

“Whose Tomorrow is Tomorrow?”¹: Remembering (Past) Futures in Autobiographical Writings of the US-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement and Contra War, 1979-1991

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ABSTRACT: Tracing the question of how life writing about the US-Nicaragua solidarity movement and Contra War comments on 1980s US society, this paper investigates the narrative construction of future visions through the plotted narratives of past presents and past futures in John Brentlinger’s *The Best of What We Are: Reflections on the Nicaraguan Revolution* and William R. Meara’s *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989*.

KEYWORDS: life writing; US-Nicaragua solidarity movement; Contra War; past futures; utopia; nostalgia; 1980s US society

Introduction and Setting

The US-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement and the Contra War

In 1985, John Brentlinger traveled to Nicaragua for the first time to get first-hand information on and actively participate in the Sandinista revolution. In the following years, the philosopher made many trips to Nicaragua as a participant-observer in the Sandinista-Contra conflict. Four years earlier, in 1981, another US American arrived at Managua airport for the first time. Bill Meara had just graduated and was looking for adventure in Sandinista Nicaragua. He returned seven years later as diplomatic representative to the Contras working for the Special Liaison Office of the US embassy in Nicaragua.

But Brentlinger and Meara were not the only US Americans traveling to Nicaragua during the 1980s. They formed part of larger collectives who participated either in the US-Nicaragua solidarity movement or the conflicts of the Contra War. During the final stages of the Cold War, the US government “provided financial and material support for right-wing forces through overt and, where necessary, covert means” (Witham 1), thus backing the rightist Nicaraguan counter-revolutionary movement, the Contras. These guerrilla fighters were meant to overthrow the Sandinistas, the left-wing movement that had overcome the cruel Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and successfully installed a leftist government during the 1980s, of which the US government strongly disapproved. The Reagan government thus justified the US involvement in Nicaragua with the logics of the Cold War, interpreting the conflict as a struggle between the forces of capitalism and democracy on the one side, and communism and totalitarianism on the other (cf. Witham 1). In 1991, when the Sandinistas were

1 The title is inspired by the poem and revolutionary working song “Solidarity Song” (1929-31) by Bertolt Brecht.

defeated in a general election, the United States considered its mission in Nicaragua accomplished and one of the last battles of the Cold War won.

However, Nicaragua was not the only society divided into two political and ideological factions during the 1980s. The Reagan administration's Central American policies led to reactions on each side of the political spectrum in the United States as well. US society during the 1980s, often referred to as the 'age of Reagan,' was characterized by Reagan's 'conservative revolution' and the development of the New Right.² Yet, the liberal agenda of the cultural and political left (cf. Witham) in the United States opposed this broadly based conservative movement. Thus, on the one hand, the leftist Sandinista government disseminated an atmosphere of hope in Nicaragua that made many liberal Americans who were critical of their own government travel to Nicaragua. These 'Internacionalistas,' or Internationalists, projected their utopian visions on Nicaragua, attributing their own political ideas, ideological feelings, and fantasies to Sandinista Nicaragua, and protesting against the repressive Nicaragua policies of the Reagan government. This development follows the pattern of the emergence of social utopias in the twentieth century, in which movements arose that tried to translate their utopias into a social reality. Examples are the Abraham Lincoln Brigadistas during the Spanish Civil War, the anti-Vietnam War movement, or solidarity with Cuba, which all imagined alternative societies and at the same time criticized their own. These cases show that social utopias are traveling concepts that form a tradition within leftist social movements, framed by their specific spatial and historical contexts.³ On the other hand, Nicaragua was important for the identity of the New Right in the United States as well, and supporters of the counter-revolution went to Nicaragua to back the rightist Contras. In the context of the Cold War antagonism of the 1980s, Nicaragua inspired many Americans to envision new futures and alternative paths for self-determination. It served as a projection surface for the desires and fears of anti-interventionists and interventionists, of leftist and of rightist visions.

John Brentlinger and Bill Meara were among these Americans. Both kept a journal during their time in Nicaragua and retrospectively wrote down and published their experiences in *The Best of What We Are: Reflections on the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1995) and *Contra Cross:*

2 According to Graham Thompson, the "gradual disillusionment with Democratic liberalism in the face of stagflation and a backlash against the social movements of the sixties stimulated [...] 'America's Right Turn'," also often referred to as New Right politics, or neo-conservatism (15). Thompson describes 'Ronald Reagan's America' as defined by "Reagan's hard-line anti-communism, his rhetorical dismissal of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' and, in retrospect, [...] the affirmation of neo-liberal economic values that were at the heart of the Reaganite project" (4). However, Nick Witham in his study on the US cultural left and the Reagan era describes the 1980s as a "period in which a range of vibrant social movements challenged the politics of Reagan's presidential administration, and demonstrated that, whilst conservatism dominated the landscape of American politics during the period, it was never truly triumphant" (1).

3 According to Ruth Levitas, "[t]he mobilization of tradition can work [...] as anagnorisis," i.e. as a process of recognition, where the gap between past and present is not collapsed (*Method* 191). One example of the mobilization of this process of recognition are the US-Nicaragua solidarity narratives' frequent intertextual references to the International Brigades, the Abraham Lincoln Brigadistas, a group of volunteers from the United States who fought in the Spanish Civil War to show their solidarity with the cause of the leftist Spanish Republicans and opposed Franco's fascist forces.

Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989 (2006). However, their narratives could not be more different. John Brentlinger, a white middle-class father and philosophy professor of German-Irish descent who is in his early fifties during the narrated time (cf. Brentlinger 7, 14-15, 67-68) consciously refers to himself as “very white and well-to-do” (15). He made six trips to Nicaragua in total for he was inspired by the Sandinista period, which he considers a people’s struggle for self-realization and an interesting research topic (cf. “blurb,” 67-68). He traveled the country and conducted interviews with Sandinistas and Contras, attempting to inform US Americans back home about the circumstances in Nicaragua (67). His narrative is a combination of journal and essay chapters, which follow a loose chronological relation of his experiences in Nicaragua from 1985 to 1992 that reveal an awareness of different presents in form of comments added in hindsight. Brentlinger openly supports the Sandinistas in his text stating: “Many North Americans who come here say they oppose U.S. policies against Nicaragua but do not support the Sandinistas, while I do. I came here with a positive attitude and it grows stronger” (41).

Bill Meara learned to despise Sandinismo after his first trip to Nicaragua where he “gradually [...] became disillusioned with the great Sandinista experiment” (16) and soon after became involved with the Contras (cf. 96). Meara grew up in a white middle-class family in New York City and enlisted in the army after having graduated from Manhattan College. Later, he joined the US Foreign Services and became a career diplomat working for different US embassies around the world (“bio blurb”). He states that the manuscript of his autobiography was reviewed by the US Department of State to exclude classified material (5). Meara describes his book as an account of an “insider” who knows “what it was like on the ground, implementing U.S. policy in Central America during the 1980s” (4). His narrative follows a chronological order covering the years 1979 to 1989 and frequently reveals the author’s awareness that he is relating a retrospective account from the viewpoint of different present perspectives.

What makes both autobiographical narratives special is their genesis. Both were published after the end of the Cold War, after the collapse of the Sandinista experiment in Nicaragua, but describe life in a decade in which these drastic changes were not yet foreseeable. Both autobiographical texts were also written in hindsight and not only describe events, people, and experiences of the respective presents, but also offer glimpses into the respective imagined futures, the “not yet” of their past times. They deal with a “noch-nicht-Gewordenes,” a “not-yet-having-become” (cf. Bloch)—a notion of desire for the future, albeit, in retrospect. Thus, “a historical analysis of these visions [...] and of the conditions that produce them” further adds to the understanding “of how and why things change,” since the construction of the present selves shapes future possibilities (Gordin et.al. 14).

Therefore, this paper investigates the narrative construction of future visions through the plotted narratives of past presents and past futures in Brentlinger’s and Meara’s autobiographies and tackles the question how their life writings about the Nicaraguan conflicts and revolutionary movements comment on US society. By using Nicaragua as a projection surface in different layers of memory, the autobiographical writings discuss

visions of utopia and dystopia in light of past futures. *The Best of What We Are* uses an imagined Nicaragua as projection surface for a utopia, that is to say, for future desires. The text retrospectively challenges the past present realities of US society of the 1980s and establishes transnational bridges. Contrary to this, *Contra Cross* imagines Nicaragua as a retrotopia, i.e., a parameter for nostalgic desires, to maintain the past present conditions and to confirm and preserve US values for future generations. However, the awareness of the fact that the Cold War was already over at the time of writing does not end these past future visions. Instead, different layers of memory are used to construct past future visions beyond the narratives' endings that either challenge US society or seek to confirm its exceptionalist path.

Theoretical Approach: Layers of Memory and the Future

Ruth Levitas defines the concept of utopia as “the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (*Concept* 9). This paper uses different notions of utopia “by treating them not so much as objects of study, but as historically grounded analytical categories with which to understand how individuals and groups around the world have interpreted their present tense with an eye to the future” (Gordin et.al. 3). Being anchored in different temporalities, the concept of utopia not only constructs future visions, but also comments on and shapes present realities. As Reinhart Koselleck puts it:

Die gesamte Utopie der Zukunft zehrt also von Anschlussstellen in der nicht nur fiktiv, sondern empirisch einlösbaren Gegenwart. Was die Zukunft bietet, ist in einem Satz die Kompensation des gegenwärtigen Elends. [...] Anders gewendet: die fingierte Perfektion der ehemals räumlichen Gegenwelt wird verzeitlicht. (“Verzeitlichung” 136)

Thus, utopias both contain compensation and anticipation (cf. Levitas, *Concept* 100) and their future desires are fueled by the conditions of the present realities. Utopia then becomes a method that points to gaps in present realities and in doing so creates a distance to the lived present which allows one to judge what *is* done in the light of what *could* or *should* be done (cf. Levitas, *Method* xvii). Utopias attempt “to figure (and figure out) the absent presence” and invite “both writer and reader to imagine themselves, as well as the world, otherwise” (Levitas, *Method* 197-98). As utopia, in Levitas sense, means desire for change and for an alternative path in the future, “we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled” (*Concept* 9). Utopias express, to paraphrase Karl Mannheim, what is lacking in actual life and serve as complementary colors in the picture of the reality of the time (cf. Mannheim 184). Consequently, utopia as a method of “simultaneously critiquing the present [and] exploring alternatives, is all around” (Levitas, *Method* 219).

