructure in order for those infrastructures to work for them at all.

Working against the notion of infrastructural invisibility from a different angle, Brain Larkin (2013) points to the ways in which infrastructures often come to symbolize state power and modernity – to the ways in which infrastructures are created to be visible as state spectacles. In the introduction to their forthcoming book, Harvey, Bruun Jensen and Morita (2017) trouble the in/visibility of infrastructures by pointing to the ways in which they are always-already both and neither. That is, the kinds of in/visibility Star and Larkin reference with respect to infrastructure are not precisely comparable since infrastructures can be state spectacles at the same time their technical workings are obscured. This clarification is notable because it allows for the many lives of infrastructure – for the many different ways people engage with and understand infrastructure. But even so, this framework implies an infrastructure that exists in the material world – *something* that can be negotiated and understood in different ways and with varying degrees of clarity. Something more is needed with which to think about those infrastructures that are yet to be built, with which to think about potential infrastructures, such as the Nicaragua Canal, because *infrastructures to be* do not yet exist in the material world.

Despite its immateriality, and as I have noted, the Nicaragua Canal possesses an undeniable capacity to affect. And because of this, while it is not accurate to say that the Nicaragua Canal exists as an infrastructure, it is also not accurate to say that it does not exist at all. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida theorizes the ghost, or the spectral, to attend to such non-present presences. He writes, “what happens between two, and between all the “two’s” one

likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost...even and especially if this, the spectral, *is not* [here, now]” (xviii). What he means is that between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, here and not-here, there lie something else that is at once both and neither thing. Doña María gets at this intuitively when she names the canal *ghost* – she gets at the unsettling feeling of not knowing whether or not the Nicaragua Canal really *is*.

Its relationship to time is essential to understanding the Derridean specter, for the specter requires, perhaps most importantly, “disjointure in the very presence of the present, this sort of non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself...[a] radical untimeliness...[an] anachrony” (Derrida 1994:25). *The time is out of joint* (Hamlet, as quoted as epigraph in Derrida 1994) – the specter’s presence is felt precisely in its non-present presence, in the fissures between conceptualization and actualization, in the simultaneous anticipation and failure of something. “The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming. The revenant is going to come. It won’t be long. But how long is it taking?” (Derrida 1994:4). How long can HKND and Ortega maintain liminality, how long can they keep affected peoples on the precipice of knowing whether or not the canal will be? Such anticipation is the reason that, for Derrida, the foremost question of the specter is, “‘whither?’ Not only whence comes the ghost but first of all is it going to come back? Is it not already beginning to arrive and where is it going? What of the future?” (1994:37). *Imagine that, Kendra. Can you imagine?*

Given their almost uncanny association, I argue that experiencing the spectral parallels how it feels to live with the potentiality of the Nicaragua Canal – how it feels to experience the oppressive and anxious uncertainty that accompanies waiting for infrastructures that have

already been approved. I mean this not only in that both the Derridean specter and the Nicaragua Canal are characterized by liminality and an anxiously awaited future, but also in that they are unable to be *known*. This is not for lack of trying – Derrida reminds that, when it comes to specters, such “not knowing is not a lacuna. No progress of knowledge could saturate an opening that must have nothing to do with knowing. Nor therefore with ignorance” (1994:37). Spectrality is not about ignorance, is not about a lack of knowledge, for there is *nothing* to know, not yet.

Speaking practically, it is true that hard information with respect to HKND’s plan to construct the Nicaragua Canal is difficult to come by, even and especially in Nicaragua. This is at least partly the case because researchers and journalists who demonstrate interest in the canal are in very real danger of detention and/or deportation. Doña María’s husband, Carlos, coached me incessantly on how to engage with people and police so that I would not be exposed as a researcher of the canal. *Dejáme elegir a la gente para vos*, he would tell me, *los sapos están por todas partes*. Let me choose your research participants for you; spies are everywhere. *Tenés suerte de habernos encontrado. Si te pusieran con sandinistas, ya habrías sido deportada*. You’re lucky to have found us. If they had placed you with Sandinistas, you would already have been deported.

Many Nicaraguan friends expressed similar worries to me, which were not unfounded. In my three months in Nicaragua, at least eight non-nationals were detained and/or deported for alleged connection to canal related research. On June 14, Evan Ellis, U.S. citizen and professor at the U.S. Army War College, was deported a few hours after attending a canal resistance event called *De Mil en Mil*. According to his statement in *Confidencial* (June 15, 2016), the Nicaraguan government deported Ellis because he did not have ‘official authorization’ to conduct interviews about the canal, authorization which Nicaraguan legal scholars subsequently

decried as unnecessary and unconstitutional. On June 19, U.S. citizen and Amnesty International affiliate, Tom Lafay, was detained and questioned by the National Police in Nueva Guinea, also for conducting interviews about the canal. He was released only after a swift and strong response by *El Consejo Nacional* to counteract his detention by contacting media outlets and holding an impromptu citizen protest. On June 25, six Latin American environmental activists travelling as the *Caravana Mesoamericana para el Buen Vivir* were also arrested and detained in Nueva Guinea. They had been teaching local residents about sustainable oven technologies. The National Police insisted they had been providing residents with the technology to make explosives. After 48 hours of detention, during which time detainees were interrogated extensively and not allowed access to telephones or other means of communication with the outside, the detainees were deported to their respective countries. According to reports by *La Prensa* (dated June 28, 2016), detainees classified their detention as “a violent experience” in which interrogators spent less time asking about explosives and more time asking questions about their relationship to the canal: *How much do you know about the canal? How long have you known Doña Francisca (a resistance leader)? What is your relationship to Popol Na (a resistance group)?*

Because of the extent to which the Nicaraguan State seems to be invested in suppressing canal-related resistance and information, and HKND’s simultaneous failure to actualize construction, many Nicaraguan peoples fear they are being deluded by the government into believing in a false canal that will line the pockets of government officials by stripping rural Nicaraguans of their land, while also garnering ill-informed votes for the FSLN that presume the Nicaragua Canal will bring economic development. This tactic – promising its populace that the government will build a canal that will lift them from poverty – is a common trope in Nicaraguan

history. Take, for example, the following excerpt from an interview I held with a council member for the city of Granada, a man I will call Geraldo.

