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SUBLIMITY AND IDENTITY: PORTRAYALS OF THE FEMALE BODY BY LATIN
AMERICAN WOMEN POETS IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

by

Kathryn J. Mendez

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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CENTURIES

by

Kathryn J. Mendez

Adviser: Professor Araceli Tinajero

This work explores the different portrayals of the female body and its relationship to transmodernity, sublimity and identity in the latter part of the 20th century up to the first decade of the 21st century. The poets cited in the following chapters are Gioconda Belli, Alejandra Pizarnik, Ana Istarú, Elvia Ardalani, Nancy Morejón, Eliane Potiguara, and Natalie Diaz. The selected poets reflect a diverse sampling of writers from the last fifty years who regularly reference the female body as part of their work, particularly in the context of violence and testimony, motherhood and authorship, the search for home and cultural roots and as a source of sublime beauty that is capable of provoking both fear and awe. Many of these writers also employ techniques that blend the female body and elements of the grotesque while at the same time recognizing that these earthy interpretations are not necessarily a negative thing, but that they are actually complementary to the concept of the sublime when addressing how the female body is viewed both culturally and artistically. While many of these poems were written at a time where postmodernist theory was dominant, it makes sense to tap into the more recent theories of transmodernity in order to provide a more complete analysis of these poets and their works. This work chronologically traces the development of a new approach to the female body through poetry and contrasts it with previous attempts to understand and label women and their role in art and culture. Starting very far back with eighteenth century philosophers such as

Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke and moving into the twentieth century by citing psychoanalytic and postmodernist theory, this work finally breaks through to the most recent and comprehensive literary theories up to date, most of which aim to reject and/or reshape the ideas that preceded them.

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To Mom

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Transmodernity and the Sublime Danger of Female Sexuality.....	14
Chapter 2: The Poetics of Violence: Testimony, Memory and the Grotesque in the Works of Gioconda Belli and Alejandra Pizarnik and Their Legacy in 20 th Century Mexican Art.	48
Chapter 3: Motherhood and Matricide in the Poetry of Ana Istarú and Elvia Ardalani	84
Chapter 4: Going Home: The Search for Individual and Collective Voices of Black and Indigenous Women in Nancy Morejón, Natalie Diaz and Eliane Potiguara	122
Epilogue	163
Bibliography.....	169

Introduction:

For centuries, the female body has been a source of preoccupation in western literary consciousness. In the last century, writers, scientists and philosophers alike have approached female subjectivity in a variety of ways as it has transformed in cultural imagination through religion, science and art, yet after so many attempts to pinpoint its exact nature, most of these attempts have come up as misguided interpretations or simply as empty-handed, open-ended questions. These same interpreters of femininity have systematically sown doubts about the intellectual capacities of women while at the same time inquiring as to whether or not women possess souls, but even beyond this, there has been an unending and at times brutal fixation on the bodies of women that is so common and so readily available in all areas of the arts, social sciences and media, that it has become practically unconscious and reflexive for the average individual in Western society, even into modern times. In Latin America, myths and legends have been created over the dead bodies of women both real and fictional; in Argentina, for example, the myths and stories surrounding the disappearance of Eva Perón's body after her death in 1952¹ has inspired a novel as well as conspiracy theories and general curiosity. There also exists the cult of "La difunta correa," the patron saint of truckers, who died in search of her husband with a baby at her breast in the mid-nineteenth century². Mexico also has several mythical female figures that embody both femininity and death in popular culture, including "La llorona"³ and "La catrina"⁴, and in Colombian folklore there exists the figure of "La patasola" or

¹ The novel *Santa Evita* (1995) by Tomás Eloy Martínez is an example of a literary work

² See Balderston and Guy.

³ A folktale about a woman who drowns her children in a jealous rage over her husband, then drowns herself, and is seen walking by night crying out for her children.

“La tunda,” a one-legged, blood sucking man hunter who originally appears beautiful but who shows her real, hideous self to her prey once she has him under her control. Most of these cultural images carry a supposed “moral lesson” regarding the dangerous powers of women, encouraging men not to trust them or stray too far from the established cultural norms of heterosexual unions, or in other words, “man’s struggle against nature expressed itself first and foremost in his struggle against the sexual woman” (Dijkstra 43).

In the last part of the 20th century and moving into the 21st century, there has been a movement to reclaim women and their bodies, both alive and dead. Just as Roberto Fernández Retamar took steps to reclaim Latin American identity in his essay *Calibán* (1971), poets in the last half of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st have begun to take back the image of the woman by presenting the female body from a different angle as a sublimely beautiful and powerful being in the face of political violence, racial struggles and in the reshaping of the world around us by means of transmodernity⁵. In some cases, this means both “giving birth” to a new concept of the female body and its role in art and other realms; it can also mean “committing matricide” by killing off the antiquated perceptions of women in order to make space for new conceptions. In either case, it is important to explore the roots of the Western obsession with the female body in order to understand the current placement of these concepts within the lens of transmodernity and an ever-evolving Latin American identity.

This work is meant to explore the different portrayals of the female body and its relationship to transmodernity, sublimity and identity in the latter part of the 20th century up to

⁴ An image in popular Mexican culture, often associated with the Day of the Dead. The image is often a skeleton dressed up in elegant women’s clothing.

⁵ See Rodríguez Magda’s book *Transmodernidad* (2004) or her follow up article, “Transmodernidad: un Nuevo paradigma” (2011) in which she sites her original work and follows up with further discussion of the topic of transmodernity.

the first decade of the 21st century. The poets cited in the following chapters are Gioconda Belli, Alejandra Pizarnik, Ana Istarú, Elvia Ardalani, Nancy Morejón, Eliane Potiguara, and Natalie Diaz. The selected poets reflect a diverse sampling of writers from the last fifty years who regularly reference the female body as part of their work, particularly in the context of violence and testimony, motherhood and authorship, the search for home and cultural roots and as a source of sublime beauty that is capable of provoking both fear and awe. Many of these writers also employ techniques that blend the female body and elements of the grotesque or the carnivalesque⁶ while at the same time recognizing that these earthy interpretations are not necessarily a negative thing, but that they are actually complementary to the concept of the sublime when addressing how the female body is viewed both culturally and artistically.

While many of these works were written at a time where postmodernist theory was dominant, it makes sense to tap into the more recent theories of transmodernity in order to provide a more complete analysis of these poets and their works. This work chronologically traces the development of a new approach to the female body through poetry and contrasts it with previous attempts to understand and label women and their role in art and culture. Starting very far back with eighteenth century philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke and moving into the twentieth century by citing psychoanalytic and postmodernist theory, this work finally breaks through to the most recent and comprehensive literary theories up to date, most of which aim to reject and/or reshape the ideas that preceded them.

In order to emphasize the significant changes and innovations that have been occurring in how the female body is perceived (particularly when connected with conflicting concepts of beauty, the sublime, and feminine identity) it is important to cite some thoughts and theories as a

⁶ See Bakhtin.

starting point. Much of the theory here starts out based on the works of European philosophers, yet a positive and important step is made in order to allow the theoretical gaze to shift and become part of a trend towards self-identification (as opposed to labeling as “other”) as the twentieth century progresses. The selections of poetry presented are active players in providing Latin American women writers with their own platforms for self-expression, removing themselves as objects of the European gaze. Many of the European theories cited in this work were springboards for some of the more contemporary, self-actualized theories of the Americas; these recent theories particularly connected to Latin American identity and thought have helped develop a more culturally relevant and subjective stance that allows women writers to be acknowledged for their own views and unique experiences.

The female body and its connections with life and death have been sources of theoretical preoccupation for almost as long as history has been recorded. If this investigation were to begin citing religious sources, the topic would become so broad that it would be excessive, however it is worth noting that religious references, particularly biblical ones, will be common throughout the body of this investigation. In Catholicism alone, there is so much material that connects the female body with darkness, fear, and shame that it is no wonder that Latin American collective unconscious has been holding on to such perceptions for over five centuries. It is crucial to emphasize a shift of awareness in the last fifty years that has brought these subconscious phobias to light through the work of poets and other artists and thinkers, yet one must also recognize the slow and complex progress that was necessary in order to arrive at such a point.

Since the vocabulary and conceptual framework of the sublime will be used regularly, the first chapter will outline some of the basic theories of Kant and Burke, two eighteenth century European philosophers who thought that fear and attraction could commonly be felt together in

circumstances that were considered “sublime”. While these philosophers often associated such feelings as being connected with nature, women have also traditionally had similar connections with nature in imagery such as mother earth or the moon, which is often regarded as being interconnected with the tides and the rhythms of human reproduction. Kant separated the sublime and the beautiful as being two different concepts; ironically for this context, he stated that “Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flowers beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in figures are beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful [...] The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*” (47). Kant goes even further as to state that man is sublime and woman is beautiful, yet these observations were very much based on a particular conception of woman’s socially assigned attitudes and behaviors in Europe of that time. Furthermore, his philosophy goes deeper to express a fear of women, and while Kant would probably disagree, such a fear would actually be related more with the sublime and less with the beautiful as he lays them out in his work. This fear of women is practically constant in much of the theoretical framework from previous centuries, hence emphasizing the difficulties modern poets and philosophers have had to overcome in order to express themselves in a new way that goes beyond a fear of the “fair sex”. Kant perhaps unwittingly discloses a fear of women in the following passage:

It appears to be a malicious stratagem of men that they have wanted to influence the fair sex to this perverted taste. For, well aware of their weakness before her natural charms and of the fact that a single sly glance sets them more in confusion than the most difficult problem of science, so soon as woman enters upon this taste they see themselves in a decided superiority and are at an advantage that otherwise

they hardly would have, being able to succor their vanity in its weakness by a generous indulgence toward her. (79)

While Kant insists that woman is somehow undeserving of such power over men, he also admits that her awareness of this power ignites her to use it, and therefore makes her all the more dangerous to the otherwise logical, rational man.

Burke also distinguishes between a masculine sublime and a feminine beautiful. When analyzing Burke's overall theoretical intentions, Philip Shaw paraphrases Burke's work by stating "the sublime is dark, profound, and overwhelming and implicitly masculine, while the beautiful is light, fleeting, and charming and implicitly feminine" (9). Many feminist writers and theorists of psychoanalysis have since revisited and questioned this idea, and the entire body of poetry cited in this work will basically turn such an idea on its head. The poets cited in this work make deliberate choices to depict women and their bodies as being perhaps dark, profound, and overwhelming, but not always in a negative sense. Shaw digs further into Burke's ideas, making them useful when applied to that which is feminine; "It follows that whatever is obscure, our ideas about death or the nature of existence, for example, is terrifying and therefore sublime precisely because it cannot be presented to the mind in the form of a clear and distinct idea... one cannot, for example, properly experience heaven or hell, yet the ideas of such states exert a profound influence on our understanding of ourselves and of the world we inhabit. For this reason, 'Ignorance' is a crucial component of the sublime" (51). There are few better examples than woman and her body that illustrate such an anxiety about the unknown expressed mostly by male writers and philosophers both in the time of Kant and Burke and beyond. Other theorists considered in this work will discuss literature, film and social sciences (among other cultural

sources) in the centuries following Burke and Kant that make fear and ignorance of that which is feminine a central theme in their pieces.

In the twentieth century, Freud and other thinkers in the field of psychoanalysis continued to carry the torch of exploring the dread and suspicion that surrounded the female enigma. Theorists Michael Ryan and Julie Rivkin note how many languages do not have a word for the particular type of fear associated with Freud's "uncanny"; "The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar"; "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (156). These theorists, writing in the twenty first century, not only revisit some of Freud's basic sources of anxiety, particularly in men⁷, but they also can be applied as far back as Kant and Burke and their philosophies of terror in the face of that which is powerful and unknown (yet somehow alluring and beautiful at the same time). Rivkin and Ryan also discuss other twentieth century theorists such as Michele Foucault in an attempt to untangle some of the widely held myths that have bound the physical bodies of both men and women into very specific mores of sexuality and behavior. Foucault questions the economics of reproduction and heterosexual monogamy the same way in which they are questioned by Latin American writers in poetry. Foucault, like many of those who wrote theories of sexuality after him, noted how the forceful entry of science and medicine into sexual theory during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was often a barrier towards further understanding of these concepts. Often, scientific claims about sexuality (and for the purposes of this investigation, female sexuality) were passed on from the church into the hands of medicine, which began to gain an equally

⁷ Rivkin and Ryan also bring up other anxieties related to the uncanny and Freudian philosophy, such as castration, living dolls, and the existence of the doppelganger, which are all subjects closely related to masculine fears about women and their obscure powers. In Freudian theory these powers are often specifically described as sexual powers.

strong foothold in the mind of mainstream culture. The relationship between sex and power would become as problematic for women as it had been back in the time of Kant and before that; yet in the 20th century, a spike in political violence in Latin America would add a new dimension to this relationship and create fertile ground for artists and writers to seek a new understanding of the political landscape as it relates to sex and violence⁸.

In the face of dictatorships, civil wars and imperialist influence from the United States, the latter part of the twentieth century in the Americas was at a point of crisis that was often explored in the theories of postmodernism. Theorists such as Patricia Waugh point out that postmodernism was divisive among feminists, since some felt that it was a viable way of approaching the new socio-political climate, while others felt that it did away with the decades of progress in feminist theory that had come before it⁹. Waugh states:

This space was often designated ‘feminine’, but in the hands of male theorists rarely had very much to do with actual women and even threatened, in continuing to identify femininity with a mysterious, irrational and unrepresentable ‘otherness’, to keep real women locked in a prisonhouse of (postmodern) language: a condition which might seem disturbingly similar to that earlier state of eternal femininity challenged by the entire tradition of modern (i.e. Enlightened) feminism. (361)

Waugh, in her criticism of previous theorists and their acceptance of woman as an irrational “other”, began to make headway for the reinvention of the female image that was beginning to spread through Latin American art. Again, many poets took ownership of the “mysterious” and “terrifying” nature of woman, yet this kind of ownership is significantly distinct from any labels given by outside entities. In the 1990s, Bram Dijkstra and Elisabeth Bronfen would also make

⁸ See Foucault.

⁹ See Waugh.

strides in exposing and untangling some of the generally accepted myths of woman as a “vampire”¹⁰ or as being her most beautiful, romantic self in the form of a corpse¹¹. Again, both of these theorists followed Waugh’s lead in that many of the books, paintings and films that they referenced were authored by males who distinctly placed women and their bodies in the space of the “other”; these artistic interpretations were then widely accepted as cultural truths by mainstream western society.

At the turn of the century, theorists such as Rosa María Rodríguez Magda have begun to introduce new concepts of approaching social theory as a way of pulling us out of the theoretical crises that arose in the last part of the 20th century. Her concept of transmodernity tries to take the best concepts mostly from modernism, rejecting many of the more pessimistic, deconstructive aspects of postmodernism¹², while at the same time making sure not to forget history or deny the effects of globalization on today’s culture. While many of the poems cited in this study were written at the height of postmodernity, the theory of transmodernity can be applied to them in the sense that their authors recognize the climate of crisis surrounding them, while at the same time comprehending the history that comes before, while simultaneously looking towards the future as source of positive growth. In the face of such an atmosphere, the poets in this study take on a new stance that seeks to bring the concept of the female body, dead or alive, into a new focus that removes them from the space of the “other” and that embraces mystery, intensity, anxiety, sexuality and the grotesque without making these subjects taboo or trying to label women and their bodies with any one particular aspect or adjective. This goal will be aided with the use of several other 21st century theoretic contributions, including René

¹⁰ See Dijkstra.

¹¹ See Bronfen.

¹² See Rosa María Rodríguez Magda’s book *Transmodernidad* (2004).

Prieto's *Body of Writing* (2000), Robert Polhemus's *Lot's Daughters* (2005), Jill Scott's *Electra after Freud* (2005), Isabel Vitalith Maduro Rodríguez's *Concepción estética del cuerpo femenino: Estética de lo grotesco* (2012), and Vanessa Valdés' *Oshun's Daughters* (2014). By applying this most recent body of critical theory to a multifaceted collection of poetry from the last fifty years, it will be possible to compare the different strategies between poetry and theory that have hopefully lead to a greater understanding of femininity and its positive influence on creative choice and social change.

The sublime danger of female sexuality transformed by transmodernity.

The first chapter will introduce theories about perceptions of the female body prior to the development of transmodernity and contemporary poetry. Some of the theories will reach as far back as Kant and Burke to introduce early on the philosophy of the sublime. This chapter also discusses some historical background into western attitudes towards death by citing works and ideas by Philippe Ariés. To make sure this chapter remains focused on the present and does not get too lost in the past, authors such as Bronfen and Dijkstra to bring together the history and philosophy about death and the sublime while focusing specifically on the female body, often as an object. This chapter will also introduce the main points of transmodernity as outlined by Rodríguez Magda in order to draw out the specific aspects of how theory has changed throughout the twentieth century; transmodern theory will be cited throughout other chapters, so it is important to begin by laying a solid foundation of ideas relating to transmodernity and poetic expression.

The poetics of violence

The second chapter includes many diverse points of view that introduce poetry as an action and reaction to the unique violence from the end of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Gioconda Belli's works bring light to the female body as a participant in armed struggle, while Alejandra Pizarnik has a much different focus, not as a participant in armed conflict but as an observer of inner struggle where questions of identity are mixed with violent tendencies directed inward and onto the poetic self. These poets have portrayals of the female body that utilize elements of beauty and eroticism; these aspects are counterbalanced by violent and dark imagery that is clearly connected to political and personal struggles. By fleshing out these poetic works and supporting them with ideas from René Prieto's *Body of Writing* (2000), this poetry is explored as a form of expressing one's own subjectivity through testimony and body imagery over which the poet can have her own sense of control. Other forms of media and writing are also discussed in this chapter; the poetics of violence is something so profound that it goes beyond poetry and should be recognized as doing so. Artists such as Teresa Margolles and Lila Downs have brought such imagery into contemporary Mexican Art in a time where the physicality of violence and death are very real and chronic issues. Testimonial literature such as Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* as well as the collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú and Elizabeth Burgos in the book *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* speak further to the legacy of violence that has left psycho-social scars in Latin America over the last several decades.

Motherhood and Matricide

Both poets cited in the third chapter dedicate a significant amount of their work to the theme of motherhood. Ana Istarú's work is intense in its descriptions of the physicality of giving birth, something that has been relatively taboo in the past. Elvia Ardalani is less direct in her choice of vocabulary and imagery when addressing the maternal figure, yet her description of motherhood as well as her recognition of the difficulty in dealing with the mother's absence is poignant and rich in her writing. The ideas of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva are brought in as introductory theory, which is then enriched by more recent discourse on maternity and matricide; Robert Polhemus in his book *Lot's Daughters* and Jill Scott in her book *Electra After Freud* are both re-examinations of Freudian thought at the turn of the twenty first century. Their ideas can be applied to Latin American poetry in a way that recognizes the advances that have been made to psychoanalytic thought since the time of Freud and since the height of Kristeva's writing period.

The Search for Roots and Voices

The fourth chapter includes the work of Black and indigenous women who have made specific choices in poetry and philosophy to include and recognize the experience of women of color. In the Latin American context, Black and Native American women have traditionally been denied some of the basic rights afforded to white men and women belonging to the dominant culture. Nancy Morejón regularly seeks to recognize the contributions of Cuban culture both in a local sense and in a larger global perspective, particularly pertaining to the Cuban revolution. Indigenous Brazilian poetry by Eliane Potiguara is also referenced, particularly in how it explores the indigenous experience and femininity together, and the works

of Natalie Diaz are cited as a transcultural mix of the Navajo, Mexican and Anglo-American experience in the Southwest region of the United States¹³. These three poets dedicate much of their work to creating a legitimate voice as part of a larger group of women who historically have been voiceless. Recent studies such as Vanessa Valdés' *Oshun's Daughters* will play a key role in this chapter, along with literary theory contributions from writers such as Dawn Duke and Antonio Tillis, both of whom reflect particularly on the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian experience.

Focusing on the ever-changing experience of women writers and their perceptions of the female body as an integral part of their identity is a necessary exercise in order to encourage continued positive change both in literature and in mainstream culture. The work that has been done to encourage female subjectivity in Latin American literature and art has been too infrequent until now, where changing social perceptions as well as evolving technologies allow for a greater sense of community and support among women writers and those who read and appreciate their contributions. Although the motives for writing may often come from a dark place such as with political violence or racial discrimination, there are also many joyful motives for writing such as motherhood and patriotism that fuel moving and valuable literary contributions to the field of Latin American poetry. The following pages are meant to pique curiosity and enhance understanding of a creative process that for many years has been either silenced or simply non-existent. Not only do the voices of these poets stand out among their peers as exceptional examples of art, they also carry with them a strong and encouraging message that ensures a valuable place for future women writers in Latin American poetry.

¹³ Diaz writes from California, a state originally belonging to Mexican territory but ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. This part of the United States is still very connected with Mexican history, culture and language and has a significant place in Latin American cultural identity.

Chapter 1:

Transmodernity and the Sublime Danger of Female Sexuality

The good woman or the bad, the virgin or the vampire-submission or a stake through the heart- those were to be the choices for twentieth century women.

-Bram Dijkstra

Part 1

When considering the contributions of poets and theorists that have graced the last half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, it is fascinating to follow the trends that have brought us to where we currently are both in terms of literature and theory. Much has changed; the body of works represented in the following chapters was written at the height of postmodernity, yet it would make sense to consider the most recent theories available in order to bring the contributions of our poets into full view of the present. The theory of transmodernity, outlined in a 2004 book by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, moves beyond the tipping point of crisis that was so prominent in postmodern theory by recognizing the need to stop and meditate on that which makes us human and that which steals our humanity from us. Rodríguez Magda states in her book *Transmodernidad*: “Vivimos bajo el imperio de exceso, de información, de estímulos, de urgencias” (*Transmodernidad*, 216). Postmodern theorists such as Beatriz Sarlo had previously made strides to understand the chaos of a world where materialism and television were taking a center stage in ruling human thought: “La universalización imaginaria del consumo material y la cobertura total del territorio por la red audiovisual no terminan con las

diferencias sociales pero diluyen algunas manifestaciones subordinadas de esas diferencias” (116), yet transmodernity takes that idea and drives it a step further. While postmodern theory stops at a point where there is no return from dehumanized chaos, transmodernity contributes in a way that makes deconstruction turn into reflection, anarchy turns into a kind of integrated chaos, and exhaustion turns into a static connectivity. In the shift from postmodernity to transmodernity, the culture of the masses shifts into a more personalized culture, still of the masses but one that somehow encompasses local culture while at the same time connecting it on a global level. Perhaps this is not the atmosphere in which all of the poets in this work have created their bodies of writing, but this is the atmosphere in which these bodies of writing are now being read, and in some cases, published.

So how did this state of transmodernity come to be, and how have the works of such diverse poets such as Gioconda Belli and Ana Istarú, for example, evolve as theory and perceived cultural realities have evolved? Can a poem written in the 1960s be applied to theory from 2004 or later? I would postulate that it is possible to apply transmodern theory to the writings presented in this work, just as it is possible to go back and apply Kantian and Freudian theory to them with the understanding that there are parts that fit and others that do not. It would not be accurate to say that each theory presented in this chapter fits each poem perfectly; on the contrary, it is interesting to analyze diverse theories and a variety of poets and the way in which it is possible to find the pieces that fit between theory and art, while at the same time identifying the areas in which there are ruptures between the two.

To begin analyzing the role of women and their bodies in Latin American poetry, it makes sense to look to the past to get an idea of where some of the imagery that floods the cultural (un)consciousness has come from. While it is crucial to look at poetry and literary

theory in the context of the time it is written, an historical foundation is also useful so that one can follow a kind of timeline to see how thoughts have been developed over time when addressing the topics of death and femininity. Studies of the sublime, both recent and from antiquity, have a significant role in tracing the development of how women have been held in somewhat of a paralyzed state for centuries when it comes to being an object of the patriarchal gaze. When I say patriarchal, I do not necessarily mean that it is only men who are making up these behaviors and norms; the patriarchal gaze can also include the ways in which women perceive each other and themselves. The poets chosen for this work have made significant strides in changing the way women and their bodies are represented in poetry, and therefore they have participated in the evolution of the patriarchal gaze, and as such, the way in which women are viewed from a poetic sense (either by the opposite sex or by each other/themselves) has changed as a result. This chapter will discuss some of the historical and cultural attitudes towards women, specifically when coupled with the equally vexing and mysterious (yet strangely familiar) entities of death, evil and guilt. Poetry is an art form that has been known to have a close link with questions of death, whether it be literal or figurative, violent or beautiful. Theories of the sublime, as well, have a direct connection with death, since it is something that causes a mixture of terror and attraction to human beings, and it is something that has a greater force that cannot be entirely understood. Writers such as Raúl René Villamil Uriarte and Isabel Vitalith Maduro Rodríguez have dedicated entire books to the power of the grotesque in artistic creation; this fascination with that which is terrifying is still very relevant in the minds of those creating and consuming art in the present day.

Starting in the eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant, it would be helpful to point out that Kant made a distinct separation between the sublime and the beautiful. Both of these

concepts were to be considered sources of pleasure, yet the kinds of pleasures aroused by the sublime versus the beautiful were quite different. In the 21st century, it seems more common to associate the two together, yet Kant was very specific about separating them. The sublime, for Kant, was to be considered a source of both pleasure and pain, while the beautiful was meant to instill joy in the person viewing or feeling it. Kant was influenced by Edmund Burke's treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, where Burke also described the sublime as something that instills terrible fear in someone while at the same time provoking pleasure once the viewer is aware that they are at a safe distance from the terribleness that they have witnessed. This could explain some of the fascination with the story of Christ's crucifixion, for example, which is often revisited in paintings, poetry, theater and film. Burke's theory of the sublime might be likened to the present day for those who watch the news constantly, drawn to the terrible violence, illness and poverty that strikes the world, while experiencing it from the comfort and safety of their own homes. This dependence on media, particularly the television and, more recently, social media, will lead to further exploration of postmodern and transmodern theories; it is in this way that it is possible to see that while the modes of experiencing feelings of the sublime have changed over time, the fact that humans have been often drawn to that which frightens them is not by any means something new, and poetry and art have been vehicles of exploration for this pleasurable pain throughout history.

Author Philip Shaw criticizes Burke's attitude toward the sublime, particularly in reference to how it approaches that which is feminine. Shaw states:

It seems therefore that Burke's privileging of the sublime is prompted by a number of fears: the lapse of the extraordinary into 'custom'; the collapse of masculinity in the face of feminine languor; and the fall of heroic identity into social mediocrity.

For a book that invests so much in the awe-inspiring, implacable potency of the sublime it seems extraordinary that the real threat should come, not from the masculine realm of asocial (or even anti-social) self-aggrandisement, but from the feminine sphere of companionable dissolution. (63; parenthesis is in orig.)

In other words, Burke and Kant both spend quite a significant amount of time insisting on the un-extraordinary, un-sublime nature of woman, yet at the same time they each spend an equal amount of time worrying about the dark side of the “feminine sphere” of something which is supposed to be nothing more than pleasant, companionable, and full of joy. To quote Shaw again as he questions the theories of Burke and Kant, “Like the sublime, the beautiful is invested with power, though of a deceitful and uncertain nature” (61). Shaw insists that Burke has a troubling phallogentrism surrounding his treatise that is equally as “deceitful” as he believes woman is herself; he pores over the many lovely and beautiful qualities of women, while at the same time emphasizing that they are not to be trusted¹⁴.

If we are to think in the same context as Kant and determine that the sublime and the beautiful are separate, then it would be beneficial in this context to recognize that in poetry as in other art forms, feminine imagery has begun to cross back and forth from beautiful to sublime, depending on the intentions of the artist. Kant, on the other hand, was very specific in his views towards how women were portrayed, describing them as beautiful beings that were also very aware of their own powers and of the control they wielded over men. Kant makes statements in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* such as “Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly” (81) while then continuing to devalue woman as her “ugliness” grows: “Finally age, the great destroyer of beauty, threatens all of these

¹⁴ For more on Burke’s perceived “evils” of languor and beauty, see Sarafianos 66.

charms; and if it proceeds according to the natural order of things, gradually the sublime and the noble qualities must take place of the beautiful, in order to make a person always worthy of a greater respect as she ceases to be attractive” (92). Hence, in Kant’s perspective, the attractiveness or beauty of a woman is extremely important to her being and when this changes, it is necessary for a woman to have an alternate sense of self, or else her value in society will no longer exist. One cannot say that these underlying ideas have changed very much in mainstream culture today; the value of a woman is very often associated with her physical beauty, in spite of many of the efforts of feminist theory and more recent artistic attempts at showing beauty and sexuality as part of the realities of aging women¹⁵.