The existence of a link between future visions and present conditions makes it also necessary to theorize temporal spaces when dealing with utopias. Thus, following Koselleck's approach of “zeitliche Strukturen menschlicher Geschichten, ihrer Erfahrungen und ihrer Erzählungen” (*Zeitschichten* “Vorwort”), this paper will analyze the uses and functions of different layers of memory in the autobiographical texts, with a special focus on the

construction of past and present futures. According to Koselleck, every temporal layer is anchored in the present of the here and now, which means that there is “Zukunft [...] nur als gegenwärtige Zukunft, Vergangenheit nur als gegenwärtige Vergangenheit” (“Stetigkeit und Wandel” 248). Consequently, there is a present past and a present future, which correspond with the present of the here and now, as well as a past present with its past pasts and past futures (248).

Two derivations of the aforementioned utopian notion are dystopias and retrotopias, which also draw on temporal layers, however, in quite different ways. Dystopias, as a variety of the “fundamentally optimistic” utopian projection, “paint the outlook for their society in distinctly darker colors” (Verheul 2). Dystopias are not “dialectically related to the present [...] but tend to suggest a continuity” and thus serve as a warning signal for a future that needs to be prevented (2). Thus, even though both utopia and dystopia are projections of a bright or bleak future, they “are not necessarily mutually opposed,” since they are either “set against or related to the perceived social reality of the present day” (2). According to Zygmunt Baumann, the term retrotopia refers to “visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future” (5). As previously mentioned, all these forms of visions are anchored in the present and transported through the narrative composition of the autobiographical writings. They have an impact on the construction of individual and collective identities and the past and present worlds in which these identities are embedded.

Reading Life Writing: Basic Methods

To gain access to the construction of a subject’s place in the world and the world surrounding this subject, “das Was der autobiographischen Kommunikation” has to be analyzed “in Abhängigkeit von deren Wann, Wie und Warum” (Depkat, “Stand” 177). Autobiographies can thus be considered acts of social communication in which narratives of the self and the past are communicated to an imagined audience by using different narrative strategies (cf. Depkat, “Doing” 44). According to Maureen Whitebrook, the assumption that narrating is a basic human activity and that human beings perceive and understand their own lives as stories forms the basis for this connection of identity and narrative communication (9).

The starting point of the approach to the autobiographical texts will be Philip Lejeune’s definition of autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning [their] own existence, where the focus is [their] individual life, in particular the story of [their] personality” (14). Lejeune has also coined the term “autobiographical pact” which “rethinks autobiography as an institutionalized communicative act where author and reader enter in a particular ‘contract’ [...] sealed by the triple reference of the same proper name” (qtd. in Schwalm par. 18). The autobiographical pact confirms the “singular autobiographical identity, identifying author, narrator and protagonist as one” and refers it back to the name of the author on the cover (Hühn 22). Lejeune thus claims that we read life writing differently than, for example, a novel when it comes to ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ because it makes us believe in the existence of a ‘real’ person whose ‘real’ story is related.

An approach by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, however, reveals that the situation is not that simple. They divide the autobiographical I in the historical I, the narrating I, the narrated I, and the ideological I. For the following analysis, the narrating and the narrated I are especially relevant. The narrating I is the “the agent of discourse” (Lionnet qtd. in Smith and Watson 73) who relates the autobiographical narrative. Unlike the historical I, “the narrating ‘I’ calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to the story [they are] telling” (Smith and Watson 72). The narrated I or “the subject of history” is “the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating ‘I’ chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader” (73). In autobiographies the pronoun I is used to refer to both “the narrated ‘I’ of earlier times” and “the narrating ‘I’ in the temporal present” (74). All of these Is are “multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous” (74). To refer to the triple entity of author-narrator-protagonist, this paper uses the term ‘autobiographical I’ or the names of the authors respectively. To refer to the process of narrating on different temporal levels, a differentiation between narrating I and narrated I will be made.

Autobiographical writings can also be understood as a collective medium since “die narrativ entworfene Identität des Ichs immer auch im Hinblick auf eine vom Autor imaginierte kollektive Identität entworfen wird” (Depkat, “Doing” 49) and the recipients are imagined to be a collective as well, the imagined readers. Thus, even though the autobiographies use the first person singular, suggesting individual agency, they are also collective manifestations in which individual subjects position themselves as part of a collective and are positioned by that collective. The autobiographical texts then allow readers to access blueprints of collective identities (cf. Depkat, *Lebenswenden*).

Future Visions, Past Missions: Nicaragua as Projection Surface for Desire

“The best of what we [were]”: Remembering Utopias

The Best of What We Are uses Nicaragua as projection surface to reveal and make use of the aforementioned complementary colors in the reality of the present time, i.e., to point out deficiencies in US society and suggest future possibilities of an alternative path. Brentlinger projects his vision of a utopia onto Nicaragua to then juxtapose it with the absences he identifies in the present realities of US society. He comments on US society as follows: “In the States I often have the sense of floating in a huge, becalmed ocean. Most people do not believe in change. The privileged white majority is complacent and self-indulgent. The poor, disenfranchised minorities seem despairing. The left is small and fragmented” (67).