The canal is a chimera. It's something of illusions, something that plays with illusion. Because, there are many humble people, hardworking people, that yeah, really believe that the canal is going to happen. If you ask them they'll say, "Well, yes, the canal would be good because it would give us work." True. We would have work. But which work? Which? We already talked about the type of work [difficult and poorly paid work]. So for me, it's a story. The canal is a story. Plus, there have been thousands of canal projects. Thousands of canal projects...it's a constant in the collective imagination of Nicaraguans, the theme of the canal. It is incredible how it's repeated, and repeated.

For Geraldo, the Nicaragua Canal is a chimera, a story: something illusory, presumed real by some, but something that will never actually come to be. His final thoughts with respect to the canal project's repetition (*it is incredible how it's repeated, and repeated*) point directly to his experience of the Nicaragua Canal as spectral. For Derrida, repetition is crucial to the specter. He writes, "repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost" (1994:10), and "[the specter is] a question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it always *begins by coming back*" (1994:11). Geraldo sees this – he knows that there is something strange in how the theme of the Nicaragua Canal seems to repeat itself, again and again, throughout history. And it is at least partly this repetition that fixes the Nicaragua Canal in the *imaginario colectivo de los nicaragüenses*, in the collective imaginary of Nicaraguans, for to be Nicaraguan emerges as inseparable from the capacity to be haunted by the theme of the Nicaragua Canal. Along these lines, and speaking to the Nicaragua Canal in more general terms, Jennifer Goett argues, "in an era of infrastructure development in Latin America, megaprojects themselves have become zombies, as one after the other is proposed, approved by the state, eventually killed due to lack of feasibility or popular resistance, only to return from the grave to terrorize local populations with the specter of

dispossession once again” (2016:para. 4). Here Goett bridges spectrality and infrastructure by naming megaprojects zombies – as those things that are neither dead, nor alive, and threatening precisely in that they are revenants that stalk resident populations through time.

Residents of my primary field site in Granada, including Doña María and Geraldo, are not in direct danger of being dispossessed. That is not to say that the Nicaragua Canal would not affect them in very real ways; an infrastructure project of this scale would have, and is having, ripple effects across the entire country, indeed, across the entire world. For people who live in the canal-zone, however, the potential physical consequences of the Nicaragua Canal are felt much more intimately. Potentially displaced peoples often do not have the option of renunciation, of waiting and seeing, of denying the canal by naming it *ghost* or *chimera*, because their homes and bodies are on the line.

Nowhere was this more evident than the resistance event and exposition I attended in Managua called *De Mil en Mil*, which took place on June 13, 2016, to mark the three-year anniversary of Law 840.¹⁰ When I learned of the event a few days prior to it, I asked Daniel, Doña María’s son, if he would be interested in attending with me. He agreed willingly, but with an enthusiasm that seemed to speak more to his desire to escort me than his desire to attend the event per se. “Claro, Kendra. Vamos juntos y seguros,” he said as he walked downstairs: *Of course, Kendra. We’ll go together, and safely.*

When we arrived at *De Mil en Mil*, a security guard asked our purpose and directed us to the second floor. There, two organizers greeted us warmly, requested that we sign in and ushered us inside. The event space was not big, perhaps fifty by sixty feet, but it was packed wall-to-wall with people. Large photographs on blue poster board lined either side of the room. The

¹⁰ This was the same resistance event attended by Evan Ellis, hours before his deportation.

photographs captured various moments from the anti-canal movement since the passing of Law 840: marches, rallies, banners, black eyes and bloodied faces, but also fishermen, families, humble homes and livestock next to bodies of water. The majority of its one hundred or so attendees were *campesinos* from the canal-zone near Nueva Guinea, but there were also a few young *capitaleños* who were eager to show their support. A dozen journalists snapped photos and took notes from the back, and it appeared that I was one of three or four foreign researchers in attendance. After a few statements of welcome and gratitude, the event director showed us a series of informational videos about the canal and the anti-canal movement, organized around interviews with residents of the canal-zone. After each video she opened the floor for comment, and many others contributed their personal experiences with government negotiations, protest rallies and police brutality as related to HKND and the Nicaragua Canal project. Doña Francisca, a coordinator of *El Consejo Nacional*, spoke for twenty minutes about an elaborate government plot to deny buses entry into Managua to stage a protest. The sentiment of her, and every, testimony was strong: *campesina/o* land is not for sale, and *campesinas/os* will fight to keep it. *Ortega vende patria.*



Figure 2: De Mil en Mil, an advertisement

Daniel and I left just before the event ended. On our way out, we asked the greeters for directions back to the bus station. As one woman gave us directions, another advised that we walk quickly, or better yet – that we run. I found this strange advice, but Daniel seemed concerned. I followed him down the stairs and out into the street, where we noticed five police officers on a stoop across from the cultural center, watching us. Daniel put a finger to his mouth, asking me to be quiet. We walked briskly, and turned a corner. Then, Daniel began to speak:

Daniel: Why are [the police officers] there, do you think? They have no reason to be there, nothing criminal is happening. Look (gesturing about), there's no danger. It's because of the event. It's because of the event the police are here. Look, Kendra, the campesinos were talking poorly about the police and the government. For deceiving them, for not offering them a fair price [for their land]. The campesinos are angry. And I understand it. This could be ugly. They're going to fight with their blood.

Kendra: Yeah, it seems that way. Did you already know most of that, most of what the event was about?

Daniel: No. I didn't even know the canal's route. I didn't even know the route.