More recent explorations of the sublime have made attempts to understand women’s place in the many theories surrounding this simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Shaw recalls the work of Jacques Lacan by discussing femininity in the context of both the sublime and the ridiculous. Shaw writes:

Both images of femininity thus conform to the Lacanian thesis of woman as the foreclosed or sublime object of patriarchal discourse, a thesis warranting the oft-cited and much misunderstood assertion that woman, as such, does not exist. What this means is that woman, unlike man, is liberated from the constraints of the signifier. Like Antigone, she becomes sublime on account of her ability to enjoy bliss, or *jouissance*, beyond the limits of symbolization. When the sublime dimensions of the feminine are encountered in the masculine universe, masculine identity begins to break down. (144)

¹⁵ Films such as Hal Ashby’s *Harold and Maude* (1971) and Carlos Reygadas’ *Japón* (2002) are two examples of films that have sought to recognize beauty and sexuality in elderly women.

It is this very breaking down of masculine identity that has made woman so terrifying, and as Kant mentioned, women are all the more made to appear guilty of causing harm since they are completely aware of this power that they possess. This kind of fear and shaming of women who dare to experience joy or power is what has helped fuel the cultural images of the vampire woman introduced here by the theories of Bram Dijkstra in the following pages. Before the dawn of the Romantic period, theorists such as Kant and Burke suggested separation from that which is feminine as a form of self-protection. Shaw quotes: “The distinction that Burke and Kant established between the bracing austerity of the sublime and the languorous ostentation of the beautiful is recuperated in the writings of male Romanticism. In both cases, the transcendental ego must strive to detach itself from nature, from society, from the emotions, from the body and above all from the feminine” (105). Romantic writers did much to undo the works of Burke and Kant as they dove head first into the subjects of death and femininity. Romantic poetic imagery brought that which was originally feared and mistrusted by Burke and Kant to a new level of intensity that would be replicated by other writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries¹⁶.

Theorists such as Richard Kearney also strive to point out moments of change in the evolution of the woman’s image and how it is in progress of becoming something that belongs to her rather than to those imposing their gaze upon her. Kearney suggests that there is a cultural and psychological progression that humans have made as a way of coping with and exploring

¹⁶ Some examples of poets who intensified the relationship between death and the female body in poetry were American poet Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) and Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones (1874 – 1938). These poets, as well as many others, were at the head of the Romantic and Symbolist literary movements that insisted on a certain poetic beauty surrounding beautiful, young and often dead women. This aesthetic choice also became a part of the Latin American *modernismo* movement. Other examples of poets who embraced the figure of the beautiful dead woman include Cuban Julián del Casal (1863-1893), Uruguayan Delmira Agustini (1886-1914) and Nicaraguan Rubén Darío (1867 – 1916).

perceived sources of evil. The progression starts with myth, then moves on to lament, and finally lands on wisdom, which appears to be what the poets of the last half-century have been working to achieve when exploring the topics of death and femininity. Death and the female body have been mythical in realms of art and philosophy for centuries, and in being mythicized, women also become the objects of significant blame for a variety of cultural maladies¹⁷.

Kearney outlines how the process of mythicizing and lamenting the actions of women has evolved into woman's own inquisitive voice, asking similar questions about the existence of evil but offering alternative ideas that do not always make evil's origins fall back upon herself.

Kearney writes:

In mythological legends and dramas, considerations of human moral choice are inextricably linked to cosmological cycles of fate, destiny or predestination. The evil figure is the alienated figure, that is, a self determined by some force beyond itself [. . .] The second discursive genre – lament – differentiates between evil as wrongdoing and evil as suffering. Lament refers to an evil that befalls us from outside. By contrast, blame refers to evil that arises from within us and that we are responsible for [. . .] Myth proceeds towards *wisdom* – our third discursive category – to the extent that we not only recount the origins of evil but also seek to justify why such is the case for each one of us [. . .] It seeks to address the question not only of *why* but *why me?* [. . .] It tries to make moral sense of the monstrous.

(486)

Kearney continues to put Kant in somewhat of a redemptive light, noting that Kant insists on the responsibility of action in the face of evil. This is something that Kant absolutely shares with the

¹⁷ Eve from the Bible is a classic example of this type of cultural guilt.

poets in cited in this work. Gioconda Belli, for example, begins her literary career with poems of love and eroticism yet quickly transforms and grows to embrace a sense of militancy in the face of the violent conflict plaguing her country at the time of her writing. It is this kind of action in the face of evil upon which Kant insisted. While perhaps the centuries have proven that there are many distinctions between an 18th century philosopher and a poet from the late 20th century, there are also significant philosophical ties that bind them as well. Yet even though Kant tried to turn evil from a mystical problem into a practical one, he was not entirely successful. There are still moments where poetry in particular is useful in addressing such un-addressable questions of abjection, fear and evil. Kearney writes “Victims of evil cannot be silenced with either rational explanation (theodicy) or irrational submission (mysticism). Their stories cry out for other responses capable of addressing both the alterity and the humanity of evil” (489). Yet while history has clearly shown that women and their bodies have not always been the sources of evil they were once believed to be, somehow popular culture, art, science and medicine have continued with this myth, and in spite of the works of many poets and intellectuals, we have still not moved on to getting over this lament in order to focus on wisdom. There are still constant images and reminders in all walks of life that put women in a place that she has not necessarily chosen to be, which is why the work of the poets analyzed here is so crucial.

To put things in perspective, Bram Dijkstra brings us into the twentieth century by discussing the image of women in film, literature, science and politics. Dijkstra begins with ideas that were prominent at the turn of the century, but his work follows patterns of race, gender and class as it develops throughout the century, bringing to light the distortions of women that were so prominent that they were normalized regularly by popular culture. In Dijkstra’s view, women were subconsciously feared and abhorred by men because they brought them to terms

with their own mortality. “Women were nature’s secret weapon against manhood’s valiant efforts to triumph over mortality...the early twentieth century’s remarkable fear of female sexuality and the scientists’ attempts to fetishize manhood as a gateway to immortality” (4-5) were rampant in many fields, particularly in the growing and developing fields of science and medicine. This kind of sublime terror of female sexuality became, if not more amplified, perhaps more acutely experienced because it was placed in a broader spectrum in comparison to Kant and Burke. Both Kant and Burke suggested the powers of nature as being sources of the sublime, but Dijkstra’s work encompasses the fields of science and art as well. Perhaps “science” should be a term taken lightly here, since some of the techniques that were considered scientific at the time of their practice have changed significantly and much of the science behind understanding female sexuality has been disproven or at least questioned at the current time. However, taking history into context, it is important to remember that at the time that scientific or medicinal theory began tackling the issue of female sexuality, most people took medical practice as fact. It was not always common practice to question the scientific community. This is not to say, however, that the twentieth century was the first time that medicine would exploit the female body for fetish, nor would this practice miraculously end at the new millennium¹⁸.

Scientists (primarily male) could take topics such as evolution, and use them to support their arguments of women either as a useful domestic tool or an animal with instinctual (an non-intellectual) tendencies. “Indeed, the psychic growth of humanity was to a large extent dependent on evolutionary ‘warfare’...But it was now time for ‘Man’ to take over the reins from mother nature. Her methods of selection had been anything but foolproof to begin with, for they

¹⁸ Public autopsies were common practice beginning in the Middle Ages in Europe, putting dead bodies on display for visual consumption, much in the same way cinema is a public form of entertainment for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

had been based, as Darwin had pointed out, more on woman's unreliable instinctive desire to choose the best available mate than on scientific, intelligent, masculine reason" (Dijkstra 17). This approach to pitting trustworthy reason against the uncontrollable savagery of nature brings back echoes of Burke and Kant, who can also be traced to Darwin and beyond, as a way of emphasizing the idea that women could not be trusted, in fact, it makes sense to fear them, because they, like nature, cannot be tamed and have limited faculties in the way of intelligence and reason. Dijkstra goes on to state that "A sexual woman, being a primitive woman, was not 'above,' but part of, nature. One could go even further and insist that she was nature itself. In consequence, man's struggle against nature expressed itself first and foremost in his struggle against the sexual woman" (43). This "wildness" that was attributed to the female being was slightly different from Burke and Kant, who again likened women to a beautiful, well-groomed garden, yet at the same time, it is understood that this garden is something that must have been manicured and developed by man and his use of reason, experience, and control. Without such influence, "beauty" could not exist; for Burke and Kant, beauty is the result of sublime nature being tamed, controlled and shaped by men, leading one to the conclusion that feminine beauty (in the Kantian sense) could not exist without male participation. It is interesting, in contrast, to look at Alejandra Pizarnik's work, for example, and see how beauty, violence and nature are entwined in her *Árbol de Diana*, very different from the way feminine beauty is outlined in Kant. The combination of mythology references with direct, untamed language is something far different from the well-groomed Kantian garden, and perhaps then, would not be considered beautiful in Kant's philosophical context. *Árbol de Diana* does not lack feminine beauty, yet it could be perceived as a kind of threatening beauty because it directly and deliberately expressed.

Dijkstra continues to take the presumed assault on manhood push it a step further into the realm of politics. Right around the time that Darwin's theories were being used and developed as a way of keeping women at a "safe" distance from men and from themselves, Marx was developing socialist theory that would threaten all of the established political norms about economic power and production, and the gender roles that had been buttressing the theories of previous centuries. "Socialism was like a 'third sex' - an offense against nature and science alike- neither truly male nor truly female, an attempt to suspend the fundamental gender dichotomy established by the evolutionary advance. It was as much a subversion of the feminine spirit of dutiful reproductive service as an assault upon the 'virile,' creative will of the male" (Dijkstra 24). In other words, Marxism would be key in turning some of the most "modern" scientific theories about women and their roles/nature around, which is one of the many reasons why it was considered such a threat¹⁹. It would be useful to consider how Marxist theory led the way towards a kind of feminism that recognized the manner in which women were often uncompensated for their labor in a capitalist structure²⁰, and that structural norms (such as the nuclear family) and moral values (such as the preservation of virginity and monogamy) were based more on male-driven economics than they were by the irrational, unthinking woman and her body. Before Marx and Engels, the elusive concept of progress could only be explained in certain terms that did not include recognition of female contributions. Dijkstra quotes:

¹⁹ The idea of women as active participants (even in the role of sexual reproduction) in a socialist/revolutionary atmosphere will be discussed further in chapter 2 with the analysis of Gioconda Belli's poetry.

²⁰ See Engels. Much of the basis for Marxist feminist theory can be found in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) by Frederick Engels. This work introduces the idea that the oppression of women is in fact due to social relations, and not due to a woman's biology.

Woman, the feminine principle of nature, was the thief of progress. She was interested only in quantity, in species survival, in maintaining life in all its forms. She had no interest in ‘quality,’ in the ‘virile,’ elitist principles of the evolutionary advance. She made time stagnate and drained the energy from the upward thrust of manly achievement... Because the feminine principle was so intent upon maintaining life at all cost, it was directly obstructive to evolutionary advance. (26)

In other words, women had no place wasting energy on questions of progress or philosophy, but rather were intended to use their energies to reproduce and raise the next generation, the males of which were the key to hope when it came to the loftier goals of humanity. Beyond these assumptions, it was even suggested by science that women had a sort of “vampire” effect on men; if they tried to do anything other than behave as silent reproducers of humanity (such as enjoy sex or choose a life beyond motherhood) they were seen as a drain on man and his noble works. To quote Djikstra further:

Standardized assumptions about sex as a form of cannibalism, which had been inspired by descriptions of the love life of a variety of predatory insects and animals, were everywhere. An endless procession of gigantic spiders, vampires, cats, tentacled monsters, snake-bedecked women, women with (or better yet, turning into) wolves, black panthers, gorillas, bats, cobras, and whatever gaping-mouthed predators these youngish men could imagine, were thus to become the most lasting cultural heritage of turn-of-the-century biological “science.” But most prevalent of all was the ultimate temptress, the bestially beautiful, primitive African queen, who made men lust after her against their better judgment. She held within herself the preevolutionary powers of all the mythical monsters and

“lower races” combined, and hence rendered men virtually defenseless against her intemperate depredations. (146)

These images of the vampire woman or the woman/animal with wild, untamed tendencies were everywhere in popular culture, starting with novels such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* published in 1899 and seeping into the growing genre of film in such examples as *A Fool There Was* (1915) *The Snake Woman* (1961) *Predator* (1987) *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *Queen of the Damned* (2002). In Latin America, figures such as Doña Bárbara²¹ appeared, emphasizing the idea of the untamed, “man-eating” woman that was not interested in the domestic life of marriage and children, and who thereby was rumored to make pacts with the devil and destroy men and feed off their lives and their wealth. There are also more recent examples of wild women such as Consuelo, the mother of Eva Luna in the Isabel Allende novel *Eva Luna* (1987), an orphan found in the forest by missionaries whose character is a symbolic nod to the ever-present preoccupation with civilization versus barbarism. It is important to note that this idea of the primitive, untamed woman put particular pressure on women of color, who were often considered to be scientifically distinct from white women, and somehow more connected to the animalistic side of nature, with tendencies to enjoy sex and therefore behave as vampires that would lust after and feed upon the sexual energy of innocent, unsuspecting men. Sex became what Dijkstra calls a “racial battleground” (182) that dominated erotic imagination but that also caused political panic among whites in power that were preoccupied about racial mixing that was, in their minds, being instigated by sexually hungry women from non-white races. This kind of attitude would be particularly difficult to contend with in Latin America where a long tradition

²¹ See Gallegos. *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Rómulo Gallegos. The novel compares two protagonists, a young lawyer Santos Luzardo who represents civilization and culture, and Doña Bárbara, a “man-eating” woman of the plains.

of racial mixing had been in place, often involuntarily, by women of color who became objects of sexual fixation by Europeans and Creoles long before works like *Heart of Darkness*.

It is in this atmosphere that the attraction and fear (often associated with the sublime) of female sexuality and its association with death became widespread in its own peculiar way in the twentieth century, and this would be the cultural ambience into which many of this work's poets would be born and raised. Not only would the collective cultural unconscious of Latin America be holding tightly to customs of the Catholic faith, but it would be also be affected from many angles by the historical violence of conquest, slavery and colonial rule on one side while bearing the weight of the growing influence of Hollywood and the popular images of the film genre that were also being cross-bred with questionable contributions from the European scientific communities.

Why are these images and ideas of the deadly woman at the mercy of her own nature so prevalent and widely accepted? Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that the poetic, literary, and artistic representations of the dead female body make it easier for humans, both men and women, to face and explore the topic of death. "For it seems as necessary to stress the fundamental difference between real violence done to a physical body and any 'imagined' one (which represents this 'dangerous fantasy' on paper or canvas without any concretely violated body as its ultimate signified), as it is necessary to explore the way in which these two registers come to be conflated and confused" (59). In other words, it is understood that humans have urges and curiosities that are often better off repressed, yet we still need a way to come to terms with them and recognize that they are there. Women have been particular vehicles in this struggle because they and their bodies combine many elements that drive such inner curiosities, such as the power to produce new life (through sex, which because it has been a taboo in so many cultures for so many

centuries, has turned into a repressed urge that requires outlet), and, as Dijkstra states, the sexual and life-bearing aspect of a woman's body somehow inversely brings man closer to the truth about his own mortality, and it is frightening to him. It is this life/death duality that has made women the object of blame, guilt and hyperbolic vampire imagery while at the same time being treated as something sacred, desired and sought after in all of the disciplines discussed in this chapter.

It is hard to know why many women accept these distorted views of themselves, often participating in and perpetuating the myths that man's fear and curiosity has created. The images of women and their bodies presented by Dijkstra and Bronfen are in the context of a traditionally patriarchal society; these views are mainly taken from the European tradition that was passed along to European colonies as one of the effects of conquest and imperial rule. Bronfen states: "The idea of beauty's perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency, even though it actually only serves as a substitution for the facticity of human existence on fears yet must accept... That beauty is only superficially death's antithesis is in fact an extremely common notion in western culture" (62). So again, it is not only males who have obsessed over feminine beauty as a way to combat the truth of death, but also women themselves who have valued such beauty as a way of perhaps escaping their own deaths as well. Yet because it has been traditionally men who have shaped and produced the majority of mass culture in the Western world, it is the male experience of female beauty that has become most prominently reflected in popular culture. Once it is determined that the mask of beauty is false and that behind it lies death and decay, no matter what any creation or theory man has established, those seeking immortality and fearing death feel horribly tricked, and the blame is placed on she who wears the mask of beauty. As a result, women have also learned by example

of mass culture to blame themselves for such trickery, and an immense trend of self-hatred and bodily punishment has been an unfortunate result. It is for this reason that I look to the poets in this work as pioneers in banishing the blame and self-hatred that women have generationally learned to heap upon themselves as mirrors of deception and death. In the vein of transmodernity, it makes sense to recognize that women have begun in greater numbers to be owners of their personal self-image (even if it is in the form of virtual image), refusing to participate in the tradition of self-hatred and punishment, and denying the claim that they are inextricably connected with an irrational nature that is distinct from men. This does not mean in any way that transmodern theory seeks to banish the differences between men and women, yet it seems to grant women more freedom to define these differences for themselves instead of molding to pre-conceived notions of gender separateness. More men have also made attempts to break with the centuries-old Western tradition of simultaneous loathing and desire for women and their bodies by creating their own poetic celebrations of their biological counterparts; it does not mean that poetry must be stripped of desire, eroticism, or even fear, but it appears that there is more recognition that the origins of these emotions do not have to come from sources such as capitalism, Catholicism, or Darwinist theory. Literary critics such as Berta López Morales, Lucia Guerra Cunningham and Lillian Manzor-Coats have all dedicated thought and criticism to the ways in which language, voice and body imagery make themselves known in the texts of Latin American women writers; these critics have embraced the idea that fragmentation and deconstruction of the female body in text is not the end of the road. The writers in these chapters go beyond fragmentation and strive to build their own imagery separate from the male-centered concept of identity that was previously so common in literary creations.

Bronfen continues to delve deeper into the concept of women taking back their own bodies through death and authorship: “While I have, up to now, treated representations of women as passive objects and privileged tropes of masculine imagination and desire I will now address the question of how an aesthetically staged performance of death may not also signify a moment of control and power, given that the woman’s self-disintegration also becomes an act of self-construction [. . .]Dying is a move beyond communication yet also functions as these women’s one effective communicative act, in a cultural or kinship situation otherwise disinclined towards feminine authorship” (141). Therefore, in the same way many marginalized groups may take on the names originally given to them by their oppressors²², women have begun to artistically embrace their own death imagery in art as a way of transferring power from another onto their own cultural creations. One somewhat disturbing trend in literature, both in the actual lives of poets as well as in their writings, is the theme of suicide. Bronfen explains:

In my previous examples masculine rivalry with nature gave birth to the symbolic portrait by killing the woman’s body, these suicides stage how, by virtue of killing her own soma, the woman destroys the cultural construction of the feminine as ‘dead’ image ruled and violated by others in order to construct an autonomous self-image. Because culture so inextricably connects femininity with the body, and with objectification, because culture makes the feminine body such a privileged trope or stake in aesthetic and social normative debates, a woman can gain subject position only by denying her body. . . . The same gesture of recuperation occurs on the level of textuality, for even as these representations of suicide as authorship

²² This has been found commonly in black, indigenous, and gay communities where individuals or groups have taken ownership of hateful and oppressive vocabulary and epithets and turned them into privileged words meant to be used exclusively by the very communities that were victimized by such language.

break with the system of representation by posing the dead body beyond and outside semiosis, the aesthetisation translates the corpse back into semiotic, textual categories. (143)

Yet, there are ways beyond suicide (or the symbolic killing of one's own image) that have been equally if not more successful in making a statement about ownership of one's art and body.

Rodríguez Magda's work on transmodernity has brought to light that many artists and thinkers of the new millennium are working to relate with a culture of peace and positive creation, moving out of crisis mode and into a new type of global collaborative that strives to create an innovative and useful approach to understanding current cultural realities. While this kind of collaboration is in no way meant to appear as a utopia, it is a step towards cooperation that seeks to better the world through global connection as well as through local understanding. Elvia Ardalani's work is an excellent example of transculturation and the growing awareness of a global society, for example, because it takes local material and language from her native Mexico and ties them in with similar themes from other parts of the world (themes such as love, motherhood and sensuality) allowing a larger number of readers to relate with the work as it applies to their own reality.

Yet it is interesting how one can encounter echoes of past theoretical fears in Rodríguez Magda's work on transmodernity. While she emphasizes nothingness as a key concept (perhaps to be taken in a new context), the human preoccupation with nothingness is not new. This, again, is why death is such a powerful subject, and layered upon it, the female body (which, according to psychoanalysis, is also representative of a frightening kind of lacking, an emptiness, or a castration) that makes both poets and their readers so fascinated by the combination of these topics. Philippe Ariés states: "It is possible that our attitude toward life is dominated by the

certainty of failure. On the other hand, our attitude toward death is defined by the impossible hypothesis of success. That is why it makes no sense” (611). Clearly, Ariés and Rodríguez Magda are coming from two different points of view and places in time (Rodríguez Magda would probably argue that the term “certainty of failure” would not fit in the model of transmodernity, since certainty of anything is not exactly part of the transmodern model). Yet decade after decade, century after century, this idea of nothingness in its various forms is redundantly haunting in human works and philosophies, and poetry is no exception. Just as Natalie Diaz creates a hybrid poetic space coming from many backgrounds, Nancy Morejón celebrates a poetic space that is specifically Cuban, while Eliane Potiguara also uses language to help establish her own place in the context of Brazilian culture. The poets chosen for this work have all tried to fill emptiness, silence and nothingness with something, and while in many ways their practices are distinctly separated from the model of transmodernity, they are also inextricably linked.

Ariés can be again be cited and linked to Rodríguez Magda in that he discusses industry and development as a human state and, according to his theory, a way to avoid what he calls “the invisible death”. “There is a second correlation between the geographic distribution of the invisible death and what might be called the Second Industrial Revolution, that is, the world of white-collar workers, big cities, and complex technology... Our modern model of death was born and developed in places that gave birth to two beliefs: first, the belief in nature that seemed to eliminate death; next, the belief in a technology that would replace nature and eliminate death the more surely” (595). In this ambience of constant movement and perceived progress, death (along with other social taboos) seems to get in the way. In highly technological societies, people are more likely to be born and die in hospitals, hidden away from the landscape of daily

life, where illness and death become barriers to progress, and in some cases, are considered to interfere with economic survival of those who will continue living²³. The same could be said of mourning. Ariés continues: “It is quite evident that the suppression of mourning is not due to the frivolity of survivors but to a merciless coercion applied by society” (579). Like Rodríguez Magda’s theory on transmodernity, Ariés’ form of thinking emphasizes the fact that humans avoid one of the major parts of what makes us human (death) by becoming super-productive, technological beings that mask the harsh realities of life and death by focusing on economy and technology which then turn into a kind of simulation of reality.

Part 2

In the following chapter I plan to flesh out more fully the ways in which death is hidden by society yet brought back to light by theory and art. In political matters, there have been several instances in Latin America where death has been hidden by political interests and the military²⁴ or by the very communities that have been affected by violence and torture²⁵.

Rodríguez Magda also emphasizes how such personal parts of being human, whether it be

²³ Ariés brings up the issue of changing family structure where all adults in a household are required to work and participate in the economic machine, and how very seldom is there a person designated to the home who can take responsibility for children and aging or ill relatives.

²⁴ Consider, for example, the Disappeared of Argentina and Chile in the 1970s and 1980s, or more recently, the victims of narco-trafficking that have gone to mass graves in Mexico and Colombia. These are only a few examples of death hidden by politics in Latin America; it does not begin to cover the civil conflicts in Central America and the Caribbean. This topic is so broad and dense that it would require an entire study separate to this one, yet it is crucial to mention as part of the collective consciousness that has helped develop 20th/21st Century Latin American poetry.

²⁵ See Poniatowska, 235. “La normalidad, la tranquilidad de la vida de afuera, fue para mí una bofetada.” This kind of normalcy in the face of daily violence and murder was also a disturbing commonality in the case of the missing women of Juárez, Mexico starting in the 1990s.

violence, the family experience, or even intimacy and sex, in fact become technological simulations that are acted out in a kind of technological utopia rather than in gritty reality of human existence²⁶ (I use the term “reality” with caution here, since both Ariés and Rodríguez Magda insist on the fact that humans do whatever they can and must to create their own realities, and that there is not one particular version of it that has a true face), while Ariés also contributes similar (though not necessarily transmodern) thoughts that reason, work and discipline have replaced love, death, agony, orgasm, corruption and fertility (395). Poetry creates a space for activism, grief, anger and mourning that does not have a time limit, it allows for exploration and expression of taboos such as sexuality and the physical body, and it includes anyone who wishes to participate, similar to online social media that has become one of the most utilized sources of information-sharing in the 21st century. Critics such as Amy Kaminsky have pointed out that Latin American literature has created a much needed space for these themes; in her book *Reading the Body Politic* she points out how women writers have been able to tackle the topics of exile, absence, silence and invisibility in ways that are accessible and innovative. Such a space is highly important not only for women readers but for anyone seeking a source of understanding in the face of such challenges that are both highly political as well as extremely personal to each reader. Others such as Jacqueline Girón have looked deeper into language and its ability to reflect physicality in that which is feminine through the writer’s voice. At times this voice is expressed violently in the form of grunts, screams, vomit and other explicit and vivid

²⁶ On September 26, 2014, 43 students went missing in the Mexican state of Guerrero. This incident was reported immediately through online social media sites of Mexican and European activists and families, such as on Facebook, but it was not reported in the United States in the *New York Times* until October 6, 2014. It appears that many communities, especially in the United States have only been able to approach this issue through the use of technology, and refuse direct involvement.

actions that have been part of the woman writer's expression against invisibility in the literary world.

Surely the scientists discussed and cited in the works of Bronfen and Dijkstra were key in paving a road to a world of deathless technology, yet perhaps luckily, the humanities (and in this case, poetry) have done significant work to upheave and overhaul the sterile, deathless simulation of the world that science and technology have so quickly and at times, desperately, sought to create. It is interesting that in the same discussion of technology, Ariés brings up nature, which in his context, is seen as something good and full of life (while at the same time being in direct contrast to man's social order²⁷). If we look back to Dijkstra's dangerous woman/animal paradigm, we can see that the nature to which Ariés refers is quite different than the hungry, dangerous "natural" woman that feeds off of men, or even further back, it is possible to refer to Kant's view of wild, untamed, sublime nature that instills terror and awe, but that does not necessarily enhance feelings of safety from death. In the Judeo-Christian religious sense, nature is death and decay, and only religious belief has the power to combat it and instill eternal life in the intrinsically flawed human being. The poets cited in the following chapters take all of these points of view into account, and they mold them into poetry that is both universally felt and understood while at the same time being deeply meaningful to their particular cultures. In the poets being explored, we can see woman as a source of natural light and life, we can see her as an untamed, man-eating animal, she can be death itself. The beauty of the poets chosen for this work is that together they address all of the theories discussed in this chapter while at the same time removing them from the realm of theory and placing them in the framework of art. While art and theory can and should be tied together, they can and should also exist on their own,

²⁷ Consider Kant's beautiful (man-made) English garden versus the sublime (and natural) mountain range.

serving different purposes and attaining separate goals. Many of the theorists cited in this chapter are concerned with stripping layers of cultural matter in order to find embedded truths, while the poets take on the task of creating and building up these layers. The task of the reader is to actively participate in the constant construction and deconstruction of cultural layers by becoming aware of and creating their own connections and ruptures between the layers and embedded truths beneath them. The concept of “nothingness” presented both by Ariés and Rodríguez Magda seems to hold a different kind of power in the realm of poetry, or at least they are addressed in this realm as valid fears or states, but not the only option for understanding the many perceived realities of the human experience. Nothingness in the sense that Ariés presents it (something that people fear as an end to life) can be explored, denied or embraced, and at the same time, the nothingness of transmodernity (a state of existence, neither positive or negative, where existence is replaced by simulation) can be recognized or denied depending on the views of both the poet and the reader. There is something both communal and personal that exists in poetry that permits its readers to consider these options in a safe way; the poet risks herself by transposing often fearful ideas onto paper, but in doing so she presents a grand gift to her readers, who can then mourn, or be excited, or explore the grotesque, or celebrate their bodies in ways that perhaps they could not have done on their own, often due to cultural taboos or lack of access to others who share their views and ideas. In the following chapters, I will show how poetry creates a cultural community within a larger community that strips the fear of nothingness and replaces it with fruitful language and encourages readers to see the portrayal of women along with their presence/absence in a different light.

