SPEAKING THROUGH THE BODY:
THE EROTICIZED FEMINISM OF GIOCONDA BELLi

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ABSTRACT

ELIZABETH CASIMIR BRUNO: Speaking Through the Body: The Eroticized Feminism of Gioconda Belli
(Under the direction of María A. Salgado)

While female authors have been writing about “women’s issues” for centuries, their foregrounding of women’s bodies is a relatively new phenomenon. This “literature of the body” is perceived as a way for women to claim back what is and has always been theirs. Gioconda Belli’s literature of the body presents a mosaic of images of woman, through which she empowers women to claim back their body and to celebrate it as the site of the multiple facets of woman. After a brief introductory chapter presenting my topic, I move to Chapter 2, which explores how Belli embodies “woman” in her poetry. In order to contextualize her representation, I first look at several poems by Rubén Darío as examples of idealized canonical portrayals. I also analyze poems written by a number of women authors who preceded Belli, thereby demonstrating a distinct progression in the treatment of women-centered literature. Belli’s representation of the erotic woman is the focus of Chapter 3, though I also examine some poems by another Central American woman poet that illustrate the boldness of her work, particularly because this author was the first Central American woman writer to celebrate women’s eroticism. These poems also serve as a tool by which to investigate the similarities and differences they present with Belli’s poetry. In Chapter 4 I explore how Belli embodies motherhood. This was a primary topic of her first collection of poetry, and one which is a significant element in
each of her works to some degree. In the final chapter I examine the multiple ways in which Belli embodies another subject dear to her heart--Nicaragua--her homeland. As with the other topics that form the basis of my analysis, the nation is a subject Belli approaches from many perspectives. Most importantly, Belli’s exploration of each of these issues displays a discernible evolution, an evolution that adds a true depth to her work, one which I endeavor to bring to light in this dissertation.
DEDICATION

To my husband, Dean Bruno, whose support and patience have been invaluable on this long journey. To my parents, Steve and Sally Casimir, for their unwavering faith in my ability. And to my in-laws, Louis and Donna Bruno, for believing that education is the noblest of pursuits.
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Finally, I would like to thank Gioconda Belli, whose belief in the feminist cause and social justice has continued to inform her literature, and whose celebration of the body knows no limits.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Though it has been mostly unnoticed or even worse, silenced, women writers have been subverting the patriarchy simply by putting pen to paper for centuries. These women writers, though relatively few in number, presented an alternate perspective for their readers; a perspective to which women responded with sympathetic recognition and men with amazed disconcertment. In many cases their literature actively advocated for a change in women’s status in the social order. In contemporary Latin American letters, this is particularly true of the works by Gioconda Belli. Born in Managua, Nicaragua, in 1948, Belli came of age during the most active period--and eventual success--of the Sandinista Revolution, an activity that also gave rise to a strong feminist commitment. Her activities as a Sandinista directly influenced her writing, and vice versa, as she reveals in her memoir of 2000, *El país bajo mi piel*:

No sé en qué orden sucedieron las cosas. Si fue primero la poesía o la conspiración. En mi memoria de ese tiempo las imágenes son luminosas y todas en primer plano. La euforia vital encontró cauce en la poesía. (62)

She emphasizes that her political involvement and her writing both emerged from her feelings of strength and power as a woman, a power centered within her body:

Apropiarme de mis plenos poderes de mujer me llevó a sacudirme la impotencia frente a la dictadura y la miseria. No pude seguir creyendo que cambiar esa realidad era imposible. Me poseyó un estado de ebullición. Mi cuerpo celebraba su afirmación. El simple acto de respirar me daba placer. Me tragaba el mundo por la nariz y la sensación de plenitud era tal que dudaba que mi piel pudiera contenerme. (62)
Belli, like many of her fellow comrade woman writers, transformed this determination into a literature that communicates the goals and experiences of those committed to the political revolution and the feminist movement. This dual effort was an easy fit for the women writers who took part in the Nicaraguan Revolution, since women made up approximately 30% of the forces.\footnote{Several texts provide this statistic, including Greg Dawes’s \textit{Aesthetics and Revolution} (110).} It is not surprising that Nicaragua--a country that suffered more than forty years under the Somoza regime (1937-1979)--would give birth to politically and socially committed writers like Belli. Indeed, a key element of her literature and that of her contemporaries, as well as many of her predecessors, is that they ground their work in the lived experience of women, writing about issues ignored by or unfamiliar to their male counterparts, or providing a different perspective on matters that are not addressed in conventional patriarchal poetry and prose.

This idea that “lived experience” is a key element in poetry is connected to exteriorismo, a poetic style popularized in Nicaragua by Ernesto Cardenal. Cardenal (1925- ), considered one of the founding fathers of contemporary Nicaraguan poetry, is well-known for his exteriorist style, which finds inspiration in lived experience. Cardenal’s emphasis on the value of exteriorismo is related to the poetic concept that literature should serve a purpose, that it should be more than “art for art’s sake.” In the anthology \textit{Poesía nueva de Nicaragua} (1974), which he edited, Cardenal asserts that “[l]a literatura debe estar--como todo lo demás en el universo--al servicio del hombre” (9).

With regard to poetry in particular, he is more specific. He indicates that it should be political, though he qualifies this statement: “[a]unque no propaganda política, sino poesía política” (9). Cardenal’s poetic style is inspired by what can be seen and touched, by what has been witnessed or experienced. He defines exteriorist poetry in these very
El exteriorismo es la poesía creada con las imágenes del mundo exterior, el mundo que vemos y palpamos, y que es, por lo general, el mundo específico de la poesía. El exteriorismo es la poesía objetiva: narrativa y anecédota, hecha con los elementos de la vida real y con cosas concretas, con nombres propios y detalles precisos y datos exactos y cifras y hechos y dichos” (9). Cardenal juxtaposes this poetic style with interiorist or intimist poetry, which he describes as “. . . una poesía subjetivista, hecha sólo con palabras abstractas o simbólicas . . .” (10). John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman address the “feminization”--that is to say, the appropriation by women--of exteriorist poetry in their book *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (1990):

The initial models of the Sandinista women poets are Coronel Urtecho, Cardenal, exteriorism in general. Their poetry is experiential, social, directly political, expressing expectation, hope, and faith in the Sandinista future, and anger and outrage over a war that leads to death and destruction, casting doubt over that future. What they add to exteriorism is a thematic of the intimacy, subjectivity and even domesticity marking the “traditional” feminine sphere. (106)

As Beverley and Zimmerman point out, these women writers frequently employ an exteriorist style in order to communicate their individual experiences, in the multitude of roles they play, including that of mother, daughter, lover--even guerrillera. These critics focus on the “Six” most well-known Sandinista women poets in their book, though they indicate that there are many others. In their analysis, Beverley and Zimmerman pose a question regarding the essence of the poetic work of these authors, asking whether their emphasis is on feminist equality or unity within the revolution:

What are the general characteristics of this work [the poetry of the Six]? Is it, to begin with, a feminist poetry championing demands for equality of

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2 These six Nicaraguan poets are: Vidaluz Meneses (1944- ), Michèle Najlis (1946- ), Gioconda Belli (1948- ), Daisy Zamora (1950- ), Rosario Murillo (1951- ), and Yolanda Blanco (1954- ).
women and for a redefinition of female role models, or a woman-centered poetry projected onto a larger sense of national revolutionary unity? (105)

They emphasize that it is, in fact, both: “Their intent has been to project an emancipatory conception of female identity without completely negating its origins in the concrete experiences of women as mothers, daughters, lovers in a given time and place” (106). This description of the poets’ intent undeniably captures the thrust of Belli’s poetic work, which clearly calls for the emancipation of women within patriarchal society through a “literature of the body,” a literature that celebrates women’s embodied experiences—emancipating not just women and women’s lived experience—but also women’s bodies and those of the men who share their revolutionary and feminist goals.

Belli is a prolific writer whose oeuvre despite her still young age includes six original collections of poetry, several poetic anthologies, four novels, a memoir, and a children’s book. Her narratives always present a strong female protagonist whose journey of self-discovery involves both personal challenges as well as a degree of defiance against the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her poetry also reflects a strong, female-centered poetic persona who defies patriarchy on several levels while also presenting women in a myriad of roles. She effectively establishes that woman is multiple, and that this multiplicity should be acknowledged and celebrated.

Numerous articles have been written about Gioconda Belli’s literary work, though to date there are no books that focus exclusively on her literature. With regard to these many articles, most tend to focus on her exploration of revolutionary and erotic themes, though her treatment of nature is also a frequently analyzed topic in her oeuvre. Certainly, these issues are central to her work. I also examine these topics, though the basis of my analysis begins with Belli's depiction of the body. Specifically, my study
focuses on the myriad of ways in which Belli uses images of the body as an empowering discourse, and how her treatment of the embodiment of these subjects--the embodiment of woman, eroticism, the mother, and the nation--has evolved over time.

My analysis of Belli’s literature owes much to Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking treatise, *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir’s assessment regarding women’s position in patriarchal society has by now been superseded by several more up-to-date feminist studies, and is at times pessimistic; additionally, and in many instances, her generalizations present a clear Western ethnocentricity. And yet, despite these drawbacks, her study still has much to offer to any philosopher, theorist, critic, and feminist of the twenty-first century. Her analysis regarding the oppression of women throughout history covers until the first half of the twentieth century, and is supported by an array of examples based on a variety of sources, including history, myths, religion, and philosophy. She divides her study into two sections, which she subtitles Book One and Book Two. The first of these books focuses on some of the theories by which women and their place in society have been analyzed by male critics. The second book, “Woman’s Life Today,” explores the life of women during the first half of the twentieth century, from early childhood to adulthood, touching on the various roles that women fulfill. In the opening chapter of Book Two, titled “The Formative Years,” de Beauvoir begins with a powerful assertion on the cultural construction of gender, one that has been referred to and cited numerous times, but bears repeating:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (267)
Her assertion that “woman” is the result of nurture rather than of nature has been a powerful tool in the feminist movement. De Beauvoir’s observation indicates that no longer can women be found deficient because of their physiology, because of what they lack or are not; she soundly rejects what Aristotle so famously proclaimed: “The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities” (xxii). Indeed, since feminism took hold among women intellectuals, many female writers have joyfully celebrated what is unique to women in their literature, in a sense highlighting what men lack, and paying tribute to the feminine.

The feminist movement, however, did not begin here, with a celebration of difference. The work of the early feminists, including de Beauvoir, tended to focus on the pursuit of equality, as Julia Kristeva indicates in her essay “Women’s Time” (1981):

In its beginnings, the women’s movement, as the struggle of suffragists and of existential feminists, aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history. In this sense, the movement, while immediately universalist, is also deeply rooted in the sociopolitical life of nations. The political demands of women; the struggles for equal pay for equal work, for taking power in social institutions on an equal footing with men; the rejection, when necessary, of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal insofar as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history--all are part of the logic of identification with certain values: not with the ideological but, rather, with the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation-state. (447)

The suggestion that de Beauvoir--as an existential feminist--focused her efforts entirely on equality, however, is a simplification. She did raise the issue of difference, and even equality in difference as well, as the following citation from The Second Sex reveals:

To begin with, there will always be certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature. This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child;
those who make much of ‘equality in difference’ could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality.

(731)

In fact, this particular declaration foretold the next phase of the feminist movement.

Kristeva suggests in “Women’s Time” that the early goals of the suffragists and the existential feminists regarding equality have been met, for the most part, at least in the so-called First World Nations, as well as in many of the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe, and even many Latin American nations, both socialist and democratic.

Kristeva lists these three goals as: economic, political, and professional equality (449).

The fourth goal--as yet unmet--is that of sexual equality. As she demonstrates, attaining sexual equality is the objective of a new generation of feminists, one which will be achieved not through claims of equality with men, but rather through the recognition and valuation of difference:

The fourth [goal], sexual equality, which implies permissiveness in sexual relations (including homosexual relations), abortion, and contraception, remains stricken by taboo in Marxian ethics as well as for reasons of state. It is, then, this fourth equality which is the problem and which therefore appears essential in the struggle of a new generation. . . . It is precisely at this point that the new generation encounters what might be called the symbolic question. Sexual difference--which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction--is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language, and meaning. (449)

This emphasis on difference is at the heart of the movement as envisioned by other feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Margaret Whitford explains why Irigaray, in particular, considers sexual difference to be the key to women’s subjecthood:

“For Irigaray, ‘equal’ tends to mean ‘equal to men’ and therefore equivalent to the imposition of a male norm, and she warns that, carried to its conclusion, this would mean
genocide: of women. She puts forward her view that women need an identity as women, that there should be womankind as well as mankind” (23-24). The idea that differences between men and women should be acknowledged and celebrated is a fundamental principle proposed by Irigaray. For this French feminist difference--not equality--is the key to undoing the power of the patriarchy, because difference has been the foundation of the debasement of women within the patriarchal societies: “The exploitation of women is based upon sexual difference, and can only be resolved through sexual difference” (32). This second phase of the feminist movement--in which difference is foregrounded and celebrated--is a key element in Gioconda Belli’s literature, as well as that of many of her twentieth century predecessors and contemporaries.

A third phase in the feminist movement has developed, as well. In this most recent phase, the focus is on the cross-over that exists between the genders, on the multiple roles that both men and women are capable of fulfilling. That is to say, this phase emphasizes the fact that each man and woman has attributes that are considered to be the purview of the other gender. This concept of gender as multiplicity is a rejection of the polarized images of man and woman constructed under patriarchy. Rather than the initial emphasis on equality, which has a tendency to ignore or erase differences through a universalizing effect, or a straightforward focus on the differences between the genders, this latest phase seeks to grant each individual the freedom to explore his or her embodied self and situation as he or she sees fit. And because we are each situated within a unique body, through which we experience the world around us, the body--and literature “of the body”--is a key element in the exploration of the self.

Speaking of being situated in a place and time brings my analysis back to de
Beauvoir, particularly to her assertion that “. . . the body is not a thing, it is a situation . . . it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world . . .” (34). Another contemporary feminist theorist, Toril Moi, picks up on this idea and expounds on it in her book *Sex, Gender, and the Body* (2005). Moi indicates that she wishes to locate a new model for feminist theory, one that “. . steers a course between . . the traditional essentialism and biologism, and [that] of the idealist obsession with ‘discourse’ and ‘construction’” (vii). She acknowledges her debt to earlier feminists, stating that “. . Simone de Beauvoir’s feminism of freedom . . .” (65) is the key to her own project, particularly de Beauvoir’s claim that the body is a situation. In keeping with the concept that the body is a situation, Moi writes that:

> To claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom. For Beauvoir, our freedom is not absolute, but situated. Other situations as well as our particular lived experience will influence our projects, which in turn will shape our experiences of the body. In this way, each woman’s experience of her body is bound up with her projects in the world. There are innumerable different ways of living with one’s specific bodily potential as a woman. (65-66)

In other words, Moi, like de Beauvoir half a century earlier, believes that one’s freedom to act is situated. Gioconda Belli, like many of her contemporary female poets, had the good fortune to be born “situated” into a wealthy family. As a result she was well-educated, and by her own admission was initially unaware that so many of her fellow citizens lived in poverty and deprivation in Nicaragua. One of Belli’s goals since becoming aware of their plight has been to change this injustice. She has sought to ensure that other women and men have the same freedoms to live their lives as they see fit, as she herself does. Her involvement with the Sandinista Revolution, and with the Sandinista government in the post-revolutionary period, is a manifestation of this
commitment. Her literature, which highlights women’s experiences, strength, potential, and value, is an expression of her commitment to the feminist cause.

Because Belli’s literature is woman-centered, she writes primarily about women’s issues, experiences, and concerns from a woman’s perspective. However, her protagonists are definitely “situated” in very material socio-political surroundings. And yet, though a social being, the speaking voice in both her poetry and prose, is definitely--and defiantly--female. The poetic persona in “Reclamos al Creador,” from her 1997 collection Apogeo, speaks of the first time she became aware of her individuality, or as de Beauvoir might say, of being “situated” in a particular place and time:

        Yo era un ente particular. Y nadie podía vivir en mi vida;
        sentir por mí, intercambiarse conmigo.
        Yo existía sola dentro de mi uniforme de colegio,
        dentro de mis rodillas con cascarones. (23-26)

        ...  
        Y yo, sola, sobre la cama,
        habitando un cuerpo mío para siempre;
        un cuerpo y una mente que no podía sustituir
        y donde nadie más que yo podía habitar.

        Para mí fue el ser y después la conciencia. (35-39)

        ...  
        Por primera vez me di cuenta
        que estaba sola; mi mente confinada a un solo cuerpo.
        Mi mente sabiéndose sola. (45-48)

The speaker, as a young girl, clearly situates herself physically within her body, which she recognizes as unique to her. She highlights this uniqueness by writing of her body, of her “rodillas con cascarones,” something that allows the reader to more easily visualize her as a singular, playful, individual. She reinforces her identification with her body by
speaking of “habitando un cuerpo mío para siempre” (36). The poetic voice also claims agency when she declares that her body is hers and hers alone--that it is a site that no one else can inhabit. At the same time she also establishes that she is more than a physical being by indicating that she has become conscious of her own existence, emphasizing “fue el ser y después la conciencia.” Not only does she wonder about her own existence, her own consciousness, but she also questions the Creator: “¿Cuánto tiempo después de todo cuánto pudo existir / existió la conciencia?” (4-5). These verses underscore that the speaker--like all human beings--is a sentient individual, one whose self-awareness leads her to question, to explore, and to be concerned for the welfare of others.

These words bring to mind the assertion of another existentialist, and Simone de Beauvoir’s famous partner, Jean-Paul Sartre “...the being which pursues the question of the meaning of Being is a conscious being” (qtd. by MacDonald 298). While much of what this philosopher proclaims in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) has little bearing on either Belli’s literature or my analysis of it, there are a few ideas that he presents in his treatise on existentialism that are relevant--primarily that existence precedes essence, and that human freedom is to be found in action. The theory of existentialism as Sartre presents it, however, is fundamentally patriarchal. Jeffner Allen proposes a method of overcoming this patriarchal bias, which she calls “...the humanist fallacy: the equation of men with human beings in general” (78). As Allen rightly points out, this theory leaves women out entirely: “Existentialism thereby establishes itself as a patriarchal endeavor that ignores women’s existence, that dismisses the past, future, and present of women’s culture” (78). Allen’s proposal for overcoming this bias is sinuosity, which she describes as “...a pattern of connectedness that constitutes women’s
experiences of being in a world. Sinuosity is a dynamic structure that enables the emergence of a positive women-identified sensibility and feminist experience” (81). It is this very idea of being, rooted in women’s lived, embodied experience that allows a way out of patriarchy.

Lavinia, the protagonist in Belli’s first novel, *La mujer habitada* (1978), also ponders her existence, her place within the wider world. In the following excerpt this character considers the situation into which each of us is born as she drives through a slum in the capital city and observes the people around her. Her thoughts signal her awakening to the fact that most of her fellow Nicaraguans eke out an existence on the margins. It is this realization, that so many live in or on the edge of poverty while a lucky few live in comfort and wealth, that motivates her to question the justice of a life that is seemingly determined even before birth itself:

“Pude haber sido cualquiera de ellos”, pensó desde el mullido asiento de su carro; “de haber nacido en otra parte, de otros padres, yo podría estar allí, haciendo fila para el bus esta noche”. Nacer era un azar tan terrible. Se hablaba del miedo a la muerte. Nadie pensaba en el miedo a la vida. El embrión ignorante toma forma en el vientre materno, sin saber qué le espera a la salida del túnel. Se crea la vida y sin más, se nace. (130)

The attitude that one’s birth has the potential to be the determining factor regarding one’s future, aside from being a fact in a general way, is in keeping with the Marxist ideology that was a fundamental tenet of the Sandinista Revolution. As Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan observe in an essay on the subject: “According to Marx, we are all situated historically and socially, and our social and historical contexts ‘determine’ or shape our lives” (234). As de Beauvoir and Belli would argue, and as the quotation marks in the above citation suggest, the degree to which the social and historical milieu “determines” one’s future can be mitigated through action. The Sandinista Revolution sought to undo
this economic and social determinism through collective action, by overthrowing the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and replacing it with a socialist government that would provide all Nicaraguans with an equal opportunity to live their lives.

The Marxist idea of being situated economically and socially is analogous to de Beauvoir’s concept that we are situated in our bodies. Because we each “inhabit” a different body, in a different place and time, our experiences are unique. As de Beauvoir indicates, our bodies situate us within the world; and as Moi writes, there are innumerable ways of living within this bodily potential into which we are born. I assert that Belli’s literature conveys these same ideas--that while we are born into a time, a place, and a body, it is up to each individual to decide how to live within their particular situation, and within their own skin. Belli’s own words, from her memoir, *El país bajo mi piel*, underscore this assertion: “Yo no había decidido ni mi cuna ni mi color, solamente podía responder por mi actitud ante la vida” (376). It is this very attitude that motivates Belli to be a voice for women, and to play an active part in improving the lives of women within a more just socialist government.

Belli, like many feminist writers, strives to give women a voice in the patriarchal society in an effort to change it, and to overcome and transform the patriarchal image of woman as secondary, as less than man. Her literature emphasizes that women are more than the blank slate on which male writers can express themselves. Woman becomes the speaking subject in Belli’s hands; she becomes an individual with her own perspectives, experiences, ideas, and opinions. The French feminist and theorist Hélène Cixous called on women to write for themselves--to write of their experiences, ideas, opinions, and desires--in her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). She begins with an
exhortation, insisting that: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies--for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text--as into the world and into history--by her own movement” (161). Later in her essay Cixous is more explicit, adding that: “To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal . . .” (165). For Cixous the act of woman writing herself accomplishes two goals. First, it brings her back into contact with her body, with what is hers yet has been denied to her, or only granted to her on another’s terms. And second, writing gives woman a voice, bringing her back from the silence to which she has been relegated by a male-dominated society.

Belli attains both of these objectives in her literature, as I hope to show in the following chapters. She claims a voice through her writing, and establishes a direct connection to her body that she celebrates in a variety of ways, on her own terms. Consequently, much of Belli’s literature is a rejection of the patriarchal view of womanhood. This rejection of the phallocentric model is accomplished in three primary ways: 1) by making woman the speaking subject rather than the object of the discourse, 2) through the celebration of the multiple roles women fulfill in society, and 3) by her portrayal of women and men as sharing many attributes, regardless of the rigid gender roles imposed by patriarchy. She achieves these aims in her literature by (em)bodying
women’s experiences, presenting woman as an active, sentient being with a sense of self and subjection.

It is through the body that one has contact with the outside world, and through the body that the world views and reacts to each individual. Belli uses the body as a situation to express the multiple facets of woman through her literature. Rather than see “lack” or “limitations” on woman, Belli sees power, freedom, and multiplicity. These concepts of power, freedom, and multiplicity, are present throughout her literary work, in both her poetry and her prose. Although some feminists have rejected the way in which women have been associated with the body because in their view it reduces them to being determined by their biology, I believe that Gioconda Belli empowers herself by using images of the body in a liberating discourse within which woman becomes the speaking subject.

I begin my examination with an exploration of how Belli embodies “woman” in her poetry, with particular emphasis on some of her predecessors and contemporaries, and on the evolution of the images of women within her own work. I focus on Belli’s representation of the erotic woman in Chapter 3. As my study shows, she embodies the erotic woman in a myriad of ways, at times challenging the patriarchal view directly, and at others taking an ironic view of the patriarchal standards imposed on women. In Chapter 4 I explore how Belli embodies motherhood. This was a primary topic of her first collection of poetry, Sobre la grama (1974), and one which is explored in each of her works of poetry and prose to some degree. In each case, however, her presentation of motherhood/maternity goes beyond the one-dimensional role so frequent in canonical literature. In the final chapter I examine the multiple ways in which Belli embodies
another subject dear to her heart—Nicaragua. As with these other topics, the nation is another subject she writes about from different perspectives. Most importantly, Belli’s exploration of each of these issues displays a discernible evolution, one that adds a true depth to her work, which I endeavor to bring to light in this dissertation.
Simone de Beauvoir suggests that the patriarchy seeks to connect women to their biology in an attempt to make woman less than human, to make her something so “other” that she is more animal than human, irrevocably tied to her biological essence. Indeed, de Beauvoir begins her text with this very assertion:

Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female--this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: “He is a male!” The term “female” is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex; and if this sex seems to man to be contemptible and inimical even in harmless dumb animals, it is evidently because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in him by woman. (3)

I believe that Belli’s literature, like that of many of her predecessors and contemporaries, seeks to undo the derogatory and limiting categorization of women by the patriarchy through a direct assault--by claiming back the female body--and by writing frankly and joyfully of her own body and experiences.

It is through this “literature of their own,” that women writers challenge the patriarchy. They make woman the speaking subject of their discourse rather than the object of the male gaze. This woman-centered literature provides an alternative to the images of women produced by their male predecessors. As Sofía Kearns asserts in her essay “Una ruta hacia la conciencia feminista en la poesía de Gioconda Belli,” the image of “Woman” has often served as a vehicle for the self-definition of the male writer:
La imagen monolítica ‘Mujer’ se ha reproducido muchas veces en la literatura mundial y latinoamericana tanto masculina como femenina. Dentro de la literatura masculina, en particular, la imagen femenina ha aparecido, desde la misma poesía amorosa de Petrarca, como instrumento para la autodefinición del yo masculino. Desde la patrística teológica, hasta autores clásicos como Henry James, Robert Musil y Marcel Proust, se ha representado lo femenino asociado al inconsciente, con la sexualidad, con lo pasivo, lo irracional y ‘lo otro.’ (n.p.)

While Kearns refers to José Asunción Silva and Pablo Neruda as examples of Latin American poets who portray women according to this limited, patriarchal model, Rubén Darío also is notable for his tendency to represent them as the passive object of male desire. Darío is widely recognized as the father of modern poetry in general and modern Nicaraguan literature in particular. Paul W. Borgeson, Jr., writes that “Darío [was] the leading figure of the Modernist movement throughout Latin America and also Spain, and the renovator (many would say the originator) of Nicaraguan literature” (446). He is clearly venerated in Nicaragua, a small country admired for the quantity and quality of its poets, so there is no doubt of Belli’s familiarity with this prominent predecessor. I begin with an analysis of some verses written by Darío, both because of his exalted position and his connection to Nicaragua and Belli, and because his portrayal of women is consistent with the patriarchal discourse against which these women authors were/are writing. Darío’s poetry deals with a plethora of subjects, including love, death, nature, the exotic, and politics, but the portrayals of women, in particular, tend to be idealized and out of reach, characteristic of the type of image prevalent in Hispanic verses during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the reign of Modernismo.

In one of Darío’s poems from “Primaveral,” (Azul 1888), the woman is presented in a passive role, as the object of the poetic gaze. Here the speaker addresses his “amada,” who serves as a mirror in which he views himself: “Mira: en tus ojos, los míos”
(1). His lover, like Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s (Spain 1836-1870) idealized amada of his many rimas, is nothing more than the passive receptacle of his verses:

Yo voy a decirte rimas,
tú vas a escuchar risueña; (9-10)

. . .
tú no oirás notas ni trinos,
sino, enamorada y regia,
escucharás mis canciones
fija en mis labios que tiemblan. (15-18)

Not only does the female lover serve for little more than to be the recipient of this poetic out-pouring, she is also depicted as “enthralled”—oblivious to anything but her love for the poet and the power of his words.

Dario’s well-known poem “Sonatina,” from Prosas profanas (1896), depicts a different image of woman, of a beautiful—though bored—princess whose life of opulence appears to be missing something. She is described in a style consistent with the poetic standards of female beauty in Modernism—her mouth is like a red strawberry, and she is pale and passive:

La princesa está triste... ¿qué tendrá la princesa?
Los suspiros se escapan de su boca de fresa,
que ha perdido la risa, que ha perdido el color.
La princesa está pálida en su silla de oro,
está mudo el teclado de su clave sonoro;
y en un vaso olvidada se desmaya una flor. (1-6)

Her fragility and beauty—and ennui—are repeatedly foregrounded and admired by the poetic persona. The emptiness of her life, amidst riches of every sort, is also highlighted. In a stanza reminiscent of the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty, the speaker reveals that what the princess lacks is her prince:

--¡Calla, calla, princesa --dice el hada madrina--
en caballo con alas, hacia acá se encamina,
en el cinto la espada y en la mano el azor,
el feliz caballero que te adora sin verte,
y que llega de lejos, vencedor de la Muerte,
a encenderte los labios con su beso de amor! (43-48)

A literal reading of “Sonatina” suggests that without this man—who will awaken her with a kiss—her life has no meaning. The role of the patriarchal virgin is to be passive and beautiful, and to wait for the arrival of her “Príncipe Azul.” This celebration of the beautiful and passive woman is a frequent theme in Darío’s poetry, as John R. Burt points out in “Why the Dichotomy of Active and Passive Women in Darío’s Poetry?” With regard to “Sonatina,” Burt observes that “[t]he active images, and real movement here . . . are those of the male. The feminine role is to wait, eternally frozen at the moment of life when she is most physically beautiful, waiting for the male who will awaken her to the potential (sexual) pleasures of life with a single kiss” (140). Another perspective with regard to this poem indicates that the poet presents love—depicted here in the prince’s kiss—as transcendence. María A. Salgado analyzes “Sonatina” from this viewpoint, concluding at the end of her essay that “. . . la princesa está lejos de ser uno más de los adornos frívolos y artificiales del Modernismo; por el contrario simboliza una faceta muy especial del alma del poeta: aquélla que, cargada de ideales, rehusa dejarse contaminar por el mundo y la carne para continuar su esperanzada búsqueda de la verdad, la belleza, y la trascendencia” (38). Love is presented as the path to transcendence. Ironically, however, since the princess is the anima of the poet it is he who attains transcendence, not the passively objectified princess.

Yet, despite these passive images, woman can sometimes be active in Darío’s poetry, as Burt indicates. One of the poems this critic chooses as a counterpoint to the passive woman appears in “Era un aire suave,” (Prosas profanas). The central figure of
the poem, the Marquesa Eulalia, is described as a beautiful but cruel courtesan who plays with her admirers’ feelings to amuse herself: “Al oír las quejas de sus caballeros / ríe, ríe, ríe la divina Eulalia, / pues son su tesoro las flechas de Eros” (25-27). Precisely because the woman is active in this poem, she is grounded in her sexuality, a sexuality that causes her to use Eros’s arrows as weapons for her pleasure.

The object of the poet’s gaze in Darío’s “La bailarina de los pies desnudos,” from El canto errante (1907), is a woman who embodies duality. In this case, the poetic persona is both “body” (human) and divine:

Iba en un paso rítmico y felino
a avances dulces, ágiles o rudos,
con algo de animal y de divino,
la bailarina de los pies desnudos. (1-4)

The woman’s body and her dancing provoke a series of erotic images from the speaker’s pen:

Bajaban mil deleites de los senos
hacia la perla hundida del ombligo,
e iniciaban propósitos obscenos
azúcares de fresa y miel de higo. (9-12)

The erotic implications of the images successfully objectify the dancer. Her rhythmic movements are cat-like; they are agile and unpolished--as if springing from a dancer with natural talent and perhaps only a modicum of training. The speaker continues his description, variably admiring the dancer’s physical attributes and hinting at his own erotic desire. This dancer with a certain “animal” quality is the passive recipient of the poetic voice’s sexual glance. Yet, paradoxically, there is something divine about her. In neither vision, however, is she viewed as wholly “human.” She is either more than human--she is divine--or she is less than human--she is animal. Whether active or
passive, good or bad, however, the women in Darío’s poetry are viewed through a patriarchal lens, through a vision tied to her physical being, to her objectified body. She is either the passive innocent beauty who awaits her lover’s attention, or she is the cruel siren who uses her sexuality to torment her victims.