I agree with Daniel's assessment of *De Mil en Mil* – certainly, misgivings regarding the obstruction of information, the dissemination of misinformation, the *engañando* (cheating, tricking) of residents of the canal-zone and of police brutality prevailed throughout the event. One interviewee went so far as to say that, given its conduct with respect to the Nicaragua Canal, the Ortega government is as bad, or worse than, the Somoza government. Worse, he said, because rather than being openly ruthless, the Ortega government hides its injustices behind promises of progress and veils of uncertainty. Consistent with this, a good friend of mine would often mime the relationship between Ortega and HKND, using his outstretched cap to represent HKND and his own face to represent Ortega, peeping out from behind the cap on either side. He would speak as Ortega from behind an animated cap, indicating his impression that HKND's words are, in fact, Ortega's.

Facts and figures with respect to the Nicaragua Canal proved fickle at *De Mil en Mil*, shifting with each testimony – there were as many understandings of the Nicaragua Canal and its potential impacts as there were people in attendance. This mirrored my research in Nicaragua more generally. I never found a consensus with respect to the progress and potential impacts of the Nicaragua Canal, and Daniel’s admission (*I didn’t even know the canal’s route*) speaks to the dearth of canal-related information available to Nicaraguans. But rather than suggest the truth-value of one testimony over another, these inconsistencies do something else entirely. They show the many faces of the Nicaragua Canal – of the many different ways people are feeling and understanding the canal’s potentiality. Such inconsistencies show how the specter of the Nicaragua Canal is multiple and heterogeneous – how there is always more than one – because speculation breeds irregularity, even concurrent truths, in that there is *nothing* to come to a consensus about in the first place. That people did not scoff at the likelihood of the Nicaragua Canal at *De Mil en Mil* as they did in my primary field-site also showed how the specter was experienced differently at *De Mil en Mil* than it was in other spaces I had observed – how the direct potential for physical displacement cultivates different relationships to the specter of the Nicaragua Canal, making denial of its viability imprudent, even impossible, in certain spaces. The specter’s local specificity is also evident in the way Daniel and Doña María spoke to me in abstracted language when talking about the impacts of the Nicaragua Canal: *they would leave them with nothing; they’re going to fight with their blood.*

Observations on the local specificity of the specter of the Nicaragua Canal shed light on those critiques that argue the specter does not adequately account for space. For example, Luckhurst (2002) argues that “*Specters of Marx* can go only so far in elaborating contexts...that, indeed, the generalized structure of haunting is symptomatically blind to its generative loci”

(528). And del Pilar Blanco and Preen (2010) write that Derrida “forgets about the specificity of ghosts, [and] the fact that they appear in specific moments and specific locations” (xi). These critiques pick up on Derrida’s preoccupation with *whither* as opposed to *whence* – it is true that the specter is fundamentally a temporal phenomenon in that it plays with, occupies, and transmits anxieties that stem from the past within the present. However, I would complicate these critiques by arguing that while the specter may be without space in that it cannot have a material body, a haunting is always-already spatial at least in so far as the haunted person has a material body and is within space. In other words, spectral space can be delineated by attending to how and whom the specter affects. For certainly specters possess and transmit affect – in fact, this is a crucial component of their power to haunt. Avery Gordon writes, “being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (2008:8). And affect does have some spatial consistency – some ‘atmosphere’ within which it operates (Anderson 2009). Riffing off of this concept, I argue that affective atmospheres ground the specters of the Nicaragua Canal by attending to the spatial consistency of hauntings, however inexact.

Ben Anderson begins his argument for affective atmospheres with a quote from Marx that speaks to the affective potential of revolutionary atmospheres: “...the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon every one with a 20,000 pound force, but do you feel it?” (Marx, as quoted in Anderson 2009:77). He argues that though atmospheres are boundless, uncontainable and excessive, atmospheres *are* in that they ‘press in on’ and ‘envelope’ the people within them. And this is, for me, Anderson’s most important point: at the same time we acknowledge atmospheres contain and transmit affect within certain spaces – that we can feel the awkwardness of a

stuttering speech in the lecture hall, or the sadness of an elegy in the chapel, or the rage of a protest in the streets – it is also a necessary condition of atmospheres that they exceed predetermined form. In this way atmospheres, as specters, are “between presence and absence, between subject and object/subject, and between definite and indefinite” (Anderson 2009:77), and therefore atmospheres are within “relation[s] of tension” (80). The excessiveness of atmospheres is in their in-between-ness, in their refusal to be ontologized. Thus, “to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague” (80). It is to learn to live with ghosts.

Though I do not think Anderson’s characterization of atmospheres as within relations of binary tension is beneficial to understanding the elusiveness of atmospheres (as it disciplines the radical openness of atmospheres he is otherwise successful in communicating), the concept of atmosphere gives bearing to affect, which might otherwise be understood as a random array of emotive trajectories that affect people in equally random ways. Atmospheres offer a theoretical tool by which to analyze collective affective experience as something that both emanates from, and yet exceeds, direct encounters between material bodies in space. Atmospheres, therefore, provide a way to conceive of spectral spaces by thinking of them as within *spectral atmospheres*. Interestingly, Anderson ignores the spectral in his consideration of atmospheres. This is especially noteworthy considering he quotes Marx in the framing of his argument – Marx, who begins *The Communist Manifesto* with the phrase, “A spectre is haunting Europe” (1964:55). By thinking of specters as within atmospheres, we can begin to see how specters may haunt particular spaces in particular ways while not limiting spectral hauntings to those people in those localities. We can begin to theorize how the specters of the Nicaragua Canal – themselves

inherently deterritorialized entities – come together to form regional atmospheres within Nicaragua, and also how residents of different localities, such as those of my primary field site or those of the canal-zone, experience the specters of the Nicaragua Canal in very different, yet spatially consistent, ways.

