

This volume introduces to English readers the life and work of Vidaluz Meneses (b. 1944), one of the most acclaimed poets writing in Central America and a public figure of distinction during the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua (1979-1990), when she held leadership positions in the new Ministry of Culture. Although poems from her first books appear in anthologies published around the world—Great Britain, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and the United States—no selection in English has included more than a five-poem sampling of her work, and the total number available in English from all published sources is under twenty. Hispanophone literary critics know and savor her work, yet only a few critical treatments (university theses) have appeared in the United States. Familiarity with her poetry and life story will trigger revision of the accepted interpretations of Nicaraguan history and letters. This volume presents her poetic works and their translation on facing pages, in addition to my substantial interviews with Meneses conducted between 2005 and 2013, which affirm the centrality of her life experiences in her works and highlight the choices confronting her and her peers. Vidaluz Meneses enjoyed a rather carefree and comfortable life as the eldest of six children in the family of a National Guard officer whose early assignments took them to the small cities and towns of rural Nicaragua. When they later settled in the capital, Managua, Meneses was sent to a Catholic “school for rich girls,” where acts of charity were part of the curriculum, but many students developed a profound commitment to the poor that questioned the political and social order. As was the custom, Meneses married and began a family, but, against custom, she joined a new wave of women who sought a university education. Her increasing conviction during the 1960s and 70s of the need for radical change and overthrow of the military dictatorship ruling her country since 1933 led to a valiant struggle to transform herself from a traditional woman into an active participant in the dangerous process of revolution. Her story exemplifies the series of passionate life choices made by others of her generation who, like Father Ernesto Cardenal, defined themselves as faith-based revolutionaries, defied their own families, and challenged the values of their class. - 20 - When the Sandinistas lost the 1990 national elections to an alliance of conservative factions, the decade of revolutionary changes came to an abrupt halt. Out of work, divorced, economically destabilized, and fearful of possible retaliations against Sandinista officials, Meneses was disillusioned and shaken by the failure of the potentially transformational revolutionary project. Her perceptions mirrored those of novelist and Sandinista Vice-President Sergio Ramirez: “I always thought the revolution would be a transcendental story in human development, but it wasn’t, was it?” (qtd. in Garvin). After 1990, Meneses embarked on a difficult, and continuing, search to reconcile historical sacrifices with contemporary reality, to recast her social role as person, woman, poet, and to find ways to build a new society outside the paradigm of revolution. Vidaluz Meneses provides powerful insight into the poetic process as she identifies particular episodes from which specific poems emerged and explains how she reworked those experiences and turned them into poetry. She presents her perspective as a daughter, wife, and mother whose marriage and family were split apart by political events. She provides her unique access to the “inside story” as a founding official of the Ministry of Culture (1979-1988), and then as university department chair and dean (1991-1996), ecumenical center executive director (1997-2002), and national codirector of a coalition of over 600 independent NGOs (2002-2005).

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