In addition to the male-centered view of women I have summarized in Darío’s verses, Hispanic poetry also has a tradition of images constructed by the female imagination. Several women writers who appeared on the poetic stage with the dawning of the twentieth century, and shortly after the decline of Modernismo, are of particular interest to my study. These poets began to subvert the male-centered discourse of the Modernists by speaking from a woman’s perspective, and personalizing women’s experiences. Rather than mere object, to be lauded, admired, desired, or criticized, these poets present woman as a speaking subject— one who expresses her own desires, disappointments, happiness, and experiences. I have chosen to focus on three writers from this period in order to contextualize Belli’s poetic work because their poetry touches on topics that Belli herself explores throughout her oeuvre. These poets are Gabriela Mistral, for her considerable writings on motherhood and maternal issues; Delmira Agustini, because of her foregrounding of (women’s) eroticism; and Alfonsina Storni, for her extensive exploration of feminism.

The Chilean Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), winner in 1945 of the first Nobel Prize in Literature to be awarded to a Latin American writer, in particular, followed closely in Darío’s footsteps. Mistral became well-known in her country with the writing of her “Sonetos de la muerte” (1914); later on she would establish her reputation on her many poems about motherhood, nature, and the sanctity of childhood, as well as for her highly
religious poetry. Her images of women, however, are generally rather patriarchal. She tends to present idealized images of woman and/or mother. Her poem “La maestra rural,” from Desolación (1922), is a case in point. Mistral, herself a teacher, held this profession in the highest regard. She saw her position and that of other teachers as one akin to the maternal role, in which the child’s welfare and future should be the entire focus of the teacher/mother. She begins this poem with high praise for this selfless role, one which she imagines as consecrated by Jesus because the teacher imparts His message and values. Indeed, she is not only a teacher, she is a type of missionary:

La Maestra era pura. “Los suaves hortelanos”, decía, “de este predio, que es predio de Jesús, han de conservar puros los ojos y las manos, guardar claros sus óleos, para dar clara luz.” (1-4)

The selflessness of the profession is particularly evident as the poem unfolds, and the teacher is described as poor, though this state of affairs has little importance, since her kingdom is not human, not of this earth: “La Maestra era pobre. Su reino no es humano” (5). She is also described as happy, in spite of her own personal suffering: “La Maestra era alegre. ¡Pobre mujer herida!” (9). And her love for her pupils is boundless, for through her personal suffering she learns to love people more, much like Jesus, whose suffering allowed him to form a special bond with humankind, thereby saving it from its sins: “Los hierros que le abrieron el pecho generoso / ¡más anchas le dejaron las cuencas del amor!” (10-11). While it is said that teachers are generally poorly remunerated for their hard work, particularly rural teachers who in many cases spend their own limited money to supply their students, few could possibly live up to this lofty, idealized description of the long-suffering, self-denying woman/teacher.
“El niño solo,” from this same collection, presents, if not an idealized image of mother and child, certainly one that conveys an idyllic scene. Upon hearing a child’s cry, the poetic persona approaches the door of a ranch-house she is passing by:

Como escuchase un llanto, me paré en el repecho
y me acerqué a la puerta del rancho del camino.
Un niño de ojos dulces me miró desde el lecho.
¡Y una ternura inmensa me embriagó como un vino! (1-4)

The child, awakened from hunger and needing to breast-feed “... buscó el pezón de la rosa” (6). The speaker, though unable to feed the child, is able to console it: “... Yo lo estreché contra el pecho, / y una canción de cuna me subió, temblorosa...” (7-8). When the mother returns, she is so relieved to see her child content in this other woman’s arms “¡que me dejó el infante en los brazos dormido!” (14). This poem clearly conveys the strength of the maternal instinct, even in a woman who is not the child’s mother. These images, however, are rather sanitized. The speaker refers to the mother’s breast in poetic terms, as “el pezón de la rosa,” and the hungry child is seemingly at ease in the arms of a stranger. These images are representative of the cultural codes of a patriarchal society, something not infrequent in women’s literature, as Berta López Morales points out in her essay “Language of the Body in Women’s Texts”:

. . . it is possible to ascertain that women’s writing is a restricted phenomenon due to the influence of the dominant patterns and cultural codes. Since women’s discourse is built upon the dominant masculine model, it reflects and repeats the male world view created by the hegemonic literary codes. In this sense, the language of women’s body shows in its own textuality the patterns established by male codes, focusing for example, upon some parts of the body and ignoring others. Motherhood is frequently associated with ‘freshness,’ ‘whiteness,’ with women’s breasts, in this way ascribing to them an ‘otherness’ with respect to the traditional functions of women’s bodies within Western society as a whole. (123)
Mistral’s representation of the mother in this poem is consistent with López Morales’s description, for the woman’s breast is described in poetic terms, and only referred to in relation to its function as source of solace and nourishment for the child.

Not all of Mistral’s poems, however, focus on motherhood, teaching, and religious topics. “La otra,” from the last collection Mistral published, Lagar (1954), presents the image of a strong woman, though perhaps one who cannot reconcile her duality. With the opening words the poetic voice expresses this inability to embrace her dual nature:

Una en mí maté:
yo no la amaba. (1-2)

This “other” is described in metaphors that convey strength and independence:

Era la flor llameando
del cactus de montaña;
era aridez y fuego;
nunca se refrescaba. (3-6)

The image of the cactus flower, a plant that grows in the arid mountains where rain never falls, is not at all reminiscent of other, more common metaphors for women, such as the delicate rose—a plant that needs a great deal of water and careful cultivation in order to thrive. On the contrary, this cactus flower withstands the dry, scorching heat without need for water.

In addition to her innate hardiness, this otra also had a self-defense mechanism, one that prevented her-it from becoming the “beautiful prey” of another:

En rápidas resinas
se endurecía su habla,
por no caer en linda
presa soltada. (15-18)
While the plant protected itself with a sticky resin, this other protected herself with harsh words--with her voice. The next verse, however, demonstrates where the speaker and her other parted ways. This mountain flower refused to bend--did not know how--though the speaker, at her side, did:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Doblarse no sabía} \\
\text{la planta de montaña,} \\
\text{y al costado de ella,} \\
\text{yo me doblaba...} \quad \text{(19-22)}
\end{align*}
\]

Yet it is the speaker who survives, in part by refusing to sustain her other:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{La dejé que muriese,} \\
\text{robándole mi entraña.} \\
\text{Se acabó como el águila} \\
\text{que no es alimentada.} \quad \text{(23-26)}
\end{align*}
\]

The speaker starves this other, denying her sustenance, thereby deliberating killing this other aspect of her personality. When the speaker indicates that other “sisters,”--other aspects of her--still ask about la otra, about this other, she indicates that she crosses herself and tells them to metaphorically search the ravines and gullies. The closing verse, however, conveys that there is little hope of finding la otra:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si no podéis [encontrarla], entonces} \\
\text{¡ay! olvidadla.} \\
\text{Yo la maté. Vosotras} \\
\text{también matadla!} \quad \text{(39-42)}
\end{align*}
\]

Not only does the poetic voice tell her “sisters” to forget about la otra, she also instructs them to kill this “other.” My interpretation of this poem suggests that the only way to survive within a patriarchal society is to deny those aspects of one’s personality that are not consistent with the role the patriarchy assigns to women. María A. Salgado proposes that “la otra” is the reflection of who the speaker was, that this description of a strong, unbending woman reveals: “... lo que fue: la mujer fuerte y apasionada, viril e
independiente que vivió-escribió esa vida-obra que le ha dado fama” (“La ‘otra’ como ella misma: Ser e identidad en cinco autorretratos femeninos” 72). Both interpretations emphasize the fact that women in patriarchal societies struggle within themselves, attempting to reconcile the multiple aspects of their personality. This struggle is often evident in their literature, underscoring that--in today’s society--they are willing and determined to try.

Another poet of Mistral’s day, the Uruguayan Delmira Agustini (1886-1914), writes poetry that more directly challenges patriarchy with themes that had previously been considered to be the purview of male writers--including, most notably, the erotic. Her eroticism is so disturbing to some male critics that Enrique Anderson Imbert describes her and not her poetry as “. . . una mujer de sexo encendido, siempre anhelante de abrazos de hombre. . .” (237). Writing from the same perspective, he next asserts that in regard to her poetry, “. . . ella transcendió su erotismo, y el deleite del cuerpo se convirtió en deleite estético” (237). While Anderson Imbert’s description of Agustini’s poetry may be accurate--in that it is both erotic and aesthetically significant--, his phallocentric bias is evident, for it is difficult to imagine a critic describing a male writer as one who “transcends his eroticism,” or of referring to a male author as “sexually afire” and “always yearning for the arms of a woman.”

The poetic voice addresses Eros directly in the poem “Otra estirpe” (Los cálices vacíos 1913). The speaker is clearly in command, indicating that she will guide her lover in a sexual encounter in which she metaphorically emphasizes the contact of their bodies, hinting at the pleasure that awaits them:

Eros, yo quiero guiarte, Padre ciego...
Pido a tus manos todopoderosas,
Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego
Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosa! (1-4)

Her words indicate that love is blind, though his body and hands (or, more precisely, those of her lover) will please her--as long as she guides him. The speaker is specifically emphasizing that her interlocutor, representative of man in general, is not the all-knowing lover who will awaken her body (as in “Sonatina”), but rather that he needs her guidance and her patience, if he hopes to be a capable lover.

Agustini’s “Mis amores,” from her last collection, *El rosario de Eros* (1924), which was published posthumously, is a long erotic poem “sacrilegiously” structured in the five sections of the Catholic rosary. These verses underscore that her erotic poetry does indeed go beyond the physicality of the body and eroticism--that, following the tenets of Modernism--she transcends the “mere” erotic, as Anderson Imbert indicates. The poetic voice begins by celebrating her various lovers, referring to them as indistinct, one rather like another. However, her sexual encounters were multifaceted, filled with caresses and pain, the divine and the devilish. And each encounter illuminated her soul while also calming her body, by fulfilling both her emotional and her physical needs:

Hoy han vuelto.
Por todos los senderos de la noche han venido
A llorar en mi lecho.
¡Fueron tantos, son tantos! (1-4)

... 

[sus ojos]
Indefinidos, verdes, grises, azules, negros,
Abraza y fulguran,
Son caricias, dolor, constelación, infierno.
Sobre toda su luz, sobre todas sus llamas,
Se iluminó mi alma y se templó mi cuerpo. (20-25)
Here the poet presents love in its duality, as both spiritual and physical. It illuminates her soul and excites her body. Indeed, Agustini presents a dual image of love, consistent with the Modernist idea that erotic love is the means to transcendence. This is not unlike Darío’s Modernist poetry, though here the one who has these experiences searching for unity is a woman. These verses, in which the poet refers to her many lovers, each of whom touched her spirit and her body, signals an evolution in women’s poetry--one in which the erotic, speaking subject embodied by woman is foregrounded in order to express feelings and desires never before voiced by male writers.

Rubén Darío admired Agustini’s work and wrote her words in which he expressed high esteem for her verses. She chose to include these words as the introduction to Los cálices vacíos. Darío celebrates the poet’s sincerity and charm, while also praising her poetry as a clear and open expression of her female feelings:

De todas cuantas mujeres hoy escriben en verso ninguna ha impresionado mi ánimo como Delmira Agustini, por su alma sin velos y su corazón de flor. A veces rosa por lo sonrosado, a veces lirio por lo blanco. Y es la primera vez que en lengua castellana aparece un alma femenina en el orgullo de la verdad de su inocencia y de su amor, a no ser Santa Teresa en su exaltación divina. Si esta niña bella continúa en la lírica revelación de su espíritu como hasta ahora, va a asombrar a nuestro mundo de lengua española. Sinceridad, encanto y fantasía, he allí las cualidades de esta deliciosa musa. Cambiando la frase de Shakespeare, podría decirse “that is a woman”, pues por ser muy mujer, dice cosas exquisitas que nunca se han dicho. Sean con ella la gloria, el amor y la felicidad.

(Poesías completas 223)

These words, however, emphasize both a phallocentric bias and a high degree of linguistic sexism. Iris G. González indicates in her essay that: “Linguistic sexism refers to the way language is used to reflect and maintain male dominance of woman. It is not instinctive, but socially learned and socially patterned” (205). Most notable is Darío’s use of the terms “niña bella” to refer to an adult woman, emphasizing her subordination
by underlining her childlike qualities and her concomitant innocence. Sylvia Molloy points out in “Dos lecturas del cisne: Rubén Darío y Delmira Agustini” that Agustini had a tendency to represent her historical persona in such terms: “En el caso de Delmira Agustini, el deliberado aniñamiento . . . es posible de interpretaciones diversas en las que la conjetura tiene su buena parte” (59). This critic cites several letters that Agustini wrote to her lover signed as “La Nena,” or “Tu Nena,” as examples. She also proposes that this was most likely a mask or costume that the writer knowingly and deliberately adopted even in her public life: “. . . creo que Delmira Agustini recurrió al disfraz--a la postura si no de Nena, de mujer frágil e ingenua--también en su representación pública, como protección y solución de comodidad” (60). One is left to wonder whether Agustini felt the need to resort to this type of mask in order to accomplish her literary goals, namely, in order to write and publish her poetry without threatening male dominance. Even so, and regardless of how she may have lived her own life, her poetry clearly explores another side of woman, and it is this poetic expression and creativity that earned the praise of Rubén Darío. His indication that she is “muy mujer”--a woman who writes about things that have not previously been said by women--is a clear demonstration that her poetry shows another side of woman’s personality. Darío further praises Agustini by forecasting an amazing future for her poetry through the “lírica revelación de su espíritu.” The newness of Agustini’s poetic work is also addressed by Magdalena García Pinto in her essay “Eros in Reflection: The Poetry of Delmira Agustini.” Garcia Pinto emphasizes the daring subversiveness of Augustini’s poems:

To capture Agustini’s place in Spanish American literature, today’s readers must bear in mind that these poems had considerable impact in a social milieu that was not only suspicious but fearful of feminine pleasure. Although Uruguayan society wished to project an image of control over
all human sexuality, it was central to its interests that women be governed by, and made to uphold, a stricter moral code than that imposed upon the male. (87)

It is through this very transgression that women writers have found the key to their freedom--writing joyfully, openly, and honestly about their eroticism and their bodies. Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938), another contemporary of both Mistral and Agustini, and an avowed feminist, explicitly addressed her resentment regarding the subordination of women by the patriarchy. One of the best known poems of this Argentine writer is her much anthologized “Hombre pequeñito,” from her collection Irremediablemente (1911), which I cite below in its entirety:

Hombre pequeñito, hombre pequeñito,
   suelta a tu canario que quiere volar . . .
   yo soy el canario, hombre pequeñito,
   déjame saltar.

   Estuve en tu jaula, hombre pequeñito,  
   hombre pequeñito que jaula me das.  
   Digo pequeñito porque no me entiendes,  
   ni me entenderás.

   Tampoco te entiendo, pero mientras tanto  
   ábreme la jaula, que quiero escapar;  
   hombre pequeñito, te amé media hora,  
   no me pidas más.

The woman, symbolized here as a canary, resists her subordinate position in society and asks to be set free. She refers to her lover as “hombre pequeñito” because he does not understand her--though the poetic voice acknowledges that this lack of understanding cuts both ways. With the closing words of the poem, the poetic voice highlights that she has given him all she wants to--and that after their brief, half-an-hour encounter she would like to be on her way. And why not? Men have always had this option--to enjoy a
short-lived sexual rendezvous without any need for a long-term commitment. The poetic voice, in her quest for equality, asks for nothing more.

Storni’s sonnet “Canción de la mujer astuta,” published in 1934, more than twenty years after “Hombre pequeñito,” tackles subjects about which few or no poems had previously been written. In these fourteen lines the poetic voice addresses menstruation, some aspects of maternity that may be viewed as negative, and erotic pleasure. The first quartet deals with menstruation, a topic associated with disease and women’s moodiness in canonical lore. Storni underscores, however, that her monthly flow is a reminder that her female body is the only one capable of creating and sustaining life, out of the same “extraña mezcla” of blood from which she herself was formed:

Cada rítmica luna que pasa soy llamada,
por los números graves de Dios, a dar mi vida
en otra vida: mezcla de tinta azul teñida,
la misma extraña mezcla con que he sido amasada. (1-4)

The second stanza emphasizes the body in pregnancy: her “warm belly” is the “promised land,” a place in which a baby can be nourished. The speaker, however, presents a counterpoint to the idealized picture of maternity in male texts, indicating that her body feels tired and miserable--and perhaps not so eager or willing to create and sustain a child:

Y a través de mi carne, miserable y cansada,
filtra un cálido vientre de tierra prometida,
y bebe, dulce aroma, mi nariz dilatada
a la selva exultante y a la rama nutrida. (5-8)

The suggestion that the speaker may not want to have a child is further highlighted in the first tercet. The poetic voice blames “astute nature,” which tempts her like a siren, increasing her erotic desires when she is most fertile, just to leave her pregnant:
Un engañoso canto de sirena me cantas,
¡naturaleza astuta! Me atraes y me encantas
para cargarme luego de alguna humana fruta . . . (9-11)

In the final stanza, the reader realizes that the poetic persona has matched nature’s
deceitfulness—“engaño por engaño”—and nature has been unable to impregnate her.

While the speaker has clearly enjoyed her sexual encounter, it has been an “amor estéril.”

Her own engaño, perhaps in the form of some type of contraception, has allowed her
body, which she describes as “mi belleza,” to avoid nature’s intended outcome:

Engaño por engaño: mi belleza se esquiva
al llamado solemne: y de esta fiebre viva,
algún amor estéril y de paso disfruta. (12-14)

The speaker’s attitude with regard to maternity is not entirely negative, however. In the
final verses she acknowledges that nature’s call to procreate (“llamado solemne”) is a
solemn one. In addition, readers familiar with Alfonsina Storni’s life are aware that she
was the unwed mother of a son, for whom she felt a profound and genuine love, and
whose welfare was of utmost importance to her. Even so, in this sonnet, the poet is
clearly celebrating what up until this time had been a male topic: the pleasures of the
erotic without the consequences—“disfruta” without the “fruta.” Like in the previous
poem “Hombre pequeñito,” the poet expresses her desire—and her right—to explore her
sexuality as freely as a man, only this time the female body and its unique attributes are
foregrounded.

This foregrounding of the female body—particularly of “female” issues that were
considered “unmentionable” and downright unpoetic—was some sort of first in the poetry
of these women. Janice Geasler Titiev focuses on this aspect in Storni’s literature,
noting that “Canción de la mujer astuta,” as well as “Tiempo de esterilidad” (in which
Storni’s title suggests an obvious reference to menopause break down male canonical conventions: “The real iconoclasm here is inherent in the idea of writing sonnets about menstruation, contraception, and menopause, [in] an explicit affirmation of aesthetic potential in the maligned and ignored processes of the female body” (235). Not only does Storni celebrate the female body and its potential in “Canción de la mujer astuta,” but she also uses this poem for exploring the problematic association between women and nature, which she celebrates. The link between women’s menstrual cycles and the cycle of the moon is foregrounded, for it is with this reference that the poet begins. The potential child is referred to as a product of nature, “alguna humana fruta,” the human fruit of the union between man and woman. The poet also honors the “intelligence” of nature, suggesting that it is “astute,” because it knows how to achieve its goal of perpetuating the species. Yet, in this particular case, the poetic persona has proven to be more astute. As the title indicates, la mujer astuta can avoid pregnancy, and prevail over nature, while taking pleasure in the erotic.

In many ways poets such as Agustini and Storni started a feminist, woman-centered literary trend that would be picked up by writers of the second half of the twentieth century. These writers were followed by several others whose literature has been even more focused on the full panoply of women’s experiences, including issues that had previously received little attention, from either male or female writers. It is with these more recent writers that Belli shares a particularly close literary relationship. Among those nearer to her generation and/or to her political and feminist ideology one may include some who preceded her, such as the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos (1925- ), and the Guatemalans Ana María Rodas (1937- ), and Carmen Matute (1944- ).
as well as some who would follow her, for example, the Costa Rican writer and actress Ana Istarú (1960- ). Several commonalities can also be pointed out between Belli’s poetry and that of her fellow Nicaraguans, including: Claribel Alegría (born in Nicaragua, raised in El Salvador, 1924- ), Michèle Najlis (1946- ), Daisy Zamora (1950- ), and Rosario Murillo (1951- ). An examination of the poetry written by these authors demonstrates a progression of themes and tone within the category of a woman-centered literature. For this reason, I will use the verses of several of these writers to contextualize Belli’s themes and tone.

Among this wave of feminists that began to write at mid-century, Ana María Rodas was one of the first of several Central American poets to celebrate women’s eroticism. The poems in her first collection, La izquierda erótica, which burst onto the scene in 1973, represent woman in a variety of guises, including that of the independent woman and lover, explicitly rejecting the limited, servile role of woman required by patriarchy. The title of this collection underscores Rodas’s membership with the leftist, Marxist Revolution in Guatemala, as well as her support of the feminist agenda. She is a revolutionary guerrillera in both the political and the feminist sense, as my analysis of her poetry reveals. Rodas exposes the silence in which women live, the “interior war” they fight between the expectations of the patriarchal society that surrounds them and their own desires. In the opening brief untitled poem, Rodas situates herself in time, claiming the position of speaking subject:

Domingo 12 de septiembre, 1937
a las dos de la mañana: nací. (1-2)

The words from the second stanza, in which she appears dressed in pink, are a clear questioning of her “classification” as a little girl. She eventually rejects pink—a metaphor
for the softness and passivity of the role women are expected to play. Instead, she claims all of the colors of the rainbow, or, in other words, all of the roles she wishes to take on--including eventually those of poet and guerrillera:

    Me clasificaron: nena? rosadito.
    Boté el rosa hace mucho tiempo
    y escogí el color que más me gusta,
    que son todos. (5-8)

The poetic voice continues, enumerating several body parts that describe her generically as a female rather than as an individualized person named Ana María Rodas. This persona, representative of all women, is also an active subject, involved in actions not typically associated with women’s roles as represented in canonical poetry:

    Tengo hígado, estómago, dos ovarios,
    una matriz, corazón y cerebro, más accesorios.
    Todo funciona en orden, por lo tanto,
    río, grito, insulto y hago el amor. (13-16)

Rodas highlights women’s unique ability to create life by foregrounding the female organs--the uterus and ovaries. Most subversively, however, her list also includes an organ, the brain, never listed by canonical texts among female attributes.

    The way the poet chooses to close her poem goes even further towards claiming agency. Not only has she been depicted as an active subject, with a brain; in the last verse, she claims agency--the right to take control to live her life and to defiantly recount it in her own words:

    Y después lo cuento. (17)

The poetic voice’s tone is straightforward. She began at the beginning--with her birth--to point out that from birth on society categorizes her, and all human beings, according to their acquired gender traits and biological sex. She is a little girl, therefore, she needs to
be all dressed in pink, and she has no control over it. As soon as she grows up and is aware of the repercussions, however, she rejects this classification by rejecting this color. Her gesture indicates that she will not be limited by the standards of the patriarchal order, no matter the pressures regarding what she ought to think and believe.

In a feminist identification with all women, the speaker’s next stanza relates what she is biologically, rather than describe her physique, as per the poetic conventions of self-portraiture. While she identifies the organs that define her biologically as a woman—her uterus and ovaries—she also points out that she, too, has a heart and, particularly, a brain—highlighting that she is a feeling but also a thinking, reasoning human being. The series of verbs of action, conjugated in the first person, at the end of the stanza: “I laugh, I shout, I insult, and I make love,” underscore this image. Her assertiveness is all the more shocking when one considers that this collection of poems was first published in Guatemala in 1973—a time and place in which women had not attained the freedom to speak of their sexuality. These words, plus the closing line on her right to recount her experiences, prepare the reader for the collection of erotic poems to come—a collection written in the first person that suggests a recounting the speaker’s personal experiences.

Rodas foregrounds the theme of women’s living in a state of sexual frustration due to the fact that female sexuality is an oxymoron in a society that does not acknowledge their sexual desires. She consequently writes on the need for liberation within the male-female relationship. In an untitled poem that begins “Hoy he descubierto la belleza / de ser yo misma” (1-2), Rodas writes of the need for gender equality, of the freedom of individuals--male and female--to be who they are:

comprendí
que libre yo
y libre tú
podemos tomarnos de la mano
y realizar la unión sin anularnos. (9-13)

The poetic voice underlines that it is through a sexual union grounded in equality that both partners can give of themselves and be satisfied, without fear:

Así
despúes de la cópula perfecta
de la unión que no ata
del entregarse
sin miedo (14-18)

The speaker’s desire for a “unión que no ata” calls to mind Storni’s “Hombre pequeño,” particularly the words of the poetic persona, who asks to be set free--“déjame saltar”--after having enjoyed a brief encounter. Indeed, Rodas, like her fellow feminists, does not reject the possibility of a mutually satisfying relationship between men and women. She simply indicates that the present inequality is unacceptable, and that nothing will change without the liberal revolution for which she is fighting, as demonstrated in the next (untitled) poem:

Ya sé.
Nunca voy a ser más que una
guerrillera del amor.
    Estoy situada algo así
como a la izquierda erótica. (1-5)

The poetic persona refers to herself as a “guerrillera del amor,” because she believes that she is fighting a battle, that she is under siege by the patriarchy. She styles her resistance, her fight, as from the “izquierda erótica” because she is fighting against the conservative, entrenched patriarchal society that denies the existence of women’s eroticism and women’s right to be independent individuals. In the following verses the poetic voice indicates that she is fighting her war, one bullet at a time, even though her efforts may be
in vain, and she may very well end up like another crazy person—“tirado” in the mountains:

Soltando bala tras bala
contra el sistema.
Perdiendo fuerza y tiempo
en predicar un evangelio trasnochado.

Voy a terminar como aquel otro loco
que se quedó
tirado en la sierra. (6-12)

In the closing stanza the speaker emphasizes that, because her cause does not have the political dimension that serves the cause of “men,” her diary will not be published, nor will her fight be popularized in posters and photographs:

Pero como mi lucha
no es política que sirva a los hombres
jamás publicarán mi diario
mi construirán industrias de consumo popular
de carteles
y colgajos con mis fotografías. (19-24)

While the poetic persona conveys a genuine feeling of cynicism, it is equally clear that she is determined to continue to fight this battle, even if she must do so by herself, and be judged as “crazy” and/or forgotten.

This image of the sexually liberated guerrillera under siege is very powerful, all the more so since this particular poem gave title to the entire collection, setting up the overall message of the poemario. Juan Carlos Galeano indicates that Rodas chose this title to convey her dissatisfaction with the failure of Marxism to address the concerns of the feminist program: “El título de su primer libro, que parecía sugerir al lector una positividad del erotismo dentro de la izquierda política asociada con el marxismo, nos enseña más bien el desplazamiento antagónico de una nueva identidad femenina contra
una inconsciente retórica ideológica incapaz de rebasar los valores sexuales dominantes en Latinoamérica” (179). Galeano may well be correct. After all, this title was purposely adopted by a group of disillusioned female FSLN members in Nicaragua (Belli among them) in the post-revolutionary period. When these militant women became aware that their feminist issues were not a priority of the Governing Junta, they sought a way to bring their concerns to the political fore, to continue pursuing a feminist program without breaking away from the Sandinista party. In fact, Belli is the founding member who chose the name “El Partido de la Izquierda Erótica,” to convey the dual goal of the group-to continue the Marxist-socialist struggle while also foregrounding feminist issues.

Chiara Bollentini’s essay, “La poesía de Ana María Rodas: la revolución socio-sexual en la Guatemala del patriarcado,” foregrounds the image of the sexually liberated guerrillera as the unifying, subversive theme of the collection. For Bollentini, “Rodas niega la imagen de la mujer sometida y dependiente, derrumbando la tradicional relación hombre/mujer de una típica sociedad machista y construyendo una realidad basada en las experiencias femeninas, en las que lo ‘femenino’ ya no tiene la connotación que la ideología del patriarcado había impuesto” (156). As Bollentini indicates, Rodas writes proudly of being a woman. Her verses demonstrate quite effectively that patriarchal society has continually repressed women by maintaining that they are secondary citizens, nothing more than the lesser companion of men. Her poems also convey her determination to change this situation, regardless of the consequences to herself.

A paradigmatic change of this new image of woman popularized by Rodas appears in Belli’s “Y Dios me hizo mujer,” a poem that strongly echoes the Guatemalan’s

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3 Sofia Montenegro indicates in an interview with Margaret Randall that Belli proposed this name for the political party, of which Montenegro and Belli were founding members (Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 307).
verses describing her poetic persona in reference to her body. This poem first appeared
in the newspaper La Prensa Literaria, in Managua, in 1970, and was later included in
below in its entirety, is the opening poem of the collection, thus setting the tone for the
rest of the poems to come. It is a clear celebration of womanhood and of the power of
being a sexual, self-confident woman:

Y Dios me hizo mujer
de pelo largo,
ojos,
nariz y boca de mujer.
Con curvas
y pliegues
y suaves hondonadas
y me cavó por dentro,
me hizo un taller de seres humanos.
Tejió delicadamente mis nervios
y balanceó con cuidado
el número de mis hormonas.
Compuso mi sangre
y me inyectó con ella
para que irrigara
todo mi cuerpo;
nacieron así las ideas,
los sueños
el instinto.
Todo lo que creó suavemente
a martillazos de soplidos
y taladrazos de amor,
las mil y una cosas que me hacen mujer todos los días
por las que me levanto orgullosa
todas las mañana
y bendigo mi sexo.

The poetic voice celebrates not only the physical bodily attributes of womanhood--her
curves and folds--but she also calls attention to the fact that she is a thinking, sentient
being who has dreams and ideas. The opening verses appropriate the words from the
Bible, “And God made man,” and then deliberately subverts them by substituting the
word woman for man. She then proceeds to recount how God made her a woman, beginning “at the top,” consistent with the poetic tradition of rhetorical portraiture, mentioning features of her head and face. Next, she describes her body, which has been “hollowed out,” or “excavated” within, so that she may be a workshop for the creation of life. The poet has consciously chosen to construct her imagery through a vocabulary that brings to mind nature and agriculture, such as “cavar” and “irrigar.” Yet these words also convey the artistry that is necessary to shape nature and to be a woman, the crucible in which life is planted and grows. She has been gently formed of hammer blows to become this workshop, injected and irrigated with blood, ideas, dreams, and instinct.