Section II: The Canal's Remains

Given its deep history, material reminders of efforts to find and control an interoceanic route through Nicaragua are not hard to find. Throughout the course of my research, nowhere were these reminders more visible than along the Río San Juan. The Río San Juan passes through the southeastern portion of Nicaragua, flowing from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean Coast, and forming a section of Nicaragua's border with Costa Rica. Historically this river was a crucial leg of the *Ruta del Tránsito*, a transit route through Nicaragua developed by Cornelius Vanderbilt in the 19th century, primarily to accommodate the burgeoning flow of people from New York to California enticed by the gold rush of 1848.¹¹ In the 17th and 18th centuries, the river also served as a strategic transit route for colonial powers, primarily Spanish in the interior of Nicaragua, and British near the mouth of the river at Greytown on the Caribbean Coast. During our discussions about HKND's plan to construct a canal, Geraldo, a council member for the city of Granada whom I mentioned as having named the canal a chimera, described the importance of the Río San Juan to the Nicaragua Canal idea in detail to me:

The Spanish founded Granada next to Lake Nicaragua in order to look for a communication route from the lake to the Caribbean. And they succeeded. They discovered the San Juan River. That's why the San Juan River has historically been an emblem [for Nicaragua], why over the last 500 years it has meant so much for Nicaragua. Surely indigenous peoples, before the arrival of the Spanish, also used the San Juan River as a communication route through the country. Surely. But, under the direction of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, the Spanish discovered the river and began to use it as a route. Later, many years later, when the gold rush in California began, it was the first time in history that the San Juan River was used intensively [as part of an interoceanic corridor]...If we say that a canal once operated in Nicaragua, it was that route, the ruta del tránsito. Which

¹¹ In 1851, Vanderbilt opened the Accessory Transit Company, which operated an interoceanic route that ran up the San Juan River from Greytown, through Lake Nicaragua, and then overland from Rivas to the Pacific Coast. It proved profitable, carrying tens of thousands of people annually. American William Walker, who invaded Nicaragua in 1855 with a few dozen men and subsequently declared himself president, cancelled Vanderbilt's contracts. Walker was overthrown by a coalition of Central American forces in 1857 and executed in 1860.

had several components: river, lake, land. And it worked. And that's where people moved, and merchandise moved...and that's where the [canal's] remains are.

My conversations with Geraldo encouraged my travel to the Río San Juan region, someplace I had not yet committed to visiting as part of my research. I was interested both in his characterization of the Río San Juan as a pseudo-canal (*if we say that a canal ever functioned in Nicaragua, it was that route*), and in his reference to remains (*that's where the [canal's] remains are*).

Since the Río San Juan region shares a border with the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), which is rife with canal resistance, and with Costa Rica, which currently experiences strained relations with Nicaragua, and because it is geographically both to be bisected by the Nicaragua Canal and very remote in terms of services and accessibility, I was aware that researchers in the Río San Juan region experience a different kind of visibility there. True to this, when I touched down in San Carlos on June 23, I was greeted by an armed guard in full military dress. Though armed military personnel were a common sight during my time in Nicaragua, I arrived to the region during a particularly precarious time for researchers of the Nicaragua Canal: Evan Ellis was detained and deported on June 14; Tom Lafay was detained on June 19; and students from *La Caravana Mesoamerica Para El Buen Vivir* were detained and deported on June 25.

The armed guard requested my documentation, noted my name, nationality and passport number, and asked me questions standard to an international customs crossing. At the time I was the only passenger in the airport, the only non-native Spanish speaker, and the only woman. *Where have you come from? Where are you staying? What are you doing in the Río San Juan? How long are you in Nicaragua? Have you bought your return ticket?* Because our plane had come directly from Managua, I found this interchange bizarre. Even so, I answered questions

politely, omitting those details that would expose me as a researcher who had come to learn about the canal. *I come from Granada, where I am learning Spanish. I am a tourist and a student. I am in Nicaragua for 87 days. Yes, I have a return ticket.* These were necessary omissions, not solely for the protection of my data and participants but also for the protection of my physical body, which felt particularly vulnerable under the circumstances I have described.

Many similar exchanges characterized my time in the Río San Juan region – armed guards patrolling city streets stopped me frequently to query my presence there. Most of these exchanges were innocuous. In one instance however, on June 27, a guard approached me as I waited to board a passenger boat for El Castillo, which was three hours upriver. His questions were similar, but his demeanor more intense. He sat just slightly too close to me, so that I could smell his breath. “Ahh, but you are not in Granada to learn Spanish, you already know Spanish. What are you really working on? Why do you have a notebook? Tell me.” I diffused the situation with humor, smiled and joked by saying, “Sure, I know Spanish, but I don’t know enough Nicaraguan slang to sound cool, do I?” He laughed, touched my bare shoulder for a moment too long, and left the waiting room, glancing back at me. The interrogation took perhaps five minutes. A man I met just previously had been watching our exchange. He came over to ask what the guard had wanted, and advised that we had made a scene. I relayed our conversation; he appeared appalled. “Es cómo, ¿y qué le importa a usted?” *It’s like, what’s it to you, sir?*

I then stepped back into the boarding line and walked toward the shore. The boat ride from San Carlos to El Castillo, on the Río San Juan and along the historic *Ruta del Tránsito*, took three hours. The *lancha* was clumsy – the weight of its 40 passengers left only a few inches of blue fiberglass above water. Low river levels meant we travelled slowly, forced to avoid boulders and rapids that surrounding passengers lamented as emergent products of climate

change and a light rain year. This is significant, for a few reasons. First, low river levels make through passage to Greytown on the Río San Juan uncertain, if not impossible. As the only other way to reach Greytown from the interior of Nicaragua is by way of air travel, the cost of which tops three times the average weekly salary, low river levels effectively cut Greytown off from the rest of Nicaragua. Second, it demonstrated to me, in a concrete way, how reliant the possibility of the Nicaragua Canal is on the natural landscape. If our tiny *lancha* – with only a few feet of hull below water – had trouble navigating the San Juan River in a time of drought, how feasible would it be to transit a mega-container ship – with fifty feet of hull below water – in similar conditions?