Several of the poets cited in the following chapters made significant strides with their works at a crucial time in history when modernity was shifting into postmodernity. Late modern

theory suggested that the present was a reality shaped by growing economics, progress, great narratives and historical absolutes. In Latin America, the *modernismo* and avant-garde movements brought a new life to poetry that kept up significantly with European trends while at the same time beginning to discover its own cultural voice. Postmodern theory, however, was significantly different and came at time where huge amounts of economic and political turmoil were plaguing Latin America; as far as women and their bodies, postmodernity suggested more than ever a connection between consumerism and female sexuality that had reached a new height in conjunction with the feminist movement and more liberal ideology where it was becoming more acceptable for women to express themselves and their sexuality openly and publicly. While this was, in many ways, a great stride for women, it also came with some negative repercussions. For example, Beatriz Sarlo calls to light the carnivalesque behavior of young Argentine women at nightclubs when wearing a kind of costume to express their newfound freedom while at the same time being completely different by day. Sarlo writes:

El disfraz es un gran tema. En las discotecas, a la madrugada, los muy jóvenes interpretan, a su modo, un rito. Se trata del carnaval que todos pensaban definitivamente retirado de la cultura urbana. Sin embargo, el fin de siglo lo desentierra para salir de noche. Que nadie se confunda: esa chica que parece una prostituta dibujada en una historieta de la movida española, es simplemente una máscara. Ella se ha disfrazado de prostituta pero sería un completo malentendido que se la confundiera con una prostituta verdadera (que, por otra parte, no se viste como ella sino en el estilo imitación modelo). Confundirla con una prostituta equivaldría a haber creído, en un carnaval de los años veinte, que la “dama Antigua” o la “bailarina rusa” venían de siglo XVIII de Rusia... Esa chica ha

elegido una máscara que usa a la madrugada; no es una versión del traje de fiesta de su madre, ni el resultado de la negociación entre un vestido de princesa y las posibilidades económicas de la familia. (31-32)

Notice how Sarlo emphasizes that this girl has carefully and willingly chosen her mask and her costume, and how this is different perhaps than what her mother may have done in a previous generation, where girls and young women were more likely to dress in a way that emphasized her (or her family's) economic value. This change is just one example of how women in the postmodern era started to be able to choose how they were to be viewed, even if it is through wearing a costume. Some would suggest that this girl has taken on a subjective role in choosing her own costume and therefore having a say in how the cultural gaze falls upon her, while others might worry that her choice of costume may only feel like a choice, but instead it is actually a subconscious decision to follow sexual norms and materialistic tendencies set by a patriarchal media. Perhaps the important question here is whether or not the girl described by Sarlo feels as though she has a choice; she may even agree with and enjoy the style suggestions presented to her by the media without being just another individual brainwashed by postmodern consumerism. Note here that I use the term "individual" quite purposefully, because again, one of the key ideas in postmodern theory is that community and societal values, norms and decisions change and develop into individual actions in postmodern theory, hence leading to the sense that the young woman described above has made her nocturnal costume decision based not on societal norms but more on what she believes would suit her best.

There are some ways in which postmodern theory flows somewhat seamlessly into transmodern theory; part of this has much to do with questions of the self²⁸. One of the main crises of postmodernity is the loss of the individual, or the self. Modernity seemed to hold hope for feminism in that it tended to expose male-dominated myths embedded in the grand narratives of progress. Postmodernism, in its own way, also tends to be feminist that it does away with these great narratives all together, yet at what price? Patricia Waugh sheds some light on the issue:

The crisis in understanding of selfhood and knowledge has produced a radical uncertainty which has infected feminism as much as any other emancipatory movement. Historically, the rise of second-wave feminism coincided with a growing incredulity towards universal truth-claims. Yet feminism has, to some extent, always been 'postmodern'. Feminists have shown how Enlightenment discourses universalize white, Western, middle-class male experience and have thus exposed the buried strategies of domination implicit in the ideal of objective knowledge... [yet] it would seem that feminists may have more to lose in a premature renunciation of the goals and methods of Enlightenment thought. For, to accept the arguments of strong postmodernism is to raise uncertainty even about the existence of a specifically female subject and inevitably, therefore, about the very possibility of political agency for women. (346-347)

In other words, one of the main postmodern intentions is to stress the fact that we only think we know things, and that if we are to do away with the great narratives of the Western white male,

²⁸ To read commentary from other theorists on the death of the self in postmodern theory, see Jameson 149.

then it would make equal sense to do away with the narratives of feminism as well²⁹. Waugh does not appear to go as far as to do away with the existence of women, yet she does make a point of how postmodern language has been guilty of perpetuating the myths about women and femininity outlined by Djikstra and Bronfen:

But analogy may all too easily be mistaken for causality and a revolutionary political significance claimed for a semi-mystical notion of otherness. This space was often designated 'feminine', but in the hands of male theorists rarely had very much to do with actual women and even threatened, in continuing to identify femininity with a mysterious, irrational and unrepresentable 'otherness', to keep real women locked in a prisonhouse of (postmodern) language: a condition which might seem disturbingly similar to that earlier state of eternal femininity challenged by the entire tradition of modern (i.e. Enlightened) feminism... What follows from this, for feminism, is that gender, like class, or race, or ethnicity, can no longer be regarded as an essential or even a stable category, nor can it be used to explain the practices of human societies as a whole. It is no longer legitimate to appeal to the category 'women' to ground a meta-narrative of political practice—even in the name of emancipation. (351)

It is at this point that I find Waugh's words to be problematic, and it is also at this point that perhaps transmodern theory would be more appropriately applied to the poets found in this work. Waugh's preoccupation that postmodern theory is somewhat unstable for feminist theory because it can tend to, in fact, do away with women altogether, is actually quite valid. However,

²⁹ See Waugh 349. Waugh briefly alludes to Judith Butler's theory that the term "woman" actually means nothing, but that it is rather the result of misguided language games related to society's invented gender roles.

stating that the term “woman” is such an unstable category that it cannot be used legitimately in discourse would thereby negatively affect some of the work that has been done by our poets. It does not appear that any of the poets cited in the following chapters have any intention of shying away from being labeled as “women”. In fact, a woman’s body, her contributions to culture, society and daily life; her participation in art, politics and war have all been important themes in the poems chosen here. It is exactly this category, “woman”, that our poets are seeking to find and redefine. Clearly they seek to remove women and their bodies from the classic Enlightenment model of narrative, but in no way do these poets appear to wish to do away with the category of “woman” altogether. Women and their different manifestations of self and female subjectivity are certainly not confined to any particular narrative; the poems in the following chapters are just pieces of experience that may not even need to be woven into a larger narrative, yet at the same time, readers are invited to create their own interpretations and narratives out of these snippets of poetry as they so choose. This is not, therefore, the kind of imposed narrative of the Enlightenment and modernist theory, but rather an offering of ideas that give their readers some agency in interpretation and value; this is where transmodernity fits well with this concept.

Transmodernity does not tend to impose narrative, nor does it aim to do away with it all together. It has a different way of approaching the difficulties of the past by recognizing them while at the same time moving on from them and focusing on a new present that is global yet local and constantly evolving. Rodríguez Magda writes:

Debemos partir, abandonando antiguas ilusiones, del análisis de la crisis de la modernidad, las críticas posmodernas, hasta llegar a la configuración del nuevo paradigma conceptual y social. Lo “trans” no es un prefijo milagroso, ni el anhelo

de un multiculturalismo angélico, no es la síntesis de modernidad y premodernidad, sino de la modernidad y la postmodernidad. Constituye, en primer lugar, la descripción de una sociedad globalizada, rizomática, tecnológica, gestada desde el primer mundo, enfrentada a sus otros, a la vez que los penetra y asume, y en segundo lugar, el esfuerzo por trascender esta clausura envolvente, hiperreal, relativista. (*Transmodernidad: un nuevo paradigma* 3)

In other words, looking at the last fifty years of Latin American poetry by women from the viewpoint of transmodernity means that we can take the best from premodernity, modernity and postmodernity, without necessarily adhering to any of them with too much vigor or insisting that they be synthesized into a newfound, hybrid theory. This does not mean that a transmodern present is a kind of theoretical utopia; there are still issues that have not been resolved and there is much work to be done, yet it makes sense to read the poets in these chapters with a sense that progress and crisis are not absolutes, and that any narrative that is developed from the messages in these poems are the result of global influence, transcultural interactions and even at times, technology.

I agree with transmodern theory in that it attempts to reestablish some of the ethical challenges of modernity, including equality and justice while at the same time recognizing that these concepts were scrutinized under the gaze of postmodernity. I also support the transmodern concept that sometimes fiction and that which appears to be concrete fact can sometimes synthesize into a virtual reality via computer screens and other forms of technology, turning our human reality into a virtual experience. There is not doubt that more and more writers are choosing to publish poetry online, for example, instead of in printed journals and books. Yet again, this does not necessarily mean that we should engage in a narrative that suggests that

books are becoming obsolete due to globalization and technology. It would be fair to say instead that in some circumstances and for some poets, virtual publishing and use of technology is more applicable to their poetic style and public message, while for others, it is not.

I also think that poetry can in many ways be exempt from the idea that our human experiences with sex and intimacy have become overwhelmingly “cyber”-connected, meaning that cybersex and virtual eroticism have taken a main stage in how we express ourselves sexually. Poetry is still very much on the forefront of celebrating human sexuality in its various forms, keeping those who read and understand it from becoming cyborgs who simply participate in mass technological sexual behavior. This is not to pass judgment on those who choose to do so, but rather a way of denying that a world in which technology, global connection and computer screens have taken a front stage, thereby allowing less of a possibility of sex and intimacy between humans without the interference of a screen. Poetry openly and fearlessly celebrates eroticism and human sexuality, allowing its readers again to construct personal narrative depending on how they interpret each work.

Where poetry and transmodernity work together well, it seems, is in their mutual ability to embrace meditation, nothingness and self-reflection. Poetry has always seemed to be an art that expresses itself more by what is not said than what is. While it appears to be commonly thought both in postmodern and transmodern theory that humans live in a world of constant, uncontrolled motion and excess, there are ways in which to control this intensity, to slow down, and to keep in touch with whatever humanity we have as a species. Rodríguez Magda quotes: “La experiencia de lo sagrado no requiere tanto de un dios como de la capacidad de ensimismamiento. Y para ello es necesario tiempo, sosiego, concentración. Detener la vorágine de nuestra actividad desbocada, recuperar el propio ritmo” (*Transmodernidad* 216). While our

theorist goes on to suggest that the world is highly lacking in this ability to stop and self-reflect, the fact that she even wrote such words is encouraging, because it means that there is at least some kind of movement towards recognizing the importance of slowing down, disconnecting and reflecting, even if it is not in the more traditional form that requires a god or religious belief. Poetry is a great force that works toward that same goal, which is why, in spite of their differences, transmodern theory and poetic practice can actually be quite compatible.

Rodríguez Magda dedicates an entire chapter to the extinction of the gaze, which again is something that can be aptly applied to the poetics of death and the female body. While the gaze is pointed out to be something that is enjoyable and powerful for those who look without being seen, those who are seen and objectified do not experience such relish. Rodríguez Magda points out that because our society is now so addicted to the use of the screen, we have this (perhaps false) feeling of power as the observer and not the objectified. While this is a complex state of being that can have both positive and negative outcomes, it is worth pointing out that the poetry chosen for this work is also an example of an attempt to show how these poets and their poetic subjects are taking back the concept of the gaze. The poems of Ana Istarú, for example, describe the subject using the “yo” to interpret the intense experience of childbirth. It is not someone else gazing upon a woman giving birth, it is not a medical or scientific explanation of female reproduction. Instead it is a woman gazing at herself and at the wonder of her own body, and sharing this perspective with her readers. Surely, her readers will have a different imaginative gaze than she does as the writer, yet she has taken control of the direction of the gaze before sharing her work with the world. In critiquing the works of Istarú, Jeana Paul-Ureña notes how significant it is that the poet not only writes openly about her own body, she also writes about the masculine body. Paul-Ureña notes that some might consider this a decidedly aggressive choice,

yet it is a choice that directly challenges traditional social behavior and the way readers view themselves and others. So while poetry does not do away with the gaze as we know it the way that transmodern theory's virtual systems try to do, it does share the theoretical concept that the idea of the gaze is changing and the viewer/object relationship is not what it was before, even after some of the more recent developments postmodern theory³⁰. While the transmodern connection with technology the screen seems to grant people a feeling that they have a stable place in the cosmos, poetry too, can have a similar effect, without necessarily tying us to a machine or an electronic network. Exceptions, of course, can be made for online publications, and even hard-copy publications are themselves creating a type of global connectivity since it is possible to access these publications via the internet almost anywhere on earth. Each possibility allows for a kind of isolated connectivity, yet each option (being part of a virtual community or being part of a community of poetry and books) can also help alleviate isolation that has become so common in hyper-technologically driven cultures. Transmodernity (as does poetry) continues the tradition of recognizing the differences in human experience; neither theory nor art in this case have any illusions of wiping historical slates clean or pretending that we have everything in common simply due to the fact that we are humans. "La transmodernidad recupera así el ideal moderno del cosmopolitismo, pero no por una universalidad limpia de las diferencias específicas como imaginara el espíritu ilustrado, sino precisamente al diseminar estas diferencias más allá de su ubicación tradicional, generando una cumplida síntesis, un cosmopolitismo transétnico" (Rodríguez Magda, *Transmodernity* 40). The transcultural relationships between different societies on earth have in some ways moved beyond the great myths and narratives of dead white men, although these myths and narratives are by no means totally gone. A great part of the work

³⁰ For more on theory connected to the gaze and the concept of panopticism, see Foucault.

of the poets cited in the following chapters is to expose these myths and narratives and perhaps recreate them in a way that would make them fit into the “trans” model of interconnected understanding. And unlike modernity, transmodern theory and the poetry of the last fifty years has stopped obsessively looking forward at the future, and both have begun to maintain more of a steady relationship with the present, perhaps not looking forward to the day when tolerance and ethics become the norm, but instead by actively trying to instill those values in today without entirely wiping away the past and its influences on thinking and co-existing.

Chapter 2:

The Poetics of Violence: Testimony, Memory and the Grotesque in the Works of Gioconda Belli and Alejandra Pizarnik and Their Legacy in 20th Century Mexican Art.

Violence has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. Ever since human beings began to develop language and writing, poetry has become an artistic, spiritual and emotional outlet that helps us process the psychological damage, both collective and individual, that violence causes to our species. The violence associated with civil war and political dictatorships in 20th century Latin America has left its mark on the world in many forms, particularly in the arts, where people use their creations to express the unexpressable, or to help create a collective memory that attempts to address the painful reactions associated with this tumultuous part of history. Gioconda Belli and Alejandra Pizarnik are two poets who wrote from a place of turmoil; Belli's works have followed the transformation of the female figure as a sensual and passionate lover to comrade in armed conflict, while at the same time she writes about being a mother and later becoming a seasoned and mature woman with experience and hindsight. This particular chapter will focus on Belli's *De la costilla de Eva*, published in 1987, because it takes some of the best of Belli's writing style from two of her earlier works, *Sobre la grama* (1972) and *Línea de fuego* (1978), while at the same time allowing wisdom and experience to seep into her poems from over a decade of resistance, experience with political exile, and experiencing the evolution from lover to soldier to mother. Alejandra Pizarnik, on the other hand, offers a very distinct point of view on violence and the female body in her work *Árbol de Diana*. Pizarnik is not writing from a participatory place in armed struggle, yet her relationship with internal violence is very real in her work. A child of Jewish immigrants who

fled to Argentina to escape the rampant persecution in Europe, Pizarnik was raised with an acute sense of death and loss. Perhaps this relationship to loss and memory are directly connected to her poetic choices. Her protest and conflict is very much internal (while Belli's often comes from a more external place), both of these poets have an approach to the female body in their work that intertwines violent imagery with eroticism and awareness of one's physical and psycho-emotional self.

Both poets deal directly with the female body and its relationship to internal and external violence. They also perhaps unknowingly seek to embrace what has come to be known as the aesthetic of the grotesque³¹ in the way that they look to explore the earthier and perhaps more taboo parts of femininity that have often been left out of imagery and verse created by male artists, such as the vocabulary of female sexual desire, or the painful and gritty process of childbirth. Pizarnik often appears to be drowning loneliness, while Belli seems to fight against the depths of loneliness through solidarity with others and regular allusions to other poetic subjects such as lovers, comrades and children. However, a common ground that they share is that there is a strong sense of feminine poetic self in these two works, even though they are separated by more than two decades, and both of their works contain violent imagery connected with the poetic self that is profoundly rooted in the feminine body and its relationship to violence³².

Further in this chapter, the works of Belli and Pizarnik will be seen as precursors to other artistic manifestations of violence and their connections with the female body, both in literature

³¹ For more on the theory of the grotesque, see Bakhtin.

³² Both works allude to some of the great female protagonists of western literary consciousness. Eve from the Bible in Belli's *De la costilla de Eva* and Diana the hunter from Greek mythology in *Árbol de Diana* are both figures that are used often in the discussion of femininity and its role in contemporary western thought.

and in other artistic areas, striving to reach this same place of connection with the female body and its experience with violence. Photography, journalism and music have all followed the example of poets in how they seek not to show the prettiness of femininity, but rather the uglier side that is harder to look at. Testimonial art is crucial to the movement toward allowing women to tell their stories of violence and pain, whether it be connected to politics or whether it comes from a more personal, intimate place of suffering. These additional examples of testimony and protest art are excellent ways of recalling some of the theories discussed in chapter one, such as the theory of transmodernity and how the cyber-universe contributes both to the reproduction of violent imagery while at the same time creating a space for dialogue and self-expression that is accessible on a “glocal” level³³.

When examining Belli’s *De la costilla de Eva*, readers and critics will find a clear relationship between love and violence. Belli started her career in poetry with a much different approach in *Sobre la grama* at a time when the armed conflict in Nicaragua was not yet at a raging boil. Her poems, while they could not be considered sentimental, were very much connected with the intimacy between human beings, sometimes between lovers and sometimes between a mother and her children. *Sobre la grama* offers endless connections to nature, particularly to trees. The poems swing back and forth between memory and forgetfulness, all the while rooted in a deep connection to nature and to that which makes us human. This kind of connection to trees, seeds and flowers which continues throughout Belli’s career, is not so different from Pizarnik’s tree imagery³⁴ yet the two poets tend to be quite different. Some examples of tree imagery in *Sobre la grama* include the poem “Metamorfosis”:

³³ See chapter 1 for more on transmodernity and the idea of “glocal” thinking.

³⁴ It is not uncommon to find references to the “tree of life” in poetry and in literature in general. The tree of life is a philosophical symbol that is somehow present in most cultures,

y mis piernas están rompiendo
los ladrillos.
buscando la tierra
enredándome. (21-22)

The feminine poetic voice turns woman into a tree, a garden, nature at its purest. This connection moves beyond just a pleasant similarity and becomes more intense as *Sobre la grama* unfolds. Perhaps Kant or Burke may have recalled this connection with nature as one of the dangers of women and their bodies, as outlined in chapter one. In Belli's poem "Menstruación", the poet breaks taboos and borderlines on what some might consider the grotesque by describing the process of menstruation, something that is certainly not anything like the concept of beauty in Kantian philosophy of the sublime. Yet in this poem Belli also corroborates Kant's ideas, since the poem suggests a loss of control over her own body while at the same time connecting it with natural imagery:

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

Todos los meses
esta comunión
del alma
y el cuerpo:

either as a religious symbol, a scientific concept or a philosophical idea that we as humans are somehow all connected.

este sentirse objeto
de leyes naturales
fuera de control;
el cerebro recogido
volviéndose vientre. (67)

It is not until the end of *Sobre la grama* that themes of political consciousness, mortality, old age and destruction begin to show themselves in poems such as “Descobijémonos” and “Inactividad”. These poems are a small sampling of what would later become a regular theme in the more politically focused *Línea del fuego*, yet even in this collection which was published six years after *Sobre la grama*, there are references to erotic love and nature, mixed with a growing sense of social responsibility and protest. Barbara Fraser-Valencia notes the following when comparing the two works:

For Belli, the erotic dyad becomes a means by which she is expanded to contain and express multiple voices. In *Sobre la grama* Belli becomes peopled by transmitting *eros* into utterance, by communing with nature, by becoming the mother of her beloved’s children and by transforming her passions into public form through the poetic art. Later in *Línea de fuego*, Belli expands on this ‘peopling’ process to include the collective concerns of the Sandinista revolution.

(1)

From the point of view of Fraser-Valencia, Belli does not give up on populating her poetry with images of nature, erotic love and the experience of motherhood, yet in *Línea de fuego* even later in *Truenos y arcoiris* (1982) Belli adds another layer onto this imagery by expressing her feelings, fears and beliefs in regards to the Nicaraguan revolution. One thing that Belli does not

do, however, is dwell on the image of Nicaragua as a defeated woman³⁵, but rather she writes about Nicaragua as an active protector and mother figure of her people. Pilar Moyano expounds upon this artistic choice by stating:

Como es posible observar, la imagen mujer-nación-ultrajada ha alcanzado en este poema una transformación importante. Aunque también (Nicaragua) ha sido violada, esta vez no permanece en actitud dolorida e impotente, sino que, por el contrario, se levanta y persigue decididamente a su agresor, para lo cual parece bastarse a sí misma. (323; parenthesis not in orig.)

It is this poetic foundation upon which Belli sustains her work for *De la costilla de Eva*, where as a person she has developed years of experience as a revolutionary, lover and mother, and where as a poet she has fleshed out these concepts for her readers in a variety of ways. *De la costilla de Eva* combines this erotic and violent connection with both the physical nature associated with her homeland but also with human nature as a more general theme.

De la costilla de Eva has an interesting mix of love poems scattered among dark and grotesque imagery. Belli makes the artistic choice to quote Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* at several points in the book, perhaps as a way of insisting on the idea of poetry as a stream of consciousness in the same style as Cortázar's novel. The quotes reflect tenderness, some natural imagery, and much questioning regarding the place of humans in the midst of chaos. These are all themes that both Belli and Cortázar share in their works, even though as writers they are quite different. One can see common preoccupations in Belli's poems that had been present all along in her earlier work; her poems are replete with allusions to flowers and nature, yet several of her

³⁵ For more examples on the traditional imagery of Latin America as a raped or humiliated woman, particularly in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Rubén Darío and Ernesto Cardenal, see Moyano.

poems also make direct reference to war and its influence on the psyche and the physical body. Her poem “Permanencia”, for example, uses imagery of silence, fear, caverns and death in phrases such as “la oscuridad de la caverna,” “la ausencia de cuerpos entrelazados / hablándose” and “un amor feroz / enjaulado a punta de razones” (21) yet at the same time the darkness and fear associated with this poem does not exclude references to erotic imagery such as entwined bodies, caverns, and snakes. She continues with this trend in the following poem “Esta nostalgia” where she makes direct references to the death of oneself in the form of shadows, drought and ghosts. “Me hundo en el cuerpo / me desangro en las venas.” “Qué haré con mi castillo de fantasmas,” and “Estoy muriéndome de frío.” (23). Belli makes it clear that the poetic “yo” is female, referring to herself as “heroína de batallas perdidas.”

Belli goes even deeper into a place of the grotesque by finding beauty in the ugliness of death. Her poetry in this particular work often places celebration and loss, beauty and decay, parallel to one another. In her poem “Reflexiones”:

Este tiempo de muertes,
es tiempo también de valorar la vida,
de olvidarnos del asco y combatirlo,
de luchar contra vicios y erradicar resabios,
de pulirnos como cristal fundido en este puro
juego de la Revolución³⁶ (55; indentation in orig.)

The grotesque and allusions to carnival also make themselves present in poems like “Nicaragua agua fuego.” Belli again pits opposites against each other in this poem, with references to rain, mountains, seeds and birds while at the same time describing the horrors of war, rivers of blood

³⁶ The Revolution often appears as a proper noun in Belli’s work, as if to personify it.

and murdered *campesinos*. At the end of the poem she uses these opposites to emphasize celebration as well as mourning, the way that carnival allows that which is forbidden out into the light:

hace circo y ferias y reza
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
partria libre
o morir. (109-110)

Further into *De la costilla de Eva* Belli begins mixing images of physical violence with memory; her poems are removed from a place of passive reflection and thrust into a more active space. She often uses the past tense (indicating a memory) with images of sex and physical ferocity. The entire poem “Anoche” illustrates this shift:

Anoche tan solo
parecías un combatiente desnudo
saltando sobre arrecifes de sombras
Yo desde mi puesto de observación
en la llanura
te veía esgrimir tus armas
y violento hundirte en mí
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. (79)

There is a kind of lunar beauty in this poem; it is not a poem of trauma or of fear, yet it contains war imagery almost as a natural companion to intimacy and sex. This same mixture of erotic violence can be found in other poems such as “Furias para danzar,” particularly in the first stanza:

Voy a cantar mi furia iluminada,
desembarazarme de ella
para poderte amar
sin que cada beso
sea mi cuerpo extendido y desnudo
sobre la piedra ritual. (83)

The theme of memory is constant, particularly as Belli nears the end of *De la costilla de Eva*. Her poem “Fronteras” pays homage to those who have passed through her life, using body imagery, the present perfect tense (again, indicating the past) and references to photography: “He visto partir tanta gente / tanta gente se ha llevado pedazos de mi piel / tonos de mi risa / fotos amarillándose en mi memoria / dulzura que guardan mis sueños.” (87) and in “Despedida en tiempo de guerra”:

Me llenaste de fiesta las entrañas.
Me inventaste un poema cada día.
Me tejiste mariposas en el pelo.

Te incrustaste en mi piel
- doloroso cuchillo de amor que se despide -
y ahora se me mojan los ojos de pensarte
y siento rebalsar de agua mis venas
y mi sangre buscarte. (141)

The use of verb tenses is interesting in Belli's work. She will often combine the past and the present together, as in the example from "Despedida en tiempo de guerra," or she will use a verb like "sembramos" in a context where it could be interpreted as either present or past, blurring the lines between the two. The poem is as follows:

Me llenaste de fiesta las entrañas.
Me inventaste un poema cada día.
Me tejiste mariposas en el pelo.
Te incrustaste en mi piel
-doloroso cuchillo de amor que se despide-
y ahora se me mojan los ojos de pensarte
y siento rebalsar de agua mis venas
y mi sangre buscarte.

Te quedarás conmigo,
amante, compañero, hermano.
Conmigo para calentar mis soledades
y las duras jornadas de esta Guerra.
Te quedarás impactado en mis huesos

como bala certera que conoce la ruta
hacia mi centro.

Yo te llevaré en mis vestidos,
en mis pantalones de trabajo,
en la chaqueta azul.

En la cobija;
te llevaré como amuleto
como piedra encantada contra los maleficios.