The subversive nature of this poem is evident on several levels. First, Belli writes that God created woman as if her creation was a purposeful decision to allow females to perpetuate life, thus changing the Biblical version that Eve was created out of Adam’s rib to be his companion and meet his needs. She also writes joyfully of her body, of her curves and her valleys, and of her pride in being a woman. Daisy Zamora has addressed the political/feminist agenda implicit in this poem in her book La mujer nicaragüense en la poesía (1992). She explains that for Belli “[h]ablar del natural funcionamiento del organismo de una mujer como mujer, supone desgarrar velos que cubren el ‘pudor’ o la ‘moral’ burguesa y, por lo tanto, los motivos se tornan subversivos. La subversión producto de la conciencia de ser mujer, sustenta plantarnos como mujeres. . .” (43). In other words, for Zamora, the simple action of celebrating being a woman, and expressing oneself from this standpoint, is subversive.

In “De la mujer al hombre,” another poem from this same collection, Belli unmistakably and more openly turns the tables on the archetypal patriarchal view that
woman was made by God to be man’s companion, when she asserts that the reverse is also true:

Dios te hizo hombre para mí. (1)

The poetic voice continues, emphasizing that the inherent differences between men and women are not a matter of opposition but are instead complementary, and of benefit to both. And most significantly, the body part that is singled out as different but complementary is the brain:

Mi mente está covada para recibirte,  
para pensar tus ideas  
y darte a pensar las mías;  
te siento, mi compañero, hermoso  
juntos somos completos  
y nos miramos con orgullo  
conociendo nuestras diferencias  
sabiéndonos mujer y hombre  
y apreciando la disimilitud  
de nuestros cuerpos. (12-21)

These verses underscore the reciprocity of the male-female relationship: the speaker is receptive to her partner’s thoughts and ideas, just as he is open to hers. The word “compañero,” part of the leftist discourse on addressing fellow comrades, strongly underscores this idea of equality, as does the line “juntos somos completos.” Not only are these two partners aware of their differences, they also revel in them, as the closing lines of the poem emphasizes: “. . . apreciando la disimilitud / de nuestros cuerpos” (20-21). These words are reminiscent of the French feminists’ concepts on equality, and particularly de Beauvoir’s text, above all her suggestion regarding “. . . the possible existence of differences in equality” (731). Indeed, this is a key to Belli’s literature--that men and women are equal but different--and that these differences should be celebrated, for in their reciprocity there is great strength and pleasure.
Belli sings to a fundamental difference between men and women when she writes her poem “Menstruación,” also from *Sobre la grama*. This poem, which I quote in its entirety, celebrates a most uniquely female function—the ability to renew her body every month in preparation to sustain life:

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Tengo
la “enfermedad”
de las mujeres.

Mis hormonas
están alborotadas,
me siento parte
de la naturaleza.

Todos los meses
esta comunión
del alma
y el cuerpo;
este sentirse objeto
de leyes naturales
fuera de control;
el cerebro recogido
volviéndose vientre.
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Here Belli not only challenges the patriarchy by speaking in a woman’s voice, claiming the position of speaking subject, but she also dares to write about a taboo subject, an “unpoetic,” and “unmentionable” aspect of being female. The poet’s deliberate use of quotation marks around the word “enfermedad” conveys an ironic tone with regard to the euphemism “sickness” employed by patriarchal discourse to control women’s bodies—or by bourgeois society, in the words of Daisy Zamora in her previously cited essay. Clearly, the poetic voice does not agree that menstruation is a sickness, nor that it is debilitating. In fact, for her, menstruation goes beyond the physical. It is an event that unites the spirit and the body, one that re-establishes a woman’s connection to nature. Indeed, she seems to revel in the feeling of being subject to nature, to “leyes naturales”
that appear to take over at this time of the month in order to renew her and her body.

“Menstruación” touches on some of the same themes addressed by Storni in “Canción de
la mujer astuta.” Both poets celebrate a woman’s connection to nature, emphasizing, in
particular, that nature exerts a certain amount of control over their bodies through the
menstrual cycle. Belli focuses on menstruation, however, whereas Storni’s sonnet begins
with menstruation, to move on to address other topics, including pregnancy and
contraception, and woman’s control over nature.

Menstruation is also a topic celebrated by Ana Istarú, a Costa Rican writer
contemporary with Gioconda Belli. “Cada luna mi vientre,” from her collection Poemas
abiertos y otros amaneceres (1980), begins by establishing a similar association with
nature through the correlation between the menstrual cycle and the cycles of the moon:

Cada luna hace germinar
mi vientre
todo henchido de mar
y golpecitos ojos.
    Cada luna lo inflama,
    lo endulza
    y madura. (1-7)

Like Belli’s “Menstruación,” Istarú’s poem uses images from nature as empowering. She
asserts that the speaker’s vientre is tied both to the cycles of the moon and to the tides of
the sea. The connection between woman and nature is repeated throughout the rest of the
poem by means of several images. She points to an incessant “marea de geranios,” and
associates duraznos and amapolas with her vientre and sexo, respectively (21 and 22).
The poetic voice also reminds the reader of the biological purpose of menstruation when
she speaks of “[u]n susurro de niños” that “recorre mis muslos” (12-13).

For Belli, as for Istarú and Storni, menstruation, a uniquely female experience,
should be celebrated, not hidden or associated with an illness; it is a powerful indication of woman’s life-creating ability. Rosario Murillo, another Nicaraguan poet of the Sandinista Revolution, like Belli, also commemorates this life-giving aspect of a woman’s body, though in her poem it is connected to a personal rebirth that unites the poetic persona to life, light, love, and the universe itself. The following verses from the poem, “Mujer en la revolución,” from En las espléndidas ciudades (1985), highlights this multiple connection Murillo perceives in menstruation:

Vivo una renovación de la sangre
--cada veintiocho días--
porque soy mujer y amo y me doy cuenta
y cada veintiocho días nazco nueva
cuando renuevo la sangre
cuando hay nuevos mundos febriles azotando
cuando nace un óvulo, un huevo, un átomo, un principio de vida
me alumbro, me doy a luz
pero mi propia vida
entre mil otras cosas importantes
como amar, dar un beso, ver reír a los niños
y aceptar hacer a un lado la poesía
--la luz
el universo--
para ponerme seria
y seguir, apurada
construyendo la luz, el universo. (17-34)

Although this poem is titled “Mujer en la revolución,” it never directly addresses any overtly political concerns of the Sandinista Revolution. Instead, it foregrounds Murillo’s revolutionary feminist agenda. The poem is clearly a commemoration of life, love, and poetry. Of particular interest are the last few lines (33-34), in which the poetic voice tells the reader that she is in a hurry, for she is busy building her revolution: “construyendo la luz,” a play on words, which could indicate that the poetic voice is giving birth--dando a luz--to a new order, to new life. The fact that the speaker feels reenergized and
revitalized every month directly challenges the myth that menstruation leaves women too weak to be active; thus, though implicitly, woman’s capacity as a militant guerrillera is also foregrounded. Through these images, the poet conveys her faith in the Revolution, and in her role within it to build this new more just society. The speaker’s sentiments also underline the joy of new life in what one would normally perceive as the chaos and loss of life in a time of war.

The images presented by these poets are empowering on many levels. Each poem establishes an association between woman and something beyond, whether it be life, nature, the Revolution, or women’s role in the construction of the future. Belli clearly expresses this personal connection between woman and something greater. In her memoir she describes the day her mother told her the “facts of life,” and how, among these, it stood out that only women have the power to sustain life within their bodies:

En la adolescencia, cuando se dio cuenta de que la luna, las mareas y las hormonas estaban a punto de revelarme los secretos que la Naturaleza reserva a las mujeres, me llamó a su cuarto una tarde a mi regreso del colegio. Echó la llave a la puerta y sentada frente a su tocador me hizo tomar asiento delante de ella para hablarme de los cambios y sorpresas que mi cuerpo preparaba para mí. . . . No recuerdo sus palabras exactas, pero sí la sensación de maravilla y poder que me invadió. . . . Recuerdo que salí de allí compadeciendo a mis dos hermanos que nunca tendrían aquella experiencia maravillosa. (44-45)

The author’s words convey her wonder of Nature--deliberately capitalized--as well as her own pride upon learning of the unique power of the female body. In fact, she was not only amazed, and proud to be a woman, she also felt sorry for her brothers, for they would never know what it was like to have the power to bring forth life. Belli’s assertion soundly rejects the idea of a female lack--an idea put forth by great male misogynist thinkers who range from Aristotle to Freud and beyond. Instead, Belli indicates that it is
men who are lacking. She is rewriting the concept of female lack by celebrating the
canine, by writing about the female body, just as Cixous instructed, as quoted by
Abigail Bray: “If Cixous encourages women to write their bodies in the écriture féminine
manifesto ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ it is because she is a feminist who is urging
women to enter into the flight of thinking by rewriting female lack” (8). Belli’s joyful
expression of the female body rewrites female lack by proudly proclaiming and
revalorizing a primary difference between the sexes.

Yet, in spite of her confidence and her pride in being a woman, Belli is not
completely immune to the pressures of a patriarchal society that emphasizes the value of
a woman’s beautiful physical appearance over any other attributes. This point is
foregrounded in her prose poem “Vestidos de dinamita,” from Línea de fuego (1978), in
which the poetic voice begins by telling the reader that she must go shopping, that she
needs to buy the make-up with which she disguises her physical short-comings, namely
her small eyes:

Me tengo que ir a comprar las pinturas con las que me
disfrazo todos los días para que nadie adivine que tengo los
ojos chiquitos--como de ratón o de elefante--. . .
(El ojo de la mujer 96)

This patriarchal emphasis on feminine beauty and physical perfection has served to
inscribe what Sandra Lee Bartky describes as an inferior status on women, one they are
compelled to remedy through cosmetics and subterfuge: “The ‘art’ of make-up is the art
of disguise, but this presupposes that a woman’s face, unpainted, is defective” (139).
While the poem’s speaker is clearly influenced by the patriarchal message that she is
defective, her concerns about her physique soon turn to other--more pressing--matters of
social justice. She indicates that she is “. . . en lucha contra la sociedad de consumo . . .”,
and, though a store window full of goods, calls out to her: “. . . me / llama con sus
escaparates llenos de cosas . . .”, she resists this temptation to consume with an
embodied, feminine determination: “. . . rechazo con todas mis hormonas femeninas . . .”
She rejects this temptation primarily because so many of her fellow countrymen and
women go without day after day, and will continue to do so until those who are fighting
for a better future take drastic measures to construct a just society:

recuerdo las caras gastadas y tristes de la gente en mi
pueblo que deben haber amanecido hoy como amanecen
siempre y como seguirán amaneciendo hasta que nos
vistamos de dinamita y nos vayamos a invadir palacios de
gobierno, ministerios, cuarteles... con un fosforito en la mano.
(96)

Because the primary focus of Línea de fuego is the Sandinista Revolution, it is not
surprising that the overall theme of “Vestidos de dinamita” is one of defiance and
violence aimed at the government and the powers that control the country. Yet, while the
overt message is the desire to overthrow the government, a parallel message inscribes a
rejection of the patriarchal standards. For though the speaker begins by voicing her need
to go shopping for make-up, she later admits that she resists the messages of the
consumer society in which she lives, and will instead metaphorically dress herself in
dynamite in order to destroy the oppressive centers of power and capitalism that maintain
the patriarchal order.

With the passage of time, and the political success of the Sandinista Revolution in
1979, Belli’s concerns and their literary expression have evolved, to a certain extent.
Thus, her poem “Menstruación” written as a young woman is matched, in a sense, by
another she published more than twenty years later dealing with another exclusively
female experience--menopause. In this poem, from her collection Apogeo (1997), the
poet once again broaches a subject that the canon has deemed unmentionable and
unpoetic, one that is often referred to by another pejorative euphemism, the “change of
life.” Titled simply “Menopausia,” the poet employs a direct style to deny knowing
menopause while also underscoring that it is an event that women “have survived,” to
great effect:

No la conozco
pero, hasta ahora,
las mujeres del mundo la han sobrevivido. (1-3)

The poetic speaker goes on to assert that “woman” has a deeper meaning, that a woman’s
body goes beyond “hormonas” and “óvulos”:

El cuerpo es mucho más que las hormonas.
Menopáusica o no,
una mujer sigue siendo una mujer;
mucho más que una fábrica de humores
o de óvulos. (16-20)

Instead of presenting menopause as an oddity or a process of degeneration, Belli presents
it as just another natural rite of passage, a rite that should not be viewed with trepidation
but rather celebrated as another experience unique to women.

No hay pues ninguna razón
para sentirse devaluada.
Tirá los tampones,
las toallas sanitarias.
Hacé una hoguera con ellas en el patio de tu casa.
Desnúdate.
Bailá la danza ritual de la madurez.
Y sobreviví
como sobreviviremos todas. (31-39)

“Menopausia” is of particular interest because it directly challenges the myth that women
“of a certain age” are no longer sexual beings. Belli, instead, presents it as a liberating
experience, one that allows women to throw away their tampons and their sanitary
napkins to establish a new rhythm of life, no longer determined by the 28-day cycle of menstruation. Indeed, the poetic persona calls for menopausal women to burn these items in a bonfire, much the way that the feminist movement of the 1960s invited them to burn their bras. The last four lines of the poem go further, for here the poetic voice incites these women to undress and dance naked in a ritual celebration of their maturity—presumably around la hoguera, or bonfire, they have just set. This representation deliberately challenges the patriarchal portrayal of the crone/witch by celebrating the vitality and eroticism of the older woman.

“Conjuro contra la enfermedad,” from this same collection, addresses another side of aging. In this poem the poetic voice speaks to her body, placing on it a magical spell so it continues to be strong and healthy. Written as a litany, the speaker employs a variety of metaphors, associating her body with foods, plants, and a gazelle—an animal known for its grace and ease of movement. She also invokes her body through a series of terms that associate it to nature and the landscape of Nicaragua, with its pine forests and tall volcanoes:

Cuerpo de mis tormentos.
Cuerpo gozoso de mis aleluyas.
Cuerpo de uvas y de verdes cactos.
Cuerpo de pan, cuerpo de gacela,
cuerpo de pino, de volcanes altos,
no te me quebrés, no te me enfermés. (1-6)

Her body has been the site of her torments and her pleasures, that is, of her life experiences, and she wants to keep it healthy. In the closing verses of the poem (20-22) she speaks to her body as to a faithful companion, asking it to accompany her on the road ahead, indicating that, though she is getting on in years, she and her body still have much life ahead:
Cuerpo fiel de todas mis edades.
Seguíme, acompañame
por un largo, oloroso, camino. (20-22)

The images Belli presents in this poem and in the previous one subvert the patriarchal association of the older woman as witch and/or death. In “Menopausia” the older woman is portrayed as a vibrant, sexual being—in spite of the fact that she can no longer have children. This image, of course, contrasts sharply with the Church’s teaching that sexual relations serve no other purpose than that of engendering life. According to this teaching, a woman past the child-bearing age is no longer sexual, nor should she desire to be so. If expressing her sexual desires and needs was taboo in her youth, it is doubly so now. And yet, the speaker addresses her body in “Conjuro contra la enfermedad,” cajoling it to remain the healthy, faithful companion it has always been.

The suggestion that she can “exorcise” illness from her body and conjure health instead very clearly challenges the Church’s teachings by embracing the belief that there are “magical” powers beyond the Church’s control. Barbara Walker indicates in The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (1983) that during the Christian era “[a]ny unusual ability in a woman raised a charge of witchcraft” (1078). She also asserts that witchcraft was one of the only means by which women could resist male authority in a patriarchal Christian society, an assertion supported by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose words Walker quotes:

. . . it was obvious to even the moderately intelligent that Christian society deliberately humiliated and discriminated against women. ‘Women have had no voice in the canon law, the catechisms, the church creeds and discipline, and why should they obey the behests of a strictly masculine religion, that places their sex at a disadvantage in all life’s emergencies?’ (1081).
As Stanton points out, allusions to witchcraft have been a common way of controlling women. Thus, when Belli foregrounds these images in her poems she challenges the patriarchal tradition, while at the same time expresses her solidarity with women who rebelled against teachings that attempted to control women by denying them the potentially empowering option of “witchcraft.”

Another poet who writes of the aging body is Daisy Zamora. “Celebración del cuerpo” (A cada quién la vida 1994) celebrates the speaker’s connection to her body while acknowledging that part of having a body is to suffer the aches and pains associated with aging. She begins by foregrounding her love for her body, and for its “feminine” shape:

Amo este cuerpo mío que ha vivido la vida,  
su contorno de ánfora, su suavidad de agua,  
el borbotón de cabellos que corona mi cráneo,  
la copa de cristal del rostro, su delicada base  
que asciende pulcra desde hombros y clavículas. (1-5)

In the following stanzas the poetic voice works her way down her body, extolling its virtues as she goes:

Amo a mi espalda pringada de luceros apagados,  
mi colinas translúcidas, manantiales del pecho  
que dan el primer sustento de la especie.  
Salientes del costillar, móvil cintura,  
vasija colmada y tibia de mi vientre. (6-10)

Each stanza underlines her shapeliness, as well as the functionality of her curves--her colinas are manantiales--the source of “life’s” first sustenance, and her vientre, where life is engendered and develops, is a jar, warm and full.
The poetic voice also applauds the “lunar curva” of her hips, and the “vast roundness” of her backside. She describes her legs and her feet according to their function: they are the support of her “templo,” her body:

Amo la curva lunar de mis caderas  
modeladas por alternas gestaciones,  
la vasta redondez de ola de mis glúteos;  
y mis piernas y pies, cimiento y sostén del templo. (11-14)

In verses 15 through 18 she ascends once again to celebrate her center: the “hidden fleece” that serves as the entrance to paradise, a hidden darkness from which blood flows and life emerges:

Amo el puñado de pétalos oscuros, el oculto vellón  
que guarda el misterioso umbral del paraíso,  
la húmeda oquedad donde la sangre fluye  
y brota el agua viva. (15-18)

Once she completes her verses honoring her body, the speaker admits that being situated in a human body also means living with its weaknesses: it means getting sick, having aches and pains, and being tired, worn out, and in many instances falling part. She also highlights the unpoetic, that is, that life also means secreting humors, feces, and saliva. Even so, she continues to refer it this body as “mío”:

Este cuerpo mío doliente que se enferma  
que supura, que tose, que transpira,  
secreta humores y heces y saliva,  
y se fatiga, se agota, se marchita. (19-22)

At the poem’s end, the poetic persona returns to where she began, to rejoicing in her love for her body, indicating that--though it is made of “mud”--it is a pure mud, which she links to a series of natural elements, going back to the Biblical creation of man:

Cuerpo vivo, eslabón que asegura  
la cadena infinita de cuerpos sucesivos.  
Amo este cuerpo hecho con el lodo más puro:
semilla, raíz, savia, flor y fruto. (23-26)

The speaker also ends by emphasizing the fertility of woman, or in other words, that her living body is the most important link in the chain that ensures the continuation of (human) life.

Belli’s “Sabor de vendimia,” also from her book Apogeo, like “Conjuro contra la enfermedad,” and Zamora’s “Celebración del cuerpo,” also addresses aging, though from a slightly different and more ironic perspective. The poem begins by foregrounding the speaker’s terror at the first sign of wrinkles on her face:

Recuerdo el terror de las primeras arrugas.
Pensar: Ahora sí. Ya me llegó la hora.
Las líneas de la risa marcadas sobre mi cara
aun en medio de la más absoluta seriedad. (1-4)

These “age lines,” forecasters of old age, initially made her feel guilty for being unable to maintain the youthful exterior that patriarchal society prizes so highly:

Viví esas primeras marcas de la edad
con vergüenza de quien ha fallado. (14-15)

A few verses below, however, and in an aside, she explains that society’s cult of youth and beauty makes women feel guilty as they age, as if their time has passed, and they should step aside to make room for the younger generations:

--Las mujeres nos sentimos culpables de envejecer,
como si pasada la juventud de la belleza,
apenas nos quedara que ofrecer,
y debiéramos hacer mutis;
salir y dejar espacio a las jóvenes,
a los rostros y cuerpos inocentes
que aun no han cometido el pecado
de vivir más allá de los treinta o los cuarenta-- (19-26)
Notice that the “sin” committed by these women is that of growing beyond their thirties or forties. That is, that they have achieved an accomplishment that should be celebrated instead.

As the poem progresses, the speaker expresses a newfound wisdom. She states that she has come to terms with the fact that she is not as young as she used to be; furthermore, she is content with her wrinkles: her face is a reflection of the life she has lived:

Paso por alto
la aparición de
inevitables líneas
en el mapa de vida del rostro. (36-39)

The closing stanza emphasizes that the speaker’s essence goes beyond her physical appearance, beyond her aging body. Age is precisely what has given weight to her essence, and with age, she has become richer and finer, like a good, aged wine:

Después de todo,
el alma,
afortunadamente,
es como el vino.
Que me beba quién me ame,
que me saboree. (40-45)

This last analogy to wine underscores that the poetic persona is still very much a sexual being, one who takes pleasure in her body and offers it to her lover for his enjoyment.

As these poems from Apogeo underline, this particular collection marks the maturity of Belli’s personal identity as a woman, and her identification with other women. She indicates this identification in a note at the beginning of the book:

En este libro he querido celebrar el apogeo, el cenit, en la vida de las mujeres. Ese momento fundamental de la existencia donde la integridad y la belleza física, coexisten con la sabiduría y la madurez del intelecto. Es una época de meditación, cambios y plenitud; de euforias, pero también de
temores. Una época en que la mujer se enfrenta a las nociones preconcebidas de una sociedad que, hasta ahora y gracias al esfuerzo de las propias mujeres de todo el mundo, apenas empieza a reconocer el valor y aporte de lo femenino. (9)

The “valor de lo femenino” of which Belli speaks, is embodied in woman because it is through her body that she and all women have contact with the world. It is how she and we are “situated,” to use de Beauvoir’s words. This embodiment, however, does not become a limiting and determining factor, as male discourse would have it. On the contrary, it is a method by which to explore and express oneself, as an equal partner in building a future, more just society.

More than anything else, Belli celebrates the “innumerable different ways” of being woman in many distinct voices. In “Secreto de mujer,” from one of her more recent collections of poetry, Mi íntima multitud (2003), she indicates what being a woman, or more specifically, being a “female” of the species means to her by emphasizing the pure joy she feels by simply inhabiting her own body:

A cierta hora del día
ciertos días
la noción de ser hembra
emerge como espuma
y sube hacia los contornos de mi cuerpo.

Plexo solar, muslos, brazos
se esponjan de una sensualidad
que va mucho más allá del sexo. (1-8)

This living, breathing, joyous woman is brought to life in this poem through verbs of action such as **emerge** and **sube**, and by the fact that the poetic voice embodies her by mentioning specific parts of the body--**plexo solar**, **muslos**, and **brazos**. These body parts humanize the speaker while also underlining the sensual pleasure she experiences all over--in her solar plexus, thighs, and arms. The internal pleasure foregrounded in these
verses emerges from deep within the speaker, flooding her with a fulfillment that goes beyond the physical, to celebrate instead the union between body and spirit.

Like many of the authors whose work I analyze here, Belli celebrates “lo femenino” as a way to commemorate female difference. As I pointed out in the introduction, Margaret Whitford indicates in her book *The Irigaray Reader* (1991) that it is through difference that women have been exploited and controlled by the patriarchy, and therefore it is through reclaiming the body to celebrate difference that women will achieve true empowerment: “The exploitation of women is based upon sexual difference, and can only be resolved though sexual difference” (32). Indeed, “Secreto de mujer,” and its exuberant celebration of femaleness brings to mind the opening words of de Beauvoir’s book, which I cited at the beginning of this chapter:

*Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female--this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: “He is a male!” The term “female” is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex; and if this sex seems to man to be contemptible and inimical even in harmless dumb animals, it is evidently because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in him by woman. (3)*

Read in the context of de Beauvoir’s words, “Secreto de mujer,” serves as a counterpoint to the pejorative idea that female biology defines women, making them less than the male of the species, and less than human. Indeed, the speaker in this poem boldly and proudly proclaims “I am female!,” just as she proudly situates herself within her woman’s body.

Belli embodies Woman as a multifaceted subject, one who revels in every aspect of her female identity. She foregrounds the female body in her poetry, joyfully celebrating those attributes previously associated with women in a negative manner by
patriarchy. Her direct assault on the patriarchal bias goes as far as to suggest that men--
who will never experience what only women can do (menstruate or give birth, for
example)--may be the gender that is “lacking.” Belli’s over-arching message, however,
is positive. She presents difference as something to be celebrated and embraced while
emphasizing that equality is the key to a more just future for all, both men and women.
CHAPTER 3:

ADOREMOS AL CUERPO: (EM)BODYING THE EROTIC WOMAN

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Belli’s woman-centered literature claims the place of speaking subject for women. Within the context of her erotic poetry, however, Belli goes even further. She not only makes woman the speaking subject, she also explores a topic seldom addressed by canonical, male poetry: women’s sexuality and their desires. Of particular significance is the fact that Belli explores women’s sexuality throughout her literature, and in a variety of ways. She presents the sexually-desiring woman as multifaceted with multiple desires; the erotic woman is at turns wife, lover, revolutionary, and/or mother. She is also the sated lover, the demanding sexual partner, and the self-assured, “mature” woman whose eroticism is undimmed by the passage of time. Sexuality is a fundamental element of Belli’s literary work, regardless of her age or situation.

Luce Irigaray has written about this very subject--of a woman-centered sexuality--in her essay “The Sex Which is Not One” (1977). She begins by proclaiming that women have not written about their sexuality because they have been denied access to the male institutions that dictate the norms by which to explore one’s sexuality and to express it: “[f]emale sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters” (254). She indicates that Freud, in particular, and his theories on vaginal passivity and women’s lack
and/or penis envy contributed to the idea of women’s sexual pleasure as lesser, secondary (if it exists at all) to that of men’s pleasure. Later in this essay Irigaray is more specific. She tells her reader what these masculine-imposed limitations have meant to women’s sexuality, namely, that they have facilitated the objectification of women, permitting them to be nothing more than the site of men’s sexual fulfillment, while at the same time denying them the position of subject, so that their sexual gratification—if they experience any—is dependent on and secondary to that of men:

Woman, in this [male] sexual imaginary, is only a more or less complacent facilitator for the working out of man’s fantasies. It is possible, and even certain, that she experiences vicarious pleasure there, but this pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own and that leaves her in her well-known state of dependency. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, if only he will “take” her as the “object” of his pleasure, she will not say what she wants. Moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (255; original highlights)

Ana María Rodas addresses this bias in a very explicitly sexual (untitled) poem that begins “Hoy he descubierto la belleza / de ser yo misma” (Izquierda erótica). As I indicated in the previous chapter, Rodas’s overall message is this poem, and the entire collection, is the need for equality within the relationships between men and women. As the poem goes on, Rodas becomes more explicit, underscoring that, at present, equality is impossible because women have been taught not to express their sexual desires and do not know how to ask:

. . . cómo decir yo deseo?
Las mujeres no deseamos
sólo tenemos hijos.

Cómo puedes pedir a tu marido
que te lama y te monte?
Eso no lo aprendiste en el colegio. (26-31)
In verses 26-28, Rodas foregrounds women’s primary function in patriarchal society— that of child-bearing—and her suppression of desire. In the next stanza she highlights that women are raised to be passive, that they never learn the vocabulary with which to ask their husbands to please them sexually. These next verses also suggest that—sexually speaking—a woman is at the mercy of her husband. The next lines are even more sexually explicit, as the poetic voice explains that she can neither tell her male partner that she is not finished—though he has had his orgasm—nor can she masturbate. And, of course, a woman cannot take a lover:

Y cuando él alcanza su orgasmo egoísta
no puedes gritarle
yo no termino.

Ni puedes masturbarte
ni buscarte un amante

Para una mujer eso no es bueno. (32-37)

The poem ends on this note, emphasizing that within the realm of the sexual, women have no voice.

Rodas openly writes of both female sexuality and frustration in another untitled poem from this same collection. In these few verses, the speaker indicates that her hands—with which she used to play with dolls—are now the hands of a woman, hands with which she eats or undresses, and that with these same hands she also enjoys sexual contact with her lover:

Mira,
con estas manos jugué a las muñecas
y juego a ser mujer.

Las uso para comer o desnudarme.

Para estrechar
con pasión y ternura
tus testículos
--dos mundos de misterio--
tu pelo y tu silencio. (1-9)

She states that his testicles are “two worlds of mystery,” perhaps emphasizing that just like men consider woman mysterious and difficult to fathom, the reverse is also true. Her words also imply that she is playing at being a woman, the way she played with dolls when she was a girl. Therefore, she can be loving and passionate, but she can also be something else more menacing. The closing verses of the poem show another facet of the speaker, as she expresses her capacity to physically and psychologically wound her partner, should she ever wish to do so:

Pero también me sirven
para hundirte los ojos
para rasgar tu carne
y para hacer cicatrices profundas
en tu cerebro. (10-14)

The poem can be read as a warning in which the poetic persona suggests that her hands can be used for pleasure or pain. Stated more plainly, the speaker is not simply an object for her partner’s pleasure (or for any other man, for that matter); she is an active, feeling individual who can herself give pleasure, or inflict pain.

For Magda Zavala, Rodas’s poetry is doubly subversive, first, because she writes about issues not previously explored in women’s literature, and second, because she does it in a straightforward manner, breaking with earlier more formal poetic traditions: “Esta voluntad [de comunicarse libremente] expresa una doble subversión: por una parte, temática, al atreverse a hablar directamente de órganos y actos del placer sexual y, por otra, estética, al buscar una expresión lejana del modernismo y de las vanguardias y sus epígonos, reactiva ante las florituras lingüísticas, ligada a una expresión sin adorno

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sonoro ni circunloquios . . .’’ (247). Indeed, Rodas’s blunt style underscores her message that the patriarchal double-standard that denies women subjectivity and sexual desire is emotionally damaging, and thus not acceptable. De Beauvoir had already commented on this state of affairs, indicating that patriarchy puts women in an untenable position, demanding that they make themselves desirable to men, but that part and parcel of this making-themselves-desirable requires women to ignore their own needs: “. . . it is required of woman that in order to realize her femininity she must make herself object and prey, which is to say that she must renounce her claim as sovereign subject. . . . Man is a human being with sexuality; woman is a complete individual, equal to the male, only if she too is a human being with sexuality. To renounce her femininity is to renounce a part of her humanity” (682).

Belli, like Rodas, challenges the traditional phallocentric discourse on several levels, including the realm of the erotic. Like Rodas, she too expresses her sexuality, though Belli does this more explicitly and more often. Unlike Rodas, however, Belli’s poetic expression is less blunt, more metaphoric. Of equal importance is the fact that the erotic themes of her literature--both in poetry and prose--have evolved in time. In her first poetry collection, Sobre la grama (1974), published when she was in her early twenties, the author primarily celebrates her position as new wife and mother. Her poem “Biblia” from this collection, is erotic, but as the title may suggest, by no means is it defiantly so, like much of the poetry would become in her later work. While in “Bible” she writes about her body--her breasts, her belly, her arms and legs--this eroticism is, in many ways, consistent with the biblical patriarchal discourse. In a language reminiscent of an incantation, the poetic voice commands her body to become the receptacle best able
to accommodate her lover’s desires; that her breasts become ripe oranges, and her belly a warm comal, a site for her lover’s manliness. She wills her arms and legs to become the doors, the ports, for his “tempestades,” the sites of his pleasure:

Mis pechos como naranjas maduras.

Mi vientre un comal cálido para tu hombría.