When the *lancha* finally docked at El Castillo, I went directly to visit the ruins of fortress El Castillo de la Inmaculada Concepción, from which the town receives its name. Historically, the fortress at El Castillo formed part of a series of fortifications on the Río San Juan built by Spanish forces in the late 17th century to protect the city of Granada from British pirates, who would raid from the east. In 1995, the ruins of El Castillo were named a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and residents now operate the ruins as a tourist attraction. Upon my entry to the ruins I met Elena, a middle-aged woman who offered to be my tour guide for the afternoon.

We began by touring a newly constructed museum just upriver from the ruins of the fortress. The entire museum was dedicated to the idea of the Nicaragua Canal idea as understood in the colonial and imperial eras. Rusted cannons, antique maps and colossal chains lined either side of the room. Red dust and jagged pieces of decaying iron lay in piles beneath parent artillery. Yellowing plastic cases held cartoon descriptions of the canal, and reproductions of

schema and other technical drawings projected the many ways colonial, imperial and Nicaraguan powers had conceptualized the possibility of an interoceanic route through time.¹²

Though her presentation on the history of the Nicaragua Canal was thorough, neither the museum nor Elena's presentation included information about the potentiality of a Nicaragua Canal today. Everything on display was a relic from an earlier era, some time that was not this one. Given the levels of secrecy and silence that I had hitherto encountered vis-à-vis HKND's canal, I did not find this surprising. But when I asked Elena about the possibility of a Nicaragua Canal today, she was completely dismissive, as if my question were a non sequitur. I continued, asking her thoughts about the nearby protests and deportations throughout the country. Turning on her heel she asked me, "What channel have you been watching? 12?"¹³ She expressed frustration with the protesters, and with the resistance movement in general, being more interested in maintaining the image of a safe Nicaragua in order to attract tourists to El Castillo. These practical concerns were not unfounded: two days later (June 29, 2016) a US Travel Advisory was issued with the following language:

U.S. citizens in Nicaragua should be aware of heightened sensitivity by Nicaraguan officials to certain subjects or activities, including...the proposed inter-oceanic canal...Even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence.

¹² The Nicaragua Canal idea has shifted as technology and engineering have become more sophisticated – how we conceptualize an interoceanic route today (as a mega-infrastructure project) is necessarily different from how colonial powers conceptualized it in the 17th century (primarily as a network of pre-existing and naturally-occurring systems). In the museum at El Castillo, both the phrases, "ruta interoceánico" and, "canal de Nicaragua" were represented in maps and schema. Though not precisely the same, when my interlocutors referenced the deep history of "the Nicaragua Canal," it was implied that they were speaking of the deep history of "an interoceanic route through Nicaragua," regardless of its technical manifestation.

¹³ Channel 12 is one of only a few news stations in Nicaragua that is not majority-owned, operated or controlled by Ortega and/or the FSLN.

Elena then walked with me along the Río San Juan to the ruins of the fortress, which were quite stunning. Dozens of stone archways connected its outer curtain walls to the main fortress structure, while cannons stood ready in many embrasures. Rusting gates groaned to permit us entry into various courtyards, marked by iron emblems that were tinged with green. Narrow rock staircases, long since softened with moss, ran haphazardly between the fortress's many levels. On the top level, beneath flying blue and white, I looked out at this part of the *Ruta del Tránsito* and was overcome by a feeling of timelessness. I imagined how visitors to El Castillo might transpose the museum onto the river by imagining English boats coming toward them from the east – by imagining men prepping cannons and muskets, and manifesting the smell of gunpowder and wet iron. Or perhaps they would imagine Córdoba and his crew searching for passage through the country in a string of canoes, or see red-bearded adventurers fevered by the prospect of California gold. Whatever they imagine, it is not likely a crew of HKND surveyors 50 kilometers to the north who are actively engaged in the preconstruction phases of a new Nicaragua Canal. Decaying cannons, plastic cases and rounded battlements communicated instead a Nicaragua Canal that belongs in the past. Encased within ruins, the Nicaragua Canal became heritage, something to be cherished and preserved as part of a collective history but not something that lives on today. In these ways, and as Geraldo articulated, El Castillo houses the *remains (los restos)* of the Nicaragua Canal, for it acts not only as a museum, but also and simultaneously as a mausoleum.

This understanding of the ruin – as something that remains of the past and that therefore demands deference as a past-object – has held a privileged position in modern conceptions of the ruin. Gastón Gordillo writes that the heritage industry conceives of ruins as, “objects without afterlife: dead things from a dead past, whose value originates far in time” (2014:9), and

discusses how his work with and within ruins in Northeastern Argentina challenged, “the alleged pastness of [ruins]...as well as the boundedness [he] inadvertently projected onto their materiality” (2014:2).



Figure 3: *La Ruta de Transito*. Photo by author, El Castillo, Nicaragua.

For him, conceiving of the ruin as simply in the past misses the multiple temporalities that characterize the ruin – it misses the many ways the materiality of the ruin is produced, destroyed and remade by the people who interact with ruins in the present. He argues that thinking of ruins instead as *rubble*, that is, as disintegrated matter and not as a fetishized, timeless whole, “can help us understand the ruptured multiplicity that is constitutive of all geographies” (2014:2).