In addition to this lethargy, hopelessness, and the lack of a strong leftist movement, Brentlinger also criticizes the absence of a sense of community and solidarity in US society: “Our world is divided and defined by levels of wealth and privilege; seductive, powerful walls of objects, pleasures, symbols, and styles of life induce us by forgetfulness or fear to ignore our connections with others” (96-97). These gaps and ‘blank spaces’ in his own society open up a desire for an alternative path, a longing for change and Brentlinger notes that “[t]he United States may often feel like an untroubled sea, but the reality is very different” (67-68).

He observes that parts of the US left protest against the present realities and envision change and considers “[t]he resistance movement, the anger and frustration, the interest in another version of reality [...] strong and encouraging” (67-68).

Interestingly, Brentlinger does not explicitly define the goals of the desired change, but remains relatively unclear about them. According to Levitas, one characteristic of utopia as a method is exactly this vagueness and openness: “The ‘thing they fought for’ remains elusive and evanescent. Each conjuring of its form is a part—but a necessary part—of a process of moving between openness and closure” (*Method* 220). However, one thing Brentlinger *is* sure about is that the envisioned change requires a “revolutionary spirit” that “breaks down walls” (97). He projects this different, yet possible, future on Nicaragua, as a “complementary” society, in which everything he desires seems to have been realized: “Nicaragua [...] is a window into the future. All Latin America has been looking. Many in North America have been watching excitedly and working in support” (4). His imagined Nicaragua represents utopian visions translated into reality, which means hope for some and fear for others and, aware of the blurry state of these utopian desires, he states: “This feeling may have been illusory, but it was widely shared by revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries alike” (68). Anthropologist David Harvey comments on this nebulosity of utopia: “While openings exist towards some alternative social order, no one really knows where or what it is.” He concludes that “just because there is no [...] articulating, let alone mounting, [...] this is no reason to hold back on outlining alternatives” (qtd. in Levitas, *Method* 220).

Thus, even though Brentlinger asks for changes and demands a transformation “toward remaking the self and the world” (69) by projecting his visions for the future on an imagined Nicaragua, he does not explicitly state what this revolutionary transformation is nor how the changes should be implemented. Instead, he uses an envisioned Nicaragua to challenge US society, since it allows him to indirectly point out gaps and misdemeanors in US society and simultaneously imply, with an eye to Sandinista Nicaragua, that change is possible. Furthermore, he constructs himself as a brave hero in the US-Nicaragua solidarity movement designed to bring about change: “In my heroic moments I feel like a guerilla fighter who is isolated, outnumbered, outequipped, out-everythinged” (267). He readily seems to accept the role of an outsider, since he constructs himself as an important agent of change: “[Revolution] meant life had a future and a modicum of hope. I was made to feel I was a part of this revolution, that I had a role to play. I was someone the revolution needed in its struggle to survive” (67).

Using the collective “We” instead of the first person narrative situation then allows Brentlinger to identify with and speak for a US national collective and simultaneously envision its change by encouraging US Americans that “Nicaraguans have much to teach us. [...] We have to know and unite with them in struggle to regain our own lost souls” (11). He rhetorically asks: “What could be more important for us in the United States to experience than a people who rejected the inhumane order based on individual greed, who reignited for a new order, a nurturant community—not just for the rich but for every human being?” (4).

The imagined Nicaragua that he uses as the projection surface for his utopian visions is to serve as an example for US society: “There was a vision there I wanted to hold onto, to bring back and transplant: the realization that people can take control of their lives and change the course of history” (68).

The autobiographical I also uses other narrative strategies to support his quest for an alternative path as exemplified by an imagined Nicaragua. *The Best Of What We Are* manages to criticize US society’s present conditions not by boldly challenging US society directly, but by praising Nicaraguan society and simultaneously constructing it as the ‘significant other’ of the United States. Brentlinger uses the opposition of light and darkness to highlight the discrepancies between the experienced present conditions of US society and the vision of an alternative path, as represented by Nicaraguan society throughout the narrative. He remembers how on his first visit Nicaragua had seemed like “a world that is bright, busy and awake” (16). He describes its people as “these strangers who stand in the sun, who create so much beauty” (11) and explains that “in Nicaragua you lived in broad daylight. You felt you knew where you were and who you were, much more than in the soft and murky world of corporate media-tech society” (68). In his opinion, Nicaragua stands in sharp contrast to US society in which “[the] darkness covers our own hearts” (11). Through this juxtaposition, Brentlinger highlights the perceived absences in US society and justifies his visions for changing the current state of US society.

By reimagining a common utopian vision for both the United States and Sandinista Nicaragua, Brentlinger creates a connection between the two societies. This reveals a poignant hidden criticism of the present realities in ‘Reagan’s America’ whose official stance toward Nicaragua was disapproval, contempt, and ignorance. Thus, Brentlinger uses the imagined transnational connection to build bridges between US society and Nicaraguan society, and suggests “working to build community—in Nicaragua, in the States, and between the two societies” (323). His message in the end is clear: the willingness to connect and overcome national boundaries “is part of the best of what we are” (323), and the memory of Sandinista Nicaragua as well as the notion of utopia that clings to it are to be preserved.