Mis piernas y mis brazos sean como puertas, como puertos para tus tempestades. (3-6)

... . . .

Todo mi cuerpo sea hamaca para el tuyo, y mi mente tu olla, tu cañada. (8-10)

The image projected is that of the woman who is sexually and mentally available to her male partner—a man whose “hombría” she implicitly celebrates. Her body is to become the hammock for his own, and her mind his “olla” (stewpot), his “caña” (glen).

Another poem, “Llena de grumos,” from the same book, conveys a similar vision, though here the poetic voice unambiguously sings of shared pleasure in the sexual union, envisioned in a series of erotic war-like metaphors. The poetic persona speaks of her lover’s “flecha,” clearly a phallic image, and of the pleasure they will experience together. Theirs is a joint erotic adventure that is also unequivocally linked to nature—to “campos llenos de amapolas explotando”—where the speaker will be “tierra” for her lover’s seed:

Estoy tensa como un arco esperando tu flecha, para atravesar de gozo los campos llenos de amapolas explotando.

Me he acoplado a tu nave vámonos juntos seré tierra para tu semilla. (3-9)
Just as the arrow is both an erotic and a violent image, so, too, is that of the poppies exploding, which can also be read as the explosive orgasms she experiences with her lover as they embark on an erotic trip together--a trip undertaken because, as the speaker proclaims, she has joined him “[m]e he acoplado a tu nave” (7). However, if one reads these poems autobiographically and receives the impression that, as the poem’s imagery suggests, Belli was a young woman in the early years of her first marriage who deferred to her husband, this was most definitely not the case. She has indicated that he objected to the erotic content of these early poems that would eventually appear in her first collection, but she flatly rejected his attempt to influence her writing: “Mi esposo anunció que no quería que volviera a publicar ningún poema si antes él no lo leía y censuraba. Nunca se lo permitiría, le dije. Prefería no volver a publicar jamás” (País 68). Her husband’s criticism, she recounts, is representative of the general reaction to her works of the bourgeois society in which she moved, though the same was not true of her peers. She in fact underlines that she was encouraged in her writing by some of the most respected Nicaraguan poets:

“Afortunadamente los monstruos sagrados de la literatura nicaragüense salieron en mi defensa. Los grandes poetas, José Coronel, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Carlos Martínez Rivas, me aplaudieron. Y en Nicaragua los poetas--quizá porque el único héroe nacional era un poeta: Rubén Darío--son figuras veneradas, célebres. (68)

It was this unqualified support of the older generation that encouraged Belli to continue writing, and to explore in her literature those issues that were, and are, important to her.

Belli’s second collection of poems, *Línea de fuego* (1978), was more defiant than the first, though, again, the primary message is not one of defiant eroticism but of an
erotic agenda linked to a political, Sandinista, defiance directed towards the Anastasio Somoza regime and his imperialist supporters. The majority of these poems, which deal with the guerrilla war the Sandinistas were waging, were written while Belli was living in exile, in both Mexico and Costa Rica. Her decision to leave Nicaragua was based on the fact that the Secret Police had her under surveillance for her Sandinista connection due to her having participated in a conspiracy against the regime. This experience was represented in the poem “Me seguían” from this collection. As she indicates in her memoirs, the time she spent in exile gave her the sense of freedom from the conventions of her bourgeois Nicaragua milieu and from the potential reprisals from the Somoza government she needed to write this poemario: “Paradójicamente el exilio geográfico significó el fin del exilio de mí misma. Me liberó de tener que falsificarme para despistar y me permitió expresar libremente cuanto estaba amurallado en mí” (País 176). Belli notes, in particular, that living in exile gave her the freedom to write explicitly political and politically erotic poetry without fearing the consequences. I will address Belli’s political poetry later, primarily in Chapter 5, which focuses on Belli’s (em)bodying of the nation and the revolution.

_Línea de fuego_ is divided into three sections, the first of which, “Patria o muerte,” is dedicated by Belli to her compatriots in the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional). This section, understandably, contains the more politically charged poems. The second section, “Acero,” is dedicated to Comandante Marcos, who was killed fighting in the Revolution in 1976. This section contains a variety of poems, touching on themes such as the erotic, the nation, and the war. The third and final section is dedicated to Sergio, her husband at the time. Though not overtly political, the poem
“Yo, la que te quiere,” from “Acero,” does bring to mind Nicaragua, for the poetic voice addresses her lover through a vocabulary that while expressing her feelings and desires is also replete with metaphors that bring to mind the natural topography of the land. One of these images--that of the volcano--is frequent in her literature, not surprisingly given that Central America is known as a land of volcanoes. Here the speaker envisions her hands, hot and explosive, as inciting her lover’s nights, while the (steamy) smoke of her “craters” bring tears to his eyes:

Yo caliento tus noches
encendiendo volcanes en mis manos,
mojándote los ojos con el humo de mis cráteres. (5-7)

In these times of war, she explores his body with her own--“tu piel y la mía”--the way she would the wilderness--“te recorro entero”--taking first one path and then another in her erotic adventure:

Yo pongo estrellas entre tu piel y la mía
y te recorro entero,
sendero tras sendero,
descalzando mi amor,
desnudando mi miedo. (12-16)

Her love is “barefoot,” without artifice, as it follows the erotic path before her, “undressing,” metaphorically removing her fears.

In the third and last section of this book, dedicated to “Sergio,” Belli’s second husband, the tone and focus of these poems is more intimately personal. “Manuscrito,” for example, expresses the uninhibited erotic pleasure the speaker receives from her lover’s embrace. This is a prose poem that reads more like a one-sided conversation. The poetic voice begins by telling her interlocutor what her intentions are: “Voy a escribir la historia de mi cuerpo entre tus manos.” She then proceeds to recount that in
his hands she was reborn, that she flowered from his touch as if from the sun. In his able hands, her body becomes something more: “Mi cuerpo, cuando lo cercan / tus brazos, se convierte en caballo, en yegua y sale a galopar / por el placer de un beso.” These verses also communicate the sense of wonderment she experiences with her lover, of the idea that everything they do together is itself new. The speaker foregrounds her body, presenting it as “unexplored land,” ready for her lover’s arrival, for him to alight upon her flesh and discover it for himself:

. . . Mi cuerpo se vuelve planeta inexplorado donde posa el tuyo su navío del espacio; tiembla con la energía de un nuevo continente que se formó después de cataclismos sin nombre y sin historia. (El ojo de la mujer 148)

Not only are these erotic feelings and sensations new again--and so grand that the poetic persona imagines her body as a planet that trembles with the energy of a newly formed continent--but she also expresses that her body has no history but that which these two lovers create together.

In another erotic poem from another collection (Truenos y arcoiris 1982), Belli writes of a cage--una jaula--thus bringing to mind the previously cited “Hombre pequeño” by Alfonsoina Storni, though Belli’s presentation of the cage is very different. While Storni’s speaker expresses the desire to escape the cage in which she, like all women, is held by a patriarchal society, Belli’s cage is an imaginary space of joyful eroticism. Titled “Como gata boca arriba,” this text takes a playful approach to the erotic. Here the poetic persona begins by comparing herself to a cat, celebrating the corporeal side of her love, her “animality”:

Te quiero como gata boca arriba
panza arriba te quiero
Belli’s *amor-jaula* is clearly a shared--and imaginary--cage, because both lovers, at least on occasion, are prisoners of their desires. In this same stanza the poetic voice refers to herself and her lover as “. . . dos gatos enamorados” (8), foregrounding again the animality, or sexual aspect, of both lovers. This is in stark contrast to Storni’s poem, in which the poetic persona is presented as a canary--a small songbird typically kept in a cage, or whose wings are clipped to prevent it from flying away, admired for its singing ability and often, for the brilliant yellow colors of its feathers. The image of the cat, however, is a metaphor for the sensual. This animal is admired for its physical prowess: it is strong and sleek and sensual, an able hunter that has the means to defend itself. This image also calls to mind Darío’s “La bailarina de los pies desnudos,” a poem I cited in Chapter 1 of this work, in which the author compares the poetic persona’s dancing with the movements of a cat. Again, the difference here is that the poetic voice is turning her gaze on herself and her lover, describing them both in these terms, and that she is the speaking subject, one who is expressing her own sexuality while also eroticizing her lover, while in Darío’s poem the (female) dancer is the object of the erotic gaze of the (male) speaker.

In the last stanza the speaker highlights the various ways in which she experiences this “amor de gata,” while also reminding her lover that she is more than an animal--she is a woman:

Te quiero como gata agradecida,  
gorda de estar mimada,  
te quiero como gata flaca  
perseguida y llorona,  
te quiero como gata, mi amor,
como gata, Gioconda,
como mujer
   te quiero. (44-51)

It is significant that in such a playfully erotic text, the speaker personalizes her experiences and images by naming herself. Her name, Gioconda, gives the poem an autobiographical context that is highly defiant of the patriarchal conventions on women’s love-making. Not only does she reject what Irigaray calls women’s “relegation to passivity” (255), but she deliberately places herself within this erotic vision.

Belli’s fourth collection of poetry, De la costilla de Eva (1987), is particularly feminist in tone and content. The title itself deliberately calls into question the Judeo-Christian tradition that Eve was created out of Adam’s rib. It directly challenges the Biblical story by indicating that her writing is a creation that springs from Eve’s rib—the first woman of the human race. The poems within this book foreground woman as the active subject in a variety of contexts, including in relationships with men, the Sandinista war against the Contras, her sexual relationships, her relation to nature, as well as in connection to her own past, present, and future. These poems emphasize that woman is a continually-evolving individual who changes with the passage of time.

Henry Cohen has studied elements of the erotic in this collection in “‘El amor . . . loca palabra’: Erotismo in Gioconda Belli’s De la costilla de Eva.” His examination of the poem “Anoche” ably supports his assertion that the poet has successfully taken over the conventions of male amorous poetry: “. . . Belli appropriates the convention of a masculine poem in order to challenge the male’s heretofore exclusive right to imagine the other in conformity with his own psychological needs” (98). As Cohen points out, the lovers in “Anoche” are equally active—and equally violent. This assertion is supported
by the closing verses of the poem. The speaker envisions her lover as an “herrero,” hammering away at her “yunque de la chispa” until it explodes like a grenade:

Abría los ojos
y todavía estabas como herrero
martillando el yunque de la chispa
hasta que mi sexo explotó como granada
y nos morimos los dos entre charneles de luna.

As Cohen points out, the sexual encounter ends with a double climax. The poetic persona underscores this idea with her last words, written in the plural in order to emphasize the shared experience, “nos morimos,” bringing to mind images of the “petit morte” of orgasm. The speaker of these verses also contrasts with the woman described by Rodas’s speaker, for it seems clear that this poetic persona would tell her lover if she were not finished. The tone conveys a distinct sense of sexual awareness and entitlement—that both lovers should find satisfaction in their encounters.

The speaker in “Definiciones,” from the same collection, is equally assertive. This poem, which begins with the poetic persona addressing her lover, explores definitions of love. The speaker rejoices in their physical contact, in the way that their bodies know each other while making love, renewing the “most ancient act of understanding.” Her images both celebrate their individual act while also establishing a connection between the poem’s lovers and those who have come before them:

Podríamos tener una discusión sobre el amor.
Yo te diría que amo la curiosa manera
en que tu cuerpo y mi cuerpo se conocen,
exploradores que renuevan
el más antiguo acto del conocimiento. (1-5)

In the second stanza the focus becomes more blatantly erotic. Here the poetic voice speaks of how she loves her partner’s “escondida torre,” which defiantly raises itself to
tremble within her “interior de hembra”:

Diría que amo tu piel y que mi piel te ama,
que amo la escondida torre
que de repente se alza desafiante
y tiembla dentro de mí
buscando la mujer que anida
en lo más profundo de mi interior de hembra. (6-11)

The speaker’s words are powerfully erotic. She unabashedly celebrates the pleasures to be found in these sexual encounters with her lover, addressing him directly, and writing joyfully and defiantly about his body.

In “Reglas del juego para los hombres que quieren amar a mujeres mujeres,” also from De la costilla de Eva, the poetic persona advises men on how to love women by presenting her own desires as an example. This poem consists of eleven stanzas, each of which presents the qualities her lover should possess, or the ways in which he should express his love for her. In the first place, he should understand her to the depths of her soul, be able to “… descorrer las cortinas de la piel, / encontrar la profundidad de mis ojos” (2-3). In the second stanza, the speaker highlights one of the most necessary attributes of a lover: a sense of companionship. Rather than wanting to possess her or show her off like a “hunting” trophy—a prize to his masculinity, his prowess as a hunter—he should simply stand at her side, just as she will be at his:

El hombre que me ame
no querrá poseerme como una mercancía,
ni exhibirme como un trofeo de caza,
sabrá estar a mi lado
con el mismo amor
conque yo estaré al lado suyo. (6-11)

Her partner should be a capable lover who trusts her, respects her moods, and knows how to make love to her, playing her body—and bringing forth music and happiness—as a
musician does a guitar:

El hombre que me ame
no dudará de mi sonrisa
ni temerá la abundancia de mi pelo,
respetará la tristeza, el silencio
y con caricias tocará mi vientre como guitarra
para que brote música y alegría
desde el fondo de mi cuerpo. (16-22)

Being a skillful lover, however, is not enough. His love itself “será fuerte como los árboles de ceibo” (13), she says, linking the strength of his love to a tree revered as a symbol of Latin America, particularly in the tropics. The speaker also indicates that this love should go beyond the sexual, forming a true bond between them, so that she becomes “la amiga con quien compartir sus íntimos secretos” (27).

This ideal lover, though not necessarily a poet, will still have a poetic sensibility: “hará poesía con su vida, / construyendo cada día / con la mirada puesta en el futuro” (32-34). Thus, he will live each day with his eyes towards the future. This attitude is elaborated in the stanza that follows, in which the poetic voice asserts that, above all, the man who loves her will also love the people and be willing to give up his life for them if necessary:

Por sobre todas las cosas,
el hombre que me ame
deberá amar al pueblo
no como una abstracta palabra
sacada de la manga,
sino como algo real, concreto,
ante quien rendir homenaje con acciones
y dar la vida si es necesario. (35-42)

In the next few verses, the speaker includes herself in this image, indicating that she too will fight alongside him, and that they will love and fight together against the enemy:

El hombre que me ame
reconocerá mi rostro en la trinchera
rodilla en tierra me amará
mientras los dos disparamos juntos
contra el enemigo. (43-47)

Not only will he be brave in the face of danger, as they fight together, but he will also be
brave in declaring his love; he will “. . . gritar:--te quiero-- / o hacer rótulos en lo alto de
los edificios / proclamando su derecho a sentir / el más hermoso y humano de los
sentimientos” (52-55). His love will also be put into actions at home, and not just words.

The poetic persona emphasizes that a good lover should also share the burden of the
everyday chores, helping in the kitchen, and with raising the children--that he should not
flee from the kitchen and dirty diapers, for instance--thus doing away with the patriarchal
myth that the kitchen is the woman’s domain:

El amor de mi hombre
no le huirá a las cocinas,
ni a los pañales del hijo,
será como un viento fresco
llevándose entre nubes de sueño y de pasado,
las debilidades que, por siglos, nos mantuvieron separados
como seres de distinta estatura. (56-62)

As the speaker points out, her man will be a breath of fresh air. He will reject the societal
norms that have maintained such a gulf between the genders, a gulf so wide that men and
women have become “seres de distinta estatura” (62). It is just this division, this idea that
men and women occupy different levels of humanity, that Belli hopes to undo. Indeed,
the speaker ends with a “revolutionary” hope for the future. First, she establishes that the
love of her partner will not try to label or categorize her, rather he will give her space and
air and nourishment, by which to grow and become a better person. Next, she invites him
to join her in fighting this feminist Revolution, which she envisions as a daily battle, one
they can wage by living together in a companionship of equality:
El amor de mi hombre
no querrá rotularme y etiquetarme,
me dará aire, espacio,
alimento para crecer y ser mejor,
como una Revolución
que hace de cada día
el comienzo de una nueva victoria. (63-69)

Belli stresses the day-to-day quality of this Revolutionary struggle. Her decision to capitalize Revolution underscores both that she is referring to a Revolution against the patriarchy at the same time that she perceives these changes in attitude as every bit as important as the political revolution she had waged with the Sandinistas. “Reglas del juego para los hombres que quieren amar a mujeres mujeres,” like the other poems in De la costilla de Eva, was written in the mid-1980s, when the Sandinistas had gained power, but were still struggling to bring about the political and social changes, such as the feminist agenda, they had promised the people in the 1970s. Implementing those promises had not been easy, and many social reforms were being delayed and/or sidelined at that time in pursuit of the “greater” goals, namely the political and economic reforms.

At the beginning of this chapter I cited Irigaray’s essay “The Sex Which is Not One,” in which this feminist critic describes women’s sexual pleasure as secondary and dependent on men in a patriarchal society. In this same essay, Irigaray indicates that women should “swear off men” in order to recover their sexuality and their voice: “Let women tacitly go on strike, avoid men long enough to learn to defend their desire notably by their speech, let them discover the love of other women protected from that imperious choice of men which puts them in a position of rival goods, let them forge a social status which demands recognition, let them earn their living in order to leave behind their
condition of prostitute” (258). Perhaps a better and more satisfying tactic is to follow the example of the poetic persona in “Reglas del juego para los hombres que quieren amar a mujeres mujeres,” and tell your lover what you want.

Certainly, the liberation of feminine sexual desire is a complex issue that is tied to several others. Abigail Bray indicates as much in her book *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (2004):

> Phallogocentrism is predicated upon the exclusion of female desire. . . . The feminine libidinal economy is about liberating a repressed female desire, about circulating that desire within language, but it is also about recognizing and encouraging an economy which moves beyond the strictures of phallocentric law. In this context, the feminine libidinal economy describes the fluidity of female desire on a material, corporeal level and also a more conceptual, metaphysical level. (52)

Greg Dawes identifies this longing for the liberation of feminist sexual desire in Belli’s work in his book *Aesthetics and Revolution: Nicaraguan Poetry 1979-1990* (1993), focusing in particular on two of her poetic collections: “Throughout Línea de fuego and De la costilla de Eva she insists on total liberation from sexual repression” (141). Dawes continues, indicating that Belli “. . . concentrates on libidinal liberation” (141). In fact, this goal is present in all of Belli’s poetry, particularly in her next collection, *Apogeo*, published in 1997.

While many of the same topics and concerns become once again major themes of these poems, her approach reflects the fact that she is now in her forties, and has entered a new phase of her life. In the poem “Los cuarenta,” the speaker expresses herself with the confidence of a mature woman, declaring that she is certain of who she is, of what she wants, and of what she will do to get it:

> Después de juventudes de angustia,
> sé quién soy, lo que quiero
y el precio que estoy dispuesta a pagar por conseguirlo.
(15-17)

Being certain of who she is and want she wants makes her continue to celebrate her sexuality. “Amor de frutas,” also from Apogeo, is a case in point. In these verses the poetic persona describes her lover’s body in relation to a variety of fruits, a quite uncommon association in literature, as it deliberately turns upside down the traditional correlation between a woman’s body and nature/food. Indeed, it is not unusual to read about the female body in connection with food: her lips the color of strawberries, or her breasts and sex organs compared to various fruits and flowers, or to describe her bodily juices with images of the sticky sweetness of fruit. Men, however, have never been portrayed with such soft and colorfully tasty imagery.

In these verses the poetic voice speaks joyfully of her erotic desires, metaphorically using the brilliant colors and the sensuous juiciness of tropical fruits to tell her lover how she would like to make love to him:

Dejame rodar manzanas en tu sexo,
néctares de mango,
carne de fresas:
Tu cuerpo son todas las frutas.

Te abrazo y corren las mandarinas.
Te beso y las uvas sueltan
el vino oculto de su corazón
sobre mi boca. (1-9)

Belli successfully combines imagery of the pleasures of the erotic, represented by her lover’s body, with images of fruit. Of particular interest for a feminist reading is the first fruit she mentions--manzanas--an item that is directly associated to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise. By foregrounding the apple, the poet suggests an image that
brings to mind the tale of the Biblical couple and the serpent. Here, however, the story is
decidedly subverted, for the poetic persona expresses a desire not to eat the apple in order
to learn, but rather to arouse her lover: “Dejame rodar manzanas en tu sexo” (1). These
erotically charged words take an irreverent stance towards the Biblical myth by
deliberately establishing a sexual connection between her lover’s genitals and the apple.

The other fruits mentioned in this poem convey a variety of sensual impressions,
associating sex to the act of eating: the succulent sweet juiciness of the tropical mango,
the bright red color and meaty texture of the strawberry, the tangy taste of the mandarin,
and the dark juice of the grape--the privileged fruit of Bacchus--that produces a
potentially intoxicating wine, associated here to the headiness of love-making. This
litany of fruit continues in the next stanza, in which the poetic persona compares the taste
of her lover’s arms to that of sweet orange, and his testicles to pomegranates, filled with
seeds:

Mi lengua siente en tus brazos
el zumo dulce de las naranjas.
Y en tus piernas
el pomegranate
esconde sus semillas incitantes. (10-14)

These fruits are associated with symbols of fertility, the pomegranate in particular,
because it consists almost entirely of seeds, an allusion clearly made in the preceding
verses.

Upon completing these associations between her lover’s body and fruit, the poem
ends as it began, with an even more obvious reference to the story of Adam and Eve. In
this final stanza the speaker describes her lover’s body as her own personal possession, a
“lost” paradise that she recovers in the here and now, and from which no God can ever expel her:

Tu cuerpo es el paraíso perdido
Del que
nunca jamás
ningún Dios
podrá expulsarme. (20-24)

“Amor de frutas” challenges the concept put forth in the Bible that sexuality is inconsistent with paradise. While Adam and Eve were banished from Eden by God when they took a bite of the apple and discovered their sexuality, symbolized by the need to cover their nudity, this poem celebrates both nudity and sexuality. The speaker revels in the joys of the flesh, in the pleasures of the body, at the same time asserting her determination to remain in her “Eden,”--her “heaven on earth”--from which she will never be expelled.

Belli writes another exaltation of the body, this time that of the aging mature woman, by endowing it with eroticism, in another poem from this same book, “De noche, la esposa aclara.” Her verses challenge the patriarchy from a more round-about and contemporary angle. The poetic voice first appears to “buy in” to the standards of female beauty through a series of negative constructions, as she compares herself physically, point by point, to Cindy Crawford, the well-known supermodel, generally considered to be an icon of late twentieth century sexiness. The speaker begins each negative comparison, each refrain, with a verse composed of a simple “No,” followed by another two or three negative verses emphasizing what standards of beauty she does not possess:

No.
No tengo las piernas de la Cindy Crawford. (1-2)

...
No tengo la cintura de la Cindy Crawford
ni ese vientre perfecto, liso y ligeramente cóncavo,
con el ombligo deslumbrante en el centro. (10-13)

No.
No tengo los brazos de la Cindy Crawford (20-21)

No.
No tengo los pechos de la Cindy Crawford,
anchos, redondos, copa B o C. (28-30)

As the poem develops, the poetic voice explains why her body--a functional, real
woman’s body--cannot sustain a comparison with the artificial, sleek image of the model
sold to women in consumer society. Thus, with regard to Crawford’s perfect belly,
smooth and slightly concave, the poetic voice explains that a Cesarean has left her
without illusions regarding this part of her anatomy:

. . . Alguna vez presumí de esa región de mi anatomía.
Fue antes de que naciera Camilo,
antes de que él decidiera apresurarse a nacer
y decidiera entrar al mundo de pie;
antes de que la cesárea
me dejara cicatriz. (14-19)

Her words do not convey a sense of regret, however, for what she has lost. Instead, she
foregrounds a matter-of-fact presentation of her body, which, once again, she associates
to the historical person of the poet. Her third child, Camilo, was born via a Cesarean
section. The resulting scar has left its mark on her body. This image of the author’s
scarred belly corroborates the theory put forth by de Beauvoir and later supported by
Moi--namely, that the body is a situation, that it reflects lived experiences. Consistent
with this idea, the words above are a testimonial, one that firmly situates the poetic
persona’s experiences in the context of her historical world. The speaker’s description,
both detailed and personal, humanizes the poetic persona at the same time that it removes her from the pedestal of idealized physical perfection upon which the patriarchal discourse had placed the image of woman.

In another stanza, the poetic persona compares her facial features most unfavourably to those of the idealized model. While Cindy Crawford’s large eyes and delicate nose represent the admired standards of beauty, the poetic voice observes that her own features are quite the opposite, she sports small eyes and a wide nose: “los ojos de elefante, la nariz con sus ventanas de par en par” (41). Her final comparison—that of her behind—is given in a playful tone that manages to suggest through words laced with a rich humor her total surrender to her inability to “compete” with this icon of female beauty. In keeping with the series of negative comparisons of the poetic presentation, she first introduces in this vein the model’s physical perfection:

Por último y como la más pesada evidencia,
no tengo el trasero de la Cindy Crawford:
pequeño, redondo, cada mitad exquisitamente delineada. (46-48)

This exquisite description of Crawford’s bottom is followed by the contrasting personalized, humorous description of her own:

El mío es tenazmente grande, ancho,
ánfora o tinaja, usted escoja. (49-50)

The poetic voice allows the reader two images for comparison: either the more feminine, sexy, and curvaceous image of the ánfora—a classical, poetic shape, or the more prosaic, everyday image of the vat. However, just as she explained why her belly no longer exhibits the smooth perfection it used to have, and why she did not mind that it does not, she also explains what makes her backside both uniquely hers and imminently functional. In simple terms: her ample backside may not be beautiful, but it has the advantage of
serving as a comfortable seat on which to accommodate herself while she reads and writes:

No hay manera de ocultarlo
y lo más que puedo es no tenerle vergüenza,
sacarle provecho para leer cómodamente sentada
o ser escritora. (51-54)

As “De noche la esposa aclara” nears the end, the speaker shifts to issues--framed as rhetorical questions--that are unrelated to beauty, and that foreground the significance of her historical persona as well as her worth as a real-life person who is also her husband’s lover. She writes of the value of her life, and of her lived experiences. While the photographs of the supermodel are beautiful and sexy, she says, they represent nothing more than an empty, two-dimensional image, but the speaker is a live woman. In addition to being a wife and mother, she is a political force, a revolutionary with a story to tell:

¿Qué experiencias te podría contar la Cindy Crawford
que, remótamente, pudieran compararse con las mías,
qué revoluciones, conspiraciones, hechos históricos,
tiene ella en su haber? (63-66)

By referring to the historical events in the life of the poet, to revolutions and conspiracies, the poetic voice establishes once again her presence, her existence outside the poem, indicating that her experiences and contributions in history have been significant, and that these have made her who she is--a unique person whose choices and actions make her so much more than the somewhat ordinary body she inhabits. She further establishes that, in addition to being a revolutionary, she is a flesh and blood woman, and that she is a talented lover who knows her partner’s body--his “geography,”--and that, although her body may not follow the beauty standards of the patriarchy, it is a perfect instrument of
eroticism:

Modestia aparte: ¿Será su cuerpo tan perfecto
capaz de los desaforos del mío,
brioso, gentil, conocedor de noches sin mañana,
de mañanas sin noche,
sabio explorador de todos los rincones de tu geografía?
(68-72)

Belli has framed this poem as an address from a poetic persona to her husband, but she might very well be speaking for most women and addressing most husbands. The speaker brings her body to life, and demonstrates that beauty goes beyond what is represented in the myths of consumer society. For Belli, each real-life woman is an assortment of unique characteristics and experiences that together form a singular individual. She thus rejects the patriarchal objectification of women by deconstructing phallocentric discourse on woman’s beauty, highlighting the limiting nature of the narrow definitions of society’s so-called standards. Indeed, “De noche, la esposa aclara,” goes beyond the body and eroticism to emphasize the situational reality of the body, consistent with de Beauvoir’s philosophy. It also brings to mind Moi’s assertion that each woman’s relationship to her body is directly tied to her unique experiences. These experiences, in turn, are reflected in and on the body.

Belli turns the tables on the patriarchy by objectifying “lo masculino” through female eyes in “Ideal del eterno masculino: MACHUS ERECTUS AD ETERNUM,” also from Apogeo. The poetic voice begins by asking the powers above that the object of her erotic gaze not lose his waistline partying with friends:

Que las cálidas tardes,
las cervezas con los amigos,
los repetidos jolgorios nocturnos
no le hagan perder la cintura
abultándole desmesuradamente la barriga. (1-5)
She also would like to prevent this “ideal” from developing a tonsure atop his head, necessitating the dreaded “comb over” to cover this imperfection:

Que no le salga tonsura en la cabeza
y tenga que ocultarlo cruzando el cabello
de un lado al otro. (6-8)

The speaker next asks that he not develop the squinty-eyed look of the old lecher, acquired through his constantly looking for the “eternal feminine”:

Que de tanto mirar y buscar el “Eterno Femenino”
no se le desgaje la piel debajo de los ojos,
dándole aspecto de viejo libidinoso,
espiando a Susana en su baño solitario. (9-12)

This reference to the “Eternal Feminine” foregrounds the patriarchal stereotype of the ideal woman, one who embodies the feminine perfection “par excellence.” She is both physically attractive in an exceedingly feminized way, but she is also subordinate, silent, and obedient. This idea of an eternal feminine is the very myth that Belli seeks to debunk in her literature. Indeed, the message in these verses is that those who adhere to the belief in an idealized eternal feminine should be equally willing and prepared to live up to the ideals of an “Eternal Masculine.”

The next stanza alludes directly to the title, when the speaker insists that the masculine “totem” needs to be eternally erect for her own pleasure. This requirement is clearly the most important, as the opening words of the first two verses demonstrate:

Sobre todo, que su totem majestuoso,
no empiece a padecer súbitamente de pereza
y se niegue a obedecer la mente,
rehusándose erguirse cuando se le comanda,
o venciéndose demasiado pronto
cuando aún la gozosa intemporal
no ha llegado siquiera al medio del camino. (13-19)
Not only is it necessary for the ideal male to be able to obtain an erection without fail, but he must be able to maintain it as well. Since so much of male pride and sense of masculinity is connected to their sexual prowess—or at least their idea of it—the speaker simply demands that the male be ever-ready to perform. As Sofía Kearns observes in her previously cited essay, this emphasis on the performance of his “majestic totem” is a deliberate mockery of phallocentrism: “La burla al falocentrismo, en especial al consabido machismo hispano, es patente por la obsesión fálica notoria en el poema . . .” (n. p.). Indeed, Belli is simply asking that a good lover live up to the phallocentric hype.

The poem ends with a reiteration of the importance of physical perfection in this idealized male, much in the way that men expect women to adhere to an idealized image of woman. The poetic voice employs the image of the famous Greek statue as representative of the ideal masculine specimen: muscular, virile, and erect:

En fin, que recio de carnes, viril y erecto, mantenga siempre la pose del discóbolo desnudo aprestándose para el lanzamiento: la fría, irreal y eterna belleza de las estatuas. (20-24)

This vision, of “Machus Erectus” compared to the nude Greek athlete, frozen at the moment of performance (throwing the disc, in this case), certainly presents an ironical contrast. More importantly, these verses implicitly reveal the absurdity of the “eternal feminine” by embodying the male ideal within the female gaze. Kearns sees here a feminine declaration of equality, though one presented in a light-hearted manner: “El ideal tradicional femenino, o lo que se ha llamado el concepto ‘Mujer,’ queda desenmascarado aquí, y la posición igualitaria de la entidad femenina con respecto a la masculina se corrobora por el tono de crítica jocosa en su contestación al patriarcado”
(n. p.). Not only does the speaker point out that few men, if any, could live up to this ideal, she also foregrounds the absurdity of the patriarchal standards of female beauty, though her gaze is focused only upon the male subject.