Derrida argues that the dis-ease that surrounds the multiplicity of specters is so intense, so difficult to live with, that people go to great lengths to conjure them away instead of learning to live with them. Among other conjuring technologies is the work of mourning, which “consists

always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and *localizing* the dead...one has to know. *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge*" (1994:9). Similarly, Gordillo writes, "a major source of discomfort has long been the fact that 'rubble' signals, for elite dispositions, the disintegration of recognizable forms" (2014:9); the ruin is, therefore, "the attempt to conjure away the void of rubble and the resulting vertigo that it generates" (2014:10). And so protection against the anxieties that accompany the multiplicity of specters, as the multiplicity of rubble, might involve conjuring, that is: ontologizing, that is: knowing the what, where and when of that which, by definition, cannot be known in such terms. In this way, the ruins at El Castillo conjure away the specters of the Nicaragua Canal by literally encasing the Nicaragua Canal idea within a particular past-world, projecting it as an archaeologically understandable entity belonging to a dead past, and not one characterized by multiple potentialities in the present.

Section III: Legacies of Hegemony



Figure 4: Death to the imperial invaders. Photo by author, León, Nicaragua.

After a few weeks with Doña María's family, I reached out to Octavio, a resistance leader and member-coordinator of El Consejo Nacional, based on his very public involvement with the canal resistance movement.¹⁴ I was interested in talking with Octavio to learn more about the atmosphere of the resistance movement, which I had only briefly experienced at *De Mil en Mil*. He called me while I was in Granada, expressing a strong interest in my project and in meeting with me to discuss his participation in it. He also explicitly warned me of the dangers involved in meeting with him:

It's really important that you meet with me. But I want this to be clear: yesterday, an international representative was detained by the police with two members of El Consejo. We're in a situation in which they [the police, the government] aren't respecting the rights of journalists nor those of human rights representatives.

¹⁴ As a prominent member of *El Consejo Nacional*, Octavio has had dozens of appearances on television and radio programs. He also cultivates a robust anti-canal presence on social media. He requested that I use his real name.

We scheduled a meeting for the following week. Octavio's hometown, located on the strip of land between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Coast, is slated for partial displacement and is a hub of canal resistance activity, which the Nicaraguan government is well aware of. We agreed to avoid the National Police by meeting outside the city center and riding his motorcycle to the interior from there. He gave me an impromptu tour of the city as we went: *that way to the market, that way to the lake, and straight ahead, to Costa Rica*. He continued to make pleasant conversation on the ride: *how are you liking Nicaragua? have you been here before? how is your research going?* I answered his questions as best I could, yelling into the wind. At some point I had to tell him that I could not hear him, not because I could not hear him, precisely, but because I could not understand him through his helmet and the wind and the choke and the adrenaline-laced fear I had while on the back of the motorcycle of man I had not previously met, in a city I was unfamiliar with, during a very uncertain political moment for researchers of the Nicaragua Canal. His warning played on a loop in my head – *I want this to be clear* – as I looked compulsively around for police, myself haunted by the prospect of their presence.

After a few minutes we arrived to his office, a standalone building on a quiet street. Maps covered the walls: maps of Nicaragua, of the Rivas region, of the lake, of the canal route. Clippings and articles were everywhere, taped and pinned to brick and wood. His glass-topped desk was stuffed with newspaper, already curling with age. Before we began our formal interview, he reiterated how many canal-related interviews he has done – over 430 by his count – and took a few minutes to show me his collection of clippings. He has curated what he says is the largest collection of anti-canal media that exists anywhere. It was an incredible amount of material: hundreds upon hundreds of articles were organized chronologically in enormous green binders. Most of the clippings were from local sources like *La Prensa*, but he had also collected

dozens of international articles. I was stunned by how much material he had gathered, and how little of it I had previously seen.

Octavio: I want you to know that I have been interviewed by more than 430 foreign journalists about the fight we've waged here. And there's something important – come over here (asks me to come look at his binders). One of the first interviews I was given at the local level was this one (points to an article). It's in the most widely circulated paper (La Prensa). And there I say it quite clearly.

Kendra: This is in 2014?

Octavio: Yes, back then I already had the front page of the newspapers. And here's what I say (points to his quote). And I still think this is going to be true for Nicaraguans: "we would be slaves to the Chinese if we allow the canal to be built in Nicaragua."

Kendra: Okay, in 2014 you said that. But there's still no information available for people?

Octavio: Right. There's no information. That's what gives me something to do, that's why I'm putting together these albums of the whole fight that we've developed.

Kendra: So then there is information, there's a lot of information, but it's hidden.

Octavio: Right.

We sat back down, and our conversation proceeded organically. He told me of the many resistance meetings that had been held in that space, of neighboring spies (*sapos*) taking pictures of the license plates of all the people in attendance and sending them to the government. "What does the government do with that information," I asked him? "No lo sabemos," he answered, *we don't know*. I then began to ask him questions about the canal resistance movement and his participation in it, what he thinks will happen in the future, and what he thinks the motives behind the Nicaragua Canal might be. To this last question, he responded:

Octavio: This is one of the biggest questions we have. Why are the Chinese interested in Nicaragua? They're interested in conquering Latin America by bringing their people to, and settling in, Latin America.

Kendra: Really? Like colonialism?

Octavio: That's right. That's it. We would be slaves to the Chinese in that they would colonize us in a different way. They're not buying our properties. The price of the properties that would be taken from us is ridiculously low for them. I'm sure there's a list of 50,000 Chinese people who want to come to Nicaragua at those property prices. And what's going to happen to us? What will happen to us? We are going to live – do you know, Kendra, what it means when I say “to live in the callejón?”

Kendra: No.

Octavio: The callejón is – okay, this property is yours, this property belongs to your neighbor (pointing to an adjacent pencil and pen). So. Here's the road where people walk (between the pencil and pen). But in Nicaragua that's known as a callejón. Here in the callejón you want cows, trees, and campesinos without land. So, they will take us off our land and send us to live in the callejón. On the street. What do you call those who are in the United States and in Canada? The home-e-leed? Those who ask for money in the streets in the United States, in Canada?

Kendra: Homeless?

Octavio: Homeless. That's what they'll turn us into. We'll be begging in the streets.