Te llevaré como llevo estas lágrimas retenidas,
ahora que no ha tiempo,
ni espacio,
para llorar. (141)

This is very much like Cortázar's stream of consciousness in *Rayuela*; memory plays tricks both on those reading and on those who are remembering. It is for this reason that Belli's poems involving memory do not often adhere to just one tense, giving the sense that she is traveling back and forth between present and past, as one does when deep in thought or when trying to remember details, particularly traumatic ones. The poem "Despedida en tiempo de guerra" has a more subtle bodily violence than some of her other poems, again mixed with love and longing, as she describes a mark on her skin, a painful knife, a physical reaction to the emptiness of loss. The body is very much a presence in this poem; it vacillates back and forth between pleasure and pain. In the first stanza, the poet focuses on the pleasure associated with the memory of someone who has been lost, although it is not clear whether this loss is due to death or to the dissolution of

a romantic relationship. It could be relevant for either; the title, as well as the ending lines of the poem, have a strong connection to the afflictions connected to war, such as having to say goodbye to loved ones, and not having the appropriate circumstances to grieve their loss. The second stanza is more graphic in its suggestions of pain, comparing memory to a bullet wound embedded into bone. There is also eroticism in this imagery, suggesting penetration into a woman's center, both painful as well as a welcome respite from the grueling tasks of war. In the final stanza, Belli lists articles of clothing, again suggesting a closeness to her body that is warm and comforting, while at the same time emphasizing pain, both physical and emotional, and the lack of opportunity for mourning. This absence of proper goodbyes and mourning rituals in times of war is something that is very significant to those who are survivors of violence. Because they cannot say goodbye or mourn in more traditional ways, goodbyes as a result of trauma are often found in artistic expression as a way of processing such a loss. Belli's work suggests a preoccupation with time and space and how it becomes distorted in times of war, thereby also distorting the human experience, including the capacity in which people relate with one another, understand themselves, and process feelings of pain and love.

One of the most profound poems in *De la costilla de Eva* is the work "Para Juan Gelman" because it embodies so many of the themes discussed in the chapter, particularly memory, war, the human body and its connection to nature³⁷. The poem is as follows:

Pienso Juan
que somos
exactamente lo que somos,

³⁷ It is important to be familiar with Juan Gelman's life and work in order to understand the significance of the title of the poem. Gelman (1930-2014) was an Argentine poet who wrote works specifically related to exile and the disappearance of friends and family from his country during the military dictatorship in the 1970s.

un hombre y una mujer
andando de corrido por el mundo,
con una suave interrogación
detrás de los ojos
y las manos abiertas
buscando pájaros azules,
victorias,
calmantes para el dolor,
sombras para guarecernos de las lágrimas,
espejos donde mirar
para encontrar quien ve
sí dulcemente, con la misma dulzura,
sí tiernamente, ternura desde adentro;
quién nos desaloja de la soledad,
nos deja sin más sol que el sol,
calientitos;
quién nos pasa
todo el calor de vida que llevamos
las cosas lindas que también juntamos
las revoluciones que ganamos,
la esperanza que nos levanta al viento,
de ojo a ojo,
de sangre a sangre.

Quién nos junta como amaneceres
de un mismo país
para mezclar alegría con tristeza
y sacarnos andando bajo los árboles
como tercos animalitos
husmeando el amor.

Pienso Juan
que hay un espejo
donde nos reflejamos
al mismo tiempo. (127-128)

This poem is a distinct reference to how one must overcome the traumas of physical violence and loss by separating oneself from those who perpetuate political violence and fear. Belli's use of the word *interrogar* is interesting here, because it sets up a direct contrast from the violent connotations of the word. Interrogation is often associated with torture, a concept that was not foreign for those who were caught up in the political climate of Nicaragua and Argentina in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet Belli takes ownership of interrogation here, and softens it, indicating that she too has questions yet will continue to softly ask them as opposed to the forceful, painful interrogation practices of the military. Belli refers to exile by suggesting that both she and Gelman have been traveling the earth with these questions, although historically it is known that these travels were not always by choice, but by necessity. Belli refers to seeking not only answers, but relief from pain and kindred spirits as part of the healing process. While there is much reference to pain and memory in this poem, there is also quite a bit of reference to healing

as well. Belli refers to revolutions being won, freedom from loneliness and warmth in her verses, suggesting that she and Gelman are reflections of one another and of each other's experiences. In this celebration of healing there is, of course, a mixture of pain and joy, just as is present in the poem "Despedida en tiempo de guerra." There is also Belli's signature reference to trees in the poem, again as a way to connect the human experience with nature and a root system.

This kind of poetry is very much related with other types of testimonial literature that have been found in Latin American literature during the same era that Belli was writing and participating in the Sandinista revolution. Two particular examples are Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) and Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983). Poniatowska's work addresses the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico, while Menchú's work tells the story of a young Quiché woman growing up in the midst of the Guatemalan civil war. Of course, these works are not poetry but rather works of testimonial literature, yet they serve a similar purpose and speak a similar message as the works of Belli. These two works, along with the numerous poetic publications by Belli in the 1970s and 1980s, serve as testimony in the face of political violence and upheaval. They all address women's issues in a tumultuous political climate; in Poniatowska's work there are snippets of poetry meant to reflect upon the mother figure and her experience with loss. One particular example of poetry by Juan Bañuelos stands out among many of the contributions collected by Poniatowska in the wake of the massacre:

Una mujer descalza
cubierta la cabeza con un rebozo negro
espera que le entreguen a su muerto.

22 años, Politécnico:

un hoyo rojo en el costado

hecho por la M-1

reglamentaria. (256; indentation in orig.)

Poniatowska also gives her own lyrical interpretation of a mother's pain in the face of loss, acknowledging the existence of absolute evil and combining the forces of physical and emotional pain that victims and their families were forced to endure after the massacre:

Este relato recuerda a una madre que durante días permaneció quieta, endurecida bajo el golpe y, de repente como animal herido – un animal a quien le extraen las entrañas – dejó salir del centro de su vida, de la vida misma que ella había dado, un ronco, un desgarrado grito. Un grito que daba miedo, miedo por el mal absoluto que se le puede hacer a un ser humano; ese grito distorsionado que todo lo rompe, el ay de la herida definitiva, la que no podrá cicatrizar jamás, la de la muerte del hijo. Aquí está el eco del grito de los que murieron y el grito de los que quedaron.

(164)

Poniatowska evokes violent, animalistic imagery in connection to the woman's experience, suggesting that mothers who lose a child in circumstances of violence and war feel the same pain experienced by the one she has lost. Both examples given here from Poniatowska's work do not shy away from portraying the monstrous details associated with political violence, and while these particular women were not the direct recipients of the violence, its presence is still clearly inflicted on their physical and emotional states in an equally damaging way as it was for those who were murdered.

Menchú, in her collaboration with Elizabeth Burgos in bringing awareness to the horrors of the armed conflict in Guatemala,³⁸ has also touched upon the theme women and their connections to the earth, to motherhood, and to the revolutionary cause, much like Belli does in her poetry. Menchú directly relates her role in particular as an indigenous woman and how it is important to Guatemala and to the earth: “Pero hay algo importante en las mujeres de Guatemala, sobre todo la mujer indígena, hay algo importante que es su relación con la tierra; entre la tierra y la madre. La tierra alimenta y la mujer da vida. Ante esa situación, la mujer misma tiene que conservarlo como un secreto de ella, un respeto hacia la tierra. Es como una relación de esposo y mujer, la relación entre mamá y tierra” (245). Menchú continues on to include the many responsibilities of the Guatemalan woman regarding her connection to the earth, yet she also emphasizes that for her, these responsibilities also included dedication to the cause for which she was fighting.

Menchú’s work has come under fire for being biased and based more on her emotional connection to her cause and less on actual facts³⁹. Such criticisms are often applied to those who write about their memories regarding traumatic events and highly emotional situations involving war, loss and physical suffering. In defense of Belli, Poniatowska, and Menchú in the face of such criticism, it appears that none of them are claiming to know or own any absolute truths about their chosen subjects; instead they are sharing their interpretations and memories in the form of literature in order to contribute to a greater good and promote a higher awareness of what armed conflict and violence means to those who are caught up in the middle of it.

Politically conscious work is something that has taken root and played a very significant and active role in Latin America’s push toward finding a voice and collective identity. However,

³⁸ The Guatemalan civil war lasted from 1960-1996.

³⁹ For more on criticism against the veracity of Menchú’s work, see Stoll.

there are also writers and artists who create from a place that is much more centered on individual experience. While each person's reaction to violence is an incredibly personal and intimate experience, the works of Belli, Poniatowska and Menchú often seem to have a very public element to them. On the other hand, writers like Alejandra Pizarnik seem to also share in depicting violent imagery, specifically in connection to the female body, but from a place that is perhaps more private and individual. As poetry, Pizarnik's work addresses a collective audience and speaks of some of the greater cultural preoccupations of Latin America and Europe, and in this way it could be considered similar to Belli's work. Both writers share an intimacy with their readers that is striking, yet while Belli often breaks out of her inner space to include Nicaraguans and their different roles in the revolutionary cause, Pizarnik appears to be writing from a place of isolation and meditation, not particularly evoking political imagery or alluding to a specific group or culture.

Pizarnik's *Árbol de Diana*, while being approached differently than Belli's *De la costilla de Eva*, accomplishes a similar mission in using natural imagery mixed with violence, female body imagery and the grotesque in order to explore some of the cultural stories of western culture in a way that demands a re-examination of women and their portrayal in these narratives. As can be noted by the title, Pizarnik is influenced by Roman mythology (similar to how Belli alludes to Eve from the Bible in her title) yet she purposefully uses the classic figure of Diana to create something new and more particular to her own reality as a Latin American writer living in Europe⁴⁰. In 1962, Octavio Paz wrote a prologue to *Árbol de Diana*, describing how Diana's tree "Nace en las tierras resacas de América. La hostilidad del clima, la inclemencia de los

⁴⁰ Other artists such as Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos have been credited with embracing similar imagery, with subjects tied to the earth through roots. For more on the contributions of Kahlo and Castellanos see Friis.

discursos y la gritería, la opacidad general de las especies pensantes, sus vecinas, por un fenómeno de compensación bien conocido, estimulan las propiedades luminosas de esta planta”

(2). Just as Pizarnik does in her writing, Paz uses natural imagery to describe a hostile local climate found in America. He emphasizes the role of the feminine in Pizarnik’s work by further stating: “La cicatriz del tronco era considerada como el sexo (femenino) del cosmos” (2; parenthesis in orig.) and he challenges critics of the work to look closely at the work in order to recognize its magic. Says Paz: “basta recordar que el árbol de Diana no es un cuerpo que se pueda ver: es un objeto (animado) que nos deja ver más allá, un instrumento natural de visión” (3).

After reading such an introduction, *Árbol de Diana* begins as a group of small, numbered, untitled poems that arrive in short bursts and which continue to grow and intensify as the short work progresses. The first three poems address themes of loneliness and motherhood, using light imagery parallel to shadow, and birth next to nothingness. Poem 3 is as follows:

sólo la sed
el silencio
ningún encuentro

cuídate de mí amor mío
cuídate de la silenciosa en el
desierto
de la viajera con el vaso vacío
y de la sombra de su sombra. (4)

The poem specifically reveals a female character, the “viajera con el vaso vacío” as well as possibly “la silenciosa en el desierto”. In further poems, the imagery becomes more intense, adding violence mixed again with specifically female figures such as “la pequeña olvidada” in poem 4 (5). Pizarnik suggests penetration in poem 4 with phrases such as “hundir su mano” and then invokes fire with “la camisa en llamas” in poem 7 (5). In the atmosphere she is creating, Pizarnik also alludes, like Belli, to questions of memory and forgetfulness, using the figure of Eve, “desnuda en el paraíso de su memoria”, fearing “lo que no existe” in poem 6 (5).

The poet expresses a certain uneasiness about the process of one becoming two, whether it be through motherhood, through gazing into a mirror and comparing the internal versus the external self, or through erotic coupling with another person. Pizarnik embraces the female figure in her poems and explores the different phases of her life journey. Poem 12 is as follows:

no más las dulces metamorfosis
de una niña de seda
sonámbula ahora en la cornisa
de niebla

su despertar de mano respirando
de flor que se abre al viento (7)

This poem references change, perhaps puberty in a shadowy female figure who is sleepwalking and who awakens with the sensation of a flower opening to the wind. Flower imagery has commonly existed as a euphemism for the female genitalia⁴¹ in many forms of art. This poem is

⁴¹ One example of the flower/vagina connection can be found in the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, a 20th century painter. *Black Iris III* (1926) is one example among many. While O’Keeffe rejected any feminist or Freudian theory connected to her work, most critics agree

simple and erotic in how it portrays its female character awakening to a breathing hand and opening flower. Yet the poem also suggests an uneasiness about the unknown, as the girl in the poem is sleepwalking near a precipice or cliff, suggesting an abyss or death close by. Further, in poem 14, Pizarnik continues to express a sleepy fear:

el poema que no digo,
el que no merezco.
Miedo de ser dos
camino del espejo:
alguien en mí dormido
me come y me bebe. (7)

Poem 14 suggests an inhabited woman, whether it be by a lover, an unborn child, or a shadowy version of herself. Pizarnik uses mirror imagery to suggest herself, yet this fear of becoming two could also signify fear of intimacy or fear of giving birth. This sleeping someone that she calls a poem that she does not deserve is eating and drinking her like a parasite. Unlike Belli, Pizarnik's form of eroticism is tinged with fear; it is not celebratory but rather it is shadowy and somewhat nightmarish. Poem 17 continues this trend of trying to identify a separate being that takes power over the poet:

Días en que una palabra lejana
se apodera de mí.
Voy por esos días sonámbula y
transparente. La
hermosa autómata se canta, se

that there is an unmistakable connection between her painted flowers and the female genitalia.

encanta, se cuenta
casos y cosas: nido de hilos
rígidos donde me danzo
y me lloro en mis numerosos
funerales. (Ella es su
espejo incendiado, su espera en
hogueras frías, su
elemento místico, su fornicación
de nombres cre-
ciendo solos en la noche pálida.) (8; punctuation in orig.)

In poem 17, Pizarnik uses similar imagery as in poems 12 and 14, including the sleepwalker and the mirror. Here, Pizarnik suggests the uncanny presence of a female automaton, leaving the reader uncertain of whether or not it is a living being or a replica of something or someone that is alive. Pizarnik directly addresses death here, alluding to her own funerals in the plural sense of the word, meaning she contemplates this death repetitively. Again, there is the possibility that motherhood is also suggested here through use of the word fornication that leads to growth, yet just as in poems 12 and 14, there is no suggestion that this feeling of intimacy with another (whether it be self, child or lover) is a positive, enjoyable feeling. In contrast, it is frightening, suggesting possession, darkness, and a lack of control over one's own body.

Further on in the work, poem 20 is incredibly transparent in its way of connecting fear, love and death in a single stanza of nine lines:

dice que no sabe del miedo de la
muerte del amor

dice que tiene miedo de la
muerte del amor
dice que el amor es muerte es
miedo
dice que la muerte es miedo es
amor
dice que no sabe (9)

The lack of punctuation in this poetry is also significant. It suggests a disconnection with the rules of language, emphasizing that the language of memory and violence often lacks convention and logic because of its connection with the human psyche. Pizarnik revisits death later on in poems 31, 32 and 33. Poem 31 begins with the line “Es un cerrar los ojos y jurar no / abrirlos” (12) and later in poem 32: “Zona de plagas donde dormida / come lentamente / su corazón de medianoche” followed by poem 33: “alguna vez / alguna vez tal vez / me iré sin quedarme / me iré como quien se va” (12). In poem 34 Pizarnik evokes the character of “la pequeña viajera” again, dead this time, in the following stanzas: “la pequeña viajera / moría explicando su muerte / sabios animales nostálgicos / visitaban su cuerpo caliente” (12).

Notice how these poems are unapologetic about their crepuscular and sometimes disturbing imagery. This poetry seems to approach the topic of self-afflicted violence, something not as common in the works of Belli and the other politically motivated testimonial works mentioned above. As noted in chapter one, one of the necessary issues one must explore when considering death and the female body is not just how the female body has suffered violence under the gaze and physical dominance of men, but also how women themselves have also historically inflicted pain and negativity upon their own bodies. Whether it is how they may

not value themselves in relation to physical beauty, or in the case of the female figure in *Árbol de Diana*, they may see violence and death as a release from the chaos of their personal reality.

Isabel Vitalith Maduro Rodríguez writes about this concept of the female body in its connection to the grotesque. She writes:

Lo deforme es un centro de polémica, siempre ha sido cuestionada en toda la historia del arte, lo deforme se aleja de un ideal de perfección. [. . .] Cada personaje tienen una historia propia, contada por los personajes en forma de poesía, en dichas poesías están plasmadas sus vidas y sentimientos, ellas trascienden su apariencia fuera de los cánones establecidos para el cuerpo femenino. (132 -133)

In other words, the poets in this chapter use violent imagery and the grotesque as a weapon against established concepts of beauty. They reject the idea of perfection and replace it with something more moving and sublime by addressing the opposite of beauty in their poems. By unmasking that which appears to be deformed or imperfect, they are tapping into the feminine experience, both physical and emotional, in a way that emphasizes the uniqueness of each experience as opposed to conforming to a general concept of that which is agreeable, pleasant, and perhaps traditionally beautiful.

Yet at the same time, the poetry of Belli and Pizarnik also suggests a vivid beauty in the symmetry and proportion of their words⁴². On the page, the words in *De la costilla de Eva* and in *Árbol de Diana* do not take up unnecessary space. The poems, for the most part are brief, free verse, and not physically complex. Visually, neither of these poetic works is intimidating, and

⁴² "Beauty" in the Oxford dictionary is as follows: A combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight. "beauty." *oxforddictionaries.com*. Oxford, 2015. Web. 20 January 2015.

one does not need to be well-versed in poetics to understand them and enjoy them. Again, this accessibility to poetry is very likely a purposeful choice, reaching out to readers who have been affected by violence, either political or self-inflicted. Some poems are no longer than a stanza, yet each poem contains a powerful message that is more in tune with the true female experience as opposed to the very specific and rigid perceptions of female beauty that have developed over time. Using a combination of grotesque imagery with proportionate, accessible visual techniques, the poems in these works offer a new approach to beauty from a female perspective, heightening the sense of female subjectivity that is outside of the traditional perception of aesthetics. Maduro Rodríguez, when analyzing visual art, suggests the following about the female body:

Se observa en el estudio del canon de la forma femenina que el cuerpo siempre tiende a expresar belleza, simetría, proporción, por el contrario el cuerpo dismórfico tiende a lo grotesco, se encuentra enmarcado en lo asimétrico y lo desproporcionado, deforme y distorsionado, las formas alejadas de ese estado de armonía se tornan grotescas, generando contraste y ruptura. (98)

This kind of contrast and rupture is exactly what Belli and Pizarnik create in their works. This is not to say that all of the female imagery in their poems is grotesque; on the contrary, there are many allusions to physical feminine beauty that are skillfully paralleled with death and grotesque imagery. For example, Belli writes in her poem “Petición,” “Vestime de amor / que estoy desnuda;” (25) suggesting the erotic imagery of a naked woman in contrast with her sadness, “Quiero encenderme de nuevo / olvidarme del sabor salado de las lágrimas / - los huecos en los lirios, / la golondrina muerta en el balcón – ” (25; hyphens in orig.) and Pizarnik also puts imagery of light and precious stones and mixes them with shadow and death, in this case,

describing bones instead of flesh in poem 9 while at the same time invoking the beauty, love and nature:

Estos huesos brillando en la
noche,
estas palabras como piedras
preciosas
en la garganta viva de un pájaro
petrificado,
este verde muy amado,
este lila caliente,
este corazón misterioso. (6)

Maduro Rodríguez alludes to what she calls “la catarsis del grito” (90) in her interpretation of art that depicts human beings who devour themselves or get lost in the midst of society, only to find a place in visual arts, music and the written word.

Raúl René Villamil Uriarte is another thinker with valuable insight on the aesthetics of the grotesque. In his book *La estética de lo grotesco*, he draws a connection between the human fascination with violence and the fascination with pornography. It is something that is forbidden yet accessible and something that is connected to the animal instincts that humans have not shed in the process of evolution:

En este sentido la verdadera imagen pornográfica, que produce virulencia, morbo y un cierto pathos por la fascinación enfermiza que provoca, es la de los cuerpos decapitados, desmembrados, desarticulados, envueltos en un manto de sangre, que sin ningún pudor aparecen todos los días publicados en las primeras planas de los

principales diarios y noticieros televisivos. Ante la imposición de símbolos que transportan a los cuerpos voluptuosos y sexuados, que se muestran como ‘un deber ser’, lo no es más que el descaro y el cinismo de la devastación trágica del cuerpo humano. (139)

This devastation of the body seeps into society’s consciousness, either in direct acts of political and domestic violence, or in text and imagery that is drilled into every aspect of the media and entertainment. As transmodern theory might suggest, images of violence and pornography are becoming more and more available because of the accessibility to the internet, adding to this sense that this kind of body imagery is something as common as eating breakfast, going to work, or any other part of a person’s daily routine.

The poets in this chapter approach this awareness of the body (either by sexuality or by violence) in a different way than active aggression or passive consumption of sexualized violence. They draw the reader in with reflections of the female body in so many of its states; naked, mutilated, aroused, or blended with nature. The messages in this poetry are clear, yet they are quite different than those of front page newspapers because they invite the reader to participate and reflect instead of forcing the imagery on any person who happens to see it. Villamil Uriarte mentions a similar invitation to think deeper on the human body in his opinions about the artist Spencer Tunick and his work with mass nude photography in Mexico. Villamil Uriarte touches upon transmodern theory by suggesting that Tunick’s work is significant both on the global and the local (or as Rodríguez Magda might say the “glocal”) level, returning the integrity to the image of the naked body to Mexico and to those who have felt that the human form had been stripped of its integrity through constant violence and empty media consumption.

Belli and Pizarnik helped pave the way for this fight to keep authentic bodies and their owners from erasure and forgetfulness, giving them a space separate from the media and politics in order to regain a sense of self and belonging. This right to choose how one views the body (whether by choosing to read poetry or to participate in a mass nude photo, for example) is one of the few weapons women in particular have against the obstacles that history has placed in front of them. These women have control over their own physicality. Villamil Uriarte discusses in depth the concepts of body, control and resentment⁴³ and how the State and its institutions have a great amount of control in how the human body is supposed to behave, what it is supposed to enjoy and what must be done to keep it from deviating from those norms. Belli, Pizarnik and Tunick have challenged these norms by fashioning literary and visual imagery that serves as an alternative to such conventional thinking, which is what makes it powerful and useful to a society that is so accustomed to the forced consumption of body imagery, violence and sex.

In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the idea of the spectacle, and how the concepts of carnival and the grotesque do not recognize any distinction between actors and spectators⁴⁴. Bakhtin writes: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). One might get the sense that in the super-connected, sensory overloaded atmosphere described as a part of the transmodern existence is a kind of carnival where both society and the media laugh at death through the constant reproduction of images, texts and static connectivity. Belli and Pizarnik, on the other hand, look death and terror in the face, calling to mind some of Bakhtin’s most provocative and poignant thoughts on the grotesque: “The unfinished and open body

⁴³ For more on the issues of body, control and resentment see Villamil Uriarte 118-119.

⁴⁴ For more recent interpretations of the Carnavalesque, see Balderston & Guy 11, 20.

(dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements” (27).

Other art forms have also embraced the concept of using the grotesque as a tool to communicate an aesthetic alternative to more traditional concepts of beauty and political expression. In *The Mexico City Reader*, there is a piece by Cuauhtémoc Medina that explores an art project that uses exhibits that include human parts and photography from a Mexico City morgue as part of a project from the artist’s collective SEMEFO⁴⁵. For those who might protest the idea, it might be worth recalling some of the arguments against similar expositions such as the *Bodies* exhibitions that have been shown worldwide which display preserved human remains of questionable origin⁴⁶. Each side of the ethical argument has relevance, yet it is interesting to notice how both science and art have taken steps together to try revealing the human body in its most naked and vulnerable form to a greater public in the name of provoking thought. SEMEFO, according to Medina, has devoted itself to “exploring the aesthetics of death – or more precisely, what its members called ‘the life’ of the corpse” (310). This group of artists, lead by Teresa Margolles, sought to reflect the way that society views violence and eroticism as two parallel forces that can often come together in a work of art. Medina continues: “In a certain way, SEMEFO imploded the stereotype of Mexico’s purported kinship with death by taking it to an extreme interpretation” (313). The exhibits being described here include a display of a

⁴⁵ This acronym representing the artist’s collective is based on the acronym SEMEFO which stands for *Servicio Médico Forense*, the Mexico City morgue. See Medina 310.

⁴⁶ For more on the ethical question of displaying bodies, see Barboza.

pierced tongue from the mouth of a young man in the morgue, another exhibit displays sheets with the imprints of corpses from the morgue⁴⁷. Medina writes:

In Margolle's work the morgue became an institution that combined a space of seclusion, a scientific laboratory, and a gruesome archive. Being the destination of all those who supposedly should not have died (those who perished in violent circumstances or whose disease was abnormal enough to merit scientific elucidation), the dissection room provides a dramatic sample of any society. (315; parenthesis in orig.)

This work, along with the others already cited in this chapter, tries to get its viewers to reconsider traditional or antiquated perceptions of human behavior, particularly when looking at ourselves as humans in connection with what some might call our most primitive of instincts, including tendencies towards violence and fascination with sex for example.

The work of SEMEFO challenges the stereotypical relationship that Mexicans are considered to have with death. It looks at Mexico as something more than just a former Teotihuacán. The displays created by Margolles, like the poetic works of Belli, are heavily influenced by social and political violence. Medina remarks:

Seen in this framework, SEMEFO is not a marginal phenomenon, but one that is paradigmatic of the overall move from amateurish dissidence to postconceptual self-reflectivity that characterized Mexico's aesthetic politicization in the 1990s [. . .] Under close inspection, the most disturbing element in Teresa Margolles's forensic art is not the horrific nature of the images and objects she creates but the institutions conditions that govern the handling of human remains in Mexican

⁴⁷ See Margolles *Dermis* and *Lengua*.

forensic practices and, by extension, the institutional crisis of the judiciary system.

(322)

The art displayed by SEMEFO is not only a powerful political statement, it is also a glimpse into what Freud called “the uncanny.”⁴⁸ This kind of art leaves its observer hanging, in a place of uncertainty. The uncanny can often be described as the feelings one experiences when looking at something and feeling uncertain of whether it is alive or not, like an automaton or a doll.⁴⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen offers some insight into the uncanny and why it is such a poignant sensation:

As a situation of undecidability, where fixed frames of margins are set in motion, the uncanny also refers to moments where the question whether something is animate (alive) or inanimate (dead), whether something is real or imagined, unique, original or a repetition, a copy, can not be decided. [. . .] Because the uncanny in some senses always involves the question of visibility, invisibility, presence to/absence from sight, and the fear of losing one’s sight serves as a substitute in western cultural myth and image repertoire for castration anxiety, the uncanny always entails anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, body integrity, immortal individuality. (113)

The sensation of the uncanny when looking at art by Teresa Margolles is so intense because one cannot help but imagine who or what these bodies were when they were alive. To whom does

⁴⁸ For more on the uncanny, see Freud.

⁴⁹ Narrative writers like Rosario Ferré have used the concept of living dolls and the uncanny. In her book of short stories, *Papeles de Pandora* (1976), Ferré includes stories of lifelike dolls with female form who leave the reader unsure of whether or not the doll is alive. See Ferré.

the pierced tongue belong in *Tongue*, or how did the people who became corpses live before they died and arrived in the Mexico City morgue? This kind of echo from past beings that no longer exist holds a special power in the disturbing imagery of the SEMEFO project. This uncomfortable yet fascinating sensation is also why these works are such strong political statements. By exposing human suffering at the hands of systematic violence and corrupt institutions, artists who plainly portray the grotesque or uncanny nature of death in these circumstances are thereby offering a strong and poignant political critique.