As the poems I have cited thus far indicate, Belli’s foregrounding of the erotic goes well beyond the conventional images and metaphors. In “Nueva teoría sobre el Big Bang” (Apogeo), the poet associates the erotic with the very creation of the Universe. She proposes that the universe was formed as the result of a sexual encounter between the Gods, and declares that each time she makes love with her partner, they too are repeating this creation, this “Universal Genesis” through their physical, sexual contact:

El Big Bang fue el orgasmo primigenio.  
Orgasmo de los Dioses amándose en la Nada.  
Cada vez que te amo repito la Génesis Universal. (1-3)

The poetic persona continues in this vein, establishing a connection between her body and the celestial bodies:

Te amo mientras mis pulmones  
crean la Vía Láctea de nuevo  
y el Sol vuelve a nacer  
    redondo y amarillo  
de mi boca.  
La luna se me suelta de los dedos.  
Marte, Plutón, Neptuno,  
Saturno y sus anillos.  
(11-18)

Each sexual encounter with her lover, each series of orgasms, links the speaker to Gaia, the Goddess who gave birth to the earth from the chaos and emptiness that reigned:

Soy Gaia. Soy todas las Díoses explotando. (22)

This analogy unites man and woman with creation itself, foregrounding the erotic as much more than a physical encounter between two individuals. Of particular interest is
the fact that there is no mention of the creation of human life; instead, these verses
emphasize the power of the erotic connection itself.

In the poem “Mujer irredenta,” also from Apogeo, Belli addresses those among
her critics who believe that she has written too extensively, too frankly, of her body and
of eroticism. First, the speaker establishes that she has been criticized for celebrating “in
excess” the mysteries of the body:

    Hay quienes piensan
    que he celebrado en exceso
    los misterios del cuerpo
    la piel y su aroma de fruta. (1-4)

In the next stanza she paraphrases their words, suggesting that while these critics seem to
have resigned themselves to the fact that she will continue to explore her sexuality, they
disapprove of her making it public. They explicitly let her know that she should celebrate
her sexuality quietly, behind closed doors:

    ¡Calla, mujer!--me ordenan--
    No nos aburras más con tu lujuria
    Vete a la habitación
    Desnúdate
    Haz lo que quieras
    Pero calla
    No lo pregones a los cuatro vientos. (5-11)

These words--¡calla mujer!--echo the sentiments of the Church Fathers, such as St. Paul,
who instructed: “[I]et your women keepe silence in the Churches, for it is not permitted
unto them to speake, but they are commanded to bee under obedience. . . ” (Cor. I, 14:34),
an edict that has been adopted and adapted by patriarchy to suit their preferences, and still
rules in today’s society. Indeed, Belli again paraphrases the patriarchal standards in this
poem, underscoring that according to this view “[u]na mujer es frágil, leve, y maternal”
(12).
Further down in the poem, the poetic voice indicates that her critics have grown more strident in recent years. She implies that while erotic imagery might have been acceptable in her youth (note the use of the subjunctive in the following stanza, however, implying that even then it was not suitable that she express herself in such a way) it is definitely not appropriate now that she is older. Topics such as bellies and dampness are not befitting from an older woman:

Cállate. No hablés más de vientres y humedades.
Era quizás aceptable que lo hicieras en la juventud.
Después de todo, en esa época, siempre hay lugar para el / desenfreno.

Pero ahora, cállate. (17-20)

In the closing words of this poem the speaker addresses her critics directly, letting them know how wrong they are, and what they are missing by not being aware and therefore not enjoying the sexual charms of a mature woman. Women, like men, in the “autumn” of their years not only continue to be sexual beings, but they are also better lovers. In her praise of the sexuality of older women, the poetic persona deliberately uses a “charged” word--humedad--, the same one that Belli had earlier indicated as having invited the condemnation her poetry has received:

¡Ah! Señores; no saben ustedes
cuánta delicia esconden los cuerpo otoñales
cuánta humedad, cuánto humus
cuánto fulgor de oro oculta el follaje del bosque
donde la tierra fértil
se ha nutrido de tiempo. (33-38)

The extended metaphor associating the older woman’s body to the mysterious beauty of the woodlands and of golden trees in the fall foregrounds her assertion that women’s “cuerpos otoñales” are sites of hidden erotic pleasure. This image once again implicitly deconstructs the cult of youth of her patriarchal society, pointing out that male judgment
is based solely on physical standards of beauty, standards that prescribe that youth is a prerequisite for passion. These are the very sentiments that the poet deliberately parodied in her previously cited “Ideal del eterno masculino”—namely, that youth and an unwavering virility are required attributes in the male lover.

Rubén Darío also wrote several poems on this theme, in particular one that touches on the topic of passion in the autumnal years. In “Canción de otoño en primavera,” from his collection Cantos de vida y esperanza (1905), the poetic voice laments the passing of his youth, but declares that he is still passionate, that in spite of his gray hair, he still has a thirst for love, which brings him back to the same rose garden where he sought out romantic interludes in the past. The ambiguity of the title of this poem (“Song of Fall in Springtime”) allows it to be read as if he still considers himself as living in an earlier era—in the springtime of his life—or as if, in spite of being in his autumnal years, he still has the passion of youth:

Mas a pesar del tiempo terco,
mi sed de amor no tiene fin;
con el cabello gris me acerco
a los rosales del jardín . . . (61-64)

Like the speaker in Darío’s poem, the poetic persona in Belli’s “Mujer irredenta” expresses her feelings of passion in the autumn of her life, though, contrary to the exaltation accorded to Darío’s verses, she must contend with the disapproval of a mostly patriarchal group of critics who object to the explicitly erotic vocabulary of her poems.

A reader need only pick up Belli’s more recent poetic publications to discover that she has not heeded the patriarchal critics’ request. In fact, if anything, she has intensified her writings about her body, her sexuality, and her desires. Her subsequent collection, Mi íntima multitud (2003), underscores this point. Though published almost
twenty years after the founding of the feminist group Partido de la Izquierda Erótica (of which she was the founding member who suggested the name), the erotic continues to be a favored theme of her poetry. “Manual para conducir,” again presents the active voice of a female lover. While on the one hand this poem takes a playful tone towards the erotic, on the other, it is also written as an instruction manual on making love. The poet takes an unpoetic, everyday activity--that of driving a car--and uses it as a metaphor for giving instructions on love-making. The tone hints at the possibility of an older woman directing a young lover on how to proceed--that is, how to make love to her--warning him as she does of both the pleasures and the dangers in the road ahead:

Para surcar mi cuerpo
sobre iluminadas autopistas,
despójate de medidas de seguridad
y avanza
cuán largo eres
sobre mí.

En la piel de este territorio
no hay más límite de velocidad
que la destreza de aferrar el volante
sobre las curvas más densas del camino. (1-10)

Here “las curvas del camino” becomes a metaphor for her erotic zones, where her lover can test his sexual prowess, or die in the attempt. The vocabulary is decidedly unerotic, though the speaker’s suggestive commentary conveys an unabashedly arousing message:

Con los faros abiertoy encendidos
habrás de recorrermee como una ciudad extendida (11-12)

En el placer de infinitas revoluciones por minuto,
de nada te servirán los frenos . . . (23-24)

While the poetic persona implies that there are pleasures to be found in this drive, she also warns that there are dangers for the unwary driver--read the unskilled lover:
Un cuerpo de mujer es también un acertijo siniestro
donde puedes estallar. (35-36)

Though there are dangers, however, there are also a multitude of ways to enjoy
navigating the “road,” that series of curves that make up her body:

Las posibilidades son innumerables. (39)

... 

Hombre. Hombrecito mío.
Te doy mi palabra.
No te mataré. (45-48)

As the title of the poem indicates, the woman is the active subject, the teacher, giving
instructions to a perhaps younger inexperienced lover. Having established herself as the
agent, the poetic voice emphasizes her authority and control by employing the diminutive
hombrecito, a common form of address used by men in the feminine form to reinforce
their control over women. The last line, “No te mataré,” is a reference to men’s fear of
sex as death, and to the petit morte, an image which Belli alluded to in “Anoche,” a poem
I cited earlier.

Belli’s “De peligros y peligros,” from this same collection, also celebrates the
erotic as potentially dangerous. The speaker begins with the very erotic image of a
sexual interlude with her partner who is described again as an edible object, as “un
bocado”:

Un bocado de vos
Un sendero para indagar los vericuetos
De tus piernas (1-3)

The poetic persona goes on to indicate that the time spent in her lover’s arms is an escape
from the world outside. Neither death nor chaos concern her when they are making love
together:
El mundo pulsa como una bomba de tiempo
Pero en los precipicios del arco de tu brazo
La muerte, ni el caos, me amenaza (4-6)

The speaker continues, indicating that she welcomes the “dangers” of the flesh every day:

Dame hoy y todos los días los peligros de la carne
Tu mortífero cuerno de la abundancia.
La muerte momentánea
Que espera en la esquina de la cama (7-10)

Once again the poet rejoices in the “muerte momentánea” of orgasm, an orgasm facilitated by her lover’s “mortífero cuerno” (deadly horn), in an encounter in which death/orgasm awaits on the corner of the bed. These “dangers of the flesh” to which the speaker refers are not physical dangers, of course, but rather the dangers of being consumed by the erotic. This is also an ironic allusion to the Church’s warning against “los peligros de la carne”--the dangers of the flesh--and to the sin of lust. For while the “world pulsates like a time bomb,” the lovers are caught up in their own world, one that consists of nothing more than a bed and their intertwined bodies. The tone of the speaker’s words clearly establishes her as in control, while at the same time emphasizing the interlocutor’s fear. This image is a reversal of the phallocentric “norm” by which men have the power and make the (erotic) decisions for themselves and for their female lovers.

“Infierno de cielo” also from Mi íntima multitude, celebrates the body as well, though in this case the poem subverts the image of hell, as the title indicates. The poetic voice begins by sacrilegiously foregrounding the body, asserting that it is the center of being:

Adoremos al cuerpo
Santuario inequívoco del verbo y del ser. (5-6)
The speaker takes this concept of the body as the center, further declaring that there is nothing more balanced, more “right” than a man and a woman together, remade into the original clay from which they sprang:

No hay equilibrio más exacto que éste
de un hombre y una mujer retornados a la arcilla primigenia.
(19-20)

The poetic persona next brings these images to life by referring to her own body. She then combines these images with those of nature, creating a link between the lovers’ bodies—“el paisaje blanco”—and the natural commotion of the earth with the bubbling of lava and the sound of the sea as it slaps against the coral reefs:

Allá mi pie.
Las uñas rojas. La imposible extensión de una pierna íngrima.
El paisaje blanco. Las pieles sumergidas en lavas ígneas resollando borboteando vaporizándose. El fuego viene y va con el sonido del mar sobre los arrecifes.
(35-39)

The erotic fire that consumes the lovers’ bodies, even when quenched, is ready to be lit again, demonstrated by the poetic persona’s rising Phoenix-like from the ashes of their love-making:

Sobre los cuerpos consumidos, carbonizados.
Se apagan las velas una a una.

Me sacudo el cabello. Me levanto, ave Fénix, de las cenizas. Soy un infierno de cielo. (40-43)

This last verse connects heaven and hell through erotic imagery. Specifically, heaven and hell are linked through the erotic activities of man and woman, through their very bodies, which the speaker has denoted as the sanctuary, or the shrine, of one’s being. By foregrounding the body in this poem, Belli both raises it up to heaven as a shrine and
lowers it to hell, where it is consumed in the flames of the erotic that make her access to heaven.

As these poems indicate, Belli celebrates the erotic—“writes the body”—in a variety of manners, providing a plethora of images of the multifaceted erotic woman. In “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l’Écriture féminine,” Ann Rosalind Jones examines the theories of several of the French feminists, pointing out that Irigaray and Cixous, in particular, “. . . emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they [women] can do this, and if they can speak about it in the new languages it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of différence) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice” (362). According to Jones, both of these feminist critics (Cixous and Irigaray) recognize that “. . . if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men” (366). Belli has been able to accomplish what Jones talks about: in her literature she explores the erotic on her own terms, and in her own manner, frequently reveling in these sites of différence to which Jones refers.

Belli’s innovative use of erotic poetry to confront phallocentrism is undeniable. Of particular interest is that she has written erotic poetry from different subject positions; not only is she the wife and mother, but she is also a sexually active woman with a variety of desires that have evolved with the passage of time. Her mature verses point
out that she is a sexually self-confident woman, one who, after her youthful anguish, is finally certain of who she is and what she wants. She is also the woman who turns her ironic gaze on “lo eterno masculino,” describing men as erotic objects. Her central message emphasizes that the speaker demands equality: the right to be an active participant and to seek sexual fulfillment on her own terms. She also claims the right to speak out proudly and joyfully of women’s erotic experiences, flaunting her verses in the face of the patriarchal society.
Simone de Beauvoir begins her chapter titled “The Mother” with words that underline this function of womanhood: “It is in maternity that woman fulfills her physiological destiny; it is her natural calling, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species. But we have seen already that human society is never abandoned wholly to nature” (484). She goes on to indicate that women have increasingly gained control over maternity the more modernity has advanced. As a result, women today have more freedom to choose maternity or to reject it. While the choice to become a mother or not can be an expression of women’s freedom and power, this topic continues to be a contentious one for some feminists, who see any celebration of motherhood as a step back to the dark days when woman’s biology tied her to motherhood. Indeed, in many cultures women continue to be valued only for their ability to procreate. Furthermore, it is easy to understand this concern because women have only fairly recently been freed from the bondage of biological essentialism, able to choose whether to have children or not.

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4 De Beauvoir states that, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, men and women were both more aware of the benefits of having fewer children, and that there were methods—though perhaps rudimentary—that helped prevent pregnancy. She mentions the development of vulcanization in particular, an important step towards the design of more reliable (and most likely more affordable) condoms (118-19).
Belli, however, celebrates maternity in her poetry. In fact, motherhood is the favored theme of her first poetic collection, *Sobre la grama* (1974). Many of these poems commemorate the birth of her daughters and Belli’s own sense of wonder and awe at being a mother. She liberates maternity from the patriarchal bindings that define it as nothing more than a biological compulsion or duty, demonstrating that motherhood is much more than biological essentialism. Her verses also underscore that having children is a shared experience, and that both mothers and fathers have a vital role to play not just in conceiving children, but also in raising them.

De Beauvoir’s own attitude with regard to maternity, by contrast, is quite conflicted, no doubt because she was living in a time when gender roles were more restrictive, and only mothers were expected to be nurturing—while at the same time having little or no say over their own lives or those of their children. Indeed, immediately after introducing the topic of maternity, de Beauvoir switches noticeably to issues of contraception, including abortion. Regarding these options, de Beauvoir is clear in her approval of women gaining control over their bodies: “Contraception and legal abortion would permit woman to undertake her maternities in freedom” (492). In fact, de Beauvoir simply expresses the need for women to have the freedom to choose motherhood—or not—on their own terms. This very issue of freedom is at the heart of her analysis on all topics addressed in her text, not only maternity.

Mary O’Brien attempts to “reclaim” reproduction for feminism in her book *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981). She points out that more than two thousand years of intellectual history, created by men and for men, has relegated women’s experiences to little more than a side note. O’Brien argues that twentieth century male-stream thought,
based on a variety of theories, including but not limited to Scientism, Marxism, and Existentialism, has been utilized to establish a patriarchal vision of the past and present, supporting the idea of male supremacy in all things, to the detriment of women. She suggests that in order to counter this all-male view, women need to develop a new type of discourse, and that they may want to begin by reexamining these two millennia of historical theorizing in order to understand, and reevaluate, the female experience. She indicates that in order to create a future for feminism, feminists much first discover/create their past:

. . . the need to develop a theoretical basis for a feminism which can transform the world is an increasingly recognized need in the women’s movement. The difficulty is knowing where to start. We cannot philosophize out of thin air, without becoming the merely normative speculators which theorists are so often accused of being. Somehow, the tradition of intellectual activity which history lays on us must be dealt with. It must also be transcended, a transcendence for which a feminine standpoint is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. One way of starting is, of course, an examination of the way men have gone about the business of unifying their historical activities with the actions which have, in a concrete sense, ‘made history’. Feminist praxis has as its aim the making of a future, which is the making of a history. (4)

Later in her book, O’Brien explains that the making of history is important because it “. . . is also the making of values, [which] is an essential component of authenticity, and that women have let men make their history and their values for them” (67). O’Brien follows her own advice with regard to dealing with this intellectual history by analyzing it within the context of reproduction. For her, this is the place to begin: “To the question: Where does feminist theory start? I answer: Within the process of human reproduction” (8). She makes this the key of her examination because she thinks it is the principal basis by which men have categorized women as those beings whose primary role is the perpetuation of the species.
O’Brien’s study makes clear that patriarchy has succeeded in marginalizing maternity by tying it to nature, and emphasizing that it is an exercise of the body, not of the mind. She underscores that, by associating women with their bodies, patriarchy can establish a male intellectual supremacy based on the rational mind over the “irrational” body. As a consequence of this duality a deliberate self-insertion of patriarchy into maternity and childbirth has taken place. Maternity and childbirth are activities that had traditionally been conducted within an all-female environment (in which midwives, for example, played a key role). Patriarchy, however, encroached into this female space by considering pregnancy as an illness, one which needs to be “treated” by a male doctor. This approach has separated childbirth from nature through scientism, leading to what O’Brien labels an “abstract process,” one controlled by men and science, rather than by women and nature: “Men have brought to obstetrics the sense of their own alienated parental experience of reproduction, and have translated this into the forms and languages of an ‘objective’ science. Thus, the process appears as a neat unilinear affair going on in women’s bodies in a rather mechanistic way” (46). What her words underscore is the fact that, according to the patriarchal view, women are present in their (irrational) pregnant bodies, while men bring the “intellectual” element, the (rational) mind, to the process.

O’Brien further establishes that duality is the principal tenet of male philosophy: “Under this general category [duality], we find a whole series of oppositions which haunt the male philosophical imagination: mind and body, subject and object, past and present, spirit and matter, individual and social, and so forth” (34). These binary oppositions are also at the heart of Hélène Cixous’ essay “Sorties” (1975). And, as Cixous warns, these
oppositions are hierarchical, as per the cultural codes of a patriarchal society. In this hierarchy, man is privileged over woman, as are all properties associated with man. While O’Brien foregrounds the mind-body opposition, Cixous prefers to illustrate the activity-passivity duality. Within the body of the essay, Cixous explains: “Male privilege [is] shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity” (579), in which man envisions woman as the passive object, in contrast to the (male) active subject.

These two binary oppositions, mind versus body and activity versus passivity, privilege the male by suggesting that man is the rational, active being while woman is the irrational, passive body, to be acted upon by the male according to his will. Cixous argues for the emancipation of woman from these binary oppositions. In particular, she calls for a liberation of sexuality for both men and women, foregrounding the importance of the body as she does so: “. . . let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is to say, a transformation of each one’s relationship to his or her body (and to the other body), an approximation to the vast, material, organic, sensuous universe that we are” (581). Belli’s poetry celebrates this liberation of sexuality, this transformation of the body (male and female), as I established in the previous chapters.

Maternity is not only a frequent topic in Belli’s literature, but it is one she explores on several different levels. In her first book of poetry her approach is relatively traditional, though motherhood is celebrated in relation to her body, as are the other themes I have explored in my study. “Quiero,” for example, presents motherhood as reproduction, but also as a demonstration of the speaker’s love for her partner. The
speaker also points out that motherhood is an endeavor that requires the participation of both parties, the man and the woman. This approach is in keeping with Belli’s feminist stance, an inclination that was apparent even in these verses from her first book of poetry. The speaker first tells her lover that she wants to have his child, then she asks him to give it to her:

Quiero tener ese hijo tuyo, mi amor.

Dárteme desde dentro de mi vientre
en una nueva prolongación de tu inmortalidad,
mostrarte hasta donde puede crecer mi vida,
como un árbol,
si tú la riegas, (1-6)

There verses bring to mind Belli’s words from her memoir, in which she writes of her reaction upon learning that women have the ability to conceive and sustain a life within their bodies, where it would grow in safety: “Éramos la obra maestra de la Naturaleza. Por ser esa criatura espléndida todos los meses, ya pronto, mi cuerpo se prepararía para recibir la semilla germinada, acunarla y hacerla crecer en la oscuridad del vientre” (País 45). In the verses above the poetic voice introduces this unborn baby as a prolongation of her lover’s immortality, and as an expansion of her own life. And she does this by employing images of nature. In particular, she uses the metaphor of the tree--one watered by her lover--to represent her life and the one they will create together. These words bring to mind the popular refrain that suggests that each man should accomplish three things in his lifetime in order to attain a degree of immortality: have a son, plant a tree, and write a book.

Immortality through one’s offspring is the theme of another poem, “Mi hija Maryam” (Sobre la grama), in which she points out that her daughter is an extension of
herself:

La inmortalidad está en el huequito de tu mano, (1)

... 

Tengo detenido mi tiempo en tus ojitos,
mirándome en tus muecas y en tus pataleos, (4-5)

... 

Te abres como un brote,
recién salido de mi vientre
y al irte abriendo te maravillas
y me dejas maravillada, (10-13)

The speaker feels reborn in her daughter, as if time has stopped. She sees herself in
Maryam’s eyes, in the faces she makes, and in her “pataleos,” the kicking of her
daughter’s little feet. She also shares the wonderment experienced by her daughter as
this newly-born baby marvels at the world that surrounds her.

In “Maternidad II” (Sobre la grama), which I cite below in its entirety, Belli
emphasizes maternity through metaphors that emphasize the nature-woman connection.
In the opening verses the poetic persona employs a simile to compare her pregnant body
to the fertile land, associating “las planicies” of her belly to a “redonda colina palpitante,”
beating with the new life within her. She also addresses her lover, speaking of the child
that he “planted” within her, a life that will grow and expand in the center of her fertility.
The child, safe in the silent, liquid world of the amniotic sac, is nourished by his mother’s
blood:

Mi cuerpo,
como tierra agradecida,
se va extendiendo.

Ya las planicies de mi vientre,
van cogiendo la forma
de una redonda colina palpitante,
mientras por dentro,
en quién sabe qué misterio
de agua, sangre y silencio
va creciendo como un puño que se abre
el hijo que sembraste
en el centro de mi fertilidad.

This intentional foregrounding of the nature-woman association differs from such images as those presented by male-voiced poetry primarily because the canonical approach was intended to uphold the patriarchal binary that opposed culture to nature. According to this ideology, nature is part of the irrational and the instinctual, in deliberate contrast to man’s self-identification with culture and rationality. Contrary to this male view, in “Maternidad II” the speaker revels in her connection to nature, her connection to her partner, and her connection to the life growing within her. While the poetic persona is aware that she alone will provide the safe haven in which the baby grows, she unabashedly acknowledges her lover’s role in creating this new life, implicitly emphasizing the fact that both men and women contribute equally to conceiving children. These words and images also bring to mind the theme of the poem cited at the beginning of the first chapter of this study, “Y Dios me hizo mujer,” from this, her first collection (Sobre la grama), in which the author celebrates her unique role as a “taller de seres humanos,” a workshop in which she creates new life.

In addition to celebrating pregnancy as procreation and immortality, Belli also celebrates maternity as artistic creation, a relatively common metaphor in canonical literature. Susan Stanford Friedman explores this association in “Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor” (1987). She focuses on two primary issues: how this metaphor is employed within cultural contexts, and how gender-specific differences are expressed through this particular literary device. Friedman notes, in particular, that it highlights a
paradox--grounded in Western ideology--between creation and procreation:

The paradox of the childbirth metaphor is that its contextual resonance is fundamentally at odds with the very comparison it makes. While the metaphor draws together mind and body, word and womb, it also evokes the sexual division of labor upon which Western patriarchy is founded. The vehicle of the metaphor (procreation) acts in opposition to the tenor it serves (creation) because it inevitably reminds the reader of the historical realities that contradict the comparison being made. (373)

She then connects these terms to the duality inherent in Western patriarchal thought, emphasizing the connotations of particular words within this cultural context:

Underlying these words [creation and procreation] is the familiar dualism of mind and body, a key component of Western patriarchal ideology. Creation is the act of the mind that brings something new into existence. Procreation is the act of the body that reproduces the species. A man conceives an idea in his brain, while a woman conceives a baby in her womb, a difference highlighted by the post-industrial designation of the public sphere as man’s domain and the private sphere as woman’s place. The pregnant body is necessarily female; the pregnant mind is the mental province of genius, most frequently understood to be inherently masculine. (373)

Belli purposefully subverts this duality by uniting creativity and procreativity, by connecting her creative mind with her (pro)creative body, by imagining her ovaries full of eggs capable of producing both poems and children, as she does in “Tengo,” from this same collection of poems. In this poem the speaker envisions her ovaries as containing the “seeds” of children-poems yet to be born-written:

Tengo en mis ovarios
semillas,
poemas sin empezar,
llantos y risas congelados. (1-4)

These seeds enclose the cries and laughter of potential children-poems frozen in time, perhaps to be born, and written, in the future.

Another of Belli’s poems, “Quiero escribir un niño,” also from Sobre la grama,
more directly connects the act of writing to creating life, while at the same time implicitly challenging Lacan’s logocentrism, which views the phallus, an exclusively male organ, as the pen:

Quiero escribir un niño,
hacerlo con palabras
en el idioma de su placenta hecha de mar,
de viento,
de sacuanjoches olorosos. (5-9)

The speaker combines images of nature with those of writing and gestation. She will “write” a child with words from the language of her bodily liquids: the placentas made of sea and of winds that carry the scent of sacuanjoches on them. This association is akin to Cixous’ calling for l’écriture féminine, in which she proposes that women write not only from their bodies, but with their bodies. In fact, Cixous suggests that women write with white ink--with breast milk--a proposal she makes in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). In the last stanza the speaker emphasizes this multiple connection between nature, gestation, and writing in the image of her “green child poet,” her “moreno cantor”:

Quiero escribir un verde niño poeta,
un moreno cantor que inundé el mundo con sonrisas,
niño mesías del mensaje vital de la naturaleza (10-12)

This “niño mesías,” this “verde niño poeta,” which the poetic persona constructs in this poem, will carry her message, celebrating the glory of nature in his words and his smiles.

As I indicated earlier, Friedman contrasts women’s capacity for creation/procreation with the male birth metaphors. As she suggests, the male analogy suffers from the fact that men cannot (pro)create in the sense that women can. She also points out that the male birth metaphors were common in literature during both the
Enlightenment and the Romantic periods, but that the intended message was different. During the Enlightenment “[t]he bad poet was above all a ‘begetter’ who breeds out of his own distempered fancy repulsive ‘offspring’ because his lack of reason makes him like ‘the one who gives birth,’ who conceives and brings forth, who is nowhere in control, but rather subject to a purely spontaneous animal function” (382). Friedman next compares this use of the metaphor to that of the Romantic poets, who employed it “. . . to define the production of art as ‘a spontaneous process independent of intention, precept, or even consciousness’” (382). As these definitions underscore, the birth metaphor was employed in the past to emphasize associations with patriarchal images of women: either the creation of a “monster” produced by an unreasonable mind and a body subject to its animal-like drives, or to emphasize that procreation is the result of the body, with no connection at all to the mind or reason. In closing, Friedman contrasts this negative use with the power of the childbirth metaphor in women’s literature by foregrounding how this image (re)connects them to their body and their mind:

Emerging like women themselves from the confinement of patriarchal literary tradition, birth metaphors have celebrated women’s birthright to creativity. Women’s oppression begins with the control of the body, the fruits of labor. Consequently, many women writers have gone directly to the source of powerlessness to reclaim that control through the labor of the mind pregnant with the word. (390)

The poems I quoted point out that Belli rejects this confinement of the patriarchal literary tradition that Friedman has studied. Instead, Belli represents the body as a source of inspiration and creativity. As a result, she writes joyfully and frankly about her (em)bodied experiences, celebrating both her creativity and her procreativity at the same time.

5 Terry J. Castle, quoted by Susan Stanford Friedman.
In a further demonstration of the unique female ability to sustain life within her body and grow through the experience, the poetic voice in Belli’s “Feto” (Sobre la gramá) speaks directly to the new life within her, once again connecting mind and body.

She presents maternity as a “growing” and learning experience for both the mother and her soon-to-be born baby:

Tú pequeño ser,
estás creciendo dentro de mí
dándome una nueva dimensión. (1-4)

The speaker goes on to underscore the close connection between mother and fetus, indicating that they communicate without words, that the rush of her blood and the beating of her heart are the lullaby she sings to her unborn baby:

Platicamos sin palabras
y luego te arrullo
con el correr de mi sangre
y los latidos de mi corazón. (11-14)

By virtue of this intimate, physical bond, the poetic persona loves and knows her baby, her “small inhabitant,” whom she waits to meet while wondering at varying points whether this sexless being is a boy or a girl:

Eres mi pequeño habitante
con el que vivo frente a frente
y yo soy tu saco amniótico
diminuta humanidad sin sexo,
al que a veces imagino mujer
y otras hombre,
al que quiero sin ver
y conozco sin conocer,
nutriéndote y esperando
el momento de nuestra cita. (19-28)

Foregrounding her maternal function, the poetic persona envisions her entire being as an amniotic sac, nourishing this “minute bit of humanity” within her while she joyfully
awaits their “appointment,” the imminent birth of this new life.

Childbirth—the culmination of those nine months in the amniotic sac—is another frequent theme in Belli’s literature. Though for obvious reasons this topic has been given little or no attention in canonical literature, Belli explores it as a miraculous event—one that should be celebrated on many different levels. In a citation from her memoir Belli describes the birth of her first child, questioning the opinion of the doctors and nurses attending her, who commented that she was too young to be a mother. Rather than feeling too young and thus uncertain and unprepared for her new role, pregnancy and childbirth were experiences that had made her feel as if she were part of a “multiple feminine body,” as if were taking part in a rite of passage that connected women through the ages: “Yo, en cambio, me sentía antigua, parte del múltiple cuerpo femenino que compartía en este rito de pasaje el poder de las convulsiones violentas de las que emergieron el mar, los continentes, la Vida” (País 48). While celebrating her membership in this multiple feminine body, Belli also, once again, establishes analogies between the feminine body and nature. Childbirth, which she presents as the culmination of a series of violent convulsions that eventually expel the baby, becomes a metaphor for the cataclysmic creation of Life on the grand scale, with a capital “L.” She employs images of the sea and the continents in such a way that childbirth is depicted as being an integral part of the formation of the planet itself.

This sense of being part of a multiple feminine body is ever-present in Belli’s literature. While each woman is situated in her own individual body, there are many aspects of being a woman that Belli sees as unifying, as something shared with other females, including menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. It is Belli’s foregrounding
of both, the universalizing aspects of being a woman and the celebration of her own unique experiences, that make her a feminist, for it is through her becoming a voice of women’s experience that Belli calls for a reevaluation of gender roles.