Contra-Future?: Remembering Dystopia and Envisioning Retrotopia

The second text, *Contra Cross*, allows a twofold approach to desires and visions by using the two political and ideological camps of a deeply estranged Nicaraguan society, the Sandinistas and the resistance movement, the Contras. Bill Meara does not consider Sandinista Nicaragua a parameter for utopian visions, let alone an inspiration for the United States. The autobiographical I explains bluntly: “All of us saw the Sandinistas as dangerous, expansionist allies of the Soviet Union” (107). Instead of representing what he desires for US society, an imagined Sandinista Nicaragua seems to be everything he dismisses for US society, thus serving as a vision of dystopia. He explains: “That was our nightmare: a rambunctious Sandinista regime spreading chaos throughout the isthmus [...] and an American president facing two unappealing options: capitulation or the use of U.S. troops” (108).

For Meara an imagined Sandinista Nicaragua thus becomes a threat to the United States, a vision of a dystopian future that needs to be prevented. “Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present,” as Michael D. Gordin et.al. put it, “dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now” (2). Hence, whereas the object of a utopia is desire, a future vision that is to come into effect in a future present, the object of a dystopia is to prevent a threatening future’s symptoms in the present. To secure the present status quo, the imagined dystopian vision has to be fought and prevented. Meara addresses this notion by stating that “much of what went on in those difficult years [...] was a struggle against something—against Communism!” (3). Meara looks back on his past mission: “Here I was, a representative of the world’s leading democracy, working with people trying to overthrow a tyranny” (119). The autobiographical I constructs an image of his past self as a tough guy with “backpack, blue jeans, jungle boots, Ray Bans and New York Yankees baseball cap” (125) who “roars” the motorcycle through the country “open[ing] [the motorcycle] up and mak[ing] a little noise” (129). The image he wants to convey of himself and his “adventures” in Nicaragua (129) is clear: it is cool to fight dystopia as an adventurous and tenacious Cold Warrior just like “Tom Cruise duel[ing] with MiGs in the movie Top Gun” (48). He contemplates in hindsight: “We saw ourselves as warriors fighting the evil empire and we were determined to do our best to make a useful contribution to the Cold War effort” (47) and “the struggle against Communism. In the ‘cult of national security,’ we were definitely in the priesthood” (48).

However, *Contra Cross* also uses the other faction of Nicaraguan society, an imagined Contra-Nicaragua, as a projection surface for the desire for a specific notion of the US past. This past is stereotypical, one-sided, and solely based on the autobiographical I’s restricted perspective and shows a very selective approach to remembering and forgetting history. As Baumann puts it, “what we as a rule ‘return to’ when dreaming our nostalgic dreams is not the past ‘as such’—‘wie es ist eigentlich gewesen’ (‘as it genuinely was’), which Leopold Ranke advised historians to recover and represent” (10), but a modified past that creates a desire that can be called nostalgia. Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but [...] also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (1). Meara relates: “On my previous visits the region had fully lived up to its colorful, exotic, and wild reputation. Newsweek had dubbed the zone ‘the Wild, Wild East,’ and indeed it was a land of cowboys and Indians, pirates, and smugglers” (125). Nicaragua is used as projection surface for an imagination of what Brentlinger perceives as the United States’ ‘glorious’ past. Nostalgia as a “historical emotion” (Boym 16) emphasizes supposed parallels between the United States and Contra-Nicaragua. The attributes the autobiographical I ascribes to the Nicaraguan Contras are taken from the myth of the ‘American Old West,’ the imagined frontier region contributing to the formation of the dominant US identity with its contrast of ‘civilization and savagery.’⁴ He refers to the Contras with the same concepts he uses for talking about

4 On how the idea of a frontier shaped American culture, see Frederick Jackson Turner’s infamous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893).

the United States' 'glorious' past: "[O]n the banks of the Coco River I had found some embattled farmers who had a lot in common with the New Englanders who fired that famous shot heard around the world" (159-60).

Meara also compares the Contra War to an instance in the American Revolutionary War, which paved the way for a strong US national identity based on exceptional values from the perspective of and available to white affluent men—a viewpoint Meara certainly can identify with. By transferring the example of the French officer Lafayette and George Washington's relation to the Contra-US relation, he seems to suggest that it sometimes needs the help of stalwart supporters to defend US values. Meara warns that this supposed characteristic in US history should never be forgotten: "As I watched the spectacle that we all perpetrated in Yamales in 1988 and 1989,⁵ I often felt like climbing one of the peaks and, thinking of that young French officer who had helped George Washington, shouting in exasperation, 'Lafayette we have forgotten!'" (123-24)—alluding to the famous words "Lafayette, we are here!"⁶ a symbol of transnational solidarity he sees threatened.