Another instance of an artist employing body poetics to address social violence is that of the music by Mexican singer and songwriter Lila Downs, who shares many identities in the Americas including Anglo, Mexican, and Mixteca. Her albums such as *Border* address issues of politics, death, and rage at the systematic violence in Mexico, particularly along the border with the United States⁵⁰. In one of her songs, “La niña,” Downs describes in her lyrics the struggles of immigrant women who live and work in inadequate conditions. Downs writes and sings:

Cierra los ojos pa’ no mirarse
en el espejo se va notando
su trabajo la está acabando
es que su santo está en descanso
todos los días todas las horas
en esa espuma de sus tristezas
uñas y carne, sudor y fuerzas,
todo su empeño, todos sus sueños
se van quedando en sus recuerdos

⁵⁰ For samples of music, refer to Downs

en la memoria de sus ahnelos. (Downs)

Like Belli and Pizarnik, Downs addresses a female figure in her words, including images of her hands, her sweat, her eyes and her reflection in the mirror as a way to create a more intimate connection with this figure that is quite distinct from traditional media interpretations of the female as a physical being. Downs, having spent much of her career in an environment where the internet is available and where musical recordings are becoming widely available online, has embraced the current generational approach to disseminating her messages. Her work, perhaps even more so than that of the other artists discussed in this chapter, can fit well with the concepts of transmodernity because of its diverse origins, its instantaneous availability via internet, its transnational messages and its aim at reaching into the culture of the masses. It is certainly less so with Belli and Pizarnik, although Belli does have a website, but Pizarnik's life ended before the internet became a regular form of "glocal" communication⁵¹. This is where it is important to consider the points in history where our artists were most active in their depictions of the female image, Pizarnik in the 1960s, Belli in the 1970s and 1980s, Margolles in the 1990s and Tunick and Downs into the twenty first century. Downs' *La niña* also falls in line with the examples of testimonial literature discussed in this chapter; both works by Poniatowska and Menchú try to give voices to those who have traditionally been silenced particularly in the realm of politics, and Downs is also speaking for someone who historically has not been able to make herself heard whether it be due to language barriers, fear of political repercussions, or simply due to her status as a woman in a male-dominated society.

⁵¹ For more on examples of what *glocal* means see Rodríguez Magda 30.

Lillian Manzor-Coats explores the broader concept of female testimonial literature in Latin America in her article *The Reconstructed Subject: Women's Testimonials as Voices of Resistance*. She writes:

Testimonial literature is not foreign nor new to Latin America. It is precisely the discursive form chosen by the chroniclers of the conquest of the New World and by Bolívar and Martí for their war diaries [. . .] The ordeal of the 'protagonists,' in this case detention and torture, is no longer seen as a individual affair; it becomes a social and historical phenomenon. [. . .] the writing itself becomes a form of catharsis, in the psychiatric sense of the word: by being able to name the terror and physical pain of torture, the fragmented subject is able to reconstitute him/herself and companions, dead or alive, through writing. (158)

Manzor-Coats is indicating that testimonial literature has been extremely important in helping Latin America come to terms with the thousands of disappeared from political dictatorships, civil war, gang violence, drug trafficking and dangerous immigration practices. While she is particularly discussing literature in this case, the same can be said of music and visual art as described so far in this chapter. Manzor-Coats uses the term "language of survival" in her work, further explaining that "the 'body' of this testimonial is the voice of the re-constructed subject, the story of pain when it is able to find a voice. Physical pain not only resists language but also destroys it" (163). From the many silenced and destroyed words left unspoken by victims of violence come new expressions of poetry and art that are meant to restore language and make it intelligible again. This language of survival is something that must be created from numerous sources, many of them places of pain or negativity. Yet their creation and distribution is a positive step towards collective healing in the face of horror and loss.

Many literary analysts address the concept of a language of pain. While testimonial art and literature aim to give voice to the voiceless, this found voice is often distorted, changed from the experience that pain causes. To quote Elisabeth Bronfen (also discussed in chapter one): “The ‘unsharability’ of pain results from its resistance to language. Transforming the real body experience of death into an objectified form mitigates the violence posed by the real. Hence, such a transformation can be seen as a personal or cultural strategy of self-preservation” (46).

Richard Kearney also weighs in on the importance of testimonial literature and how it is key to helping survivors of traumas work through their memories. Kearney explains:

The role played by narrative testimonial is crucial in this respect, whether it be those of survivors of the Holocaust or of trauma-abuse. [. . .] What the catharsis of mourning-narrative allows is that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered*. It detaches us from the obsessional repetitions and repressions of the past and frees us for a future. [. . .] Working-through the experience of evil-narratively, practically, cathartically – enables us to take the allure out of evil so that we can begin to distinguish between possible and impossible modes of protest and resistance. (501-502)

But is it possible to really take the allure out of evil, as Kearney suggests? This is a difficult question. Certainly, if one were to look at the trends in media and entertainment today it would be very difficult to deny that evil, violence and death have a grip on the cultural imagination, not just in western societies, but on a global scale. The proximity that we as a species choose to keep with death often varies depending on cultural norms and personal experiences, but a common ground we have is that most cultures deal with questions of death and suffering by means of artistic expression, in similar ways to those outlined in this chapter. Whether these

manifestations are meant as political tools or as personal reflection depends on the intentions of the artist and the socio-political climate in which the work was created. As such, the poetics of violence should be a significant consideration when analyzing and exploring Latin American contributions from the last decades of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

Chapter 3:

Motherhood and Matricide in the Poetry of Ana Istarú and Elvia Ardalani

Motherhood is a complex topic. Every human being comes from a mother in one way or another, yet the relationships maintained with this mother figure are unique for each person. In order to take a glimpse into how 20th and 21st century Latin American poetry addresses the theme of motherhood, a sampling of works from Costa Rican writer Ana Istarú and Mexican writer Elvia Ardalani will be explored in this chapter. Questions of how motherhood is intrinsically tied in with death and the female body will be addressed by using post-Freudian theory combined with specific examples from Freud's own work. While Freud's theories have been exposed as being misogynist in many ways, his legacy as a sculptor of Western thought and culture remains very relevant, and his contributions, while contextually dated, are worth exploring when discussing the role of the mother as an important symbol in artistic creation.

Ana Istarú has been publishing poetry since 1975 and her poetry often alludes to her country of Costa Rica with its cultural richness as well as its historical challenges. Istarú also writes in a way that speaks to the female experience on a universal level. Istarú explores what it means to be American⁵² and she also brings detailed definition to what it means to be a woman in the cultural and geopolitical context of Central America in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. Istarú holds a deep nostalgia for her country of origin and her native language. As noted in the prologue of *La estación de fiebre*, her work has been enjoyed internationally and in

⁵² "American" for the purposes of this chapter means someone from the Americas (North, South, Central and the Caribbean) and not necessarily someone from the United States; there is no translation in English for the term *estadounidense*, leading many who are born in the United States to self identify as "American" without recognizing that other nationalities can also fall under this category.

translation because of her concise use of erotic language and imagery related both to nature and to the human (and most notably, the female) body. Ricardo Bada, writing as editor of this particular edition, describes Istarú as “mujer-maremoto amoroso y, de allí, como que no hay más que un paso, a ser humano solidario con los hermanos más próximos y más prójimos, que son las nicas” (9). Bada is referring here to the sympathetic nature of Istarú’s relationship with revolutionary Nicaragua, a Central American neighbor of Costa Rica that came under fire for its political climate during the twentieth century particularly by the United States. Bada also notes that the surname “Istarú” comes from a Mesoamerican indigenous name for a volcano in the region that is now Costa Rica; therefore, while her poetry is widely read and understood on an international level, there is also something deliberately and unmistakably Central American about her work.

Elvia Ardalani has a very different approach to culture and womanhood in her poems. Her book *Cuadernos para un huérfano* does not have a prologue or any kind of introduction other than a brief dedication that reads “para todos aquellos que se han sentido huérfanos” and quotations from the poets Vasko Popa⁵³ and Sohrab Sepehrí⁵⁴. Her titles follow the pattern of beginning with the word *sobre* followed by densely meaningful themes such as maternal love, faith, and sadness while at the same time offering deceptively simple imagery of daily life such as sunflowers and feet. Her choice of titles suggests that her work is constructed as a list of observations about the human relationship to her chosen themes, yet her poetry is crafted in a way that expresses the very deep and complex views tied to them. Her work is connected to both

⁵³ Vasko Popa was a twentieth century Serbian modernist poet whose work was influenced by Serbian folk tradition and surrealism.

⁵⁴ Sohrab Sepehrí was a twentieth century Persian poet whose work was uniquely tied to nature and a love for humanity. Ardalani holds deep connection with Persian culture as can be noted in many of her poems.

the presence and the absence of the maternal figure and Ardalani's entire repertoire of poetry is very much a transcultural experience, specifically in terms of the mixture of Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures. Her poems often suggest that God has multiple voices and languages and that the experience of childhood and motherhood is something that can be understood beyond the limits of language and culture. It is very interesting to pair both Ardalani and Istarú together when exploring motherhood in Latin American poetry because, in spite of their similar time-frames for writing and publication, they are quite different from one another.

Both Istarú and Ardalani offer poems that name specific parts of a woman's body in relation to motherhood; the womb, breasts, the vagina. Life is infused into many of these poems through allusions to blood, milk and living beings existing or growing inside of a female figure. The process of giving birth can be violently painful and, one might even argue that it has elements of the grotesque in the demands it places on a woman's body; it is fascinating yet frightening to witness, and it is a moment where both mother and child are at their most vulnerable yet it can also be a moment of intense catharsis and joy. The main works of focus in this chapter are Istarú's *La estación de fiebre y otros amaneceres* (1991) and several selections from Ardalani's *De cruz y media luna* (1996) and *Cuadernos para un huérfano* (2011).

Theorists such as Jill Scott, Diane Jonte-Pace, Robert M. Polhemus, and Julia Kristeva are called upon in this chapter to enrich these examples of poetry by contributing to post Freudian thought and by shedding some light on current trends in the field of psychology that are connected with motherhood and matricide. Other theorists such as Balderston, Guy, and Kaminsky are revisited from previous chapters in order to hone in on Latin America in particular and how mass culture

views the highly personal yet also universal experience of motherhood⁵⁵. The works of Benigno Trigo and Anaisabel Ortiz-Avila are also cited here as yet another source of thought and opinion specifically in relation to the Latin American experience.

In her work *Electra after Freud* (2005), Scott explores the cultural comparison between Oedipus and Electra, two figures from Greek mythology that found themselves at the heart of two of Freud's most well known complexes. In the story of Oedipus, the young king kills his father; in the story of Electra, the princess follows through with a plot to kill her mother. Both of these characters are also suggested to have erotic motives with the parent of the opposite sex. Scott argues that the first decade of the 21st century has been especially embroiled in a "culture of revenge" (164) and that Electra's act of matricide has made a comeback in popular imagination. Scott suggests that such an act is a way towards self-renewal and growth: "Inevitably death only interrupts the love between father and daughter. Such a curse is indeed no different from the one that mires Electra and her family. The Atrean princess has inherited the cannibalistic crimes of her forefathers [. . .] The self is indeed nourished and healed, resuscitated through devouring" (149).

When connecting these theories to poetry, it is important to note that there have been countless allusions in both theory and literature that suggest a relationship between writing and giving birth. While the creative process between poet and poem is as symbiotic as mother and child, there are also similarities of how that relationship changes once the poem or child is released into the world. The poet or the parent begins to lose control of how their offspring relates to the world, and this can be a painful separation. The most extreme case of this would be

⁵⁵ The term "universal" is used here not to suggest that motherhood is a requisite experience for all women, but rather that it is a universal concept known to human beings as an inevitable part of existence.

matricide; a poem that results in the literal or figurative death of the poet, or the child who commits the act of matricide (such as in the case of Oedipus or Electra). In a literal sense, a poem cannot come off the page and kill its author⁵⁶, yet the circumstances around creating and distributing poetry can certainly have violent backlash in the form of political violence or perhaps even domestic violence⁵⁷. Whether a poem becomes something that devours its own creator or something that simply separates itself from the mother figure depends often on how the poem is received by its readers; the intentions and biographical story of the poet are secondary. The poet (or the mother) mourns this kind of figurative death in a way that Scott outlines as “the aesthetics of mourning” (143), a way of bringing beauty into the process of decay or loss. Scott writes: “Freud distinguishes between normal and pathological responses to loss, between mourning and melancholia, the latter of which is characterized by a narcissistic regression to the cannibalistic phase of infantile development” (143). Jonte-Pace also contributes to the discussion of mourning versus melancholia by emphasizing that Freud characterizes mourning as a healthy reaction to loss, while melancholia suggests a sickness that cannot be shaken and that intrudes upon an individual’s ability to feel pleasure: “The impermanence of beauty, and of life itself, should neither diminish the beauty nor obstruct our experience of pleasure. [. . .] The inevitability of death and loss, in Freud’s view, increases the

⁵⁶ For more on the concept of “Death of the Author”, see Barthes.

⁵⁷ Consider, for example, the death of Uruguayan poet Delmira Agustini at the hands of her husband in 1914 as an example of domestic violence. While it is not specifically stated that Agustini’s murder was related to her poems, in posthumously published literature on her life, the fact that she was murdered by her husband is often mentioned as an intriguing footnote to her life story as a poet. For more on Agustini’s life and work, see Jade. When considering the political dangers of poetry, one might consider the death of Chilean poet and songwriter Victor Jara in 1973 at the hands of the Chilean dictatorship as a political backlash reaction to poetic creation.

value of the objects we love. To experience this is to be able to mourn. The ability to mourn makes possible the ability to love, to feel pleasure, to enjoy beauty” (123-124).

It is interesting to bring together the experience of motherhood with the figure of the cannibalistic child in the poetic sense as Scott describes it. It helps to shed light on how the poets discussed in this chapter can manage to create a parallel between the beauty of motherhood and the darker imagery embedded within its powerful language. While Scott focuses mainly on European writers in her book, the theories she has attached to their works bind well with Latin American poetry. In her exploration of poets like H.D. and Sylvia Plath, for example, Scott sites “the poetics of survival” (15) which were thoroughly outlined in chapter two’s examination of political violence and the female body in Latin American poetry. Scott explores the mourning process and its connection to paternal imagery and maternal space. While Scott does not entirely support Freudian theory, she at least recognizes Freud’s attempts at trying to understand the female psyche in his studies, perhaps creating his own form of testimonial literature⁵⁸ in his writings that would reshape psychology and the perceptions of mass culture. Scott remarks:

If nothing else, Freud was a revolutionary and a provocateur. We should not forget, for example, that the very act of inviting young women to speak openly about their experiences of mistreatment and abuse was radical in every way. He may have bungled the analysis, but Freud took risks merely by listening to women and taking seriously what they had to say as an integral component of their treatment. Freud shocked the medical establishment but also shook society as a whole by rethinking its most valued institution: the patriarchal family. (4)

⁵⁸ For more on Latin American testimonial literature, see chapter 2.

Polhemus shares a similar sentiment about Freud. In his book, *Lot's Daughters: Sex, Redemption and Women's Quest for Authority*, Polhemus establishes a connection between Freud's work with the Oedipus and Electra complexes and his research using female subjects. Polhemus, like Scott, gives Freud the recognition he deserves for his contributions to the field of psychology while at the same time pointing out that Freud was aware of how working with these women would be beneficial to his career:

Freud, it seems, really did want to empower young women and liberate them from oppressive restrictions, *and* he really did want to use them for his own intellectual purposes and benefit [. . .] Freud wanted to save these girls and women from destructive repression, oppression, sickness and harm, *but* he also wanted their maiden tribute in the form of his own lasting greatness and immortality. (218; italics in orig.)

Later in the century after Freud's death and after many of his theories were contested, the identities of the women from Freud's studies were still inextricably linked to him, as if his writings were the only way that their voices could be heard. Similarly, those who lived under the yoke of colonialism in Latin America faced similar struggles, their voices shared with the public only by means of works created by the dominant culture⁵⁹. In this historical context, the poets discussed in this chapter (and in this entire work) have taken on the mission of challenging established societal values by allowing women to have their own voices in their poems, either as mothers, lovers, daughters as well as ghosts, objects of nature and survivors of trauma. Ana Istarú calls up all of these potential figures in her collection of poems *La estación de fiebre y otros amaneceres*.

⁵⁹ For more on the ways in which Western culture has sought to represent other cultures in postcolonial literature, see Morris and Spivak.

In her poem “Mi nombre de persona” Istarú alludes to the process of childbirth:

Y sólo entonces
será hermoso
tener un hijo
de lirios y hogueras
incendiando
las paredes de mis muslos,
porque voy a parir
el universo
con mi milagro
enorme como un dedal.

Porque al fin
tendré el orbe
bien construido
y ordenado,
donde nadie
ensucie
mi nombre de persona,
donde no venga nadie
a mancharme
y declararme
menos
que mi hijo

o que mi padre.

Donde todos carguemos

la misma hambre rosada

de heliotropos en la carne. (30; indentation in orig.)

In this poem, childbirth is something that physically burns the body, with vocabulary that includes fire, the color red, and verbs like “incendiar” while at the same time suggesting hunger and flesh. There is a large amount of contrast between beauty and pain in this poem. The two are fused aesthetically as flower and nature imagery is used. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement of an unseen *nadie* that is associated with stains and defamation of the mother figure. Istarú stays true to her style in that she connects with nature, inviting lilies, roses, and heliotropes to color the universe she has created in the imagined moment of childbirth. The use of the future tense and the subjunctive mood in this poem is significant because it suggests a moment that has not yet occurred; the verb tenses take the reader to a situation that is perceived as being hypothetical, allowing both the poetic voice and the reader to envision impending events that both please and provoke anxiety. “Mi nombre de persona” simultaneously expresses recognition of the mother figure’s creator (her father) and her creation (her child), suggesting a cosmic connection that includes all human beings while at the same time being intensely personal. The poetic voice takes ownership of this view of the cosmos, using the possessive “mi” to describe her name, her miracle, her child and her body. But who is the *nadie* that threatens the experience of the mother? Although *nadie* literally means no one, by recognizing and naming a “no one”, the poem insists that there is actually a someone or something that could have the power or desire to interfere with the intimate universe created by the child’s birth. The poetic voice insists that the moment of birth is so magnificent that nobody can interfere with it

except, perhaps, those closest to the mother, yet, the darker side of this poem reveals the fear and apprehension associated with the process of procreation. There are references in this work to filth and stains, something not commonly connected with childbirth in Istarú's poetry but certainly a part of the reality of giving birth. "Mi nombre de persona" suggests many physical realities of a woman's birth experience while at the same time reflecting on the psychological aspects of motherhood that can cause as much uneasiness and dread as they do bliss and celebration. This poem is rather subtle in how it connects the experience of childbirth directly to the physical aspects of the female body without directly alluding to the specific anatomy but rather to the body's connection to a human experience.

Poem XII, in contrast to "Mi nombre de persona", is much more direct in its description of the female body:

Yo soy el día.

Mi pecho izquierdo la aurora.

Mi otro pecho es el ocaso.

La noche soy.

Mi pubis bebió en la sombra

negros viñedos, duraznos,

la tempestad.

La rosa recia del viento,

seda encarnada en mi ovario. (65)

This poem shares some of Istarú's signature imagery, particularly that of fruit and flowers.

While this poem contrasts dusk and dawn, light and dark, it emphasizes that the female figure has a darkness and a secrecy to her that is intrinsically connected to her physicality. While the poem at first describes the female as a bright figure of daytime, the last two stanzas focus more on darkness, storms, and shadow. While this poem suggests mystery, there is also something refreshingly direct about the poet's choice of words that has been rare in poetry where the female body is described. Here, Istarú chooses specific anatomical words such as "pubis" and "ovario", avoiding the common practice of using euphemisms to describe the reproductive parts of a woman's body. Berta Lopez Morales comments on language in women's texts, suggesting that the female body is presented differently in texts depending on whether their authors are men or women, and that even women's writing has tended to follow male 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)

Istarú breaks with these suggested male codes by referring to other parts of the body such as the ovaries. The ovaries are something inextricably female but not often included in the angelic imagery of the mother in male discourse. Poem XII does use the breasts as a specific point of reference to femininity, but they are used here in conjunction with the significance and intensity of day and night and coinciding with direct references (as opposed to euphemisms) to female physicality. While Istarú often refers to breasts in her poetry, this imagery is often used in

conjunction with the grittier, earthier part of femininity and childbearing, such as blood, stains, flesh, and sweat. In “Tráiganme gente,” the poet uses body imagery to celebrate human physicality; she also returns to the theme of hunger:

¡Tráiganme gente!

Que quiero gentes de gentes

esta noche.

Que no hay nada

que me guste más que una persona

llena de músculos

y tendones

y besos

y gritos

y palabras,

y de ojos verdes,

y piel negra,

que a nada quiero más

que a una persona

de sangre

para ser esta noche

otra persona.

Que tenga el sudor de la tierra

y el hambre en los costados. (43; indentation in orig.)

This poem borderlines the grotesque in its description of human physicality, connecting sweat, blood, tendons, muscles, eyes and skin in a way that constructs an image of erotic pleasure and connection with the earth. Istarú paints all of these basic human characteristics in a positive light, refusing to shy away from them and avoiding a more traditional description of physical beauty as described by Lopez Morales. “Tráiganme gente” suggests a hunger for life and the human experience, similar to the hunger found in the experience of childbirth described in “Mi nombre de persona”. These two poems are significantly different, but they are similar in that they take the details of the human experience and exalt them instead of attempting to make them appear clean or manicured like one of Kant’s English gardens. Istarú does not refer to motherhood, the human body, and hunger together as a unit in every poem in *La estación de fiebre*, yet the different references sprinkled throughout the work in its entirety allows for a constant train of thought that is directly related to these three themes. Istarú often blends erotic imagery and motherhood into the same poem through describing the female body as a source of both sexual and maternal love. In poem IX the poet refers to sexual desire between a man and a woman, yet she describes part of the man’s body as if it were a child. She also includes several allusions to the vagina:

Un nido,
una copa de vino
culminando mis muslos
para calmar tu ayuno,
país de recocijo.
Para el niño
creciente

y decreciente

que tus ingles corona

de azafrán y otros humores perfectos [. . .] (61)

Here again, readers are given the chance to experience imagery that goes beyond the more traditional poetic allusions to the female body. The vagina is referred to as a nest, a glass of wine, and a place of rest; the male genitalia are depicted as a child that finds refuge in these places. The poet uses *ingles* and *muslos* to give a more complete description of the bodies that are united in the act of lovemaking. This poem in particular emphasized the sexual role that mothers can take, either in the Freudian sense of the Oedipus complex, or in a multidimensional sense that was not previously available to women. Traditionally, women have had to choose between being an asexual mother, a virgin, or a whore. Mothers were not supposed to enjoy sex, girls were supposed to remain virgins until marriage, and any woman who enjoyed sex ran the risk of being considered a whore. Istarú breaks through these stereotypes by offering a maternal figure that possesses nurturing imagery blended with nature (through the use of the word *nido* and the reference to the spice *azafrán*) that is also shamelessly naked and engaging in sex with a man while feeding and giving shelter to the child within him. There is something very authentic about her approach to the female body and its essence both in lovemaking and in childbearing. Yet, at the same time, it references a certain uneasiness, which is very important and key to her success as a female writer. As mentioned in chapter one, the historical and social implications of discussing the female body in any context have been based around a centuries old system of shame. Polhemus refers to Calvin in *Lot's Daughters* as one of the most influential silencers of

women and proliferators of shame in the face of sex, in this case when interpreting the story of Lot and his daughters in the Bible⁶⁰:

He won't allow them the slightest justification. They are like calculating prostitutes, like lecherous villains, like shameless breeder-beasts, and what sticks out is how perfect an occasion Calvin finds the Lot chapter for expressing an ideological misogyny and fear and loathing of sexuality that would have huge, if various and unpredictable, social and psychological consequences. In one swoop he collapses the distinction that shaped the traditional interpretation of the Lot chapter, which distinguishes between sex for illicit pleasure (Sodom) and sex for progeny (Lot's daughters). Sex is just plain bad. (70)

At the time that Calvin was reforming Protestantism in Europe, Europeans were also flooding over into the Americas, bringing such myths as the catholic virgin and the protestant, asexual, prudent woman as the prime imagery used to enforce the regulation in the behaviors of indigenous, black, and creole women. Nearly five centuries later, it takes poets like Istarú to question these paradigms by writing books of poetry where a woman can be both a mother and a lover at the same time. The most intimate parts of her body, her breasts, and her vagina, can be used both for raising children, pleasing a partner or pleasing herself at her will, and even better, she is able to share these ideas with others using her own poetic voice, rather than being the subject of someone else's discourse on her body or her experiences. Istarú's combination of mother and lover is an effort to assuage some of women's own fears about themselves and their value to society. Polhemus suggests that the character of Lot's wife, who turns into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom during the family's escape, is punished specifically because she is

⁶⁰ Lot is a character from the book of Genesis who is told to have had incestuous relations with his daughters in order to continue their lineage after fleeing Sodom.

no longer valuable to her tribe since her childbearing years have ended. Polhemus suggests: “One possible meaning of the backward gaze is surely a wife’s desperate nostalgia for a time of maternity- acknowledged social purpose and value. To remember Lot’s wife is to remember the hard lot of women in history” (56). Istarú, while looking fondly at the experience of maternity, does not appear to desperately yearn for it as a source of social value because she has access to other sources of joy and satisfaction that can also spring from her own body. This is something new and revolutionary about the way in which Istarú poeticizes the link between sexual pleasure and motherhood. The two have been connected since the dawn of time, yet so many of the cultural complexes plaguing Europe (and then brought to the Americas) about the two have denied women such comfort and recognition around the subject. Eduardo Archettei discusses this dichotomy between the sexual woman and the mother figure when exploring the values expressed in traditional Argentine tango:

Maternal love is exalted and closely associated with ideas of purity, suffering, sincerity, generosity, and fidelity. A mother’s love is the only permanent feeling and is embedded in a web of relations characterized by loyalty and where unselfishness dominates. The tango thus presents romantic love as less “pure” than a love based exclusively on moral duty. For a loving mother, there is no place for calculation, second thoughts, or hidden intentions. The idealized mother is the source of boundless love and absolute self-sacrifice. [. . .] Hence, for the chaste mother, romantic love is impossible, [. . .] Moreover, the mother is precisely the figure one cannot choose; and thus, also in this sense, she represents an absolute contrast. [. . .] Romantic love challenges the accepted perception that feelings,

pleasures, and excitements are culturally constructed. Instead, they are perceived as ‘subversive’ to family life and ordered biological reproduction. (203)

In other words, according to the cultural norms of masculine discourse in Latin America, motherhood and sexual pleasure are considered two separate things not meant to be experienced by the same woman. To quote Polhemus again: “Children, on whom people project their hopes and desires for spiritual rebirth and the justification of their own lives, are, in fact, the products of wild appetite. [. . .] A child is, in one sense, a big headline crying that sex drives life, but, of course, the sensual hunger that makes the child cannot raise the child. Hence the many conflicting emotions and attitudes surrounding children and sex” (28). Istarú’s poetry does away with these conflicting emotions by recognizing that the two are inextricably linked. She also calls into question the myth of the virgin’s central place of importance in the cultural imagination of Central America. In poem III, Istarú politicizes the female body as she makes parallel allusions to the socio-political climate of Central America:

Este tratado apunta
honestamente
que el pudor y su sueño
no encuentran mejor dueño
que el rincón apacible
de la vagina
y me destina
a una paz virginal
y duradera.
Esto el tratado apunta.

Por ser latina y dulce y verdadera-
mente inclinada
a una casta tensión de la cadera.
Y no lastima
al parecer
las intenciones puras
de tantos curas.
El novio se contenta,
al padre alienta
que en América Central
siempre se encuentra
su hija virgen y asexual.
Este tratado enseña
cómo el varón domeña
y preña
en la América Central
y panameña.
Y de esta fálica
omnipotencia
mi rebelión de obreras
me defienda.
Porque tomo la punta de mis senos,
campanitas

de agudísimo hierro
y destierro
este hymen puntual
que me amordaza
en escozor machista
y en larga lista
de herencia colonial.
Yo borro este tratado de los cráneos
con ira de quetzal
lo aniquilo,
con militar sigilio
lo muerdo y pulverizo,
como a un muerto ajado e indeciso
lo mato y lo remato
con mi sexo abierto y rojo
manejo cardinal de la alegría,
desde esta América encarnada y encendida,
mi América de rabia, la Central. (51-52).