In her short poem, “Parto,” which I cite below in its entirety, also from her first book, Sobre la grama, the poetic voice celebrates the birth of her first child. She writes of the pain and the fear of not knowing what to expect:

Me acuerdo
cuando nació mi hija.

Yo era un solo dolor miedoso,
esperando ver salir de entre mis piernas
un sueño de nueve meses
con cara y sexo. (1-6)

Despite her overwhelming fear and pain, the poetic persona describes her expectation, envisioning her baby as a nine-month “dream” born from between her legs—finally a human being with a face and a sex.

I have pointed out previously that Ana Istarú’s poetry has much in common with Belli’s own poetic work, at least with regard to the topics these writers explore. For example, Istarú also writes about childbirth, often employing similar metaphors and images to those used by Belli. “Al dolor del parto,” from her collection Verbo madre (1995), is a salute to the pain of childbirth; however, unlike in Belli’s poem, this speaker addresses “dolor” directly, as if it were her lover, inviting him to dance with her in this exciting day:

Hola dolor, bailemos.
Serás mi amante breve
en este día (1-3)

It is not coincidental that both authors foreground the pain of childbirth. Istarú, in
particular, celebrates it, inviting it to dance with her. Belli is not as assertive; as she
describes it as “. . . un solo dolor miedoso.” Nonetheless, both speakers celebrate the
pain because it is part of giving birth. These images of acceptance and even joy contrast
with the male-voiced representation of childbirth, which, if it is mentioned at all, tends to
be a relatively clean—-even linear—“process.” A prime example of patriarchal childbirth
is the account of Jesus’s birth. Not only does he emerge as a “ray of light,” without
causing Mary any pain, but she also miraculously remains a virgin—she is left without a
mark on her body. These poems, by contrast, describe the fear and pain experienced by
women in childbirth, acknowledging and celebrating all aspects of this very human event
and the marks it leaves on the body, as the scar of Camilo’s birth day, which Belli
underlined in the previously cited poem, “De noche la esposa aclara.”

In another example of a poetic description of childbirth, the speaker in Istarú’s
“Abrete sexo,” also from Verbo madre, addresses her own body, telling it to open up in
order to let the child out, even though it is sad to let him depart:

Ábrete sexo,
 hazte cascada,
 olvida tu tristeza.
 Deja partir al niño
 que vive en tu entresueño. (18-22)

The words “ábrete sexo” call to mind the phrase “ábrete sésamo,” spoken by Ali Baba in
one of the stories of the Arabian Nights, underscoring the magical, miraculous aspects of
giving birth. They also express the close relationship between the poetic voice and her
body, implying that by asking her body to “open up,” it will.

Like Belli, Istarú also foregrounds women’s connection to nature in maternity and
childbirth. The poem “alumbramiento,” from this same collection, underscores this link,
as the poetic persona envisions her belly as if filled with the sea when she arrives at the hospital to give birth, a belly in which the tight skin displays a “mapamundi” of the entire world:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{vino de mi} \\
\text{salió del fondo} \\
\text{el médico aplaudía} \\
\text{yo vine con el mar en la barriga} \\
\text{como un intenso parasol} \\
\text{un mapamundi (1-6)}
\end{align*}
\]

The speaker’s belly, crisscrossed with veins, is envisioned as a map of the world, extended over her sea-filled belly, protecting the baby within.

Another topic seldom or never represented in male poetry is the partner’s reaction to the birth of his child. In this poem he is present to support and encourage his lover, this soon-to-be-mother; he is an active participant in this special event. The rhythmic breathing that women are encouraged to do in childbirth—often with the help of their mate—is conveyed in the rhyming of the words “expirando inspirando y expirando” (39). The speaker even hints that at some level her partner may envy her unique ability—not only that she can create and sustain life, but that her body is designed to expel this new life when it is time:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{César me retuvo del cabello} \\
\text{estaba emocionado} \\
\text{sin saber si tintinear o si envidiarme} \\
\text{de entero dedicado a mis pulmones} \\
\text{expirando inspirando y expirando} \\
\text{me miraba de adentro de sus ojos} \\
\text{como sólo una vez me mirará} \\
\text{en toda la vida de su vida} \\
\text{y a mi vientre que cambia de paisaje (35-43)}
\end{align*}
\]

The implication that her partner César may envy the poetic persona’s unique maternal ability echoes Belli’s sentiments from her memoir, in which she indicates that she felt
sorry for her brothers because they would never know it was like to be a woman, to have those experiences that are exclusively female: “Recuerdo que salí de allí [del cuarto donde su madre la había hablado sobre su cuerpo y la menstruación y la maternidad] compadeciendo a mis dos hermanos que nunca tendrían aquella experiencia maravillosa” (País 45). Perhaps the main point made by these verses is that they establish how the uniqueness of this experience serves to unite these lovers. César even sees the poetic persona in a new light, looking at her in a new manner, a look that will never be repeated.

Belli writes of another uniquely female experience associated with maternity--breast-feeding--in “Dando el pecho” (Sobre la grama). The speaker first sets the scene: she is comfortably seated in the rocking chair, cradling her baby, and then, startling the reader, she compares herself to a “tranquil cow,” peacefully giving its milk:

Me siento en la mecedora,  
la acuno,  
y al primer quejido,  
empiezo a dar leche como vaca tranquila. (4-7)

The closing verses foreground the intimacy of breast-feeding, in which mother and child reaffirm the close bond they shared before the birth: close together in the rocker, they are reunited:

Ella vuelve a ser mía,  
pegadita a mí,  
dependiendo de mí,  
como cuando sólo yo la conocía  
y vivía en mi vientre. (8-12)

Once again the poetic voice emphasizes the special connection shared by mother and child. When the baby was within her belly, only she knew her, and this intimate bond can be momentarily restored during particular activities, such as breast-feeding. The depth of this feeling is conveyed in the repetition of the pronouns mi, mi and mía. These
possessives appear four times in this closing stanza, and, combined with several other words-- _pegadita, conocía, and vivía_--establish a rhyming rhythm that sounds something like a lullaby.

One of the first to have dealt with the subject of motherhood among twentieth century poets was Gabriela Mistral. Though never a mother, she also wrote a well-known and oft-cited poem about rocking a child. “Meciendo” (cited below in its entirety), from her collection _Ternura_ (1924), presents the rocking of the child as both a universalizing event and a very personal one. The poetic persona begins, as it is often done by Belli and Istarú, by establishing a series of analogies with nature, comparing her rocking motion to the movement of the tides, or the wind on the fields of wheat, and finally of God rocking the thousands of worlds that populate the universe:

El mar sus millares de olas
mece, divino.
Oyendo a los mares amantes,
mezo a mi niño.
El viento errabundo en la noche
mece los trigos.
Oyendo a los vientos amantes,
mezo a mi niño.
Dios Padre sus miles de mundos
mece sin ruido.
Sintiendo su mano en la sombra
mezo a mi niño.

As God the Father rocks the universe noiselessly, the speaker too rocks her child under the shade of His hand. Mistral first establishes this link with both God and nature, while the closing lines personalize the scene, for the poetic voice’s ambiguity also suggests that the hand she feels may be that of her child. This rocking motion establishes the tranquility the speaker feels as she “mece” her son through the rhythm of the words. In particular, the repetition of the verb _mecer_ in the even numbered lines is suggestive of the
actual rocking motion portrayed in the poem.

Because Belli’s poetry tends to be a reflection of her life, it is not surprising that her second collection of poetry, *Línea de fuego* (1978), presents another—even more politicized—view of maternity and motherhood. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the poems in this collection are decidedly more militant, and so is the attitude of the poetic persona with regard to motherhood. In effect, in this *poemario* Belli addresses maternity as defiance to hegemony. The poem “Engendraremos niños,” is an excellent example of this notion, of giving birth as a way to “engender” a cause. Clearly writing from the perspective of the Sandinista Revolution, Belli speaks of the future birth of hundreds of children, a birth that signals a new dawn, and the rise of the oppressed against the oppressors:

Engendraremos niños,
cientos de niños saliendo a la alborada
entre piernas morenas y canciones.

Engendraremos niños
con el puño cerrado
y la conspiración, el secreto en los ojos. (1-6)

While in “Maternidad II,” from *Sobre la grama*, the poetic persona envisioned the life within her opening up “como un puño,” here this image is decidedly war-like, for she envisions instead a raised “puño cerrado.” In fact, the closed fist raised in defiance is the Communist salute, a symbol of both challenge and solidarity, that will be enacted by these “hundreds of children”:

Engendraremos niños
por cada hombre o mujer que nos maten,
pariremos
cientos de niños
que seguirán sus pasos. (16-20)
The poet’s message is unequivocal: while the Nicaraguan government under the Somoza regime, supported and financed by a capitalistic United States, has the power and the will to kill those dark skinned men and women who oppose it, these very men and women will continue the fight by giving birth to hundreds of children, who will be born of the blood of fallen heroes to rise up and take their place.

There is no doubt that this image of the mother that gives her children to the patria is a cliché in patriarchal literature. In Belli’s poetry, however, it is daringly embodied within one of the more empowering images of women that this author represents in her poetry, that of the female warrior; and like the other female roles she foregrounds, the guerrillera is also multidimensional. Her poem “La madre,” also from this collection, highlights this multidimensionality. The mother portrayed in these verses transforms herself from that of the domestic madre to one that exchanges her skirt, shoes, and purse for pants, boots, and a backpack:

La madre
se ha cambiado de ropa.
La falda se ha convertido en pantalón
los zapatos en botas,
la cartera en mochila.
No canta ya canciones de cuna,
canta canciones de protesta. (1-7)

The metamorphosis from mother to guerrillera emphasizes that, by changing her clothes and gear, this mother has become a warrior. She is no longer the picture of passivity, femininity, and domestic bliss; instead she is an active, militant revolutionary, one who also embodies an image of the patria. Her mochila, packed with all she will need, allows her to live on the run. Thus, not only has this mother changed her outward appearance, she has also changed her behavior. No longer does she sing lullabies to her children, now
she shouts songs of protest. As a madre/patria, she has also enlarged the limits of her family, and instead of mothering only her children, she mothers all those who need her:

No quiere ya sólo a sus hijos,
ni se da sólo a sus hijos.
Lleva prendidas en los pechos
miles de bocas hambrientas. (10-13)

Belli has metamorphosed the protagonist into a symbolic mother, figuratively feeding thousands of hungry mouths with her own breasts as she takes up arms in this Marxist Revolution to bring equality in solidarity to her fellow Nicaraguans.

The theme of maternity as defiance is foregrounded again in Belli’s poem “Seguiremos naciendo,” from De la costilla de Eva (1987); the approach, however, is different. This poem celebrates the initiation of her daughter Maryam into the Sandinista Movement. The speaker first addresses the young girl, reminding her of the moment of her swearing-in ceremony, “cuando firmemente pronunciás tu juramento” (10), underlining that she is a “... digna militante de la juventud / sandinista” (14-15). The poetic voice stresses next that the plaza is like a giant womb giving birth, and that she too feels reborn at the same time that she gives birth to her daughter for a second time. She envisions this plaza, full of young life, as the future of the Party. In a sense they are each reborn in this moment, when they commit themselves, or recommit themselves in the case of the speaker, to the Sandinista agenda, united in their goal of creating a better future for all. Her daughter is presented as born from the poetic persona’s flesh, but also as one who has grown (germinated) into something more, torn from the Universe and sprouting from her mother’s body:

No sé dónde termina mi sangre y empieza la tuya.
La plaza es como un gigantesco vientre dando a luz
y mi carne se nace de nuevo para parirte,
This young woman, this “muchacha amapola,” who is her daughter is, indeed, part of something greater. As the speaker indicates, they are now united not only by blood, but also by the Revolution. The poetic persona is certain of their victory—that just like they defeated the Somoza regime, they will also prevail against the Contras. She also believes in the continuing cycle of defiance, that just as she has given birth to a daughter who will fight in this Revolution, her daughter, too, will give birth to future combatants:

Ven y dame la mano,
esa tu mano joven, militante.
Ahora que nos unen Revolución y sangre
enfrentaremos juntas
este futuro de guerra y de victoria
y cuando amés a un hombre
y también brote vida de tu vida,
naceremos otra vez, (31-38)

The speaker also emphasizes that, just as she was reborn in her daughter Maryam, she and her daughter both will be reborn in Maryam’s own children. This cycle of immortality, linked by blood and Revolution, will continue generation after generation. As Pilar Moyano observes in her article about the transformation of nation and womanhood “[i]n Belli’s poetry, the Sandinista woman has extended the role of the mother in a revolutionary fashion: she, as the male soldier, is willing to sacrifice all for the good of the community” (89). Not only is the mother a warrior who is prepared to die for what she believes in, but she has also prepared her own daughter to do the same. This personal, mother-daughter connection becomes evident when the reader reaches the end of the poem, for he/she discovers that the poetic voice is not only addressing a younger
guerrillera, but that she is specifically addressing her daughter, Maryam, whom she identifies by name in the closing line of the poem:

hija,
mujer,
compañera
Maryam. (41-44)

“Seguiremos naciendo” foregrounds and capitalizes the Revolution; it is presented as greater than each individual. Each person is part of “un gigantesco vientre,” even though each also has an essential individual role. The cyclical nature of life is also celebrated in this poem. Each birth is a rebirth. The mother-daughter relationship is something bigger, it is something that goes beyond a connection of blood. Now that Maryam has joined the ranks of the Sandinistas, she and her mother are also compañeras, united in the work of the Revolution. These poems, “Engendraremos niños,” “La madre,” and “Seguiremos naciendo,” (em)body motherhood and the Revolution by drawing on Belli’s own experiences as a mother and as a revolutionary. All three poems foreground the interconnectedness of the distinct roles of mother/guerrillera, uniting them through the image of “woman,” underscoring, once again, that women are multifaceted human beings.

While the three poems cited above approach maternity as defiance in solidarity within the Sandinista Revolution, Belli also writes of women’s deliberate rejection of motherhood as defiance. Itzá, the indigenous warrior woman and co-protagonist in Belli’s first novel La mujer habitada (1988), embodies this image. The following excerpt from a speech by Itzá illustrates the refusal to procreate as an empowering decision. Once it became clear to the protagonist, and the other women in her tribe, that they could not win the war against the Spanish conquistadors, they took the only path of resistance
available to them. They rejected maternity, thereby denying the invaders the slave force they depended on in their enterprise to colonize this new land and its peoples:

Nos negamos a parir. Después de meses de recios combates, uno tras otro morían los guerreros. Vimos nuestras aldeas arrasadas, nuestras tierras entregadas a nuevos dueños, nuestra gente obligada a trabajar como esclava para los encomenderos. Vimos a los jóvenes púberes separados de sus madres, enviados a trabajos forzados, o a los barcos desde donde nunca regresaban. A los guerreros capturados se les sometía a los más crueles suplicios: los despedazaban los perros o morían descuartizados por los caballos. . . . Yo recibí noticias de las mujeres de Taguzgalpa. Habían decidido no acostarse más con sus hombres. No querían parirle esclavos a los españoles. . . . Nos negamos la vida, la prolongación, la germinación de las semillas. (157-59)

Withholding life was an empowering choice that united the women in their determination to resist. It is clear, however, that they suffered, at least emotionally, as a result of this decision, for they denied themselves physical intimacy with their partners while also denying themselves the opportunity to contribute to the continuation of life, a sacred undertaking in the Mayan culture.

Another example of withholding life, of refusing maternity in defiance, is also illustrated in this same novel. When Lavinia, the other protagonist, joins the Sandinista Movement, she decides that her involvement also means the delay of motherhood:

Su existencia, día a día, parecía confundirse en acontecimientos impredecibles. La mañana y la noche eran territorios inciertos; la desaparición, la muerte, una posibilidad cotidiana. En esa situación, no quedaba más alternativa que renunciar al deseo de prolongarse. Un hijo no cabía en semejante inseguridad. (156)

Both women, Itzá and Lavinia, once they become involved in the wars being fought in their respective times, feel compelled to reject maternity. While both express a sense of loss as a result of their decision, they also demonstrate that they have the power to control their own destiny, at least when it comes to controlling their own bodies and reproductive
choices. These women embody the decision to delay or deny themselves maternity for the good of their unborn children, because they do not live in a world (Itzá) or a time (Lavinia) in which children can thrive.

The rejection of maternity is also a major element of Belli’ second novel, Sofía de los presagios (1990). The protagonist of this story, Sofía, is a modern woman who finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage. She sees divorce as her only escape, and realizes that obtaining it and making a clean break will be much easier if there are no children involved. The marriage between Sofía and her husband René was doomed from the beginning, as they came to the marriage with completely different ideas regarding what it meant to be married. Additionally, since the husband’s word is law in the patriarchal society of this novel, Sofía is virtually powerless. The narrator explains that the protagonist’s initial desire to be married was tied to gaining freedom: “Sofía quiere casarse porque el matrimonio para ella marcará el inicio de su vida adulta en la que ya no será necesaria la inocencia ni la sumisión” (31). However, her husband René has other ideas. Long before he has approached either Sofía or her guardians to make his intentions known, he has decided he will marry her. His thoughts are focused on claiming her physically, primarily by impregnating her as often as possible, while at the same time ensuring that no one else has access to her body:

Es con él que se va a casar la Sofía, se promete a sí mismo. Y cuando sea su mujer, nadie más le va a tocar ni un pelo de la cabeza. El mismo la va a acompañar a la iglesia los domingos y la va a mantener cargada como escopeta de hacienda, preñada, hasta que se le acabe la cinturita y se le pongan dulces y maternales esos ojos oscuros que brillan demasiado . . . (28)

As these words foreshadow, Sofía’s very body will become the site of their battleground.

While Sofía cannot deny René his husbandly rights, she can deny him what he
wants most of all: a child. She has access to oral contraceptives, which she takes without her husband’s knowledge. Her control over her own body, however, is limited: “Todas las noches, cuando él la toca, trata de desaparecer en su cuerpo. Sólo no estando, imaginándose lejos, puede soportar aquella violación cotidiana” (51). Regardless of his wife’s lack of receptivity, René is determined, sure of himself and of his plan. He keeps up his end of the bargain, so to speak, having sex with Sofía every night. Belli’s choice of words here is telling--la violación cotidiana (in the above citation), as well as “copulando” (below)--for these indicate that there is no love in their physical contact, no shared intimacy. René is simply claiming Sofía’s body because it is his right, in the hope of impregnating her:

René la observa y piensa que es orgullosa la mujercita, pero que el orgullo se le vencerá con el tiempo y con los hijos que tendrán que llegar porque él cumple religiosamente con su parte de hombre preñador, copulando con ella todas las noches aunque esté cansado, aunque ella no haga ningún ruido y sólo se quede inmóvil debajo de él con los ojos abiertos viendo para el techo como una estatua fría y bella. (47)

In spite of René’s determination and his diligence, he is unable to impregnate his wife.

While he can claim her body physically, he cannot overcome either her will or the contraceptives. The success of her birth control strategy proves what de Beauvoir wrote in 1949, that control over pregnancy would eventually empower women: “[c]ontraception and legal abortion would permit woman to undertake her maternities in freedom” (492). It is this very freedom of preventing motherhood, forecasted by de Beauvoir, that Sofía is enjoying some fifty years later.

Sofía not only controls her own destiny by preventing maternity and thus denying
René his much desired offspring, she also controls it by seeking a divorce, and making a deliberate decision to have another man’s child, without this other man’s agreement. Sofia chooses him, seduces him, and gets pregnant, as planned. By demanding and obtaining a divorce, and by getting pregnant on her own terms, Sofia reclaims possession of her body. Her actions prove that she has recovered her body for herself, and that she is also willing and able to possess a man’s body for her own purposes and to accomplish her own goals.

While these protagonists, Itzá, Lavinia, and Sofia, are from different places and/or times, each takes action to play an active role in her own life, to live according to her own beliefs and desires. It is significant that a primary way by which they reclaim their freedom to control their destinies--and their bodies--is through their personal decision to reappropriate motherhood: either to embrace it when and how she chooses (Sofía), to reject it (Itzá), or to delay it (Lavinia).

Belli’s next poetic collection, Apogeo (1997), though published more than twenty years after her first poemario, touches on some of the same motherhood/maternity themes the author explored in previous collections. A case in point is “Nacimiento de Maryam,” which revisits the birth of her first child, a birth she had poetized in Sobre la grama as well as in De la costilla de Eva. Here the poetic persona addresses her daughter, speaking of the unique connection that bound them together, in one body, as well as of the beginning of a birthing process that would separate them physically:

Yo, en la cama,
oyendo las voces de tus abuelos a lo lejos
desde el mundo donde sólo existíamos
tu cuerpo, mi cuerpo

---

6 The Sandinista Government granted women the right to sue for divorce. Previous to this time only men in Nicaragua had the right to do so.
y las leyes de la creación separándonos. (8-14)

The biographical elements become evident in this poem also, particularly in the next verses, for the poet writes of her thoughts and feelings, in a manner similar to the way she does it in her memoir. Again, the speaker addresses her soon-to-be-born daughter, reminding her that she was born of a woman that others perceived as too young to be a mother, though she saw herself as old through the experience of giving birth:

Diecinueve años tenía tu madre.  
“Tan jovencita”, dijo la enfermera,  
mientras yo me sentía antigua.  
(No hay momento de más sabiduría que el parto:  
el rito milenario de la especie hace una a todas las mujeres.)  
(14-18)

Once again, the poetic persona foregrounds the universalizing effects of childbirth, of how she felt connected to all women through an ancient rite that all mothers share.

As indicated, Belli writes of her wonderment at the birthing process in her memoir. She felt as an outside observer, as if Nature was taking control of her body, and she was just a witness: “A pesar del dolor, me maravillaba el proceso, la Naturaleza hecha cargo como si ella y mi cuerpo hubiesen concertado un pacto y a mí no me quedara otro papel que el de observadora” (País 47). She also describes the painful sensations of labor as erotic: “Me entregué al doliente erotismo de aquella fuerza abriéndome por dentro” (47), bringing to mind Istarú’s poem “Al dolor de parto,” as well as Belli’s previously cited “Parto.”

Both Belli and Istarú have written about uniquely female experiences such as maternity and childbirth, foregrounding both the universalizing elements of these experiences as well as the deeply personal. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, patriarchy’s
attitude with regard to the birthing process is quite different. By treating it as an abstract process, as Mary O’Brien indicates in her analysis, men have made childbirth an illness that is best treated/managed through a scientific, dispassionate approach. While Belli’s poetic version of her daughter’s birth is very personal and emotional, the account she gives in her memoir is quite different. In fact, the author recounts that, upon her arrival at the hospital, a plethora of doctors examined her in a very clinical manner. She underscores that their treatment of her and the soon-to-be-born baby—“el producto”—was consistent with O’Brien’s assertion that patriarchy considers pregnancy an illness, and childbirth a process to be managed scientifically: “Uno a uno llegaban y sin más revisaban mis intimidades, asomándose entre mis piernas como si se tratara de un open house. Los médicos se referían al bebé como ‘el producto,’ como si yo fuera una máquina ensambladora a punto de escupir alguna herramienta de jardín” (48). Contrary to this description, her poetry, like that of Istarú, ignores the objectification brought about on the mother by this rather cold, calculated male attitude with regard to maternity and childbirth. Instead, these poets explore motherhood, in all its aspects, as a joyful, fulfilling experience. Each also includes her partner in the birthing process, pointing out that in modern society fathers play a role beyond that which was imagined by patriarchy.

Belli celebrates motherhood in its myriad aspects as something unique to women that bonds them with each other while at the same time granting them a singular connection to nature through the creation of life, far surpassing the patriarchal myth of woman as the passive, irrational mother. All of her poems, however, do not follow this pattern. In some instances her verses deconstruct head-on patriarchal misinformation. “Prejuicios sobre la maternidad,” also from Apogeo, does not rejoice in the almost
magical power of women. Instead, it takes on some of the prejudices she observes in everyday life with regard to maternity. The speaker first quotes a popular saying--that the more often women give birth, the more life they themselves lose--and follows this statement by elaborating some assertions put forth by those who support this refrain, namely, that pregnancy and childbirth stretch women’s bodies, leaving them fat, old, and worn out:

Más vida dan las mujeres,
--sostiene la popular sabiduría--
más vida pierden.
Los partos las destiñen.
Engordan. Se agotan. Envejecen. (12-16)

Next, the poetic persona adds another negative association--that pregnancy takes a toll on a woman’s libido, by paraphrasing a common reaction to those who learn that she is the mother of four children. They wonder whether surely, four pregnancies have taken a toll on her sensuality and her (sexual) desires. She counters this assumption, indicating that, for her, the opposite is true: having more children connects women more closely to life, while also making them more tender and affectionate, and their bodies more sexually accommodating:

Cuatro hijos tendrían que haber terminado con la sensualidad
o el deseo.
Como si cada hijo mágicamente redujera la libido,
y no fuera la realidad exactamente lo contrario:
Cada hijo dejándonos más cerca de la vida
más proclives a la ternura,
la piel más suave y el sexo más acogedor. (17-23)

The speaker ends this poem by illustrating what she thinks wears out women--not childbirth--but rather hunger and lack of love:

Es la falta de pan, de amor, la que desgasta.
No el parto. (24-25)
Just as my previous chapter pointed out that Belli’s poetry foregrounds that older women are sexual beings and desirable, she now insists that women have a sexual appetite, even after having had several children. The speakers of these poems make plain that neither age nor childbirth need decrease a woman’s sexual drive, as is commonly reported in canonical texts and popular wisdom.

Belli celebrates those experiences that are unique to woman as unifying, as we have seen, but she also recognizes that these events are personalized by each individual. In “Y el sueño se hizo carne y habitó entre nosotros” from Mi íntima multitud (2003), she writes about what is clearly a personal experience, one drawn directly from her own life, though she also universalizes it through the title’s Biblical allusion to the Gospels. The author appropriates this quote—with a twist—from the Gospel according to St. John: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the onely begotten of the Father) full of grace and trueth” (John 1:14).7 The poetic persona recounts a dream she shared with her husband, one in which they envisioned a little girl who would become part of their family. This child is not of her body, though she is just as dear to their heart:

Tu padre y yo te soñamos la misma noche.
A la mañana siguiente, nos sorprendimos contándonos el mismo sueño.
Desde entonces te andábamos buscando.
Hay niños que se gestan en el vientre.
Y niñas, como vos, Adriana, que se gestan en el corazón. (1-6)

The child’s name allows the reader with knowledge of Belli’s personal life to recognize the identity of her adopted daughter, Adriana, a little girl that was dreamed of before she became part of the family, gestating within their hearts. This poem additionally

7 This title also establishes a connection to Belli’s poem “Parto,” from Sobre la grama, in which the poetic voice refers to her soon-to-be-born child as “un sueño de nueve meses” (5).
deconstructs the myth that adopted children are not as well loved as those of one’s flesh and blood.

Another poem from this collection, simply titled “Adriana,” elaborates on the same topic. It tells how this baby girl came to be part of the author’s family, while also emphasizing that pregnancy, gestation, and love are not the only path to motherhood:

Adriana
posiblemente nunca sabremos
ni vos, no yo,
quê entraña te dio a luz (1-4)

Qué misterio este embarazo de tu amor, Adriana,
Nacida te has gestado en mi vientre. (13-14)

The speaker reverses the birth process. Rather than gestating in her womb, the child is first born, and then grows within her mother’s womb, establishing a direct connection of love to her adoptive mother. These two very different poems on adoption point out that maternity, childbirth, and motherhood are multifaceted emotional events that cannot be summed up in a few simple facts, or reduced to one single image.

Despite Belli’s and other contemporary women poets’ celebration of motherhood, the subject of maternity continues to be problematic in feminist circles. The theorist Moira Gatens asserts that de Beauvoir’s study The Second Sex proves that the French author herself was anti-maternal, and that she considered female biology to be fundamentally limiting to women: “De Beauvoir sees female biology as a serious limitation on woman’s transcendence of ‘mere life’ into the realm of projects and the creation of values” (Feminism and Philosophy 3). Gatens, in fact, includes de Beauvoir among some feminists that view maternity and childbirth as tied to biology, thus reducing women to nothing more than the human “animals” that give birth to the next generation:
“... many feminists have connected women’s liberation with the ability to become disembodied and transcend ‘mere animal functions’ and nature” (5-6). In other words, she asserts that for some feminists, until science finds a way to create human life without the need of a womb, women will be shackled to their bodies, ultimately controlled by their biology.

Toril Moi, however, disagrees with Gaten’s conclusions, and does not read this same message in de Beauvoir’s text. Instead, she establishes a connection between this early French feminist’s idea of the body as situation and the way women explore their freedom: “... the logic of her argument is that greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman’s body, not that women will for ever be slaves to the inherently oppressive experience of childbearing” (66). Simply stated, for Moi, if power is associated with choice, then choosing to be a mother is just as empowering a decision as choosing not to be, a concept clearly exemplified in Gioconda Belli’s world.

Belli’s literature revels in this capacity to create life, unique to women, but also foregrounds woman’s freedom, exemplified by their capacity to withhold life. I once again cite her memoir, and a discussion she had with her mother regarding “the facts of life” that I mentioned in my first chapter. The young Belli was astounded to discover that she had the power to create life within her body. While she clearly states that all human bodies--those of women and men--are a work of art, it is evident that she considers that women’s bodies are even more so, that they are the masterpiece of Nature. Her words also point out that women’s power of creating life goes beyond the “mere biological” function of perpetuating the species:
I believe that Belli’s reference to a young mind, “free of prejudice,” is particularly significant, for it reflects her innocence of the very prejudices of a patriarchal society that attempts to dictate what woman is and is not, what woman can and cannot be. In short, it is these very patriarchal prejudices that seek to proclaim that woman is determined by her biology that the grown-up Belli rejects.

Yet, as proud as Belli is to be a woman, to have this unique ability to create life, she does not consider the maternal role of nurturing as the exclusive purview of women. She is, after all, a Sandinista and a feminist--one who seeks to create the “New Woman,” just as the Revolution proclaimed the creation of the “New Man.” She is also a woman who seeks to break down the polarized gender roles of patriarchy, replacing them with a more fair and equal definition of gender: “Las mujeres no poseíamos el monopolio de la maternidad. Ser consecuente con la aspiración de igualdad entre hombres y mujeres era aceptar que los hombres podían ser madres también” (País 339). Her message is clear, that while men cannot give birth, they can and should play a role in the birthing and upbringing of their children. In other words, conception should not be the beginning and the end of the man’s role and responsibilities. For Belli, men, like women, are multifaceted beings who can overcome the limited roles constructed for them by patriarchy.
CHAPTER 5:
TENGO LA PATRIA ATRAVESADA EN EL CUERPO:
(EM)BODYING THE NATION/REVOLUTION

Nicaragua is also a frequent theme in Belli’s poetry. She envisions the country as lover and muse, as a defiant young woman, and as a child in need of its mother’s protection. Within this broad range of images, however, there is one constant—the author’s deep, personal connection to her patria. The fact that Belli was a member of the Sandinistas—fighting and preparing to die for her country and her fellow countrymen and women—certainly intensified her relationship to Nicaragua. The years she lived in exile before the Sandinista victory (she had been sentenced in absentia to seven years in prison for conspiring against the dictatorship) also informed her poetry, as has her more recent self-imposed “exile,” now that she lives part of the year in the United States with her North American husband. As my study shows, Belli’s vision of Nicaragua and her relationship to her country have evolved with the passage of time. These changes are written plainly, evident in the various ways in which she embodies the nation in her literature.