Meara's narrative projection of US values onto Contra-Nicaragua justifies his support of the Contras "who were fighting for the things the United States stands for" (110). *Contra Cross* expresses the desire to maintain an imagined status quo aligned to a selective construction of a US past in order to prevent a dystopian future. The autobiographical I does not construct the desire for an alternative future, but for a retrotopia, a future that re-installs, what it considers, past achievements. Retrotopia here refers to the desire to maintain and continue a strong past tradition that is supposed to provide stability and self-assurance (cf. Baumann 8) and that needs to be defended against what Meara considers an evil future vision. Likewise, in Meara's opinion, a victory of the Nicaraguan Contras and the United States side by side not only guarantees a safe future, but also promises a future kingdom of retrotopia. After having successfully created a sentiment of nostalgia for what Baumann describes as "genuine or putative aspects of the past, believed to be successfully tested," by relating the Nicaraguan Contras to the supposedly 'glorious' US past, Meara's personal account establishes the "main orientation/reference points in drawing the roadmap to Retrotopia" (9). While *The Best of What We Are* imagines a utopia that serves as projection surface for what appears to lack in the United States, *Contra Cross* uses an imagined Nicaragua as projection surface for the perceived greatness of past US values.

Retrotopias "are rather [...] conscious attempts at iteration [...] of the status quo ante, existing or imagined to have been existing before [...]—its image having been modified anyway, in the process of selective memorizing, intertwined with selective forgetting"

5 Between 1988 and 1989, as the Honduran government had just forced the Contras to abandon their main military camp in Yamales, Honduras, the weakened Contras suffered heavy losses in attacks by the Sandinistas in what is considered the last major battles of the Contra War (Brown 168-71). According to Timothy Brown, however, the Contras got their "killing blow" by their "erstwhile American allies, not by the Sandinista army" when "the U.S. Congress [...] permanently ended American lethal aid to the Contras" in 1988 (168).

6 "Lafayette, nous voilà!"—as spoken by Colonel Charles E. Stanton during World War I at the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette during a speech honoring his heroic service in the American Revolutionary War.

(Baumann 9). US national identity is not challenged but confirmed by attributing the Nicaraguan Contras with imagined characteristics of US values and by praising these traits on behalf of US society. Meara describes the Contras as “fighting for the values that form the essence of our own national identity” (97).

Even though the term refers to the past, retrotopia does not mean “ultimate perfection,” but assumes “the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing thereby for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of further changes” (Baumann 8). Therefore, retrotopias encourage one to use the past as a source for the present and the present’s future visions. Meara considers Nicaragua an inspiration, albeit only the part of Nicaragua that corresponds best to his concept of US national identity: “But I ended up believing that we should stick with the Nicaraguan resistance for spiritual and moral reasons, for reasons related to American exceptionalism and our national heritage. I ended up thinking that we should stick with them just because they really were freedom fighters” (160). He thus also tries to retrospectively justify the military involvement of the Reagan administration in Nicaragua by strengthening the transnational links between Reagan’s United States and Contra-Nicaragua and by using their aforementioned nostalgic similarities as well as their common rejection of a dystopian future.

Remembering the Future, Envisioning the Past: Past Futures and Present Desires

Utopian Visions: Hope Beyond Endings?

The different temporal layers of the autobiographies, as discussed at the beginning of this article, require a closer investigation of the narrative situation. While the narrating I occupies the present of writing with its present memories and present futures, the narrated I belongs to the present of the past with its past memories and past futures. Thus, two different futures can be distinguished: the past future of the past, and the (past) future of the present of writing. Relating these ideas to the concept of utopia further complicates the matter. While future-bound utopias normally occupy the realm of the possible but ‘not yet,’ utopias of past futures have already turned out to be possible or not, thus hope has been fulfilled or disappointed.

As explained in the previous section, the utopia created in *The Best of What We Are* is tied to Nicaragua as a projection surface. Thus, a collapse of hope for an alternative path and a changed society in Nicaragua would logically mean an end of future desire, of hope for change in the United States. The autobiographical text was published four years after the collapse of the Sandinista regime, the supposedly great social experiment that disappointed leftist movements worldwide. The present of writing in *The Best of What We Are* would thus suggest the end of utopia, the end of hope for the fulfillment of future desires. The Contras won and the narrating I is aware of the end of these utopian visions: “As I write this, the Nicaraguan government is now in the hands of the counterrevolution” (284).

Remembering his experiences in Nicaragua, but knowing what he knows in the present of writing, the narrating I also recalls the narrated I's doubts about a positive outcome and about the insecurities of the future of the past utopian visions: "We think we are building something permanent [...]. We never know. And much of our work, what was completed, seems to have been [...] abandoned by a history that has turned away" (2). He doubts: "Where is hope to find its way?" (3). Even though he knows that the past future visions have been shattered, he does not express his doubts using a declarative statement, but an interrogative clause. He seems to know, or at least hope, that the visions can survive by becoming a new present's new future. Returning to Koselleck's aforementioned statement that "[d]ie gesamte Utopie der Zukunft zehrt [...] von Anschlussstellen in der [...] empirisch einlösbaren Gegenwart [und] bietet [...] die Kompensation des gegenwärtigen Elends" ("Verzeitlichung" 136), it becomes clear that new absences in present conditions can cause a demand for new utopias. Brentlinger, however, very consciously reconstructs the story of his utopian vision "like a writer who keeps revising or wishing to rewrite what is already said once and for all" (4). He criticizes the attitude of simply sticking to past traditions without trying to imagine alternative possibilities for the future: "I think most people in the United States now believe, or act as if they believe, that the sources of the sacred are in the past" (349).