This poem embodies many examples of female subjectivity that arise in Istarú's poetry. The poet decisively uses the verb "preñar" in contrast with allusions to virginity. She also adds lust to the mix by describing Central America as "encarnada" and "encendida," suggesting heat and flesh in conjunction with references to her vagina as being "abierto" and "rojo" which could either be references to menstruation and childbirth, or to sexual arousal. The poem includes not

only imagery of the mother or the passionate, sexual woman, but also to the daughter and the bride, expected in the male gaze to be virginal. Istarú directly contradicts and criticizes the expectation of virginity in conjunction with a woman's social value; she becomes a murderous monster, chewing, pulverizing, and killing machismo and the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon women in her culture. She rebels against the figures of priests, fathers, and the system of colonial rule that has dominated with "fálica omnipotencia." Istarú does not shy away from politicizing her poetry by suggesting revolution, "mi rebelión de obreras." The poet breaks a symbolic hymen, the sacred symbol of virginity, with her own breasts. It is replaced with a fiery figure full of rage who is at the same time filled with a sense of peace and strength; Istarú constructs this female figure as a symbolic survivor of colonial rule and machista traditions. This imagery could be considered shocking or grotesque, yet it is also undeniably beautiful (although perhaps not in the Kantian sense). The female body and its parallel connections to the social and historical challenges faced by Central America are clearly presented here, and the female figures together as virgin, mother, lover, daughter, bride, worker and defender of self and culture are molded together into a creature that is both monstrous and elegant, dangerous and sweet. This creature embodies the complexities of the female role in culture and politics and denies the one-dimensional concept of the feminine experience⁶¹. Istarú's poetry is in direct contrast with the textual trends previously put in place by dominant male cultural patterns. To quote Lopez Morales:

There are three different aspects which need to be outlined in order to analyze women's texts. First, there is the merely referential and/or descriptive aspect, which lacks sexual or erotic connotations modeled by the male code. Second, we

⁶¹ For more on the erotic discourse from a feminist perspective in *La estación de fiebre*, see Paul-Ureña.

see the female body as a manipulative trope between good and evil, where the privileged sexual connotations are designed to justify biblical myths which in turn justify the traditional secondary role of women in society. Here we see feminine beauty alternately possessing either luciferic or angelical qualities. And third, we see the language of the woman's body as a split between the subject of the discourse and her writing. This last observation implies a radical change of perspective within the literary production since here we are dealing with a feminine subject of discourse who recognizes herself in her writing, even though her production is still inscribed within the dominant cultural and social norms which devalue her role in society. (123-124)

Istarú's writing, while embracing some traditional mother imagery as outlined by male codes, is in direct contrast with many of the justified myths outlined by Lopez Morales. Instead of relying on the sexual connotations suggested by male-centered literature, Istarú directly expresses female sexuality from a subjective standpoint. She does not turn female sexuality into a battle between good and evil as suggested in biblical myths, and she very openly recognizes herself in her writing, making herself or a reflection of herself as the understood subject of her poems. Istarú has helped lead the way towards producing literature that transcends the diminished role women have played both as subjects and producers of literature in Western culture.

The poetry of Elvia Ardalani follows many of the trends set by Istarú in *La estación de fiebre*. In Ardalani's works, the figure of the child plays a prominent role, and the poet also brings a transmodern flair to her work both in the way that it combines different world cultures as well as in how it is displayed online as part of her personal website. Her poetry in *De cruz y media luna* suggests motherhood in many ways, for example, in her poem "Tus abuelas rezaron."

Tus abuelas rezaron cada una
en su sitio todos los días de su vida.
Arababé, limpias sus manos y sus pies,
contrito el rostro, en la mezquita.
Mi madre, mirando hacia lo alto
al pie de la cruz en una iglesia.
Los abuelos, cada uno en su contexto,
optaron por ser libres.
No sé si lo lograron.
Tampoco sé si rezaron en la pena.
Fueron buenos.
Hoy son los únicos que saben la verdad.
Tu padre te enseñará a rezar
inclinando la frente sobre el suelo
sencillo y limpio de una alfombra.
Hacia el este tu cara infantil
intacta de nostalgias.
Te habré enseñado yo a arrodillarte
y a cruzar por tu rostro la señal de otra fe.
Quizás un día te venga bien
recostar tu rostro adolorido sobre el
suelo y repetir un Padre Nuestro
o arrodillarte en una iglesia y cantarle

a Dios el Misericordioso, el Compasivo.

Se vale rezar en cualquier lengua

o no rezar.

La oración eres tú. (95)

This poem suggests motherhood in the way that it is addressed to a child, recalling the lives of the child's grandparents and the child's father. The poet makes allusions to her own mother (one of the grandmothers), leading the reader to understand that this is a poem written from a mother to her child. Again, in the vein of transmodernity, this poem blends cultural practices from Islam and Christianity and folds them together in the image of the child. The poem ends with the verse "La oración eres tú." suggesting that the child holds deep meaning and spiritual connection just through the nature of its being. Ardalani's style is quite different in this poem from Istarú's in that it does not insert the same kind of erotic imagery connected to motherhood that can be found in the poems of *La estación de fiebre*. Yet the connection with death is palpable here; Ardalani's use of the past tense when speaking of the grandparents in the verse "Fueron buenos" suggests that the grandparents are no longer alive. "Hoy son los únicos que saben la verdad" is somewhat of a convoluted verse, but could perhaps mean that in death, the grandparents, unlike the living parents, have been exposed to the truths behind the mysteries of faith that the living cannot know. This poem is heavily steeped in both Islam and Catholicism; Catholicism itself is centered in the maternal figure of the Virgin Mary. In this way, there are several maternal allusions present; the grandmothers, the mother herself who is also the poetic narrator, and the presence of Mary as an integral part of the references to church, the cross, Catholic prayers such as the "Our Father." Incidentally, "Tus abuelas rezaron cada una" also gives significant space for the father figure (something that is also noticeable in Istarú's poetry). While the maternal

holds its own space here, it does not dominate entirely, and it leaves rightful space to fathers and their role in creating and raising children. Interestingly enough, there is reference to “padre” and “Padre”, differentiating between the biological father of the child and the faith-based father figure of the Christian God.

“Tus abuelas rezaron” is bathed in light, but does not spare the reader reminders of darkness and death. More apparent is the mention of the death of the grandparents, yet it also infers to the child that one day he or she will likely feel the pain and nostalgia that life brings after the idealized time of childhood. Ardalani suggests, using the future tense and subjunctive mood, that there will be a time when the child will have an expression of pain on his or her face (the gender of the child is unclear and perhaps inconsequential in this case) and that for now, as a child, this face has not been affected by nostalgia but inevitably will change as it did for the grandparents and the parents. The poet also references the contrite faces of the grandparents in the mosque, and she clearly states uncertainty about whether or not they achieved true freedom in their lives, unsure of what the content of their prayers were and whether or not they prayed from a state of pain. The poem suggests a place of closeness to the earth, using verbs such as “arrodillarte,” “inclinarse,” and “recostarse.” This connection to the earth is not only a connection to life but also to death as a necessary part of the life cycle.

Other poems such as “Me ha crecido la noche,” a poem from the book *De cruz y media luna*, go deeper into the maternal experience by specifically naming female body parts such as the womb and breasts and widening hips, along with mention of fluids such as water, milk and blood. While this poem does not go as far as suggesting violence or matricide, the poet’s choice to use the adjective “infestada” when talking about the beings growing inside of her suggests an uncertainty or uneasiness about being inhabited by another being. The night itself is often

associated with darkness, mystery and fear, and the female reproductive system has historically been viewed with similar feelings of uneasiness, particularly under the male gaze. The poem recognizes that the experience of becoming a mother is a lot more complex than the feelings of joy and light often associated with it. The poem is as follows:

Me ha crecido la noche
traslapada en mi cuerpo
expandida
inmensa
prolifera callada
infestada de seres
silenciosos y agua
va abriéndose en mi vientre
va arrollando mi espacio
va tumbando paredes
enreda oscuridades
ata mi carne a otra
como un mar desbordado
va ampliando mis caderas
va llenando mis senos
de leche transparente
milenaria
eterna
la noche va pariendo

sus milagros de siglos
en mi cuerpo
de sangre
en mi vientre
de tiempo. (49)

Here, the darkness of night is directly related to pregnancy and the growth of another being inside of the mother figure. Similar to Istarú's use of the possessive in "Mi nombre de persona", the word "mi" is repeated deliberately in "Me ha crecido la noche", emphasizing *my* body, *my* space, *my* womb, *my* flesh. It is almost as if the poetic voice is attempting to preserve her sense of self in a moment where her body no longer belongs to her. Losing ownership of one's body appears to be a great source of preoccupation for these women writers when describing the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. There is also a suggestion of physical destruction with the use of the verbs "abrir", "arrollar", and "tumbar" along with a sense of entrapment with the verbs "enredar" and "atar". Yet this poem is not entirely negative; in the final stanza the word "milagro" can be found, suggesting that motherhood is a concept much larger than the individual woman herself, and that the fear and perhaps even loathing she may feel at the idea of being inhabited by an unknown being is outshined by the greatness and timelessness of the task before her.

Ardalani continues to ruminate about the anxiety of childbirth in *De cruz y media luna*; her poem "Los dolores de parto" goes perhaps further than Istarú's "Mi nombre de persona" in depicting the physical pains of childbirth while at the same time (and in the same manner as Istarú) insisting on its cosmic importance and its magic. The poem is as follows:

Los dolores de parto me recuerdan

la música marítima y oscura de Shwan
tocada tristemente en las tormentas de arena
de mi cuerpo convulso
tenso filarmónico
después la calma momentánea que presiente
y se angustia imaginando la nota violenta
que prosigue
a la respiración armónica del bajo
el granular salvaje del desierto
y el temor se convierte en lúgubre dolor
de los tejidos que se trenzan de nuevo.

Visualizado en la poca lucidez de la labor de parto
el cuerpo moreno distendido
en la corriente nocturna de la música fúnebre
que precede a la vida
y cuando creo angustiada que no puedo
me lanzo alucinada
como el pez suicida que rompe su pecera
hasta que la vida me parte a la mitad
y la magia desdobra su alfombra de presagios
felices.

No sé por qué será pero no olvido
y los dolores de parto me recuerdan
la música marítima y oscura de Shwan. (59)

This poem brings together many of Ardalani's signature techniques, including references to Persian culture and landscapes, connections to nature, and death of the mother figure. Ardalani, in her tendency towards creating a hybrid space for Mexican and Middle Eastern cultures, writes in Spanish yet alludes to the geography of the Middle East through inclusion of sand storms and the desert. The poem also embraces nature in its connection with the sea and of the body in connection with several types of music. Again, Ardalani includes references that represent her personal version of cultural hybridity. The name Shwan, for example, is the name of the poet's son but also acts as a double reference to a Kurdish musician, Sivan Perwer, whose artistic specialty is traditional revolutionary music. The poet's children are a blend of two worlds, as is her poetry, and there are constant reminders of this sprinkled throughout her writing⁶². When writing from this state of embracing two worlds and cultures, the poet most interestingly connects the concept of suicide and bodily mutilation with the mother figure; in this poem, she suggests that the moment of birth is like a suicidal fish breaking out of its bowl, a moment where the body is torn in two. This graphic and violent imagery exists in the same stanzas where magic and lucidity are also present, providing contrast and texture to the poem's rhythmic flow and overall intention of expressing both the fear and beauty involved in the life cycle.

Anaisabel Ortiz further explores Ardalani's conceptual approach to creation and motherhood through the lens of blended cultures that have resulted in Hispanic identity. Ortiz discusses how the Muslim and Judeo-Christian traditions are all given a foothold in Ardalani's

⁶² Ardalani, Elvia. Email interview. 8 June 2015.

writing, and how her poetry at times models medieval Spanish poems that included Arabic or Hebrew language as well as Spanish⁶³. This cultural amalgamation finds relevance here as it is very much a part of the history of Spain, and as it later spilled over and became part of the history of the Americas, further layers were added to the linguistic richness and cultural complexity available to Hispanic poets. The clashing and cooperating of language and culture runs deep in the Hispanic collective (un)consciousness, and Ardalani's work hones in on this unique blend and weaves it into a variety of images and plays on language. Ortiz writes:

Ardalani describe en un proceso de metaescritura y de revelación místico-biológica, cómo su identidad de mujer evoluciona de amante irredenta a madre prodigiosa del hijo mestizo [. . .] El escenario caótico-multicultural precede al llanto ancestral: la creación de un nuevo orden, una nueva estética, y una reconciliación del nuevo y viejo mundo. Ardalani abraza en su obra poética posibilidades de creatividad infinita con su pluralismo y sincretismo culturales, su conciencia artística sobre la meta-escritura- escribiendo sobre la heredad ancestral de la mujer- y la meta maternidad- su capacidad natural dar a luz una nueva lírica.

(34)

While the poems discussed in this chapter are highly concentrated on the act of creation and the celebration of life through childbirth, this study would not be complete without returning to the theme of matricide. Matricidal imagery can arguably be found in the poem "Sobre los girasoles" from Ardalani's collection *Cuadernos para un huérfano*. The fact that the title of the collection as well as the poem cited in this chapter both focus on the figure of the orphan shows that the poet has done away with the mother figure, yet at the same time, the mother figure's

⁶³ Ortiz discusses the genre of Spanish *jarchas romances* which contained *las moaxajas*, verses that contained Hebrew and Arabic. See Ortiz 32.

ghost is constantly present and referenced in the poems. So while Ardalani has removed the centrality of the mother figure by making her dead, she has also at the same time brought focus to the mother figure who, in her death and absence, has created a fertile space of recognition.

The poem “Sobre los girasoles” is as follows:

Buscan la luz
como los huérfanos desean
una única mirada
aquellos ojos capaces de piedad,
que no tendrán jamás,
y giran la cabeza sencilla
hacia el lejano horizonte de aquel incienso rojo,
de aquel inicio incierto,
de un origen que habla de sábanas lavadas,
de tibiezas que mecen universos y cuerpos.
Buscan la luz
esperanzados con los rostros abiertos
a ese viaje de aire que los viste
con velos luminosos, con promesas de padre
y palabras urgidas de cielos maternos.
No se miran jamás,
los pies desorientados,
la raíz enterrada en esa oscuridad
narrada ciegamente

por gusanos y helmintos,
por negruras que callan los rizos de ese cielo
telúrico.

Ama los girasoles
porque son como tú,
porque sueñan con ángeles y ríen
con semillas y ansias de otras formas,
porque buscan la luz y la alegría
desde su mundo pobre de heliotropo,
porque tal vez un día alguien les premiará
la cabeza caída sobre el pecho en la noche,
los pies terrosos, la vendimia de luz
a la que vuelven vestidos
con andrajos de sombra cada día.

Ama los girasoles
porque también son huérfanos
y como tú se crecen en la promesa eterna
de la vida y la luz. (7-9)

So many images in this poem point to both the absence and the presence of the mother. The sunflower, compared to an orphan, is a motherless figure constantly seeking light. The word *luz* appears five times in this short poem; it is important to remember that in Spanish, the phrase used to describe giving birth is *dar luz*, or to give light. In this way, there is constant reference to the life cycle, birth and death residing in the same poem in parallel form, particularly in

connection to the image of the mother. The poem continues to embrace questions of origin and birth. Ardalani cites uncertain beginnings along with warmth that rocks universes and bodies. Again, the missing connection between mother and child is emphasized here in the way that the sunflower longs for these origins, to be rocked, to be warm, like a child. Without the mother figure, the sunflower is portrayed as having disoriented feet and roots sunken into a dark earth with worms and insects. Similar to the poets discussed in chapter two, Ardalani makes a conscious choice to connect her poetry firmly with earth, flower and seed imagery, which suggests life, yet at the same time, the dark earth of this poem, filled with worms, also could support the concept of death imagery. In the life cycle of humans, sunflowers and worms, life and death exist together. Ardalani does an excellent job of making this point in her poem; with each reference to birth there is another complimentary reference to death. With each suggestion of light there is recognition of its opposite. In this way, her choice to recognize the mother by emphasizing her absence is not a violent or frightening reference to the death of the mother figure, but rather a matter-of-fact positioning of the two opposites (life and death) in a single poem. The figure of the orphaned child is key here; there are moments when the reader must re-read verses to decide whether or not Ardalani is talking about a child or a sunflower, falling asleep at the end of the day, head on chest, with dirty feet, dreaming of angels. The sunflower/child personification is as poignant as the constant references to the absent mother. There are also questions left unanswered for the reader, for example, who is the subject of the verb “amar”? Also, to whom is the poet referring to as “tú”? These questions do not necessarily have to be answered, in fact, the poem insists on uncertainty as part of its foundation. Finally, the poem ends with a wish for an eternal promise of light and life, yet it should be noted that

such a promise is not possible to keep, and that light and life must go hand and hand with darkness and death, as they do throughout the poem and in the course of human (and plant) life.

It is interesting to take the works of Julia Kristeva apply them to the light and dark imagery found in poetry related to motherhood. In her book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva pays attention to the duality of positive and negative that surrounds the process of giving birth and becoming a mother. Kristeva writes: “Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual” (155). In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva recognizes that there is a sexual element to motherhood, yet she also affirms that the experience is also at the same time entirely opposite of that which is sexual. In Ardalani’s poem “Sobre los girasoles,” perhaps the uncertainty of subject and verb or the mysterious “tú” can be connected to the “other” that is referenced by Kristeva. These “other” figures in Ardalani’s poem are not the poetic “I”, they are separate from the self as Kristeva suggests when describing the moment of hesitation, light and darkness associated with giving birth. Kristeva continues to explore the mix of horror and awe that is felt when one contemplates the mother figure:

But devotees of the abject, she as well as he, do not cease looking, within what flows from the other’s ‘innermost being,’ for the desirable and the terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body [. . .] the hope for rebirth is short-circuited by the very splitting: the advent of one’s own identity demands a law that mutilates, whereas *jouissance* demands an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent. (54-55; italics in orig.)

What Kristeva is saying here, and what Ardalani’s orphan figure perhaps suggests, is that in order for one to find his or her own identity, it is necessary to representationally do away with

the mother figure. Yet, once this opportunity for growth is established, the mother figure continues to appear in thoughts and words as an inseparable part of the self. Both the figure of the mother whose presence both allows life but stifles growth, along with the concept of the death of the mother figure, can be connected with Kristeva's concept of abjection⁶⁴, Freud's Oedipus and Electra complexes, and, according to Richard Kearney, Kant's concept of the sublime. Kearney writes of Kristeva's connection to Freud and Kant:

As such it is an objectless and borderline experience of something monstrously alien and disturbing which fills us with both repulsion and a perverse attraction. This mixture of disgust and fascination before the abject is close to Kant's description of the 'sublime' in *The Critique of Judgement* as a mélange of terror and exultation (though she does not explicitly mention Kant). The terror comes from the fact that the abject refers to *no-thing*, that is, to an archaic and unnameable non-object that defies language [. . .] Kristeva goes on to define the sublime as 'objectless' or at best as a kind of pseudo-object that dissolves into bottomless (and archaically repressed) memories striking us with a sense of both loss and dazzlement, of alienation and exaltation. (490-491)

Hence, while Ardalani's poem could be superficially construed as a tender and sincere poem about children and sunflowers, beneath the surface it holds keys to much deeper concepts such as matricide, horror and abjection. Kristeva suggests that separation from the mother is crucial in order to allow the existence of the individual; she writes the following when addressing the relationship between birth and abjection:

⁶⁴ See Kearney, 490. "Abjection is defined by Kristeva as an experience of the 'abominable real' prior to any sense of ego or of identifiable objects."

Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be- maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (10)

Kristeva emphasizes that the life cycle in which motherhood is an integral part can be conceived as violent and part of a process that goes beyond memory; the separation of the mother both in the process of birth and in the death of the mother are considered to be imponderable. Poetry is one of the ways in which human beings work on this dark part of the human psyche; Ardalani in her poem suggests that even in the mother's absence, the maternal presence is still very palpable and can also be considered a necessary part of childhood consciousness, growth, and participation in the life cycle. Further, Kristeva suggests that art is one of the ways in which people tend to process their feelings of horror about the abject, attempting to purify themselves through artistic catharsis and religious belief:

The various means of *purifying* the abject- the various catharses- make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions. (17)

Putting words to their fears and facing the distinct elements of the abject in the experience of giving birth are some of the missions to be accomplished by the writers cited in this work. While some might consider Kristeva's theories to be somewhat out of date, Jonte-Pace also contributes

to the idea that the death of the mother is necessary to individual growth in a more recent analysis of the concept:

The melancholic response to the separation from the mother is part of what gives rise to the self. If that mourning is always partly melancholic or troubled, then we are all melancholic mourners of lost mothers. In the variations and vicissitudes of mourning and melancholia, we encounter the familiar signals of the uncanny, maternity, mortality, and the demand for immortality. Death, absence, and loss are the precipitating events of mourning and melancholia. The strange, yet familiar body of the mother is the corpus or corpse or 'open wound' underlying both. And the 'demand for immortality' and the 'refusal to mourn' obstructs the mourning process wherein losses are paradoxically 'immortalized' in psychological structures. (138)

The theorists cited in this chapter work both to expose the holes in Freud's psychoanalytic theories regarding the Oedipus complex while at the same time recognizing their valid points; Kristeva, for example, accuses Freud's Oedipus theory of being contradictory and flimsy⁶⁵, yet at the same time it is incredibly useful when analyzing the underlying meaning of the poems previously cited. That the father is the authority figure and the mother the castrated version of the boy child's own image is something that has become steadfast in many cultural collective imaginations, whether or not it is an accurate portrayal of the human psyche. Yet poets like Istarú and Ardalani (as well as theorists such as Kristeva) have eased some of the tensions around this theory reinventing the mother figure, removing her as the representation of castration anxiety and bestowing her with a more active role in the psychology of the child figure. In the

⁶⁵ See Kristeva 31.

poems referenced in this chapter, the child figures do not typically have a specific gender; they are portrayed as being connected through nature to the mother as well as to the father, whether it be by showing that the mother and the father played an active, erotic role in the process of childbirth or by suggesting that the absence of both is also an essential part of life. Some writers have even suggested that the act of writing itself is an act of giving birth⁶⁶. Therefore, the poets in this chapter are representationally taking on the role of mother through the act of artistic creation, in spite of the fact that their creation will in turn take on a separate life of its own. Yet they are also working towards a deeper understanding of something that most would consider an infinite mystery; the contrasts of dark and light, terror and joy, that are associated with the mother figure and her absence. Rodríguez Magda discusses this fascination with trying to uncover that which we find troubling. In *Transmodernity*, she includes a chapter called “La ética como estética” where she calls upon Kant’s version of inner morality as a way to help ease the inquietudes that often seem to elude us as human beings:

El ser humano busca siempre trascender sus límites, ir más allá, pues todo lo que realmente le inquieta se halla del otro lado de su finitud, envolviéndola, dándole cifra y razón. El cielo estrellado sobre nosotros y la ley moral en nuestro interior eran dos de los asombros inconmensurables que extasiaban a Kant. (140)

She continues later to insist that humans have developed ways of coping with the unknown and the intense fears and pleasures that we feel in the face of absence:

Transitamos un paisaje silencioso, que los dioses abandonaron hace siglos, contemplamos en el horizonte la majestuosidad de todo lo que el ser humano construyó, como una patria deshabitada pero propia. Es el reto trágico de lo

⁶⁶ For more on women establishing maternal identities through writing as opposed to physical motherhood, see Trigo 3-4.

sublime, en el que nuestro compromiso ético se torna voluntad creadora,
enteramente recomenzada. La estética ante el vacío. (154)

Both poets in this chapter have consistently cited the sky and the earth as possible sources for answers. They have used creativity as a tool against fear of the unknown, turning it into something like the ecstasy Kant described when writing on the sublime. Yet this ecstasy would not have the same power without the dark side that constantly encourages us to search for words to describe that which cannot be described. Istarú and Ardalani recognize and embrace the traditions of their homelands and their roles as mothers, but they do so in a way that also recognizes the brevity and fragility of human life. These poets recognize the role of sex and eroticism in the life cycle and they are emphatic about drawing direct links between pleasure, fear, and creation. The constant references to the earth and everything that springs from the earth (such as plants, fruit and flowers) are deliberately and directly associated with both literary and maternal creation. Ardalani and Istarú create a linguistically and culturally hybrid space through poetry that allows for female participation in the creation of the world and its place in the cosmos. Each poet in her own way insists that the role of women, and in particular of mothers (both literal and figurative) is a necessary link to a greater understanding of ourselves and our world.

Chapter 4:

Going Home: The search for Individual and Collective Voices of Black and Indigenous Women in Nancy Morejón, Natalie Diaz and Eliane Potiguara

In the last fifty years, much progress has been made in how readers and critics are beginning to recognize the valuable contributions of Black and indigenous women's writings in Latin America. The word "beginning" is key here, as there is still much work to be done in order to reverse centuries of the damage and silence imposed upon women of color as a result of European conquest, slavery, and colonial rule. To put things in perspective, let us remember some key historical turning points that reflect how recent and fresh the memories of euro-centric cultural domination actually are. Slavery was not abolished in Brazil until 1888, it was abolished in Cuba in 1886, and the United States maintained its "peculiar institution"⁶⁷ until 1865. Each of these nations along with most others in the western hemisphere practiced exploitation of the African and indigenous populations of their regions. In the case of Cuba, the indigenous people were wiped out entirely as a result of disease and forced labor prior to the influx of African slaves; in the United States and Brazil many indigenous cultures partially survived but suffered severe cultural consequences from which most have not been able to fully recover, such as population decimation, racism, geographical isolation, loss of land, and loss of language. The results of this painful history have been especially burdensome for women because of their double marginalization; women of color have had to endure both the stigma of being non-white and of being female in an environment that highly values whiteness and male contributions. This volatile situation has created a particularly challenging landscape for women writers of color;

⁶⁷ A common euphemism used in the United States during the 19th century referring to the institution of slavery.

while the experience of conquest and marginalization can be considered a collective one, there is also something deeply personal about it that each writer must grapple with on an individual basis. The poetry discussed in this chapter takes several different approaches to dealing with this issue; some of the writers address it directly while others take more subtle approaches to self-expression in order to find and come to terms with their cultural roots. In this selection of poetry, women of color reach out into their communities for inspiration and for models of linguistic creativity while at the same time alluding to their own emotions and bodies as a way of drawing their readers into a more intimate and personal version of what it means to wrestle with the burdens of marginalization. The question has been posed in literary criticism many times as to whether or not it is necessary to recognize women writers of color instead of assuming a color-blind approach; should the women in these pages be identified as Black or indigenous women writers, or simply women writers, or even more broadly, just writers with no necessity of placing importance on their gender or race? I would suggest that the color-blind approach is not a wise idea, since it perpetuates a notion that ignoring issues of race is the best way to eliminate them. On the contrary, it seems that recognizing, verbalizing and exploring the realities of race and the female experience are likely some of the best tools available to eradicate the cultural and gender stereotyping and racist ideology that has dominated much of Latin America's literary landscape for the past five centuries.

Theorists and artists alike are divided when it comes to the amount of emphasis that is necessary when identifying the work of non-white women writers. Nancy Morejón from Cuba, for example, has been known to de-emphasize this aspect of herself in many of her poems, yet at the same time her admirers and critics agree that Blackness and her identity as Cuban are closely linked, and these two aspects of Morejón's identity cannot and should not be overlooked in her

work. Brazilian writer and activist Eliane Potiguara and Mojave poet Natalie Diaz are also among the artists cited in this chapter who choose to include their cultural heritage as one of the principle sources of poetic inspiration and artistic purpose in their works. These writers have made a conscious choice to include issues such as race, gender, poverty and national identity in their poems as a way of giving a voice to a group that has been historically silenced.