Octavio's fear that Nicaraguans will be forced to live on the street (*vivir en el callejón*) speaks to the profound dis-ease he feels with respect to the Nicaragua Canal's, and by extension his, uncertain future – to the oppressive uncertainty that accompanies expecting to be, but not yet being, displaced. That Octavio explicitly ties colonialism to HKND and the Nicaragua Canal (*they're interested in conquering Latin America; we would be slaves; they're going to colonize us in a different way*) deserves, I think, extended thought, for it is a pointed example of how specters stem from a haunted historical imagination, in this case, of colonial dispossession and slavery. Here Octavio reveals how the specter of the Nicaragua Canal is wrapped up in Nicaragua's colonial history, as well as the many ways in which that history haunts *by way of*

and *through* HKND's Nicaragua Canal.¹⁵ In thinking about the Nicaragua Canal, which has phantom limbs throughout Nicaragua's colonial and imperial histories, scholars also have to consider the (often violent) legacies of those histories, and how they might be remade or rethought of in the context of HKND's Nicaragua Canal.

Speaking to U.S.-America, Renée Bergland writes, "the specter of [Native Americans's] forced dispossession haunts the American nation and the American imagination" (2000:5) by both functioning as a figure of national guilt (*how could we have been so violent?*) and as a triumphant agent of nationalization (*we have conquered [them]*).¹⁶ These reflections on the relationship between haunted subjectivities and nationalism make tangible Derrida's observation that "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (1994:37). There is something magical about power, which itself is ghostly – insubstantial, somehow imaginary, and yet at the same time unequivocally real. And so hegemony requires ghosts in that power itself is spectral – but it also demands ghosts in that it requires, often if not always, a history of violence that haunts the people who live within them. In the so-called "New World," as in all spaces touched by settler-colonialism, specters of dispossession – such as those that stem from mega-infrastructure projects – cannot be abstracted from the history (and perpetuation) of the dispossession of indigenous peoples in the name of the State. Such specters are even necessary to – and constitutive of – state hegemony.

¹⁵ I do not mean to imply that colonialism or imperialism is strictly *in the past*. On the contrary, that Octavio is wrestling with the prospect of colonialism here shows how colonialism is active in creating present reality. The specific anxieties he references, however, speak the renewed potentiality of a foreign power conquering Nicaragua by force today – they speak to the renewed prospect of *conquistadores*, settlers and slavery.

¹⁶ *Ghostly language* in literature is Bergland's main point of analysis: "When European Americans speak of Native Americans [in literature], they always use the language of ghostliness. They call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms or ghosts...most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead" (2000:1).

Of course, scholars point to the ways in which infrastructure itself has a constitutive relationship with state power. Hetherington and Campbell suggest, “one aspect that Star’s definition of infrastructure as ‘background’ does not account for particularly well is the primary experience of infrastructure that many people in the developing world have historically had: public building projects have offered spectacular proof of the presence of states, colonial powers, or multinational lenders” (2014:192). Certainly, and for reasons I have already articulated, the Nicaragua Canal has served as a symbol of colonial and imperial power – Spain, Britain, and the United States, at a minimum, have used it as a springboard for the oppression and control of Nicaraguan territories and peoples. Even so, Brian Larkin argues, “the tie between the representational logic of infrastructure and the state was not loosened with the end of colonialism but intensified, only now infrastructure came to represent the promise of independent rule rather than colonial supremacy” (2008:8). If Daniel Ortega and the FSLN were to collaborate with HKND to build a Nicaragua Canal when no outside powers were able to do so, it would symbolically assert the power of the Nicaraguan state over and against the colonial and imperial presences that dominated it for centuries. A *Nicaraguan* Nicaragua Canal would symbolize national self-sufficiency, and ultimately, national triumph.

Even given the immense importance of attending to colonialism and imperialism in the context of HKND’s Nicaragua Canal, Nicaragua’s more recent history of oppression and resistance also shapes the ways in which Nicaraguans are haunted by the specters of the Nicaragua Canal, and especially in how they respond to them. Principally, the successful socialist uprising of the 1960s and 1970s represents an implausible grassroots victory against the brutal tyranny of a dictatorship, won by revolutionaries who are still alive today. Daniel Ortega himself was a revolutionary, something he and the FSLN tout incessantly. Largely because of

this, the atmosphere of revolution is still very palpable in Nicaragua, both in discourse and in practice – *the people* still hold an immense amount of power in the Nicaraguan imagination. My friend and teacher, Marco, reminded me of this whenever our conversations about the Nicaragua Canal turned grim. Pessimistically, I would ask things like: “But what can the campesinos do, Marco, if Ortega is corrupting the courts?” “Everything,” he would say patiently. “All they need are machetes.”

Over many weeks and a few *Toñas*, Marco described to me in depth what he thinks of the Nicaragua Canal. My discussions with him were wandering, relaxed, and never formally recorded, though in retrospect they were quite intentional – he wanted me to understand, in a complicated way, how the Nicaragua Canal project is haunted by the broken promises of the Sandinista Revolution. *Se creció demasiado*, Marco would say of Ortega, shaking his head – literally, “he grew too much.”

Marco: Ortega has a huge ego. But he wasn't really even part of the revolution. He was arrested for being part of a student protest in the early 70s, and so was in jail for most of the war, but he still considers himself the number one hero of the revolution. In this and other ways, he's like a child. When he resumed office in 2007 he picked up right where he left off in 1990 – he never forgot the U.S. intervention – and he still talks badly of the U.S., even though no one my age cares anymore (Marco is in his mid-30's). The older generation just wants to forget there was war. They just want to go forward, you know. Let's go forward. But he keeps holding these grudges. We see this with the canal, too.

Kendra: What do you mean, like the canal is like a big fuck you to the U.S. from Ortega?

Marco: Exactly, Kendra, exactly. But he wouldn't say that. Ortega knows how to manipulate people.