Luisa Passerini argues that many utopias have reappeared "in the form of nostalgia for rebellion" and that they are "a memory more than a hope" (61). However, Brentlinger seems to counter this notion. His narrative holds that what constitutes and binds a society, what he calls "the sacred," cannot be found in the past, but rather in the memories of past futures. For him, these memories do not exclude hope for the future: "My central idea is this: The sacred is produced by people in our struggle for higher forms of being and society. A society maintains and venerates 'its sacred' in its memory of its originative and defining history" (358). Instead of merely passively remembering, he stresses the necessity of an ongoing commitment to the realization of a new society. By remembering and relating past futures through the medium of life writing these past futures can become future visions of the here and now; they survive until the present and live on, serving as renewed utopian visions. As Brentlinger puts it, "after the Sandinistas have lost the election [...] we need more than ever to renew this hope" (4). Now, however, these visions are no longer bound to an imagined Nicaragua, but to the memories of an imagined Nicaragua. Not only the utopia has survived through different layers of memory, but also the discrepancies between reality and desire. Thus, the cause for utopian visions has also persisted.

Brentlinger alludes to this idea of continuity beyond the ending of his narrative by comparing the ongoing struggle to the sea: "The beach is constantly being remade. [...] [The waves'] work goes on constantly" (11). He uses the sea as a reoccurring metaphor throughout his narrative to underline the continuity and longevity of the revolutionary struggle. He suggests to "do all we can to preserve" (6) and spread this newfound meaning to life (6).

Brentlinger also remembers a joint painting project of Nicaraguans and Internationalists during an art exhibition: "The painting continued even on the day of the opening. Other

painters joined in. Perhaps it wasn't finished, although it looked to be" (346). The ongoing process of working on the painting seems to allude to the unfinished revolution that is supposed to continue beyond its perceived ending and beyond the end of the autobiography. Thus, the autobiographical I draws the following conclusion of the revolutionary work in Nicaragua after it has supposedly come to an end in 1991: "Out of this journey much has been created, much has grown. But like any such journey we cannot find a beginning or an end. We cannot make an accounting of it, we cannot measure [...] progress and change, as if we were at the end of a day's business" (6). Thus, Brentlinger's account tries to reveal that "what counts is not the object of desire but the state of desire" to secure "the only possibility of denying this present" (Passerini 58).

Retrotopian Missions: Maintaining the 'Status Quo Ante'?

Contra Cross also reveals different layers of memory. There is the present of writing with its supposedly safe future after the end of the Cold War when the US mission in Nicaragua has been accomplished with the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. In the present of the narrated I, however, the future still lies ahead and, according to Meara, needs to be appropriated to US national interests, i.e., the Cold War with its two opposing ideologies has to be won by the United States. The narrating I is aware of this, explaining in the very beginning that this book was written in 1989 and 1990 and "looks back at that decade" (3). He emphasizes that "[t]he world has changed quite a bit since then—I ask readers to remember that the Cold War was still under way during the period described, and was just starting to end as I was writing" (6). Furthermore, the narrating I also acknowledges a different, new present: "On November 10, 1989, four months after I left Central America, [...] I listened to the radio reports from Berlin. The wall was falling, and the world was changing" (162).

However, Meara not only reveals his awareness of different presents, but also of the past and the future attached to these presents. Using different layers of memory, the narrative jumps through different temporalities and demonstrates the narrating I's awareness of the narrated I's future, a past future from the hindsight position of the narrating I: "I didn't know that in the years ahead I would become very closely involved with these armed groups, with the people who were launching the ambushes" (19). Furthermore, the narrating I is also aware of the temporal present and reflects on the future visions of his narrated I: "This fear may seem ridiculous now, but when we were fretting about this scenario [i.e. the consequences of a potential victory of the Soviet Union] the Berlin Wall was still up, and the Soviet Union was still a real threat" (108).

The use of past future visions serves as a strategy to narrate a coherent, linear story, implying a logical and justified victory of the United States brought about by what Meara considers brave Cold Warriors just like him. He recalls his own conversion from a formerly naïve utopian flirting with the Sandinista revolution toward a rational, tough fighter who had learned "that I would not, despite hope and expectation, find my quarry in Nicaragua" (17). He represents this conversion as the result of an either/or decision and he decides to fight for the winning, and not the "wrong side in the Cold War" (164). Even though he reveals

some doubts (“as I walked through the dusty Yamales Valley in that dry season of 1988-89, I pondered glasnost and wondered if I was walking through a dustbin of history” (110)), he is sure that the past and present achievements of the Contras and the US government led to victory:

While we frequently stumbled and made some tactical mistakes I think that Americans should be proud of what the Reagan administration did and tried to do in Central America. [...] At the beginning of the decade there was a lot of concern that Central America might become America’s next Vietnam. Because we succeeded, it did not turn out that way. (164)

He uses the victory of the Contras as confirmation of the past deeds of US Americans supporting the Contras back when “[w]e all worked with the satisfying assurance that we were doing something important and useful for Uncle Sam” (108). The new present seems to show that the fight against dystopia was necessary since it successfully prevented a dystopian threat. He states: “I am proud of what we did and what we tried to do” (4). Meara constructs a coherent story from both the past perspective of the narrated I envisioning a successful future, as well as from the narrating I’s perspective of the present of writing that retrospectively confirms a successful past. He also stresses US national values and exceptionalism that have survived and persisted throughout the different layers.