For this chapter I will refer to the concept of transculturation as well as to more recent postcolonial and subaltern theories and the ways in which they can be applied to the hybrid fluidity of these poets and their use of language and imagery. So much of Fernando Ortiz's theory of transculturation can be found when exploring Black and indigenous women writers because these writers have been able to take from a variety of linguistic and religious sources, which have led them to a greater capacity for communication and self-expression. Yet more recent studies on cultural hybridity by Néstor García Canclini as well as on subaltern theory by Gayatri Spivak are equally useful and perhaps more easily applied to the twenty first century where most of the works represented have been published. These poems blend language and a variety of cultural concepts in order to encourage readers to take a hard look at the effects of history on women while at the same time recognizing the realities and value of each woman's individual experience. The three poets discussed in this chapter have all used language and the collective contributions of their respective cultures as springboards for understanding themselves in a new light, and hopefully such self-awareness can translate into a greater understanding and inclusion of the Black and Native American female experience by the dominant culture.

First and foremost, it is essential to emphasize that we are dealing with women who are products of the twentieth century; these poets do not seek to be read in the context of the darker parts of history that surrounded European conquest and colonial rule. Each of them in their own

way resist the romanticized notion of what it means to be of African or Native American heritage. These are women who live and write in the 21st century; they are not isolated or limited by their cultural heritage even though they choose to recognize it as an integral part of themselves and their poetry. These women live in modern cities, speak the dominant language and are much more multidimensional than women writers of color are often given credit for being. The purpose of dedicating a specific chapter to Black and Native American poets is to emphasize the artistic legitimacy of writers who, as women of color, have been specifically left out of written history for a much longer time than most others. These women have all made incredible strides, not just in opening up about a painful past, but also in paving the way for contemporary women to come to terms with the past while living in and celebrating the present and all of its unique realities.

Nancy Morejón was born in Havana, Cuba in 1944 has dedicated her life and career not only to poetry but also to Cuba itself and to its unique social and political structure. Morejón has been considered a protégé of the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, who was also active in using poetry as a vehicle to spread awareness and appreciation for the Afro-Cuban experience. Although her support of revolutionary Cuba has been questioned many times, Morejón has remained a central figure as an artist there, choosing to live and work on the island nation surrounded by her culture. Her poetry fluidly embraces the fusion of African, Hispanic and French cultures as a necessary part of the present day Caribbean, particularly but not always exclusively in relation to Cuba. Morejón does not use her poetry as a platform for critiquing the Cuban government, at least not overtly. She also does not dwell on the painful past of the slave trade or the colonial era, although she certainly alludes to it and uses imagery from these unavoidable cultural memories in order to enrich her expression of a very pluralistic, diverse

present. Dawn Duke thoroughly discusses the sense of mixed subjectivity that is so palpable in the Black female experience in Cuba: “The vision of female self seems constructed upon the notion of racial fusion, comprising female ancestors of different ethnic backgrounds to whom the contemporary woman owes her allegiance. The African woman’s experience is not unilaterally contemplated, but rather configured as one of the two important components that come together to create the complex and mixed subjectivity that is Cuba today” (200). Other writers such as Fernando Ortiz and Ángel Rama, for example, have thoroughly explored the topic of racial fusion in Cuban culture, yet their works are not particularly in tune with the female experience in the way that Duke and other contemporary theorists such as Vanessa Valdés, Miriam DeCosta-Willis and C. Rosegreen-Williams have been. Contextually speaking, Ortiz published one of his most prominently known works *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* in 1940, four years before Morejón’s birth. Historically, it makes sense that at the time Ortiz was writing, there were very few opportunities for women, particularly Black women, to participate in art and contribute to theory, even though the *negrista*⁶⁸ movement was in full swing at the time. Nicolás Guillén was writing poetry in the same time frame as Ortiz was writing his essays, and while Guillén’s poetry takes steps to recognize the Afro-Cuban woman in a positive light, he often fell short of this goal and it was not until Morejón’s generation that a more authentic and subjective female voice could be found in the fields of poetry and literary theory.

Cuba, like most nations in the Americas today, is a rich combination of many cultures, including African, European, and Asian. Therefore, it is not possible to look at the Black woman

⁶⁸ The *negrista* movement from the 1920s and 1930s was a literary phenomenon that attempted to capture language, sounds and cultural customs of Black Cubans in literature. This movement was often criticized as being led by white writers who had more access to education and publicity. It wasn’t until later that *negrista* literature became more of a movement led by black writers.

as a one-dimensional being. In the past, Black women were left with very few options in literary representation, such as the archetypal mammy⁶⁹ or the sensual or tragic mulata⁷⁰. These archetypes, particularly the mulata, were often used in literature less as a way of encouraging subjectivity for women of African descent but rather for promoting the white abolitionist agenda. Today, writers like Morejón produce work that is designed to address society and the world from the perspective of both men and women, not avoiding expressions of Blackness and at the same time not employing such expressions as the only purpose for her writing. Morejón, however, shies away from being labeled as a feminist. In fact, many of Morejón's poems are written from a male perspective⁷¹ and while there is never a loss of consciousness about the realities of being Black in Cuba (and in other nations that have dealt with the historical footprint of slavery), Morejón is crafty and multifaceted in how she writes about these issues. To quote Duke:

Morejón's poetic focus on aspects of African and Afro-Cuban culture are not concentrated but rather scattered, incorporated into other themes. There is no extreme idealizing of black, Caribbean, or African elements but more an acceptance and smooth blending with the current socialist motivations of her time. The presence of poetry about African heritage contrasts with the poetic silence on the theme of racism in Cuba. [. . .] For Morejón it is possible to be a black writer and a full supporter of Cuba's chosen path of nationhood. Having recovered from

⁶⁹ A commonly known example of the archetypal mammy can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

⁷⁰ One example of the tragic mulata character can be found in the Brazilian novel *A escrava Isaura* by Bernardo Guimarães (1875) which was later adapted into a telenovela in 1976 and again in 2004. Another example can be found in the novel *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde (1882).

⁷¹ Some examples of poems about men or from a male perspective include "Farewell" from the collection of *Parajes de una época* (1979), "Negro" from *Piedra Pulida* (1986), and "Aniversario" from *Baladas por un sueño* (1989).

the initial trauma of being stigmatized by the revolutionary government, she defends the national socialist ideals and converges on them within her diverse themes of literary expression. Currently she offers no explanation of her choice, nor does she seem to dwell on the fact that in the 1960s there was not much of a choice. She continues to prosper, remaining true to her calling with poetry as her weapon of reconciliation and recognition. (109)

There are two poems by Nancy Morejón, “Mujer negra” (from *Parajes de una época*) and “Amo a mi amo” (from *Octubre imprescindible*) that have been extensively analyzed and referenced in literary criticism. Because of the extensive availability of academic thought on these two poems⁷², they will not be included in the analyses in this chapter, although it would be problematic to leave them out altogether because of their very specific and valuable relationship to the thematic content of this chapter and to this work as a whole. Instead, this chapter will be used to explore some of Morejón’s lesser-known poems in an attempt to broaden the scope of her contribution to female subjectivity, particularly in relation to how Black women have found and cultivated connections to a sense of home and belonging in a culture where they have often been marginalized, displaced, and silenced.

The poem “La claridad” combines many elements essential to the expression of the female body, the sense of home felt in the island of Cuba, and the contemplation of human mortality:

Cántame, pájaro que vuelas
sobre el espacio austral
que desconozco. Húndete

⁷² For a more thorough analysis of “Mujer negra” and “Amo a mi amo”, see Gutiérrez 209-219, RoseGreen-Williams 187-200, and Valdés 95-99.

en mi sed de persona
y póstate en los dedos
que conforman mi mano.
Iremos a la floresta,
después que la lluvia
haya posado su cansancio
en la tarde. Después
que el sol haya alzado
su cabeza dorada
a través de las sonantes
hojas verdes.

La tarde es una sola,
en Greenwood o Almendares.
La puerta blanca de mi alcoba
se entreabre ya.
Rayos solos de luz
se cuelan desde allí,
alcanzando mis pies en reposo.

Qué humedad la que deja el chubasco
en el verano!
Este mediodía, que ya deja de ser

por el canto de un pájaro,
se esfuma con el tiempo.

Naces y mueres, claridad.

Nacemos y morimos

en esta isla de la borrasca.

Ven hacia mí,

ay, cántame, pájaro de Cuba,

en la frescura de la patria. (17-18)

This poem is less intense than some of Morejón's works depicting the history and suffering of Black people in Cuba, but it is significant because of its personification of Cuba in a moment of tranquility, after a rain shower. While imagery of the female body has often been used in conjunction with descriptions of land and earth, many times these descriptions depict violence and conquest⁷³ from the perspective of the male gaze. In "La claridad" on the other hand, the poet uses references to the body (fingers, hand, head, feet) as a way of describing this landscape that is so much a part of her poetic, political and personal consciousness. While Morejón admits that this poem is written in the Romantic style, and in a superficial reading it may appear to be little more than a pleasant homage to her homeland, in close reading it also makes references to unsettling aspects of Cuban and Black realities.

First and foremost, the poem directly references death. The brightness of the afternoon is born and it dies, human beings are born and die as well. Morejón describes Cuba as "la isla de la borrasca," suggesting that it is not always the picture of light and beauty described in this idle

⁷³ Many examples of this can be found in Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950) in poems such as "Surgen los hombres" or "Valdivia".

afternoon. Also, the second stanza suggests the figure of a woman in repose, noticing the passage of time and the partial opening of a white door. While on the surface this could appear to be a figure in her midday rest, it also suggests an end to something, a reference to eternal rest and the white light or doorways and passages associated with it. The poet is meditating on her mortality, as well as on the finite nature of everything. There is a sense of “not yet,” as the poet discusses plans with the bird to visit a glade once the rain has stopped. While she uses the subjunctive mood several times in this first stanza to suggest something that has not yet happened, her use of “iremos” in the future tense suggests a direct plan to continue with life after this brief moment of summer rain and reflection.

References to the Black experience are subtle but not lost in this poem. Morejón mentions Greenwood and Almendares, suggesting that evening is the same no matter where one is resting. Yet reading deeper into her choice to include Greenwood in the poem, it could be that she is referencing Greenwood, Mississippi, an area of the United States that was a major cotton producer during the era of slavery and then also a site of significant protests during the civil rights movement. Almendares is a river in western Cuba; here Morejón is suggesting that the struggles of the people in these regions while in some ways distinct from one another, is also very much the same.

In spite of the shadows and conflicts suggested in this poem, there is a deep tranquility and love for her homeland that is the principle expression in “La claridad”. Morejón is well known for her love and appreciation for Cuba, even in the face of criticism over some of the political choices made by its leaders during her lifetime. Duke makes significant references to the importance of love and natural elements as an integral aspect of Morejón’s poetry:

Love intermixes with the surroundings and seems to draw on the human and natural landscape as a way of expanding itself beyond the persona or the couple. The appropriation of nature as the perfect symbol for reiterating romance is very evident in Morejón's poems. Love becomes part of a larger circle of life and existence. The motif that is very prominent is the sea; the waters, ocean, sea, beach, sand, sky, clouds and air are the natural elements that profoundly affect the poetic subject. (174)

While "La claridad" is not necessarily a romantic poem, it is in many ways a loving homage to the fleeting moments of life and to Cuba's natural beauty.

Morejón also intermixes imagery of the sea and nature with national identity particularly in how it is tied to the Cuban revolution. In "Renacimiento," she blends allusions to the life cycle with the power of the sea and the importance of the revolution to what it means to be Cuban:

Hija de las aguas marinas,
dormida en sus entrañas,
renazco de la pólvora
que un rifle guerrillero
esparció en la montaña
para que el mundo renaciera a su vez,
que renaciera todo el mar,
todo el polvo,
todo el polvo de Cuba. (42)

This brief poem celebrates the male/female dynamic suggesting pregnancy but also suggesting birth as a result of gunpowder being spread along the mountainside (guns and rifles are often euphemisms for the male genitalia, in this case the gunpowder being semen that repopulates the Cuban landscape). Frequently, dust is also euphemistic for death and decay⁷⁴ yet in this poem it is paired with life and earth imagery, the dryness of dust also contrasting with the water from the sea as a way of suggesting how the Cuban Revolution has brought about new life not only to the island nation but to the world. “Renacimiento” is an appropriate title for the poem because it does not just suggest birth, but rather rebirth from something that has died and become reincarnated into something better, fresher, and more full of life than its previous existence. The connection with revolutionary Cuba is unmistakable here. Morejón utilizes repetition, emphasizing *pólvora* and *polvo* several times, and including the verb *renacer* twice in the poem as well as in the title. This repetition is somewhat of a curious choice, because it draws attention to the life cycle, to the beginning and end of things. Everything is born and becomes dust, over and over again. But what does this mean in the context of revolutionary Cuba? Is Morejón suggesting that this glorious phase will eventually pass as well? As history has proven, Cuba has continued to be reborn in the decades following the revolution; it takes a great amount of wisdom and insight on the part of the poet to recognize this reality even in a moment of jubilation over the positive changes that Morejón often associates with the Cuban revolution. This poem does not necessarily indicate the Black female experience, but rather the Cuban experience. As mentioned in many writings on Morejón’s work, while her Blackness is very much interconnected with her Cuban-ness, she considers herself to be Cuban before anything else.

⁷⁴ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the phrase “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (*King James Version*, Genesis 3:19) is commonly used in funeral services to denote the simple and cyclical nature of human life and the finality of death.

Richard Jackson comments on Morejón's race and national identity and how they are inextricably linked:

Though she does not write intentionally as a feminist or as a Black, it is easy to understand why Black and female readers identify with her poetry. In her work, Blacks and females are human beings first, even when they are exploited because of color and gender. Morejón's poetic voices are always expressed from the perspective of the abused, the underdog, and the mistreated. [. . .] Because she is Black and female, Morejón's poetic direction is, in a sense, unavoidable. It is inevitable for her to write about Blacks and females because to do so is to express part of her essence, which she does consistently whether in poems on family, race, country or women (104-105).

There are so many other poems in Morejón's collections, however, where the use of the Black woman as the poetic subject is very necessary to the poem's essence. For many of Morejón's readers, this direct reference to race is a refreshing and necessary way to begin the healing process in the wake of centuries of imposed silence on the issue. Morejón's open approach to discussing blackness is something that is sorely lacking in political and theoretical context on a global level. Toni Morrison discusses how American literature and its criticism has historically evaded discussions of race. While her thoughts are geared towards understanding literature from the United States, her theories can be applied to Latin America as well. She writes:

One likely reason for the paucity of critical material on this large and compelling subject is that, in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the

issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. (9-10; italics in orig.)

Morrison makes the point that much of the writing and literary criticism produced by the dominant, white culture in the United States (and I would argue, in Latin America) prefers to ignore race with the intention of avoiding the discomfort of being misunderstood or with the hope that race issues will simply resolve themselves, while Black and indigenous writers in recent decades have bucked against this norm, insisting that such color-blind behavior actually continues the tradition of making their respective cultural heritages invisible in the field of literary production. Bringing the focus back to Morejón's poetry in particular, poems such as "Baas" and "El tambor" reshape the concept of national identity in order to make it visible from the experience of Black women. This is important and in many ways revolutionary, since even the *negrista*⁷⁵ poetry from previous decades often left out the poetic voices of women, or they tended to insist upon the myth of the highly sexualized Black or mulata woman. RoseGreen-

⁷⁵ *Negrista* poetry, as mentioned previously, came from a movement perhaps most well-known in the works of Cuban writer Nicolás Guillén, who was a mentor to Nancy Morejón. While Guillén inspired Morejón, their works are actually quite distinct. *Negrista* poetry, while very valuable in its literary and historical contributions, has been criticized for not necessarily including a feminist perspective. It makes sense to remember that there are significant generational differences between Guillén and Morejón (Guillén began the height of his work in the 1930s while Morejón began to publish nearly fifty years later), and while the two poets often shared common points of view in regards to Blackness and Cuba, they are two very different writers.

Williams suggests that Morejón has improved upon the mission of the *negrista* movement by de-idealizing it and bringing it into a place where it is firmly connected to the Revolution:

With the intensification of Caribbean nationalist movements in the 1920s and after, some *negrista* poets (especially in Puerto Rico) saw the mulatto woman as the natural icon of Creole identity, epitomizing, as she does, the racial and cultural conjoining of Africa and Europe. Through the depiction of the Black woman in her poems, Morejón offers an alternate Creole icon, defined less by race or cultural identity and more by the firmness of her Cuban roots and commitment. (193)

The poem “Baas” follows the trend suggested by RoseGreen-Williams in that it finds the Black female poetic voice, not only recounting an experience of pain, but also leaving the reader with a sense of changes to come. Again, this is Morejón’s signature nod to the revolution and how necessary it is to positive change, not only in Cuba but in other nations where Black people have suffered at the hands of slavery, colonialism and modern day racism. The poem is as follows:

Eres el amo.
Azares y un golpe seco de la historia
te hicieron ser mi amo.
Tienes la tierra toda
y yo tengo la pena.
Tienes la hacienda,
el potro, el olivo, los rifles
y yo tengo la pena.
En medio de la noche

te alzas como una bestia en celo.
Tuyos mi sudor y mis manos.
Me has hecho nómada en mis propios confines.
Eres el amo
y eres esclavo
de lo que posees.
Eres el amo.
Me has despojado de mis cosas
pero no de mi canto.
¿Qué vas a hacer
cuando me alce mañana
y recobre mi potro, mi olivo
y mis estrellas? (66)

This poem contains all the elements that have made Morejón's poetry such a success in finding words to express the Black, female and Cuban experience all in a singular poem. She presents the master/slave dynamic; grammatically she makes the gender of her characters known through the male "amo" and the female "nómada" who is also the subject of shame and abuse simply due to the unlucky hand dealt to her by history. In this way, Morejón implies that race relations are not truly based on superior and inferior culture and biology, but rather the whim of historical events that ended up with one in the dominant position and the other as the dominated. In the middle of the poem there is a shift, similar to the shift of subjectivity and awareness found in the poem "Amo a mi amo", where the victimized Black female speaker suggests revolt, revolution, and change of the status quo. The speaker in "Baas" suggests that a time will come when she is

in control of her own body and her own voice; the master is converted to a slave (“Eres el amo / y eres el esclavo / de lo que posees. / Eres el amo. / Me has despojado de mis cosas / pero no de mi canto.”) By the end of the poem, Morejón no longer repeats the word *pena*, which is a very versatile word that can mean shame, suffering, sorrow, misery and punishment. In this way, Morejón’s choice of words like *pena* with many layers of meaning allows her to write succinctly while at the same time allowing for broad interpretations of meaning and expression. The end of the poem is clear; the dominated subject is certain that she will rise tomorrow and take back her power, her body and her land. She asserts that she has a voice and a song to sing, and that her position as a silenced piece of property will change. This could be an allusion to slavery but it could also be read as a nod to revolution and a critique of capitalist society. The fact that the master or “Baas” in the poem is a slave to his own material belongings is a very direct way of criticizing the materialist tendencies of the capitalist culture and economy ousted by the Cuban revolution.

While literary theorists such as Jackson and RoseGreen-Williams have suggested that Morejón takes an understated approach to expressing her African roots, poems such as “El tambor” are in no way subtle. “El tambor” appears to be very much in the tradition of Guillén’s “Sóngoro cosongo” in that it is rhythmic, repetitive, and suggestive of African-style drumming that was brought to the Americas with the arrival of the slave trade. “El tambor” is as follows:

Mi cuerpo convoca la llama.

Mi cuerpo convoca los humos.

Mi cuerpo en el desastre

como un pájaro blando.

Mi cuerpo como islas.

Mi cuerpo junto a las catedrales.
Mi cuerpo en el coral.
Aires los de mi bruma.
Fuego sobre mis aguas.
Aguas irreversibles
en los azules de la tierra.
Mi cuerpo en plenilunio.
Mi cuerpo como las codornices.
Mi cuerpo en una pluma.
Mi cuerpo al sacrificio.
Mi cuerpo en la penumbra.
Mi cuerpo en claridad.
Mi cuerpo ingrávido en la luz
vuestra, libre, en el arco. (113)

This poem is a celebration both of the body and spirit, as well as of the different elements of Cuban culture and the cultural mixture of the island. Images of Spanish/Catholic cathedrals next to the sea and corals of the island, as well as references to light and dark existing together are just some of the ways in which Morejón celebrates the uniqueness of her surroundings, all tied together in life's rhythm and in the body belonging to the poetic voice. Vanessa Valdés writes extensively on Morejón's unique way of demonstrating her love for Cuba through poems that include such fluid examples of cultural *mestizaje*:

With these poems, Morejón demonstrates her love for her country; she does not separate her identity as a woman of African descent from her Cuban nationality,

any more than she could isolate her gender from her race from her class from her nationality. Whereas she communicates her reservations about the Revolution (though never in an obvious manner), she conveys without hesitation her love for the *mestizaje* that created modern Cuba. Her work honors her ancestors, those men and women of African descent forgotten and therefore silenced by history; it is a testimony to her belief in the Cuban nation, more so than in the Revolution. (99)

Perhaps Valdés' point regarding Morejón's love for Cuban culture could explain why the poet so openly embraces the fluidity of change expressed in poems like "Renacimiento"; while Morejón does express reserved support for the ideals of the revolution in her poetry, her scope is actually much broader and reaches beyond it, constantly connecting a difficult past with a brighter future that will constantly evolve into new forms of Cuban *mestizaje* as the island nation continues to grow and evolve as part of a global community.

Brazil is another nation with many different forms of *mestizaje* as well as with a close cultural connection to the sea. Also, because of its geographical placement and its history as a Portuguese colony, Brazil has a deep past with the slave trade and a very turbulent colonial history. While many would like to consider Brazil a racial democracy, the reality for women of color is often quite different than that of white women; echoes of past discrimination and racial prejudice are still a part of Brazil's cultural landscape in the present. In recent years, academic contributions by Antonio D. Tillis, Miriam Alves and Vanessa Valdés have brought light to some of the complex issues faced particularly by Brazilian women of color, including poverty and lack of access to education and adequate resources that would allow them to improve their situations. Valdés in particular draws parallels between the experience of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian women, and her work along with the works of the other writers mentioned all attest to the fact

that it has been rare to find poetry from women writers of color in both Brazil and in the Caribbean islands, since history has typically silenced them and the movement towards changing this fact has been slow. However, there is a rising number of Brazilian women writers of color, Eliane Potiguara being one of them. Potiguara's poetry is quite different from Nancy Morejón's, although the two share a tendency to write about their concept of home and the different elements that make up their sense of belonging in their respective communities and nations.

Eliane Potiguara (1950-) is a Brazilian-born poet and is a descendent of the Potiguara people who are mostly located in the Brazilian state of Paraíba. She is active in several political groups that strive to improve the condition of indigenous people in Brazil, particularly women and even more importantly for the purposes of this study, women writers. Her publication *Metade cara, metade máscara* is a combination of her own political discourse and poetry combined with the works of other indigenous Brazilians who have shared in her struggle of representation and individual/collective identity. Her work is dedicated to the indigenous people of Brazil who have been displaced, murdered, and disappeared by colonizing forces⁷⁶, and her voice is persistent and defiant, insisting on the large amount of work that is left to be done both by the indigenous people of Brazil to make their voices heard and by the dominant Brazilian culture and governmental body to validate the concerns and demands of their people. Her work is highly political, yet at the same time it is a collection of poems that expresses an intense love and healing. Potiguara writes:

O ato de criação é um ato de amor. Amor a si mesmo, amor ao próximo, amor à natureza. Seja criar um texto, uma música, uma pintura ou qualquer outra arte.

⁷⁶ See the introduction page to *Metade cara, metade máscara*. This page is particularly dedicated to an indigenous woman named Maria de Lourdes who is survived by her four daughters as well as to Potiguara's family and to all of their indigenous ancestors.

Mas, para se chegar até aí, muitos caminhos foram bloqueados, tivemos que tomar muita água envenenada; muitos fantasmas tivemos que enfrentar. Permanecemos como um rio que more, que não corre e não ecoa encontrar-se com as pedras. Nos tornamos uma fome desesperada pelo novo, enfraquecendo a nossa fecundidade. Enfim, um caminho árido e infértil. Estivemos enclausurados dentro de nós mesmos. Mas não agüentamos mais e damos um basta! É hora de criar *pacientemente* o novo! (57)

In her political writing, Potiguara reflects on the struggles of her people in a way that is accessible yet assertive. She alludes to nature not only in her poems but in her essays as well, showing that a connection with nature is a part of her very existence and that it cannot and should not be separated from her work or her political thought. Potiguara insists in particular that indigenous women have survived centuries of violence, subjugation and racism because creativity is in their nature; women play a crucial role as healers, mothers and warriors and they have particular skill when it comes to healing cultural wounds. Her poem “Terra cunhã⁷⁷” appeals to the wisdom of women, insisting that they use their strength and patience to create the changes that are so badly needed in the world and in post-colonial Brazilian society. “Terra cunhã” is as follows:

Mulher indígena!
Que muito sabes deste mundo
Com a dor ela aprendeu pelos séculos
A ser sábia, paciente, profunda.

⁷⁷ This poem has also been published as “Mulher Macuxi, Mulher Yanomami”.

Imóvel, tu escutas
Os que te fingem aos ouvidos
Fé guerreira, contestas:
“Não agüento mais a mentira!”

Mas longe deles, choras a estupidez,
O MEDO...
(sim, longe deles!)
Sofres incompreensão e maldade
Aos poucos morres à míngua...
Desrespeito, roubo, assassinato.

No dia em que rastejaste
Imploraste tua terra – e JÁ TINHAS!
A teu lado companheiras: miséria e morte
A violência e a angústia dos trópicos...

Nas caras ela viu o abuso
A inveja de ser o que és: cândida,
lúcida, mãe, companheira...
E tu zombastes desses pobres (de) espíritos.

Sabes do rio de lágrimas

Que te aperta o peito aflito
Na bolsa d'água o filho esperas
Futuro, luz, nova era.

Mas luta, raiz forte da terra!
Mesmo que te matem por ora
Porque estás presa ainda
Nas garras do PODER e da história. (74-75)

This poem is so rich in both meaning and metaphor, and it is very consistent with Potiguara's style of combining natural imagery, criticism of historical and present realities for indigenous people, and emphasis on the important role of women in this context. While the poem lists the many grievances that indigenous women have against the society and history into which they have been born (including disrespect, thievery and murder), the poem also allows for a significant amount of space that encourages women to continue fighting against such grievances by using their strength, and by bringing more children into the world who will continue to fight for a better future for their people. "Terra cunhà" balances the darkness of the past with the light of the future, even showing compassion and pity for those who have committed crimes against indigenous people. Yet Potiguara's message is unmistakable here; it is a message encouraging forgiveness but not forgetfulness. She even unleashes a phrase in quotation marks, signaling a voice for those who have traditionally had none in the context of the larger society in which they live.

Visually speaking, "Terra cunhà" is interesting because it has the word for fear in capital letters but it also capitalizes two separate phrases that, when put together, translate into "you now

have the power”. Again, this visual play with words emphasizes the ongoing fight that is currently taking place for indigenous women of Brazil to take their rightful place in society while doing so with patience and wisdom, and with a deep connection to the earth as creators, companions and warriors that mock and pity those who have perpetuated the racism, corruption and psychological damage of previously colonized societies. Potiguara writes that pain can act as a teacher, misery and death can act as companions, and tears can convert into the water that holds the next generation of fearless fighters who will speak out against lies and violence. “Terra cunhà” does not idealize this fight; the poem recognizes the sacrifices made and work that is still left to be done for the women to whom it is dedicated. At the end of the poem, it suggests that indigenous women are still suffering at the hands of a terrible history, yet in doing so they are also being patient, smart and resilient. They have a voice to exclaim against the lies of the past and a voice that will also ask for (and receive) help from the earth when used, and they have light growing inside them as a part of future generations of patient fighters who know how to stay still and listen until the time is right.