Benedict Anderson examines the formation of nation and nationalism in his book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983). His analysis situates the beginning of this socio-cultural process in the late eighteenth
century, the result of “... the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces . . .” (4). Anderson indicates that these forces were primarily economical and cultural, tied to activities such as imperialism and capitalism, though he believes that nation and nationalism are most closely connected to kinship and religion, rather than to political or economic trends (5). With regard to capitalism, Anderson points to a direct connection between print-capitalism (primarily newspapers) and the formation of a national consciousness. In his opinion, print-capitalism facilitated communication, contributed to the “fixity” of language, and gave rise to “languages-of-power” (44-45). The result was an idea of unity, of “nation,” linked to linguistic and cultural traits, as well as shared experiences. He defines the nation as “... an imagined political community [that is] both inherently limited and sovereign” (6), an entity that engenders a sense of “fraternity,” for which its members are willing to fight and die. He points to “[t]he cultural products of nationalism--poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts . . .” (141), as being a clear mode of production of the personal bond between individual members and the nation. His focus on this production, however, is predominantly masculine, as the term “fraternity” implies. This perspective is also supported by the fact that, until the twentieth century, these cultural artifacts were produced almost exclusively by men. Indeed, (male) Latin American poets have been celebrating la patria in their literature for a long time. Among female Latin American writers, celebrating--and embodying--the nation is a relatively recent, and as yet relatively uncommon, and almost never studied, occurrence.

One of the finest examples of male, that is to say, canonical poetry that celebrates and embodies the nation is Pablo Neruda’s (Chile 1904-1973) Canto general (1950).
This book of poems, which was written over the course of a decade (1938-1949), encompasses the history of Latin America, from the late 1400s to the mid-twentieth century. One of the most powerful and most frequently cited verses, from the section titled “Los conquistadores,” describes the rape and torture of Cuba, personified as a young woman:

Cuba, mi amor, te amarraron al potro,
te cortaron la cara,
te apartaron las piernas de oro pálido,
te rompieron el sexo de Granada,
te atravesaron con cuchillos,
te dividieron, te quemaron. (3-8)

This cruel treatment of America by the first European conquerors, however, is just the beginning. As Eliana Rivero points out in her essay on Neruda in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, through this poem Neruda highlights the fact that the Americas are still being raped, pillaged, and exploited by outside powers, though in the modern age multinational companies are the exploiters (255).

Neruda touches on a plethora of topics in his Canto general, including the natural beauty of the Americas, and the importance of acknowledging that these nations are formed by indigenous groups, the descendents of Europeans, and of the mestizaje of them both. The author also sings the praises of many who have died during these centuries of exploitation. While he begins by honoring such well-known men as Moctezuma and Atahualpa, he also recognizes the contribution of those who have died fighting the modern scourge of imperialism, including Augusto Sandino, whom he refers to as “capitán de Nicaragua” (section IV: XXXVII, verse 92). Rivero underscores the interconnectedness of these various elements in the Canto general: “Throughout its pages the figures of the men and women who populated and created Latin America and suffered
injustice and death appear as heroes against a magnificent background of mountains, forests, oceans, and volcanoes” (256). In spite of the fact that the poet foregrounds the misery suffered by these peoples, the long years of mistreatment, inequality, and exploitation, Neruda ends this story on a most positive note, emphasizing that he is hopeful that the future will be brighter for all Americans, when Communism overcomes capitalism, bringing about social justice for the common man.

These elements--connecting the past with the present, honoring fallen heroes from previous battles (including the indigenous inhabitants), foregrounding nature, and optimism for the future--are present in much of the work of the Nicaraguan poets of the second part of the twentieth century, particularly in those poems that highlight the nation and the left-leaning Sandinista Revolution from the fifties to the eighties. And within these contexts, the personified nation is most often imagined in the guise of a woman, as lover, mother, or even muse. Laura Barbas-Rhoden indicates that this tendency is a legacy of Romanticism and Modernism: “In the code of modernism, the act of writing is gendered masculine, the passive page of chaotic natural force that must be subjected by the male imagination is gendered female, and the work of art is born from this union or violation. Similarly in the national rhetoric of the nineteenth century, the nation is gendered female, in need of male domination to realize her potential” (12). In many cases the country is envisioned as a violated, defenseless young woman, as is the case in Neruda’s poem on Cuba from Canto general. Contrary to this male tradition, the decade of the 1970s saw the integration of women writers into this previously masculine-voiced poetry. Daisy Zamora, a poet herself, focuses on the participation of women poets in the Revolution in her previously cited text La mujer nicaragüense en la poesía: “La poesía
fue, pues, para algunas mujeres un acceso a la participación revolucionaria y, al mismo tiempo, un producto literario, verbalmente revolucionario” (21). To say it another way, women too became a revolutionary force in Nicaragua, both fighting for their nation and writing about their experiences in their own words.

Belli’s second collection of poetry, Línea de fuego (1978), is an excellent example of this interaction between revolutionary activity in the form of direct participation in the Sandinista Revolution, and a woman-centered, erotic, revolutionary, feminist literature. With regard to this poemario, Belli writes: “Mi identidad fundamental era ser sandinista; ser poeta era un agregado conveniente, un talento valioso y útil para la lucha política. Mis poemas eran, pues, una mezcla--a ratos caótica--de erotismo y patriotismo que reflejaba las vivencias de mi vida cotidiana” (País 238). As the author states, these poems were written during the height of her revolutionary activities (1974-1978), a fact that is clearly reflected in the passion of her theme and tone. In fact, the revolutionary theme of these poems, combined with the quality of the poetry, earned Belli the much-coveted Casa de las Américas award in 1978. This literary prize was first awarded in Cuba in 1959. Though Casa de las Américas professes to be a non-governmental institution--it was founded in April, 1959, with the explicit goal of promoting and supporting the arts in Latin America--given the political tenor in Cuba, it is not surprising that in most cases the literature that is singled out and honored with the award is of a revolutionary, Marxist nature.

As I indicated in a previous chapter, Línea de fuego is divided into three sections, the first of which, “Patria o muerte,” is dedicated to her fellow revolutionaries and members of the FSLN: “A mis compañeros del Frente Sandinista de Liberación
Nacional” (77); the other two parts foreground a more personal embodiment of her feelings of love and sacrifice for Nicaragua. One of the first poems in the first section, “Hasta que seamos libres,” combines the personal with the patriotic, establishing a direct connection between the speaker’s body and the land for which she fights:

Ríos me atraviesan,
montañas horadan mi cuerpo
y la geografía de este país
va tomando forma en mí,
haciéndome lagos, brechas y quebradas,
tierra donde sembrar el amor
que me está abriendo como un surco,
llenándome de ganas de vivir
para verlo libre, hermoso
pleno de sonrisas. (1-10)

The poetic persona envisions her body as taking on the form of the land, a land that will be seeded with love by the liberators, through which they will give birth to a new nation, one that will be beautiful and free from political repression. This image turns around that of male poets; the patria is no longer the poet’s lover, it has become the poet herself.

The speaker foregrounds the dual actions of violence and love, highlighting the fact that the seeds being planted are those of freedom, inflaming her desire to rid her country of its oppressors: “Quiero explotar de amor / y que mis charneles acaben con los opresores” (11-12). The hearts of the people, filled with a “devastating love” for their nation, will overcome all resistance: “porque un corazón tan grande como el nuestro / resiste las más crueles torturas / y nada placa su amor devastadora” (19-21). Indeed, the very beating of these hearts will deafen their enemies:

y de latido en latido
va creciendo,
más fuerte,
más fuerte,
más fuerte,
ensordeciendo al enemigo. (22-27)

When victory is achieved, through the power of the common effort of the revolutionaries, 
shouts of victory will erupt in the mountains, inundate the rivers, and shake the trees of 
her body/patria:

y gritos de gozo y de victoria
irrumpan en las montañas,
inunden los ríos,
estremezcan las ramas de los árboles. (41-43)

Not only are these soon-to-be victorious revolutionaries directly linked to the land for 
which they fight, imagined in this poem is the speaker’s body, they are also connected to 
those who have fought and died to bring justice to the land: “Entonces, / iremos a 
despertar a nuestros muertos / con la vida que ellos nos legaron” (44-46).

Nature is foregrounded in this poem on several levels. First, the poetic persona 
imagines herself as embodying the land: she is crisscrossed by rivers, shaped by 
mountains, lakes, and valleys. It is the very land which gives her a reason to live, that is, 
to see the land free from oppressors. The land is also personified, not only as her body, 
but also because it shouts with victory and joy. In the closing stanza the speaker 
indicates that these victorious fighters will awaken the dead with their shouts of victory-- 
the dead who now form part of the very land for which they fight. This image is not only 
a Christian one derived from canonical conventions, it is also in keeping with the Mayan 
belief in the cyclical nature of life, in which death is a rebirth, and in which life and death 
are intimately connected to nature.

Michèle Najlis, another Nicaraguan Revolutionary poet, celebrates many of these 
same themes: of love in times of war and the connection the revolutionaries feel to the 
land and to those who have died for the cause, particularly in her first book, El viento
The following untitled poem, which I cite in its entirety, touches on many of the topics highlighted in Belli’s poem, though Najlis’ speaker, talking to her lover, does not foreground the body as extensively as does Belli:

A veces te miro y pienso en lo que hay entre tú y yo.
Entonces comprendo que caminamos el uno hacia el otro sobre el mismo suelo que amamos.
Sé que andamos cogidos de la mano
y que la savia se confunde con la sangre;
que nuestras vidas están unidas a las vidas de los muertos;
que nuestra voz es la voz de la montaña
y de los que habitan el corazón de la montaña.

Sé que la fuerza del hombre es nuestro canto.

The speaker envisions her body as traversed with both sap (from the trees) and blood, substances that mix within her, uniting her to the land and to the dead who are now an integral part of the land itself. It is this shared love of a couple for the land and the connection to those who have fought and died for the land and their fellow citizens that unite much of the poetry that celebrates the nation.

Amy K. Kaminsky proposes that the idea of “presence” is a key element in these revolutionary movements, in which the dead are a touchstone and a motivating factor for the living:

When victims of repression are honored in Latin America, be they disappeared students or murdered archbishops, their names are called out as if in the rolls, and the collectivity responses “Presente,” often eliciting the response, “ahora y para siempre.” Presence so asserted is at once embodied and represented, individual and historical. It does not rely on a notion of fixity and unchangeability--despite the “now and forever,” which is best read as a challenge to death and a promise to continue the struggle against tyranny. (24-25)

As Kaminsky asserts, this idea of presence is a key element in the literature that sprang
from these revolutions. Belli, however, goes beyond embodying the presence of the
disappeared, murdered, and tortured. She primarily embodies the nation as an erotic
being whose love will help bring about the coming victory, though she also, at times,
embodies the nation as suffering, tortured victim (as Neruda does with regard to Cuba);
though when she envisions the nation as victim of violence, she empowers the nation to
fight back, as I will point out in my analysis. This type of personal embodiment goes
beyond the collectivity, as Kaminsky underscores: “The revolutionary project in which
‘presence’ so constructed resonates testifies to a belief in radical change, not simply in
society but in the relations of individuals as well. ‘Presence’ . . . is . . . a notion that
posits the sense of self in the quest for transformation” (25). Belli articulates the personal
aspect of the revolution in an interview conducted by Margaret Randall after the
Sandinista victory. In response to the question: “What has it been like for you, being a
poet in this period of victory and relative peace?” (149), Belli responds:

... it’s also a process of internal revolution, which becomes more intense
during peacetime--even during this relative peace--because it’s a search
for the revolution on other levels, deeper levels. The revolution from the
inside out, the search for one’s authentic identity, for new human relations
... I’m talking about the more intimate level; the traditional man-woman
relationships, for example. That whole process can really hurt. Because
sometimes I think it’s easier to face an enemy army in combat than to
confront the inheritance of concepts and prejudices we carry inside
ourselves and to transform it. (Risking a Somersault in the Air 150)

This internal revolution is evident throughout Belli’s literature. In her efforts to confront
and change patriarchal conventions, she imagines and re-imagines her “authentic”
identity, embodying woman and the nation in a multiplicity of roles.

The poet addresses Nicaragua as a woman in “¿Qué sos Nicaragua?,” a poem
structured through a series of rhetorical questions, also from Línea de fuego. She begins
by foregrounding a rather feminine picture by referring to the relative diminutive size of Nicaragua, portraying it as a small triangle of land, lost in the middle of the world. She also underscores the erotic, for the image of the triangle is frequently associated with women’s anatomy—with their pubic hair, specifically:

¿Qué sos
sino un triangulito de tierra
perdido en la mitad del mundo? (1-3)

The speaker also envisions this vulnerable land, as “. . . un vuelo de pájaros” (5), “. . . un ruido de ríos” (10), and as the “. . . cantar de hojas en árboles gigantes” (17). This land embodies nature, but also feminized woman:

¿Qué sos
sino pechos de mujer hechos de tierra,
lisos, puntudos y amenazantes? (13-15)

However, rather than continue to present Nicaragua as the feminine lover of patriarchal discourse, soft and pliable, the poetic voice suddenly portrays her as the potentially threatening figure of a woman warrior. In the article “Erotismo, cuerpo y revolución en Línea de fuego de Gioconda Belli,” María A. Salgado observes that, in this poem (in the verse cited above, in particular) Belli “. . . se le atribuyen simultáneamente y paradojalmente a ese mismo cuerpo suave de Nicaragua atributos femeninos, pero que se describen no en términos de las suaves morbideces femeninos del paisaje, sino de las cualidades violentas y agresivas asociadas a lo masculino” (10).

Later in the poem and after addressing it through similes that speak of the country’s luxuriant vegetation, the speaker envisions Nicaragua’s shout of pain, which she portrays as the embodiment of multiple women giving birth:

¿Qué sos
sino dolor y polvo y gritos en la tarde,
This is a pain that demands revolution to bring about change: “¿Qué sos / sino puño crispado y bala en boca?” (22-23). With the closing words, the poetic voice situates herself within the poem and Nicaragua within her, demonstrating that her connection to Nicaragua is deep and personal; she is one with the county and the Nicaraguan people:

¿Qué sos, Nicaragua,
para dolerme tanto? (24-25)

Kathleen N. March characterizes Belli’s embodiment of Nicaragua as infinitely personal, and as deeply connected to the land: “Her Nicaragua is one she also defines in her own terms. It is a triangular expanse of earth, the element her feminine nature recognizes as part of itself. It has flora and fauna which populate it like her own hormones and nerves, and rivers that circulate like blood” (250). Most powerful of all is the speaker’s clear identification with the land, which, in its own suffering, brings great pain to the poetic persona.

Of a similar tone is a poem by another militant poet, a male in this case, Otto René Castillo (Guatemala 1936-1967). “Tu madrugada, Patria,” from his collection Patria, mi amor, published posthumously in 1969, foregrounds the speaker’s love for Guatemala, which he also describes as a woman. This poem’s subtitle conveys the author’s personal view of his country: “Así concibo yo a mi patria, que otros la conciban como quieran.” The speaker begins by recounting the long years he lived in exile, longing to be home:

Anduve viajando
muchos años
por el mundo,
con el lucero
de tu nombre
en los ojos.

Y no hubo
una sola mañana,
que se fuera
sin algo de lo tuyo. (1-10)

He explains that when questioned regarding the depth of his love for his country—a place of bitterness and cruelty, a small land of hunger in which the only future is death—his response is unequivocal. His love is too deep to be ignored, as is his hope for the future, for the new day that will dawn:

“¿Por qué la quieres tanto, me decían,
si es amarga y cruel
como el alma de un basta?
¿Por qué, si es tan chiquita
y tan hambrienta, que en ella
a uno sólo le queda por delante
la ardua tarea de morirse?”

Pero yo siempre respondía,
que te quiero tanto,
porque aún sumido en la tiniebla
oyendo el largo llanto
de tus hijos,
no puedo ignorar
que detrás de mí
comienza, en verdad,
tu madrugada. (17-33)

While Otto René Castillo envisions the cries as those of the children rather than those of mothers giving birth, he, like Belli, foregrounds the suffering of the people in his poem. The author’s reference to “la ardua tarea de morirse” (25) turned out to be prophetic, since he deliberately returned to Guatemala knowing the danger he was in, only to be tortured and killed by the government’s forces soon after.

Castillo again envisions Guatemala as a woman in the poem “Patria, mi amor,”
from this collection of the same name. This time the country is imagined as lover, as the title suggests. These lovers, however, are separated, leaving the speaker to feel like a widower, a man alone like a blind star in the sky:

Todo
el amor del mundo
está en mis labios
cuando te beso,
cuando caigo a tu alma
como una estrella ciega
a la noche de un viudo. (1-7)

This love the speaker professes for his lover—patria—is palpable, it is something that can be heard and seen and touched: “Oyelo, míralo, pálpalo” (8). This is a love that will be with his beloved—his Guatemala—at all times, even when he is physically absent:

Sea
siempre mi amor
tu compañía. (18-20)

The speaker indicates that he will always support his beloved patria, that she can always stand up on his love, with her bare-feet, filled with the mud of Guatemala’s winding paths:

Alzate
firme sobre
él,
patria,
con tus descalzos pies,
llenos de lodo y de caminos! (24-29)

This evidence of the poetic persona’s love, though he is in exile, is also a demonstration of his determination to return, to ensure that his love will always accompany his beloved Guatemala: “Sea / siempre mi amor / tu compañía” (18-20).

For Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Otto René Castillo is “. . . ante todo un poeta de amor” (Informe de una injusticia ix), a poet whose love goes beyond the actual beloved:
“Para mí hay en Otto René Castillo un sentido de Patria que yo suelo experimentar . . .
intima y elevada y personal, sentido casi misterioso y mítico, mucho más que mapas y
geografía. Yo siento leyéndolo su emoción por Guatemala, por el ser amado y descubro
que la dimensión de su sentir lo volcaba en una fraternidad sin fronteras” (ix-x). These
same emotions are present in Belli’s poetry. She expresses a love that also knows no
boundaries, a love that envisions Nicaragua in many guises, not limited to the
“fraternidad” of male poetry; her feminism aims to encompass both men and women.

According to this aim, Belli, does not always envision la patria in the guise of a
woman. Her poem “Ah, Nicaragua,” also from Línea de fuego, is a case in point. Not
only does the speaker embody Nicaragua as a man, she also portrays the country as her
lover:

¡Ah, Nicaragua
vos sos mi hombre
con nombre de mujer! (1-3)

This lover, the “male” Nicaragua, is envisioned as a virile, masculine presence, despite
his feminine sounding name. The poetic voice indicates that she likes everything about
him: his large expanse of jungle, valleys, and mountains; his enormous chest, covered in
curling green hair. She also revels in his physical strength, in his thunderous volcanoes,
the furor with which his sky brings a rain that soaks everything:

Me gustas en toda tu extensión de selva,
de valle y de montaña.
Me gusta tu calor y cómo reverbera el sol en tus caminos.

Me gusta tu enorme pecho verde y erizado
donde oigo tronar magma y volcanes.
Me gusta el furor que respira tu cielo
cuando llueve y empapa. (4-10)

This physical, sexual association between the Nicaragua-nature-interlocutor and the
speaker is underscored in the following verses, in which she depicts how he has possessed her from head to toe, filling her with green grass (representative of her lover, of Nicaragua), and with the pain and pleasure of her suffering country:

Me gusta esa manera en que me has poseído,
llenándome de grama, de dolor y de risa,
de los pies hasta el pelo. (4-13)

Nicaragua, embodied in this manner, is a virile male, one who the poetic voice misses tremendously because she is living elsewhere, in exile. Even so, she has not forgotten him, that is, forgotten Nicaragua, land of chains:

Estoy enamorada de vos,
perdidamente enamorada
y si te he dejado no es por mucho tiempo,
no es para olvidarme de limas y cadenas,
no es para olvidar lo que no hay que olvidar. (14-18)

In spite of the distance, and like Castillo, the speaker is with her lover, her sweet Nicaragua, her man with a woman’s name:

¡Yo estoy con vos, mi Nicaragua
mi hombre
con nombre de mujer! (19-21)

This imagery breaks with the patriarchal tradition, in which the country is decidedly female, the muse/lover/mother of the male poetic voice. This opposition would not be original, however, as it would maintain the polarization of the patriarchy, which discriminates between the genders by delineating specific, rigid roles for the sexes. Belli deliberately mixes the male/female attributes, making a true feminist contribution by highlighting the fact that there is cross-over between the genders, and that this should be acknowledged and fostered. For example, she envisions Nicaragua in a male body-- strong and virile--but with soft touches, embodying him as the lover of a poetic persona
who has been described as possessing some definitively aggressive and militant “male” qualities. Especially significant is the fact that the female poetic voice is the active subject, while the male object (Nicaragua-lover) is the passive recipient of the speaker’s erotic gaze. Salgado addresses this very issue in the previously mentioned article:

Expresar el discurso del cuerpo no representaba ya pues las mismas dificultades que sí se seguían confrontando al escribir el discurso de la militancia revolucionaria feminista. En otras palabras, el tabú del discurso erótico del propio cuerpo femenino había sido roto por la mujer desde principios del siglo XX, pero el tabú de personificar al poeta/héroe revolucionario masculino continuaba vigente. En la literatura canónica patriótica y revolucionaria la mujer había sido siempre un objeto pasivo, representado con frecuencia bajo la imagen de la Patria a la que el Poeta ama y por la que sufre y da la vida. . . (“Érotismo, cuerpo y revolución en Línea de fuego de Gioconda Belli” 7)

Indeed, Belli does not envision la patria here, but rather el país--a thoroughly masculine subject, eroticized by a female speaker--in a deliberate subversion of the male-voiced canonical paradigm. She also associates the poetic subject--this male Nicaragua--with nature, though rather than an aggressive, threatening landscape, here nature is soft and inviting. He is a land of heat and sun, with an enormous, hairy green chest that invites her sexual gaze. He fills her with grass and pain, but also with laughter.

In the years following the initial success of the Revolution in 1979, the Sandinistas had to confront a new foe--the U.S.-backed Contras. Belli’s next poetic collection Truenos y arcoiris (1982), conveys both the sense of jubilation at the victory in certain poems (“Patria Libre: 19 de Julio de 1979,” and “19 de Julio de 1980”); though others express frustration, disappointment, and the fatigue of having to continue a fight that so many thought had been won (“Ternura de los pueblos,” “Ayudame a creer que no seremos los últimos pobladores de la tierra,” “La sangre de otros,” and “Ir dejando en jirones la piel en el amor”). “Canto al nuevo tiempo” conveys the determination of the
speaker to continue the fight. She foregrounds that she is a warrior, a Sandinista, and that in order to become this warrior-Sandinista, she has renounced her class and is now perceived as a renegade:

Me levanto,
yo,
mujer sandinista,
renegada de mi clase, (1-4)

The poetic persona indicates next that she was born and raised in comfort, amongst soft pillows and dresses of tulle, unaware that so many of her fellow Nicaraguans lived without food or access to their own land, working only for the benefit of the wealthier class. She has not only repudiated her class and joined the Sandinistas, she also has left behind her name, her husband, her family, and her identity as an individual, identifying instead with the collective: “desnudando mi apellido, mi nombre” (31).

The speaker--now a New Woman in the Revolutionary sense and in the sense that she is no longer the daughter of privilege, carrying a name that would identify her with the wealthy class--joins her voice with the rest, prepared to continue the fight like protective mothers in defense of their newly-born children:

Canto,
Cantemos,
para que no se detenga jamás el sonido de estos pasos estallando,
haciendo trizas el pasado,
el brillo de las bayonetas bordeando las fronteras como una muralla de madres protectoras,
celosamente cuidando a su criatura. (54-60)

This “criatura,” the new nation of Nicaragua, is made possible by the sacrifice of so many Sandinista revolutionaries, male and female. And as the poem above points out, this new nation will need the care and protection of all its citizens, men and women. Though the
speaker envisions the nation as a child being protected by its mothers—a relatively typical role for women—these are the same mothers-guerrilleras who fought in the Sandinista Revolution in the 1970s, mothers like the one portrayed in the poem “La madre,” who are determined to continue the fight to protect and ensure their dream of freedom and justice for all in Nicaragua.

Belli once again envisions the nation as a woman in “Soñar para despertar soñando,” from this same collection. The poetic persona refers to “mis volcanes,” which she compares to the disordered breasts of a woman. Once again the natural topography of Nicaragua is foregrounded, envisioned as women’s breasts, though here they are peacefully at rest, neither soft and inviting nor militantly threatening. Instead, they are represented in a direct, true-to-life image, unbound and in their natural state:

Me dirá que tenía razón,  
que es bello este lugar,  
mis volcanes tendidos sobre el paisaje como una mujer de pechos / desordenados  
(61-63)

The speaker further indicates that this land is the same one they have all dreamed about, that it is their present, and that they must continue to work to make their dream come true:

Trabaja, mujer, trabaja,  
trabajemos,  
que el sueño está aquí mismo,  
en este mismo sitio. (66-69)

These words also convey the fact that women were an integral part of the Sandinista Revolution, and as such they are an integral part of the future of Nicaragua, for which they must work to bring it to fruition.

Belli’s feminist beliefs were evident in her first book of poetry, Sobre la grama
(1974), particularly in those poems that celebrated woman in so many different manners (poems such as “Y Dios me hizo mujer,” “De la mujer al hombre,” “Menstruación,” and “Tengo”). Her feminist convictions strengthened as she became more involved in the Revolution, something evident in her subsequent collections of poetry. Karen Kampwirth points out in *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (2004) that organized feminism was an outcome of women’s participation in the revolutionary struggle:

In Nicaragua and El Salvador, organized feminism can be seen as an unintended consequence of guerrilla struggle. The vast majority of the leaders of the feminist organizations of the nineties were active, in some way, in the revolutionary struggles of the seventies and eighties (or in the revolution of the eighties in Nicaragua). Feminists were not born, they were created. Central American feminists were created by decades of armed and unarmed social struggle for reasons that, originally, had nothing to do with gender interests. In general, the reasons women gave for joining the guerrilla struggle were similar to those given by men: to end dictatorship, to end exploitation of the poor or indigenous (or both), or to create more just countries for their children. (7-8)

Despite women’s active participation in these revolutionary struggles, Kampwirth goes on to indicate that in the post-revolutionary environment, gender-specific injustice was still a fact of life: “. . . for women, the end of the dictatorship or the completion of the civil war did not eliminate many of the forces that limited their options” (8). Feminism came to the fore to resist these limiting barriers.

Margaret Randall chronicles this very fact in her book *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited* (1994). She states that women and “women’s issues” were pushed aside by the Sandinista government after the 1979 victory. Randall goes on to explain that feminism, or “women’s issues,” were at the time of the Revolution concentrated on a few specific goals: “In Latin America, our demands were generally focused on equality in defense, access to education and jobs, more sexual and intellectual freedom, a more equitable
division of labor in the home, and control over our reproductive choices” (4). At the
start, these issues did receive some support from the FSLN, especially during the
Revolution and immediately after the July 19th victory. Kampwirth indicates as much,
explaining that introducing and enacting new laws was fairly easy in the immediate post-
revolutionary period:

Starting in July 1979 the state was transformed in multiple ways, many of
which directly affected gender relations. That transformation involved
legal reform, the expansion of access to education, the nationalization of
health care, and the creation of a wide range of state services, such as day
care centers, that opened new opportunities for women. Revising the laws
that regulated gender relations was one of the very first things the new
revolutionary government did. No doubt this was because changing laws
was fairly easy. Also, in the initial excitement of the revolution, many
hoped that new laws would rapidly make a new society. (21)

Kampwirth lists particular laws that were passed and the goals they were intended to
accomplish, such as the Law of the Means of Communication, which prohibited “. . . the
use of women as sex objects in advertising” (22). She also adds that some of these laws
“. . . contained a dual agenda: to improve women’s status and to limit what the
Sandinistas saw as capitalist excesses” (22). A third law— that of Relations between
Mother, Father, and Children— enforced shared custody, in the form of equal rights and
equal responsibilities toward children.

Not all laws introduced to enforce equality, however, were passed. Kampwirth
speaks of the 1982 Nurturing Law as a case in point. Some points of this law tried to
implement ideals expressed earlier by the Sandinistas: “[u]nlike earlier legislation that
also proclaimed shared responsibilities of family members, this law included mechanisms
to put those ideals into practice, introducing equal pay for equal work, state pensions, and
the right of nursing mothers to take an hour off work every day to breastfeed” (23).
However, Kampwirth points out that, while some of these provisions may not have presented a problem for the patriarchy, apparently another element of this law that treated masculine roles did: “. . . the Nurturing Law also required that all household members—including men—participate in housework and childcare” (23). Though this item would certainly have been difficult—if not impossible—to legislate, the law never went into effect “. . . because the Governing Junta would not ratify it” (23). Kampwirth marks the defeat of the Law of Relations between Mother, Father, and Children as the beginning of the end for “gender lawmaking” in the Sandinista government, particularly due to the fact that women decided to go along with this male-centered legislation, due to a more pressing threat against the country:

The reason that was most commonly given for the end of the first period of gender lawmaking was the beginning of the contra war. The same women who had been promoting family law reforms agreed with the Sandinista leadership that campaigning to democratize gender and generational relations could be divisive and, ultimately, threatening to the war effort. (23)

Michèle Najlis spoke about the shunting aside of feminism and gender issues with Margaret Randall in regard to the time leading up to the elections in early 1990 (in which the Sandinistas were defeated by UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora), and Violeta Chamorro was elected president): “. . . in the latter half of the eighties if you were a woman here in Nicaragua—or, worse, a woman artist or writer—you really did not have much of a chance to be who you really were. And if on top of all that you were critical, if you insisted upon voicing your criticisms, you just didn’t have a chance” (Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 57).

Belli also discussed these same issues with Randall. As Belli points out, in the immediate aftermath of the Sandinista victory, it seemed that everything was on the right
The reality was quite different, however:

What I am saying is that we didn’t analyze the discrimination at that time. We felt we had gotten what we wanted, by being allowed to fight. And you have to remember, everything was very chaotic, very intense. But in retrospect it’s quite clear; the moment victory became a possibility, that’s when we women who had been active participants in the struggle began to be forced out, to lose power, to be marginalized. We’d been on the front lines, and then we weren’t. (176)

Due to this impasse, some feminists opted for an alternative path within the system. Belli spoke to Randall about the development of another women’s group that was created to pursue feminists issues, independent from others such as AMNLAE (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza), which was so closely connected to the FSLN that it was unable to act separately. This group, the Partido de la Izquierda Erótica, which I mentioned earlier, had the explicit goal of discussing and supporting feminist issues:

A group of feminist began getting together, more than anything to talk about what was going on in the women’s movement. Because it was clear that the Sandinista women’s movement operated more in line with male interests, with the so-called national interests. They kept telling us we had to put off talking about women’s problems until we’d won the war, until the economy was back on its feet, until . . . whatever. After all that had been accomplished, then we could talk about feminist issues. (179)

This new group got its name, according to Belli, from Ana María Rodas’s book Poemas de la izquierda erótica (1973), from which I quoted earlier. As Belli indicates, the members of PIE were women who wanted to ensure that feminist issues continued to be an important part of the movement: “What we had in common was that we were all women who were well placed here; we all exercised a certain amount of influence. And we began to figure out how we might bring our ideas to bear upon public opinion, each of us working with women in whatever sector we were influential . . .” (180). This idea,
that each member would use her connections and abilities to foster support for PIE and feminists issues, is evident in Belli’s own poetry, in which one can detect a more marked tone of feminism in combination with militancy and revolutionary zeal.