However, the hindsight perspective on past futures also reveals a different sentiment. After the end of the Cold War, the United States stood “alone, enemy-less and seemingly confused in a world of midget bad guys” (Engelhardt x). Likewise, lamenting the current post-Cold War situation, Meara describes the present of relating his narrative as follows: “Without the Cold War, without the opportunity to participate in the titanic struggle for world freedom . . . well, it just wasn’t the same. The Cold War had allowed us to be American revolutionaries” (166). With nostalgia, he reflects on the present, for which all negative consequences had been eliminated in the past. Tom Engelhardt calls this phenomenon “the end of victory culture” and states about sentiments in the United States after the end of the Cold War: “And for all the victory rhetoric, the initial American response was the kind of befuddlement and paralysis one would usually have associated with loss” (x). Meara seems to share this feeling:

The months following the fall of the Berlin Wall were a very strange and uneasy time for erstwhile Cold Warriors. The compass that had guided us for the previous forty-five years no longer worked. The conflict that had provided our mission and had justified our actions and policies simply disappeared. In winning the war we lost our cause. (166)

Without the struggle for winning a communism-free future, US national values now seem weaker and degraded to shadows of what Meara perceived as past grandeur as he recalls: “We had been crusaders fighting in a holy war; we had been on a forty-five-year jihad against the Communist infidels. Peace and victory threatened to change us from crusaders to bureaucrats. The Communists were gone. Deep down, I already miss them” (167). Meara seems to question whether “we [US Americans] are to remain exceptional” and “are to be true to our heritage” (160). A new vision of a retrotopia is to encourage US Americans to use their ‘glorious’ past to become the source for the present and its future visions. Meara

claims: “We should remember our history” (166). Thus, just like a utopia is continuing and inspiring beyond supposedly hopeless endings, a longing for the past is also established and meant to last into present futures.

Whose Tomorrow is Tomorrow?: Visions and Divisions

Both autobiographical texts cover the same time span, interpret the (past) present with an eye to the (past) future (cf. Gordin et.al), and use Nicaragua as projection surface for future visions. But while *The Best of What We Are* constructs a utopia with a desire to transform US society and to establish transnational bridges, *Contra Cross* seeks to prevent an imagined dystopia and envisions a retrotopia to affirm and strengthen a selective vision of US national identity. Thus, both also reveal divergent opinions and perspectives on the conditions of the present as they point toward gaps and absences in the realities of the present and use Nicaragua as parameter and substitute. By comparing visions of a Nicaraguan utopia to the present state of the United States, Brentlinger identifies a lack of community, increasing me-ism, injustice, and exclusion, as well as a lack of solidarity in an estranged US society and criticizes that “we tend to disengage ourselves” (96). Meara, in contrast, uses a selective vision of a supposedly ‘glorious’ US past to criticize the present state of US society and to warn of future threats. Furthermore, both writings create visions beyond the endings of their stories, in Brentlinger’s case utopian visions to secure hope for change, in Meara’s case visions of a retrotopia to secure American exceptionalism.

Thus, through their divergent comments on the future, the texts also comment on, challenge, and position themselves toward present realities of US society. This positioning reveals the construction of two divergent collectives and their contrasting visions of future possibilities, either a desire for change following a revolutionary Nicaraguan model, or a desire to bring back the ‘good old times’ to strengthen traditional imagined US values, and to fight the Sandinista threat. The incompatibility of both collective stances is also revealed through direct harsh criticism of the respective other side. Brentlinger states “[i]t wasn’t just that I was for the Sandinista revolution and they were for US policies” but “[o]ur difference in perspective affected everything: the subjects chosen, the people who spoke, even physical details in [...] description[s]” (268). He concludes that he “could understand why [he] felt so estranged from the world [the supporters of the Contras] created” (268). Meara also concludes his story with a severe accusation:

But I don’t think that everyone has the right to feel good about their actions during the Central American conflict. I think those Americans who gave aid and comfort to the Sandinistas [...] should feel guilty. They were on the wrong side in the Cold War. Some of these people were knowingly supporting Communism, others were what Lenin called “useful idiots.” All of them should feel remorse about supporting that evil system. (164)

He criticizes the perspective and stance of the ‘others’ by saying that “I was working with bright, well-educated people, but their level of political naïveté and wishful thinking was quite high” (11).

Through their narrative constructions of different layers of memory, both perspectives not only exclude each other, but also position themselves in a collective with which they share similar loyalties, beliefs, and worldviews. That is either supporters of the US-cultural and political left aligned with the Sandinista ideology or members of the US right positioned at the very other end of the political spectrum and backing the rightist Nicaraguan Contra-movement. They reveal that not only their versions of the present, but also their visions for the future are entirely different. Thus, the future is yet to be won and the question whose tomorrow *tomorrow* will be remains unanswered. Aware of this discrepancy, Brentlinger wonders: “Whose dream am I thinking of? And is it really over?” (325).

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