Something very significant about the writings of Eliane Potiguara is that she discusses the value of self-love in a society where women are taught to loath and criticize themselves. Whether it be because their skin color or that their bodies do not fit into preconceived notions of beauty or because they are taught to blame themselves for not being able to live a lifestyle of their choosing, Potiguara writes openly about how difficult it is to achieve something that should be a right for any person. She writes:

A partir das histórias, pude compreender que a sociedade impõe às mulheres e pessoas discriminadas racialmente um desamor a elas mesmas, conduzindo-as aos vícios e à baixa autoestima. Há mais de 50 anos tenho trabalhado pelo amor a mim

mesma, para colocar na prática que a re-evolução começa dentro de cada um, para que possamos construir o amor ao próximo ou o amor sem imposições, o chamado amor incondicional. Isso é muito difícil na prática. (90)

This tendency toward self-deprecation is something that women often participate in without even being conscious of it, and the pressure towards this behavior is two-fold for women of color because both race and gender are factors that add to this feeling of self-loathing. Potiguara's confession that she has struggled to achieve unconditional self-love is something that adds depth to her poetry and helps guide her readers of any gender to question their own self image and how it fits into the concept of love. Potiguara uses similar tactics to address the concepts of healing and collective rage; she is not shy about expressing her own experience with rage and she asks her readers to tap into their anger (either collective or individual) and allow it to act as a teacher in order to ensure a happier, more just future. In her work *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1996), Clarissa Pinkola Estés explores the concept of collective rage and how it can actually be useful and valuable as a tool for healing:

Collective rage is well utilized as motivation to seek out or offer support, to conceive of ways to impel groups or individuals into dialogue, or to demand accountability, progress, improvements. These are proper processes in the patterns of women coming to consciousness. These are appropriate to their caring about what is essential and important to them. It is part of the healthy instinctual psyche to have deep reactions to disrespect, threat, injury. Devout reaction is a natural and expected part of learning about the collective worlds of soul and psyche. (368)

For Potiguara, rage is both personal and collective, yet as outlined by Pinkola Estés, this rage may act as a teaching tool for others who also feel it, encouraging them to use their strong

emotions as a force to propel them forward from a bitter past into a better future. The rage and sadness of the poet and her people is palpable in her poem “Brasil” where she repeats the same question “Que faço com a minha cara de índia?” four times before directly asking this same question of Brasil as a whole in the face of a violent history. In this poem, it is as if the poet is looking into a mirror, describing what she sees (her personal experience) and then broadening her view to include a collective demand of identity and validity from Brasil. The word “índia” is important here; she does not use “indígena” or “Potiguara”; she instead uses a term that historically has been used to demean indigenous peoples and has roots in European conquest⁷⁸. This self-identification has become common for many but also avoided by others due to its roots in conquest and racism. The use of the word “índia” in the poem “Brasil” brings us back to the subject of self-love versus self-loathing that Potiguara discusses in her book. The poem is as follows:

Que faço com a minha cara de índia?

E meus cabelos

E minhas rugas

E minha história

E meus segredos?

Que faço com minha cara de índia?

⁷⁸ European explorers originally came to the Americas seeking a route to Asia, therefore, the indigenous people of the Americas erroneously came to be called “Indians” due to the geographical confusion of those who encountered them.

E meus espíritos

E minha força

E meu Tupã

E meus círculos?

Que faço com a minha cara de índia?

E meu sangue

E minha consciência

E minha luta

E nossos filhos?

Brasil, o que faço com a minha cara de índia?

Não sou violência

Ou estupro

Eu sou história

Eu sou cunha

Barriga brasileira

Ventre sagrado

Povo brasileiro.

Ventre que gerou

O povo brasileiro
Hoje está só...
A barriga da mãe fecunda
E os cânticos que outrora cantavam
Hoje são gritos de guerra
Contra o massacre imundo. (34-35)

There is so much in this poem that indicates a mixture of patience and rage, individuality and collectivity, fight for justice and feminine creation. Potiguara's choice of vocabulary and verb tense keeps readers in the present while at the same time looking back at the past as a source of learning through personal and collective experience. The repetition in the poem suggests a persistence that has been an integral part of the political struggle among Native American people. Indigenous leaders have had to repetitively ask the same questions and demand answers in political contexts where the dominant culture prefers to imagine that colonialism is a closed chapter of history that does not require further attention. However, for those recovering from the damages of history, the only way to move on and look to the future is by demanding justice from past harm, and Potiguara does this in her poetry both for herself and for Brazil as a whole.

The first stanzas in the poem refer to "my face" or "my blood", yet there is a shift to collectivity when the poem alludes to "our children" and then addresses Brazil as a people when returning to repeat her questions. The poem then shifts into a focus on motherhood, and how the poetic "eu" is a sacred womb for future generations of Brazilians. Potiguara alludes to the songs sung by those before her, and in the same stanza she celebrates her war cry of the present. Here the female body is steeped in creativity, presented as a fertile ground for change, a vessel of spirits and a carrier of history and struggle. There is a hunger in her words that again relates well

to the theories of Pinkola Estés when she writes about the human need for connections with ancestors and the past:

Underneath it all is the same hunger for numinous experience that humans have had since the beginning of time. But sometimes this hunger is exacerbated, for many people have lost their ancestors. They often do not know the names of those beyond their grandparents. They have lost, in particular, the family stories. Spiritually, this situation causes sorrow... and hunger. So many are trying to recreate something important for soul sake. (206)

Potiguara herself seems to have a significant connection with her ancestral language and heritage, and she is clearly aware of its importance. Yet her poetry is a reminder that the colonial past of the Americas caused many to lose this connection and feel a great sorrow for it. Since the arrival of Europeans, native peoples have been forcibly assimilated and manipulated into letting go of language, spiritual practices, traditional names and cultural norms. Institutions such as slavery and systematic poverty separated families and left an empty space where ancestral connection could not be formed. Potiguara openly mourns this loss while at the same time accepting her participation in the larger dominant culture of Brazil as a way of making her voice heard and trying to give some kind of voice to those who have been silenced in the wake of conquest and colonial rule.

For indigenous women in particular, there is a tendency for non-indigenous writers to glorify a cultural past that is no longer relevant to the present realities of the 21st century. Amy Kaminsky reflects upon how indigenous women have been burdened with the task of representing the concept of “home” in Latin America, often from an idealized, objectifying, and white gaze:

Deeply embedded in Latin American revolutionary ideology is a longing for a Golden Age, a return to the true culture, tied to indigenous roots, a memory constructed of desire and related to a sort of mythic cultural childhood. The mother at the center of this dream is only partly metaphorical. [. . .] The myth of the indigenous mother as the embodiment of racial and cultural heritage, however, masks the more complex relationship between the geopolitical reality of Latin America neocolonialism and a high culture that claims European roots. [. . .] A real identification with indigenous Latin America is possible and encouraged for those women, but their urban background and their access to Western education is an equally valid part of who and what they are. Latin America cannot be the repository of innocence for North American and European women, any more than women can be the reliable home that men can strike out from and return to. (17-18)

The poetry of Natalie Diaz is a refreshing and eye-opening alternative to the idealized vision of the Native American woman that has been perpetuated since the initial point of European contact in the Americas. Diaz embodies so many cultural realities in her being and her writing; she is Mojave-American, born and raised in California where her connection to Mexican culture and Spanish language are significant contributors to her work. Diaz does not evade her indigenous identity, and she uses references to Nahuatl, Mojave, English and Spanish languages in a fusion of culture for her poems. Yet these images are not of pyramids and pow wows, but rather of the incredible difficulties of living as a Native American woman among the dominant white culture in modern day America. While Latin America often has a visible indigenous presence due to the cultural mixture of many native people with Europeans, the United States

does not. During the last century, most surviving Native Americans of the United States were either forcibly assimilated or relocated to reservations where there is very little access to adequate resources. Many people in this situation feel torn; the only way to stay close to family connections, traditions and language has been to choose a life of poverty and sub-standard conditions. Those who leave the reservations often suffer from isolation and depression as a result of feeling displaced from something so essential to them. Returning to the theme of collectivity versus individuality, those who choose reservation life pay a price for maintaining a collective existence, while those who choose to build a life elsewhere for individual reasons often suffer for that decision as well.

Diaz's work is interesting because it is geographically connected with Latin America. While the Southwest region of the United States is technically within U.S. borders, culturally and linguistically it is very much a part of Mexico. Diaz is included in this work precisely because the very existence of her poetry questions and transcends political boundaries set by the dominant white culture. Diaz's poetry cannot squarely fit within political and social boundaries of the reservation, the United States or Mexico. She moves fluidly between all of these places, as do many people living a similar reality. Her poem "The Red Blues" from her 2012 collection *When my Brother was an Aztec* details the experience of menstruation from all of these cultural angles while at the same time paying attention to the female experience in particular, emphasizing the female body as a center of fusion and confusion as she navigates the different cultural aspects of herself:

There is a dawn between my legs,
a rising of mad rouge birds, overflowing
and crazy-mean, bronze-tailed hawks,

a phoenix preening
sharp-hot wings, pretty pecking procession,
feathers flashing like flames
in a *Semana Santa* parade.

There are bulls between my legs,
a *torera*
stabbing her *banderillas*,
snapping her cape, tippy-toes scraping
my mottled thighs, the crowd's throats open,
shining like new scars, *cornadas* glowing
from beneath hands and white handkerchiefs
bright as bandages.

There are car wrecks between my legs,
a mess of maroon Volkswagens,
a rusted bus abandoned in the Grand Canyon,
a gas tanker in flames,
an IHS van full of corned beef hash,
an open can of commodity beets
on this village's one main road, a stoplight
pulsing like a bullet hole, a police car
flickering like a new scab,

an ambulance driven by Custer,
another ambulance
for Custer.

There is a war between my legs,
'ahway nyavay, a wager, a fight, a losing
that cramps my fists, a battle on eroding banks
of muddy creeks, the stench of metal,
purple-gray clotting the air,
in the grass the bodies
dim, cracked pomegranates, stone fruit,
this orchard stains
like a cemetery.

There is a martyr between my legs,
my personal San Sebastián
leaking red arrows and sin, stubbornly sewing
a sacred red ribbon dress, *ahvay chuchqer*,
the carmine threads
pull the Colorado River, *'Aha Haviily*, clay,
and creosotes from the skirt,
each wound a week,
a coral moon, a calendar, a begging

for a master, or a slave, for a god
in magic cochineal pants.

There are broken baskets between my legs,
cracked vases, terra-cotta crumbs,
crippled grandmothers with mahogany skins
whose ruby shoes throb on shelves in closets,
who teach me to vomit
this fuschia madness,
this scarlet smallpox blanket,
this sugar-riddled amputated robe,
these cursive curses scrawling down my calves,
this rotting strawberry field, swollen sunset,
hemoglobin joke with no punch line,
this crimson garbage truck,
this bloody nose, splintered cherry tree, *manzano*,
this *métis* Mary's heart,
guitarra acerezada, red race *mestiza*, this cattle train,
this hand-me-down adobe drum,
this slug in the mouth,
this 'av'unye 'ahwaatm, *via roja dolorosa*,
this dark hut, this mud house, this dirty bed,
this period of exile. (11-13)

This poem can be considered an example of transculturation or one of its more contemporary counterparts in the sense that it makes reference to the fusion of the different cultures that make up the poet's blended heritage. Linguistically, her poem includes examples of three different languages, including Mojave, English and Spanish. She also uses references to the Spanish language and its connection to Catholicism (likely influenced by her geographical closeness with present-day Mexico) as well as to historical events that have shaped the contemporary Native American experience, such as racism, poverty, addiction and genocide. General George Custer⁷⁹ is mentioned twice in this poem, along with an allusion to smallpox riddled blankets⁸⁰ and amputated limbs as a result of diabetes, which is another common illness in reservation life due to the substandard nutrition available to these communities. Diaz includes the word *mestizaje* in her poem, which literally means mixture, particularly in the sense of the mixture of Spanish and Native American blood as a result of the encounter between these cultures in the Americas. She also makes reference in Spanish to San Sebastián, the *manzano* tree, and the phrase *via roja dolorosa*, again using Spanish to express anguish in as many ways as possible.

“The Red Blues” ties this unique experience in with the physical reality of being a woman by addressing the subject of menstruation through the lens of different languages and ethnicities. Unlike many of the poets discussed in previous chapters of this work, Diaz does not particularly celebrate the experience of menstruation. She uses words such as “martyr,” “war,”

⁷⁹ Custer was a well-known figure in United States history for his participation in the so-called “American Indian Wars”. He led several expeditions against the Lakota people and was eventually defeated at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. Custer defended American expansionist efforts connected to extending the railroad and trade systems westward which severely encroached upon tribal territories.

⁸⁰ During westward expansion and the American Indian Wars, Native Americans were intentionally given blankets infected with smallpox as a way of weakening their populations. This was one of the many practices used against indigenous people in an act of genocide that resulted in millions of Native American deaths.

“scab,” and “rotting” when creating imagery related to menstruation. It is also mentioned in the poem, and significant to her work in particular, that the redness of her monthly menstruation is connected to the color of her skin, and how in both cases the presence of red has been a source of frustration and pain. The color red is also interlaced with mention of various articles of clothing, including skirts, dresses, robes, pants, shoes, handkerchiefs and bandages. These articles of clothing create the illusion of a person trying on different identities, such as a bullfighter, Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, a goddess or a corpse. While Diaz does not disparage the fact that she is a woman or that she is Native American, she is forthcoming in the how both of these conditions have been causes of personal struggle, and the different languages and metaphors she uses to express herself allow her to reflect on both the beauty and the horror of herself. Like Potiguara and Morejón, Diaz’s work abounds with images of nature, including dawn, birds, water, grass, fruit and mud. Yet these natural images, similar to Potiguara’s, are interlaced with rage. They are not meant to be pretty images, but rather connections to the earth that help the female poetic voice find words to release the anger that has built up over generations.

Diaz also addresses the issue of Native American poverty in this poem by referring to cans of corned beef hash and commodity beets provided by the U.S. government to the people living on reservations. She also brings poverty to the forefront of the poem by describing things as hand-me-down, broken, dirty. She uses the word “begging” as well as “master” and “slave”. From there she shifts between animal metaphors and toxic, war-like representations, such as rusted and mangled cars, bullet holes and explosions. Her words also turn to corpses, cemeteries, garbage and vomit, sparing no reader the graphic details of what it means to suffer the double marginalization of being both female and Native American. Theorists such as bell hooks have criticized feminist theory because it often excludes poor women of color. bell hooks

suggests that traditional feminists who are often white and economically stable “reflect the dominant tendency in Western patriarchal minds to mystify woman’s reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of woman’s fate” (144). Diaz helps de-mystify the feminine experience by giving a voice to what it means to be a poor woman and a woman of color who is forced to exist and participate in the daily rituals of white culture. This double marginalization is also something significant for women of African as well as indigenous origin in the Americas who supposedly live in racial democracies yet who somehow continue to be underrepresented in most areas of cultural consumption and political discourse. Heloísa Toller Gomes writes about the concept of orality and hybrid space as being a necessary characteristic of Afro-Brazilian writing, yet her reflections on the concept of hybrid space and the crossing of poetic languages can be easily applied to the many forms of indigenous artistic expression in the Americas as well. Toller Gomes writes:

This trait inscribes knowledge, values, concepts, world views and styles, in its multifaceted expression, as it makes use of the meta-languages of cultural performance. [. . .] This process manifests the cross-fertilization of “natural languages” with the “metalanguages” of the poetic, fictional and theatrical universe. Hybridity is its realm – and hybridity is, perhaps, its most permanent, enduring characteristic, always flowing in the movements of time and space and in negotiations, adaptations, responses and stimuli of the successive generations.

(159)

Toller Gomes’s concept of hybridity as a necessary and natural phenomenon validates the way in which Diaz so fluidly combines not only language and collective memory but also her own version of the feminine experience. While a white-centered form of feminism was perhaps one

of the starting points for female artistic expression in the twentieth century, artists like Diaz, Potiguara and Morejón have laid important groundwork since then, fleshing out the female experience through art and verse, thereby transforming it into the present as a broader, more inclusive literary landscape. The concept of that which is considered to be traditional is beginning to transform; many poets are attempting to revise and renovate concepts of tradition from the past by making them relevant to the culture of the present, which often means recognition of a glorified African or Native American past without suggesting that such a past is the only lens through which these women artists can or should be seen⁸¹.

Returning to the technique of Nancy Morejón, her understated yet consistent approach to identifying as both Black and Cuban and her connection between the natural landscape of Cuba and its place in revolutionary ideals is a very new, unique and significant contribution to the hybrid space that Cuba has become. Although some theorists would suggest that Cuba is an example of failed transculturation due to the complete decimation of the island's indigenous people, it could be argued that in other ways, Cuba has been successful in combining some of its other great artistic resources through the blending of African, Hispanic, Anglo and Asian language and culture. The language that arises, particularly in its oral state, is something that has made Eliane Potiguara's poetry possible and accessible to a wider range of readers, and Natalie Diaz also captures voices brought together by a turbulent past and places them in a present reality as a way to search for the right words to describe her own personal femininity. What these women are doing, essentially, is composing a set of compelling verses that place importance on the past of women of color while refusing to allow that past to define them. Instead, these women poets have worked to redefine themselves and ensure that a great many

⁸¹ For more on the concept of the transformation of the traditional in Afro-Brazilian writing, see White.

layers be added to the one-dimensional characters once depicted by the dominant white (and often male) culture about Black and indigenous women.

The poetry in this chapter bears witness to both the positive changes that have come about for women of color at the turn of the century as well as to the work that still needs to be done. Full recognition of hybrid space, cultural and linguistic *mestizaje* and female subjectivity in the voices of Black and Native American women writers is something that still needs wider recognition and more extensive study. Many theoretic trends have developed since Ortiz began his work discussing transculturation; since then, the concept has widened and transformed into something much more complex than cultural mixture. Uruguayan Ángel Rama revisited transculturation in the 1980s, while Argentine Nestor García Canclini developed the theory of cultural hybridity in the context of postcolonial life, globalization and popular culture. According to García Canclini's theory, the pace of globalization becomes more frenetic with each passing year and cultural mixture can no longer be seen as something separated from economics and popular cultural production. However, many theorists worry that the theory of cultural hybridity is still being applied to Latin America of the 1960s when the "Boom" generation was at large. Mabel Moraña writes:

La hibridez facilita, de esta manera, una seudointegración de lo latinoamericano a un aparato teórico creado para otras realidades histórico-culturales, proveyendo la ilusión de un rescate de la especificidad tercermundista que no supera, en muchos casos, los lugares comunes de la crítica sesentista. (177)

It seems to be true that on a global scale, Latin America is mistakenly considered to be an imagined space of cultural hybridity with limited access to modernization. The poets in this chapter and the very fact that their works are available to readers on a global scale proves that

Latin America has moved beyond such a perceived obstacle and that writers, and in this case, women writers of color, have been able to wrestle agency into their own hands and words, allowing for a new and subjective voice to be included in the landscape of the twenty first century.

Furthermore, subaltern⁸² studies groups have suggested the idea of reading in reverse, in other words, taking a piece of work and reading it outside of the euro-centric gaze and the colonial experience in order to cease the positioning of European males as the protagonists of history. In many ways, this is a valuable tool, and it partially applies to the works of Diaz, Morejón and Potiguara. Yet, all of these women writers would not have written the poems that now exist without the backdrop of colonialism and the cultural domination perpetuated by Europe and the United States. These women were all born, raised, and educated in a system that perpetuated the myth of the European protagonist, and therefore their personal and collective imagery and metaphors cannot entirely escape it, since the poems themselves are part of the tool kit used to facilitate a shift away from euro-centric attitudes. Can and will these writers exist and thrive outside of the mythical landscape created by the dominant culture? Absolutely. However, the struggles that they have had to endure in order to do so require recognition and should be written about and used as educational and emotional support in order to ensure that positive change will continue to occur in the future. There are too few of these writers available to the average reader; as the accessibility of global technology and the hyper-connectivity of the earth's population grows, it is possible that more women of color will have access to create and publish poetry and other forms of literature that will reach a greater population, thereby encouraging an

⁸² See Morris and Spivak. See also Ileana Rodríguez.

even larger space which can foster greater tolerance, understanding and enjoyment of culturally diverse poetry.

Epilogue:

The poets considered in this work offer a wide range of experience and perspective as women writers and as subjects of their own poetic expression. These women have both built upon foundations previously laid in modernist and postmodernist eras, yet they have also established their own foundations for future writers and literary theorists alike. While it is not uncommon these poets to explore themes such as death, the female body, eroticism and motherhood, the cultural and historical context surrounding these themes is unique and valuable for setting new trends both in literature and in societal behavior. In the last five decades, the world has changed tremendously. Of course, change is an inevitable part of the human experience, yet the rapid pace at which change has occurred at the dawn of the twenty first century is nothing short of mind-blowing. Our world has never felt smaller, yet at the same time the abundance of connection and information has never been so immense.

Women are finding more and more opportunities to step away from invisibility, silence and shame; the result is powerful and splendid. Women who have suffered the traumas of war and political violence have found venues to relate with others and spread awareness not only through publishing books but also through music, journalism, social media and plastic arts. Mothers are finding comfort in one another through sharing experiences, remembering their own mothers, and learning to enjoy the multifaceted identity that motherhood offers (the mothers in these poems are also lovers, thinkers, writers and soldiers). Motherhood is also breaking out of its previously singular definition by becoming a broader, more inclusive experience. Women poets do not have to necessarily endure pregnancy and labor in order to enjoy the fruits of creation. Producing literature in itself is becoming a more widely understood and accepted form

of motherhood, and it does not necessarily have to be based around heterosexual norms or boundaries of religion or race. Women of color are also increasingly finding innovative ways to tell their own stories and invoke their own communities in ways that open up dialogue and celebrate cultural difference while at the same time enhancing understanding and praising that which connects us as human beings. All of this is being done more rapidly than ever yet there is still so much work to be done.

Despite the progress made by Latina women poets, there are still many hurdles that will require continued work, skill and patience as the twenty first century progresses. The world, while connected through increased ease of travel and availability of the internet and social media, is not (nor will it ever be) a utopia. Machismo still exists, even in countries that perceive themselves to be modern and progressive. Practices such as female circumcision, arranged marriages and sexual slavery are abundant and will not stop without participation and cooperation of the global community. This mission is very connected to the idea of “glocal” which is one of the key ideas in transmodern theory. The combination of global and local partnership to end violent practices and promote independence, education and self-worth for women is a powerful tool that has not been fully utilized by much of the world’s population. Latin American women poets have become active participants in this mission through the creation and dissemination of their works. On the local level, these women have been able to write in a language that can be understood by a majority of the other women in their communities (although there is still a considerable lack of published indigenous voices in Latin American literature) and they can rely on metaphor and symbolism that is culturally relevant to their audience. When looking at the global side of things, this audience has the potential to increase manifold through forms of communication available on the internet. Those who live in

limiting circumstances such as poverty and exile are still often more aware of world issues than was permitted in past generations, and previously ethno-centered societies are accepting and even welcoming influence and contributions from outside cultures. Again, this does not suggest in any way that women's issues have been resolved. Poets have traditionally made crucial contributions to political change through their writings and publications, and while their increased availability has "glocally" promoted positive change, they and those of future generations will have to continue tackling the issues discussed in these chapters along with others in the arts, politics, religion and media.

The female image in the media continues to be problematic, and the poems discussed in this work are excellent alternatives to some of the distorted concepts of femininity that can be found in the media of dominant cultures. The poems in this work do not cater to the idea that the female experience must be categorized. None of the poets pretend to ignore that categories such as race, gender and nationality exist; on the other hand, none of them subscribe to a specific set of categories in their various portrayals of the female body. Istarú revels in giving birth while Diaz condemns her menstrual cycle; Morejón exposes some of the painful language associated with blackness and Potiguara examines her face as a reflection of the inner turmoil that is connected to the history of her people. Ardalani bridges significant cultural gaps between two worlds, and so do each of the other poets in a way that uniquely belongs to Latin America. This region of the world has been blending and reshaping cultures and languages for more than five centuries. Much of this *mestizaje* has been the result of violent conflict and injustice, yet there are also aspects of the resulting culture that allow for a deep sense of belonging. Morejón's poetry for example, is so perceptibly Cuban, and even though it recognizes the horrors of African slavery, indigenous genocide, Spanish colonialism and aggression from the United States, it is

also pays tribute to the unique, distinctive and positive cultural outcomes that are a result of such a tumultuous history.

Julia Alvarez is another poet writing in the twenty first century who speaks both to the Latina experience and to the condition of living between two worlds and two identities. Alvarez, while born in the United States, lived her childhood years in the Dominican Republic and identifies closely with her Dominican heritage. Her book *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2011) embraces this very issue in a variety of ways, citing nature, childhood memories, and a constant coexistence of Spanish and English languages. Like each of the poets explored in the previous chapters, Alvarez relies on nature imagery (particularly trees and roots) to help her articulate her experience as a woman, and more particularly, as a Latina woman passing in and out of the dominant Anglo-American culture of the United States. While *The Woman I Kept to Myself* is not a journey into darkness or the macabre, it certainly addresses valid, present-day issues that Latinas face in poems like “Spic” and “Cleaning Ladies” as well as delving into the complexities of living a life in two languages from an autobiographical perspective.

Other poets like Argentine Liria Evangelista have also taken concepts explored in these chapters and continued to push them towards important and innovative evolution. Her book of poems *Una perra* (2011) skillfully explores the female experience in a circular motion, confronting the different images of women in the context of seduction, communication, sexuality and silence. Evangelista seeks to explore the origins of desire and of speech; these two basic human functions that have been wrested from women for centuries come to light in ways that are both eye opening and haunting in her work. Rage, sorrow, and silence are integral themes in many of the works emerging from the female poetic voice in Latin America, and these elements are especially raw and aggressively portrayed in *Una perra*.

Mariela Dreyfus is another poet of this century who takes perceptibly negative experiences and finds aesthetic value in them. Dreyfus, originally from Peru, contemplates the rituals of death and the horrors that accompany such rituals by turning them into something familiar. Her work *Morir es un arte* (2010) particularly focuses on the death of the mother figure; the poet finds a way to bring beauty into a subject that is deeply unsettling for many people. Dreyfus seeks to look nothingness in the face, naming that which is nameless while at the same time celebrating the importance of the mother and the joys of infancy. *Morir es un arte* is both an admission of fear of the unknown as well as a tribute to the life cycle, particularly in connection with the mother and daughter figures. Her work could easily fit with analysis of Pizarnik and Ardalani in that it addresses the concept of orphanhood, maternal death and internal turmoil in the face of fear and nothingness.

These twenty first century women poets could have easily been analyzed in depth along side the other poets in this work. These women and many others continue to tirelessly address the female experience, particularly in the context of Latin America as well as within the Latino communities of the United States. To include all of the contributors to this mission would require countless pages and volumes of work; the women chosen for this work are a sampling of the rich and growing community of poets that write poems in the name of taking back the female body and female identity. While there is no indication of when or if the world will be rid of violence, ignorance and oppression of women in the future, it makes sense to continue the pursuit of positive change and progress, even if it feels slow and incremental. While the concept of progress has been widely debated and challenged, the writers discussed in this work have all participated in a progressive effort to make the female experience more fully understood.

The triumph of understanding over fear and ignorance is key to achieving whatever

positive progress is possible for human beings. Poetry, and in this case, Latin American poetry by women writers, justifies optimism in the face of huge obstacles presented by antiquated norms of male-dominated societies. These poets have encouraged the understanding that women of all backgrounds have complex abilities and desires, and that these assets can be positive contributions to the “glocal” culture. Each of these poets has sought to be the subject of her own writing, and each has worked to have her unique experience affirmed as a woman in Latin America’s cultural context. These poems ask readers to reexamine themselves and their own perspectives, and each poem, even the grittiest and most grotesque, insists that there is beauty in hidden and unlikely places. The female body, so often a landscape of misunderstanding and misguided fascination, has created a common ground for dialogue, celebration, awareness and admiration in the words and voices of these fine and fierce women writers. Those who will follow them in Latin America’s rich literary heritage have a large task at hand, yet they will be building upon a literary foundation that is solid, extensive, and supported by readers, writers and literary critics both locally and globally.

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