Another time Marco described a trip he took to Coyotepe, a fortress where Somoza would incarcerate and torture those who opposed the dictatorship. Long since closed, Coyotepe is now operated as a tourist attraction. Marco went into detail about how it felt to be inside

Coyotepe, articulating he felt incredibly uneasy there (*muy aprensivo*), how the place filled him with goosebumps (*se me puso la piel de gallina*), and how he felt its power (*había poder*). He told me he could feel the ghosts of Somoza's prisoners – not least because that they had written their names and the phrase *sácame* (get me out) all over the bricks. “That was a terrible time, but they still do it,” he said to me. “What,” I asked, “they still do what?” To which he responded:

Lock people up for speaking out against the government. They get to you. I don't know how, and it's much less obvious than it used to be, but they get to you. They won't lock you up in a fortress and torture you openly – they'll hire a mob to beat you up, or get a gang of kids to shoot you in a robbery. No one would know it was the government. But it would be.

Whether the Ortega government actually engages in the kind of activity Marco warns me about is difficult to say – its inability to be proven is even a necessary condition of the distrustful anxiety Marco articulates here. Marco's accounts are, however, significant in that they expose the varied and complex ways in which the specters of the Nicaragua Canal invoke a history of oppression and resistance, in this case, of Somoza, the revolution, and the failure of Daniel Ortega and the revolution to create a more egalitarian society. Necessarily temporal, Marco's repeated use of *still* (*Ortega still talks poorly of the United States; the government still locks people up for speaking out against it*) implies a past within the present, something that has yet to be overcome, as does his characterization of Ortega's grudge (*he never forgot the U.S intervention*) and child-like actions (*he's like a child*).

Bitter disappointment in Ortega and the FSLN was something I heard reiterated again and again. *They aren't real Sandinistas*, Carlos would say to me, *they don't know Sandino anymore*. Such sentiments are not limited to members of the conservative party – in 1995, defectors from the FSLN started an opposing political party, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), to challenge FSLN hegemony. In their own words, the MRS arose “in clear opposition to the

growing authoritarian tendencies of Daniel Ortega” and in order to “rescue Sandino’s example and virtues, beyond his political affiliations” (MRS Website, accessed Feb 19, 2017). In 2008, the Supreme Court of Nicaragua barred the MRS from formally participating in government elections. When I asked a friend who identifies as a member of the MRS his thoughts with respect to the current state of the FSLN, his response to me was as follows:

Daniel Ortega's anti-imperialist discourse is empty, hollow, a bubble, because it's not true. That is, [the rhetoric of] anti-imperialism is just part of the populist demagoguery that an authoritarian requires.

Undeniably, one of the FSLN’s most important platforms has been one against imperialism. Augusto Sandino rose to power principally as a response to U.S. imperialism, and Daniel Ortega himself is quoted as having said, “Nicaragua will continue to be, above all else, anti-imperialist” (Ortega, as quoted in Booth 1982:214). That the specters of the Nicaragua Canal – an infrastructure project that relies on foreign investment and that reeks of government corruption – haunt by way of exposing Ortega’s broken promises and the resurrection of dictatorship is not surprising. For a party whose platform has been staunchly anti-imperialist, HKND’s plan to construct a Nicaragua Canal represents, in a loud and symbolic way, that the FSLN is slowly shifting away from its socialist platform and toward one that might better be characterized as left-populist-nationalist.

Conclusions

In this thesis I have explored how HKND's plan to construct a Nicaragua Canal might be thought of as spectral in both its non-present presence, and in its propensity to invoke anxieties that stem from a haunted historical imagination. I have considered the ways in which people might conjure away the anxieties that accompany the uncertain future of HKND's canal – by naming it ghost or chimera, or by encasing it in ruins – and I have also drawn attention to the spatial dimensions of such conjuring by showing how the specter of the Nicaragua Canal is felt much differently by those resident peoples dealing with the possibility of direct physical displacement. Finally, I have suggested that the ways in which the specters of the Nicaragua Canal haunt resident peoples are inseparable from the violent legacies of hegemony, as they are from the legacy of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the bitter disappointment that accompanies the descent of the FSLN and Daniel Ortega into an authoritarian populist regime.

Thinking of infrastructure in tandem with spectrality gives substance to impending infrastructures – it provides a tool with which to consider the very real affectations of mega-infrastructure projects that have been approved but are still yet to be. More than that, it urges scholars and developers to take seriously the ways in which modern infrastructure projects are tied up and within the many histories of violence, oppression and resistance that haunt the people who live with their potentiality. Rather than assuming that potential infrastructures bring with them the promise of political recognition (see, for example, Hetherington 2014), I premise the ways in which the 'promise' of infrastructure burdens resident peoples by exhuming a painful social past. And therefore resisting infrastructures like the Nicaragua Canal is never only about the injustices committed against resident peoples today in the name of development, economic growth, or the state (though such injustices are certainly necessary and sufficient for their

resistance). It is also always about recognizing and defying a history of oppression (and, sometimes, oppressing) that lives on in the bodies and minds of those resident peoples today.

Though the Nicaragua Canal presents an especially salient case study through which to analyze the spectrality of infrastructure, especially in that it has risen and died hundreds of times throughout Nicaragua's history and now stalks a contentious political present, the implications of spectral infrastructures span pipelines, dams and many other mega-infrastructure projects in the current era. Surely, the prolonged and impassioned protests at sites like that which would be bisected by the Dakota Access Pipeline are testimony to the argument that infrastructures, even when still a potentiality, have incredible affective and material power across the world and in many different contexts. As scholars we need to do justice to all parts of the infrastructural process – to attend to the material impacts of negotiation and pre-construction as well as operation and decay. When thinking about those infrastructures that have been approved but not yet constructed, the question for resident peoples is indeed, *whither?* Will the infrastructure really be – what of the future? For until it arrives, all there is is anxious speculation. And the very real fight against ghosts.

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