Another active member of PIE who spoke to Randall about her own experiences with feminism and the Revolution was Sofía Montenegro. She grew up the daughter of a major in Somoza’s army and the sister of a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard who was accused of torturing prisoners. Montenegro asserts that she first identified herself as a feminist, and only later became involved in the Revolution as a result of her feminist concerns: “I knew I’d been fucked over because I was a woman. And I could see that rebelling at home had gotten me nowhere. The whole system was at fault. I was eager to destroy the system, beginning with my own family” (291-92). Though Montenegro’s path to feminism via the revolution is not in keeping with Kampwirth’s model that participation in the revolution came first, and that feminism was a secondary movement/sentiment, her words do bear out Kampwirth’s statement that “Feminists were not born, they were created” (7), for Montenegro the feminist was also “created”--the result of growing up in a traditional patriarchal family in which sons were encouraged to get an education while daughters were expected to marry and become dependents of their husbands. Not surprisingly, once the Revolution was won and feminist issues were pushed aside, Montenegro, like many feminists, became frustrated with the Sandinistas. She concurs with the women quoted previously that PIE was the result of this frustration, and that many feminists saw PIE itself as a way to work within the system:

By around 1987, we were acutely aware of the fact that we hardly counted--I mean, in the sense that women with real power were such a tiny minority inside the Party. We knew we could shut up or we could become involved in a tremendous confrontation: those were the two obvious
options. But we developed a third, a way of putting some of these issues on the agenda without actually breaking with the revolution. We knew that we needed more of a lobbying strategy--a lobbying technique if you will--because if we opted for confrontation, we were sure to lose. (Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 306)

This determination to continue the feminist struggle and the formation of PIE coincided with the publication of Belli’s next poetic collection, De la costilla de Eva, in 1987.

The poems in this collection convey both this fortitude that Belli shared with her fellow PIE members, as well as a renewed celebration of woman and of a female-voiced eroticism. It is thus not surprising that the poems in this book emphasize a clear interconnection between eroticism and the political, between the female body and the body politic. Greg Dawes has noted that: “Belli’s poems in De la costilla de Eva implicitly meet Cixous’ challenge [to write the body] by calling for the affirmation of the female body in the body politic. Arising out of a struggle with silence and with once-dominant patriarchal ideology, poetry attempts to define the human subject as active participant in the eros of revolution” (130). In fact, poets such as Belli attempt to redefine the body politic by re-imagining the nation in a different type of female-voiced literature, as I have pointed out in this chapter.

In her essay titled “Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic” (1987), Moira Gatens explores the need for this “re-imagining.” The critic begins by pointing out that the image of the body politic “. . . is constituted by a creative act, by a work of art or artifice, that uses the human body as its model or metaphor” (80). She goes on to indicate what I have already emphasized, that this “political” image, until quite recently, has been representative of one body only--the male body. This metaphor of the male body as the only voice present in the body politic is most evident in literature in which
the male voice envisions the nation as woman (mother, lover, or muse). In this vision, the nation’s privileged members are all male, which allows for ignoring differences within the body politic, for these differences are considered either nonexistent, or inconsequential, and are therefore rightly excluded. Gatens explains this exclusion, stating that “[a]t different times, different kinds of beings have been excluded from the pact [with the body politic], often simply by virtue of their corporeal specificity. Slaves, foreigners, women, the conquered, children, the working classes, have all been excluded from political participation, at one time of another, by their bodily specificity” (83). She goes on to suggest the lack of military abilities as a possible reason by which women, and women’s issues, have been excluded from this political body: “Constructing women as incapable of performing military service and so incapable of defending the political body from attack could serve as an example here” (83). As Pilar Moyano points out in “La transformación de la mujer y la nación en la poesía comprometida de Gioconda Belli,” women’s direct participation in the Revolution gave them a new status as members of the formerly all-male fraternity of warriors. The fact that 30% of the Sandinista forces were women might serve to point out why so many Nicaraguan women were insistent that their feminist concerns continue to be a part of the newly formed revolutionary nation, for their participation in the Revolution had been clear.

In her analysis, Gatens indicates that there are two primary tactics employed by patriarchy to silence women who attempt to present a non-canonical view: one, by animalizing the speaker, or two, by reducing her to her sex. These strategies are employed in both the literary and the political fields. Darío’s poems that I cited in Chapter 1 do both of these. Woman is presented as animal or divinity, and as defined by
her sex. As I have shown, one way by which women writers have begun to overcome these attempts to silence them has been by embracing their sexuality, and celebrating their bodies, as shown in the poetry of the authors cited in my study. Belli, in particular, undertakes this task through the multitude of roles woman (and man) embodies (embody) in her work--including those of nation as woman/male lover--thereby placing woman as speaker and partner to the body politic. This embodied, woman-voiced speech, however, is not easily heard by patriarchy:

If woman speaks from her body, with her voice, who can hear? Who can decipher the language of an hysteric, the wails of a hyena, the jabbering of a savage--apart from other hysteric, hyenas, and savages? Our political vocabulary is so limited that it is not possible, within its parameters, to raise the kinds of questions that would allow the articulation of bodily difference: it will not tolerate an embodied speech.

(Gatens, “Corporeal Representation” 86)

As Gatens implies, embodied speech will only be heard when difference is recognized and accepted by everyone, when the body politic is no longer defined by the narrow terms of man’s discourse. And as Sofía Montenegro underscores, in order to be heard, feminists in Nicaragua had to work within the system, not outside it. For Belli, a female-voiced, embodied literature speaks clearest of women’s experiences and of woman’s multiplicity. One way in which she accomplishes the foregrounding of women’s experiences and women’s multiplicity is through what Dawes terms “libidinal liberation” (141), that is to say, through a literature that combines the sexual and the political, calling for liberation within both realms. Dawes, however, emphasizes that true libidinal liberation cannot be achieved until the human body--including the female’s--is an integral part of the body politic: “When the human body can no longer be disengaged from the body politic, then an ideological inversion that allows us to appreciate it not as a ‘thing-
But rather as a thoroughly social organism, will take place” (129). Belli’s feminist struggle, like that of her peers, has been to accomplish this very goal—to make sure that the female body is an equal member of the body politic.

The speaker in Belli’s “Canto de guerra” (De la costilla de Eva) combines images of love and war, bringing together the struggle for both libidinal and political liberation. This first stanza also presents the metaphor of poetry as a weapon:

Vendrá la guerra, amor
y en el combate no habrá tregua
ni freno para el canto
sino poesía naciendo del hueco oscuro
del cañón de los fusiles. (1-5)

Because there will be no time to stop and sing, these combatants/poets/lovers will have to create poetry from war, from the battle itself, poetry that will also be a weapon in battle, though whether the poetic voice is referring here to armed battle or the feminist battle for rights, it is difficult to discern.

The last stanza hints at another danger she and her lover are in: that they may not see each other again, and thus their “memories” may die. This is no doubt an allusion to the fact that they may die in this war, but even so, this stark reality does not alter her determination; on the contrary, it reinforces her will to fight and resist:

Aunque ya no nos veamos
y hasta puedan morirse los recuerdos,
te lo juro por vos,
te lo juro apretando a Nicaragua
como niña de pecho:

¡No pasarán, amor
los venceremos! (18-24)

The poetic voice envisions Nicaragua as a young girl, a baby really, in need of her mother’s protection. And as these words clearly suggest, the speaker will hold
“Nicaragua” close to her breast, where she will be safe, because she will make sure that “they will not pass.” As Beverley and Zimmerman observe, this refrain “no pasarán,” comes from the Republican’s defense of Madrid against Franco during the Spanish Civil War, 1933-1936 (Literature and Politics 108). This allusion makes it clear that the author is associating this war with leftist struggles that have taken place in other parts of the world.

Belli’s poem “Nicaragua agua fuego,” from this same collection, uses the image of the raped woman, like Neruda in Canto general, and like so many other Spanish American poets have done since the days of the fight for Independence. Contrary to the earlier traditional image of the raped continent/country that is portrayed by canonical literature however, and of which Neruda’s earlier quote is only one example, Belli’s Nicaragua gets up after being raped, rearranges her skirt, and pursues her attacker, thereby rejecting the patriarchal role of the silent victim:

Nicaragua mi amor mi muchachita violada
levantándose componiéndose la falta
caminado detrás del asesino siguiéndolo
montaña abajo montaña arriba
no pasarán dicen los pajaritos
no pasarán dicen los amantes que hacen el amor
que hacen hijos que hacen pan que hacen trincheras (26-32)

Nature, symbolized by the birds, is on the side of Nicaragua, for they sing the same song—no pasarán—as do the lovers (the people), who in addition to making love, not weapons of war, also build a country by producing children and bread and building the trenches from which to defend their country. Like Neruda and so many others, Belli also foregrounds the mixed heritage of her country. In her characterization of Nicaragua, the poetic speaker emphasizes the mestizaje of her nation by mentioning several black and
indigenous groups that live within its frontiers: “Nicaragua mi amor mi negra miskita suma rama” (35).

This violated young woman that is Nicaragua not only gets up and goes after her attacker, she is also able to tell her story far and wide:

Nicaragua mi muchachita
baila sabe leer platica con la gente
le cuenta su cuento sale en aviones a contar
su cuento
andra por todo el mundo con su cuento a tuto
habla hasta por los codos en periódicos de idiomas incomprensibles
grita se pone brava furiosa
parece mentira cuánta bulla mete y cómo resiste
(52-60)

This modern young woman is empowered, in part, because she knows how to read. 8 She also travels and shares her story far and wide, garnering attention, in part, because she is willing to tell her story so vociferously--shouting and getting angry when necessary rather than hanging her head in shame, in keeping with the patriarchal attitude that rape is a shameful event that women must bear silently. For Pilar Moyano, the rape image Belli presents in this poem is totally new: “Such transformation results in the revision of the myth of female rape as representative of a nation humiliated and exploited by the forces of dictatorship and oppression” (“The Transformation of Nation and Womanhood” 84). Indeed, while Nicaragua, embodied as a young girl, is raped, her self-confidence is not destroyed. Thus, she will not hang her head in shame and accept society’s labels. On the contrary, she rises, pursues her violator, and--most importantly--she speaks out, far and wide.

8 This ties in with the Sandinista educational efforts in the post-revolutionary period, in which the government made the education of the citizens a primary goal--teaching people to read and write, as well as educating them about history and culture of Nicaragua. Numerous talleres de poesía were also instituted, encouraging the people to write poetry.
“Nicaragua agua fuego”—all 111 verses—is written entirely without punctuation. When read aloud, this lack of punctuation transforms these verses into a type of litany, into a long list of crimes against the people of Nicaragua, to which is added their determined response: “hace milicias va al parque inventa el amor / enciende los malinches se esconde para desconcertar / sale andando en medio de bayonetas caladas” (101-03).

This multicultural, multilingual Nicaragua that Belli has embodied in this young girl, this muchachita, is prepared to continue the fight—for freedom or death—echoing the Sandinista call to arms:

```
y cree en la vida y en la muerte
y alista espadas de fuego
para que a nadie le quede más decisión
que paraíso terrenal
o cenizas
patria libre
o morir. (105-111)
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This new embodiment or personification of Nicaragua as a young girl has her eyes wide open. She is not the victim represented in conventional literature. She is an experienced woman who has received the legacy of an imperialism that began with the conquest by the Europeans in the fifteenth century, and continued with the U.S. domination that brought about the Sandinista Revolution. Belli’s novel La mujer habitada portrays the participation of Indian women in the struggle against the conquistadores as well as the contemporary protagonist’s militancy in the Sandinista movement, in which approximately 30% of the forces were women. This girl/country is thus determined, and able, to fight back.

Pilar Moyano focuses on this dual raising up of woman and the nation in Belli’s
poetry in the previously cited article “The Transformation of Nation and Womanhood.”

As Moyano contends, this image is doubly empowering, for it presents the Sandinista woman as a capable, determined warrior who is prepared to die in battle (as many, in fact did):

In Belli’s poetry there is a simultaneous raising up by woman and nation, and both their revolutions and subsequent liberations cannot be made possible without the former’s active and forceful participation: women, as men, are willing and capable to take arms and kill in their struggle for a more just social order. The image of woman has changed to one that is fearless, strong, with the will and the skills to fight, resist and defeat domination. The Sandinista woman, as her male counterpart, is also willing to sacrifice all for the good of the community. (82-83)

Belli’s poetry not only embodies woman in a plethora of roles, including that of the woman warrior, but she also embodies the nation in a variety of guises, such as that of a young woman who is determined to fight for her people.

Other poems in De la costilla de Eva bring eroticism and revolution into the bedroom. Patricia Murray has already focused on two of these poems in her essay “A place for Eve in the revolution: Gioconda Belli and Rosario Murillo.” I have also addressed some of these poems, “Reglas del juego para hombres que quieren amar a mujeres mujeres,” and “Pequeñas lecciones del erotismo,” for example, in Chapter 2 of this study. Murray reads this collection as an example of Belli’s subversion of rules, pointing out that the poet “. . . revolutionizes social convention, particularly the traditionally passive and servile role of the woman, and demands that the Nicaraguan man take his revolution into the home” (179). Despite her approval of Belli’s subversion, Murray is also critical of the poet’s themes. She refers to a quote in which Belli had addressed the difficulty of finding one’s way in this new time, in a society in which women question the patriarchal norms. In answering a question posed to her in an
interview: “[a] lot of the men in the left today are intimidated in a certain way that you had expressed. . .”, Belli replies:

And I think it’s a problem for women, too, because sometimes you think you are very liberated. When somebody might try to establish a relationship with you, which is not traditional with you, you might feel they are not treating you the right way. I was saying to a friend that we have points of reference in the past but we don’t have points of reference towards the future. And it’s hard to know what you really want. And you have all this programming in your head that affects your whole way of behavior. (“Gioconda Belli: A Poet and Revolutionary Speaks” 42)

Commenting on these words, Murray foregrounds Belli’s ambivalence towards the construction of the “New Woman,” a woman who is equal to man in all things, writing:

This is what lies at the core of Belli’s poetry. For although she is a consistent and convincing spokesperson for the revolution and at the forefront of Nicaraguan women’s struggles against male machismo, in her poetry she reveals her own insecurities, her own clinging to points of reference in the past. (186)

Murray and her readers might have been better served if she had quoted Belli’s complete response, for the poet’s words point out that the feminist effort is an ongoing struggle for everyone involved, but that it is a battle worth waging, as is evident in the second part of her response:

I like to say that to be a liberated woman and to be a revolutionary in a sense are parallel. It’s an everyday struggle; you have to be thinking of new things and new ways. I think that’s the main thing—there’s a new way—just as I am sure the Revolution is a new way of life for women. And we have to create that new way. We have to be the creators ourselves. (“Gioconda Belli: A Poet and Revolutionary Speaks” 42)

As Belli asserts, at times even committed feminists confront internal struggles because the feminist cause is part of an evolving Revolution. It is not easy for a woman to unlearn the entrenched ideals of a patriarchal society that she has been taught. Belli indicates that at times, this is the more difficult, more painful battle: “The whole process
can really hurt. Because sometimes I think it’s easier to face an enemy army in combat than to confront the inheritance of concepts and prejudices we carry inside ourselves and to transform it” (Randall, Somersault 150). In other words, the feminist movement is an on-going battle, one that must be fought on many fronts, sometimes even within oneself, as Kaminsky indicated in the quote from Reading the Body Politic I cited earlier in this chapter.

Belli reveals the truth of this daily struggle in her memoir. In Chapter 17, “De las complicaciones del amor en tiempos de guerra,” Belli explains that she was asked by fellow poet and close friend Tomás Borge, who was serving as Minister of the Interior at the time (1984), to break off her romantic relationship with a North American journalist. In Chapter 19, “De cómo la solidaridad femenina me llevó a recuperar a Carlos,” she explains why she decided against it. According to Belli, the reasons for asking her to end this relationship were twofold: one, having to do with her position with the FSLN; and two, with her lover’s job as a journalist. Belli explains that Borge was explicit regarding his concerns: “El problema es que tu trabajo es muy delicado. Vos estás manejando toda la información de las elecciones. Los periodistas andan detrás de eso. Sería preferible que dejaras de verlo” (118). While Belli indicates that she initially agreed to his request, she was torn nonetheless:

Me senté tras el escritorio sin dejar de pensar qué actitud debía tomar. Parecía casi una disyuntiva de manual: lo público o lo privado. ¿Qué escoges? ¿Es feliz o es revolucionaria? ¿Será portar como mujer emotiva, o escoger ser “hombre nuevo”, ese constructo utópico, paradigma de nuestros sueños, capaz de sacrificar cualquier cosa por la patria? . . . Mis aspiraciones, ilusiones fantásticas de libertad, igualdad, fraternidad, cada día se iban diluyendo, desvirtuando en medio de la guerra. (119-20)

As these words underscore, Belli was torn between being an old fashioned, conventional
“emotional woman” or a “new man,” between following her heart or her mind. More than anything else, these words suggest that she was still thinking within the polarized paradigm of the patriarchy, within that binary that links woman with the irrational (the body and the emotions), and man with the rational and heroic sacrifice.

Still struggling with this decision, Belli spoke to one of her female cousins about what was being asked of her. Her cousin’s reaction is telling, for this woman recognized this request for what it was—a double-standard of the patriarchy:

¿Me vas a decir que después de tantos años de andar en esto, vas a aceptar mansamente que desconfíen de vos, que crean que porque sos mujer no podés distinguir la cola de la cabeza? Lo que pasa es que son unos machistas empedernidos. Ellos pueden hacer lo que quieran, pero que Dios nos guarde si nos atrevemos a hacer lo mismo. (136)

Belli’s disconcertment upon listening to this answer shows that there is indeed an internal revolution that must be waged, even within someone who is an avowed feminist:

Me quedé mirándola avergonzada de que no se me hubiera ocurrido a mí, que militaba activamente en las luchas feministas, ver las cosas desde esa perspectiva. Pía tenía razón. Yo había respondido de manera tradicional asumiendo sin rechistar el prejuicio engendrado desde que Adán mordió la manzana. ¡Vivan las mujeres!, pensé. Sólo juntas podíamos evitar que las nociones masculinas del deber, de lo que era incorrecto o correcto, nos nublaran el entendimiento. (136-37)

As Greg Dawes emphasizes in his analysis of Belli’s poetry in Aesthetics and Revolution: “If there is a parallel between revolutionary struggle and sexual liberation, it is valid insofar as they are both ongoing processes, a type of fluid, continuous movement” (141). Belli, like many of her contemporaries, is constantly moving toward freedom and justice, for both men and women, though she, like everyone else, has inner demons with which she must come to term from time to time.

There is a noticeable shift in the theme and tone with regard to Belli’s
(em)bodying of the nation in her later collection, Mi íntima multitud (2003). These poems are not those of militancy, war, and a violated country. “Metamorfosis” is a case in point. In these verses the poetic voice embodies the nation within herself:

Tengo la patria atravesada en el cuerpo
creciendo sus cordilleras en mis pulmones
extendiendo sus valles en mi vientre,
sus grandes ríos anegando mis piernas. (2-5)

The speaker envisions this embodiment from afar, however, as is soon revealed:

“Descarnada ambulo en las esquinas de este exilio / en otoños e inviernos” (6-7). The poetic persona indicates that she lives in exile, and that this distance from her country affects her sense of self: “No sé quién soy sin Nicaragua” (12). “Metamorfosis” conveys an autobiographical suffering, as Belli, who, since her marriage to her North American journalist, Carlos, has lived splitting her time between the Los Angeles area and Managua, Nicaragua. Though she writes of exile, as she did in her earlier poetry (particularly in Línea de fuego), this time the reason for exile is different--it is for love, not war. Even so, the poetic persona conveys the deep sense of loss and longing, much the way she does in poems from her earlier collections. While the author can return to her country at will, she still misses it as much. And, as in previous poems, the speaker foregrounds her connection to the land, and of the land to her body:

Cuando partí fue como dejarme atrás.
Cada vez que retorno, es mi cuerpo extendido
el que me da la bienvenida.
El bosque, el verdor:
yo misma. (31-35)

Not only does the poetic voice indicate that she misses her country--though it is embodied within her--, she also underscores the fact that by returning to Nicaragua, she is returning to herself, and that she welcomes herself home. Later in the poem the speaker
declares; “Mi conciencia está llena de lagos. Imágenes” (39). She then recounts these lakes and images, listing a number of places, highlighting what she misses about each one, as in the following example: “la somnolencia de Granada, los malinches en la carretera / de Nandaime” (41-42). With the closing verses the speaker implies that life away from her beloved Nicaragua--from this part of herself--is not really living:

Pasan los días sin que yo los viva.

Soy añoranza
vestida de mujer. (56-58)

She is no longer a woman, instead, she is a “yearning,” the embodiment of longing for her country, dressed like a woman. Her message is clear, while on the outside she appears to be a normal woman, she is really a being that embodies her country--its cordilleras in her lungs, its valleys in her belly, and its rivers flooding her legs--and that without her country she has no identity.

“Canción de cuna para un país suelto en llanto” foregrounds the devastation of Hurricane Mitch, which struck Central America in October and November of 1998. This hurricane caused some of the worst flooding on record, and killed thousands of people. The speaker begins by comparing the satellite image of the hurricane to an innocuous image from childhood:

En la imagen del satélite
el huracán Mitch
me recordó de la primera vez
que vi hacer algodón de azúcar. (1-4)

The poetic voice indicates that there was little warning of the devastation to come, no Noah and his Ark ready to come to the rescue: “sin que ningún Noé de barba blanca /
diera la voz de alarma / y nos acogiera en el refugio del Arca” (9-11). The next line once
again calls to mind the Bible: “El agua se hizo lodo y habitó entre nosotros” (12). Though this time the allusion to the Gospel is decidedly not in celebration, but instead conveys a message of despair, that the “mud” comes to life and lives among the inhabitants of the nation, making their lives miserable.

The remainder of the poem includes a number of rhetorical questions, such as: “¿Quién te sanará país pequeño?” (21), while the speaker tries to calm her country with promises of a lullaby:

Shssssss. Callate ya, paisito cansado de llorar.
¿Quién le canta una canción de cuna a Nicaragua?
Empecemos. Hagámoslo todos. (43-45)

With the closing words of the poem, the speaker does just that. She sings a lullaby reminiscent of a popular canción de cuna, with some minor alterations, to her country, one whose suffering causes her to envision it as if it were a child, and to sing to it as if she were soothing a child:

Duérmete Nicaragua
Duérmete mi amor
Duérmete paisito de mi corazón. (48-50)

Once again Nicaragua is foregrounded as her love, the land of her heart--perhaps even dearer now that she lives in (self-imposed) exile several months of the year.

As these two poems from Belli’s recent collection of poetry demonstrate, her vision of Nicaragua has changed. Though she previously imagined Nicaragua as a child, as in “Canto al nuevo tiempo,” for example, the speaker’s tone then was militant, for these poems conveyed the message that Nicaragua and her people were at war. In these more recent poems, however, Nicaragua is the country she feels “under her skin,” a
feeling she emphasizes with the very title of her memoir, *El país bajo mi piel*. In fact, now that she lives outside her country much of the time, Nicaragua is present within herself, and within her daughter, as Belli reveals: “Carlos y yo tenemos otra hija, Adriana, que nació en 1993. . . . Ella es mi Nicaragüita, alegre, atrevida y llena de fuerza vital” (409). Not only is woman multiple in Belli’s poetry, but Nicaragua—her other “self”—is multiple, as well. Belli has embodied Nicaragua as a strong warrior-woman, her male lover, a violated but unbeaten young woman, a child in need of protection, a baby in need of a lullaby, as her own self, and as her very own children.
CONCLUSION

Gioconda Belli has been re-imagining the female body in her literature since her first publication of poetry in *La Prensa Literaria* in 1970. These poems, which later appeared in her first poetic collection, were not politically revolutionary in the way in which much of her later work would be, though they did present a bold new vision of woman, one emanating from the patriarchal society’s image of her physical being. By writing about issues rarely expressed in poetry and by celebrating the female body in all of its unique facets and abilities, Belli announced the joyful advent of a new phase in the search for feminine identity, one that embraces the female body rather than distances itself from it. Her literature of the body answers Cixous’ call for women to write themselves into history, into the discourse, on their own terms. Belli’s foregrounding of female difference coincided with the so-called second phase of feminism, just as her emphasis on the cross-over that exists between the genders corresponds with its third phase.

Feminist women writers, particularly those who have heeded Cixous’ appeal to write the body, have affected a change in society by questioning and often subverting the patriarchal view of women presented in the literary canon. Belli herself unequivocally challenges and subverts this limiting view in her literature by rejecting the passive/active binary, claiming agency in her writing, and by celebrating woman in all her embodied potential. She also celebrates freedom—the freedom of each woman and man to choose their path and to make of themselves what they wish. These ideas are consistent with de
Beauvoir’s theory of the body as situation, and with Moi’s extrapolation of this theory:

“To say that ‘woman is not a fixed reality’ is to say that as human beings (and unlike animals) women are always in the process of making themselves what they are. We give meaning to our lives by our actions” (62-63). This assertion is consistent with Belli’s own attitude, which she communicates so eloquently in the first chapter of her memoir:

. . . pienso [que] uno llega a la vida con un ovillo de hilos en la mano. Nadie conoce el diseño final de la tela que tejerá, pero en cierto momento del bordado uno puede mirar hacia atrás y decir: ¡Claro! ¡Cómo iba a ser de otra manera! ¡En aquella punta brillante de la madeja estaba el comienzo de la trama! (20).

Indeed, that “brilliant” moment in which Belli’s feminist agenda became clear--at least to her readers--was with the publication of her very first poems. Since this auspicious beginning, her literature continues to convey a feminist message, a message which springs from her own body, in her own lived experience.

This emphasis on lived experience ties in to the feminization of exteriorist poetry, a development highlighted by Beverley and Zimmerman. Just as the testimonial novels of the seventies and eighties testified to the lived experience of the writers, exteriorist poetry, in a sense, conveys the lived, embodied experiences of those poets who write in this style. This poetry also serves as a vehicle for re-imagining the feminist identity. In Belli’s literature, the feminine identity is multiple, and continually evolving. As her own experiences as a woman have evolved with the passage of time, so too has her writing, which clearly expresses an evolution within the topics I have studied. This evolution of her treatment of these subjects underscores the true depth of her literature. For though Belli revisits these topics--woman, the erotic, motherhood, and Nicaragua--throughout her work, her approach is varied.
I began my analysis with Belli’s embodiment of “woman” because this is where the author herself initiated her feminist rebellion. Her earliest poetry joyfully celebrated the unique physical attributes of women, directly challenging the patriarchal view that envisioned the female body as the site of passivity and irrationality, as an inescapable limitation on women. Belli, on the contrary, presents the body as a site of numerous possibilities. In her literature, as in her own life, woman is multiple--she is wife and mother, lover and friend, comrade and guerrillera.

Belli’s vision of the erotic woman is a particularly subversive image. As Rodas indicates in her verses from Poemas de la izquierda erótica, women are not taught the vocabulary with which to voice their erotic desires and needs. They have had to learn it for themselves, often in open opposition to the phallocentric discourse, as Belli points out in “Mujer irredenta,” where she responds to the pressures of the patriarchy to be silent, to keep her celebration of eroticism to herself, to not talk about bellies and dampness. In this same poem Belli paraphrases the patriarchal vision of woman, according to which: “Una mujer es frágil, leve, maternal” (12). While at times Belli’s literature represents woman using these images, she also represents her as strong, profound, and “paternal.” Just as this author declares that men can be maternal, that they too are capable of fulfilling the stereotypical female role of the maternal, women are also able to perform those activities associated with the paternal role, capable of protecting their children and of fighting and even dying in war.

And yet the maternal role is one which Belli joyfully embraces in her literature. Her vision of motherhood is not one of biological essentialism, however. Maternity is a multifaceted undertaking, one which is embodied in her writing in a variety of ways. The
mother is represented as loving and nurturing, but also as defiant and war-like. Motherhood is also presented as optional. In her novels La mujer habitada and Sofía de los presagios, the protagonists display their power and independence by “undertaking their maternities in freedom” (492), to paraphrase de Beauvoir.

Belli also embodies the nation according to her own vision. She inserts woman into the previously all-male fraternity by re-envisioning the nation in a multiplicity of images. She does not simply reverse the patriarchal vision of the nation as woman. Her embodiment is a mosaic. Nicaragua is at times male lover, violated young girl, defiant woman/militant, and child. But here too there is cross-over; she also envisions Nicaragua as a man with female characteristics, underscoring the fact that the male/female binary is no more valid than the passive/active binary.

My analysis establishes that Gioconda Belli explores the multiple dimensions of woman, and sometimes of man, in her literary work. She rejects the man/woman binary opposition that Cixous analyzes in her essay “Sorties” for a more complete representation of woman. She re-imagines the female body and female identity throughout her literature, presenting woman--and by extension, herself--as multifaceted.

The poetic persona in Belli’s “Poema del encuentro,” from Apogeo, proclaims this multiplicity. The speaker highlights the fact that after searching for so long to find herself, she has finally done so. She announces that she found herself within, and that she has also discovered that she--one singular individual--is a reflection of the Universe itself:

Tanto anduve para encontrarme
no más que conmigo misma,
con el Universo reflejado en mis facciones
de premeditada imperfección. (41-44)
Not only has she found herself, discovering that she is a being who reflects the very universe in all of her little imperfections, she has discovered her own multiplicity:

La esencia de ser es multitudinaria
y en su multiplicidad
contiene mi nombre. (48-50)

This idea of multiplicity is at the heart of much of Belli’s literature. Not only does each individual have multiple facets, but it is through this multiple nature and potential that each person is connected to others, to the nation, and to the universe itself.

Belli embodies the many roles of woman in her poetry and prose. Her literature is an expression of what woman can be, of what woman has a right to be, of what it means to be a woman. In the introduction to her memoir, Belli illustrates the struggle she has undergone in order to live according to her own desires within a patriarchal society:

He sido dos mujeres y he vivido dos vidas. Una de mis mujeres quería hacerlo todo según los anales clásicos de la feminidad: casarse, tener hijos, ser complaciente, dócil y nutricia. La otra quería los privilegios masculinos: independencia, valerse por sí misma, tener vida pública, movilidad, amantes. Aprender a balancearlas y a unificar sus fuerzas para que no me desgarraran sus luchas a mordiscos y jaladas de pelos me ha tomado gran parte de la vida. Creo que al fin he logrado que ambas coexistan bajo la misma piel. Sin renunciar a ser mujer, creo que he logrado también ser hombre. (País 12)

While one cannot help but notice that Belli must equate herself to a man in order to convey the breadth and width of her achievements as a woman, I believe that her true intention is to demonstrate that we are all--men and women--multifaceted, and that the body is a situation with multiple potential.
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