Feminist Philosophy in Central America: Global Reflections and Contributions of Gioconda Belli and Rigoberta Menchú

Filosofía feminista en Centroamérica: Reflexiones y contribuciones globales de Gioconda Belli y Rigoberta Menchú

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Resumen: Este ensayo propone nuevas rutas de lectura a nivel contemporáneo y global de la literatura testimonial de la activista maya k'iche' y nobel de la paz Rigoberta Menchú y la poeta, novelista y escritora de memorias revolucionarias, Gioconda Belli. Inspirándose en el marxismo decolonial, la ética cristiana y los valores indígenas, estas autoras abogan por nociones diferentes de trabajo y de ecología, así como por la persistencia de la cultura indígena. Nosotros ponemos en diálogo sus ideas con las de pensadoras feministas como Germaine Greer, Silvia Federici y Elizabeth Grosz, así como con las de las intelectuales indígenas contemporáneas guatemaltecas Gladys Tzul Tzul y Lorena Cabnal. Las contribuciones filosóficas de Belli y Menchú apuntan hacia nuevas estrategias de decolonización del siglo XXI, enfatizando el papel del cuerpo, la comunidad para luchar contra la desposesión, el trabajo reproductivo y la solidaridad para la liberación de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: pensamiento feminista, Gioconda Belli, Rigoberta Menchú, materialismo del cuerpo, comunidad, trabajo reproductivo, ecología

Abstract: This essay proposes new routes for reading contemporaneously and globally the testimonial literature by the Guatemalan Maya K'iche' activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú, and the Nicaraguan poet, novelist, and revolutionary memoirist, Gioconda Belli. Drawing on decolonizing Marxist, Christian ethics, and Indigenous values, they advocate for different conceptions of labor, ecology, and the permanence of Indigenous culture. We put their ideas in dialogue with feminist philosophers, such as Germaine Greer, Silvia Federici, and Elizabeth Grosz, as well as with contemporary Guatemalan Indigenous intellectuals Gladys Tzul Tzul and Lorena Cabnal. Belli and Menchú's philosophical contributions point toward new strategies of twenty-first-century decolonization, emphasizing the role of embodiment, community to fight dispossession, reproductive labor, and solidarity for women's liberation.

Keywords: Feminist Thought, Gioconda Belli, Rigoberta Menchú, Embodiment, Community, Reproductive Labor, Ecology

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Introduction

As we reflect on the 25 years of *Istmo*, its legacy, and on regional perspectives of literature and cultural studies, this article emphasizes the contributions to feminist thought made by two pivotal Central American women. Both took part in the struggles against political and gender violence in the 1970s and 1980s: The Nicaraguan poet, novelist, and revolutionary memoirist, Gioconda Belli (1948), and the Guatemalan Maya K'iche' activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú (1959). Drawing on decolonizing Marxist, Christian ethics, and Indigenous values, they advocated for different conceptions of labor, ecology, and the lessons of Indigenous culture. Moving forward, Central American feminist thought presents new proposals for social transformation that promise liberation within an awareness of human immersion in a living Earth. This essay explores the literature of these Central American authors and brings it into dialogue with comparable feminist philosophers, such as Germaine Greer, Silvia Federici, and Elizabeth Grosz. We also draw on contemporary Guatemalan Indigenous authors, Gladys Tzul Tzul and Lorena Cabnal. From the perspective of global feminism, Central American figures are distinguished by their ability to combine socialist egalitarian values with expressions of sexual difference, as well as their profound experience of mortal danger and mourning, and their attention to humans' immersion in a greater ecology.

There are significant studies of Central American feminism, which locate the origins of the movement in the guerrilla and war experiences of the twentieth century (see Randall; Rodríguez; Barbas-Rhoden; Kampwirth; Padilla). Notwithstanding their importance, we expand sociological and historical approaches to propose other possible routes, putting their ideas into dialogue with feminist philosophers. Moreover, the question of the revolutionary Marxist tradition's continuing effect on feminism in this region has not really been asked. In this essay, we review two of the characteristic figures and ideas of Central American feminist thought and argue that these constitute an original and compelling extension of the promise of socialist philosophy. In our reading, Belli and Menchú's philosophical contributions emphasize the role of embodiment, community to fight dispossession, reproductive labor, and solidarity for women's liberation. Belli's connection with second-wave feminism exposes how to think about the materiality and difference of the female body positively: An individual and collective liberation force, a place for sexual desire, erotic exploration and creativity, and a maternal and botanical body with regenerative possibilities. Menchú's ideas dialogue with contemporary Indigenous communitarian feminists and their notions of collective community service that is the basis of Indigenous systems of governance in Guatemala. In the community, Mayan daily practices and participation in life and death (through mourning) are central. Likewise, Menchú's memoirs depict the importance of the body and its interdependence with the land and the non-human world, and how they can be affected by violence. These are core ideas of Mayan feminist activists in the present, as we will discuss further in this essay.

Gioconda Belli's Feminism, Between Socialism and Sexual Difference

Gioconda Belli's poems, along with her memoir *The Country Under My Skin* (published in 2001 under the title *El país bajo mi piel. Memorias de amor y de Guerra)*, make visible feminist approaches to women's experience and embodiment, particularly social repression and violence exerted toward their bodies. She is committed to the liberation of sexed bodies and views this as compatible with (or even essential to) the project of national liberation. In her writings, there is an insistence on the value and creativity of the female body, for example, through maternity and feminine sexual enjoyment. She re-expresses these experiences in order to transform gender roles and to overcome the alienation imposed by an exploitative society. An active participant in the Nicaraguan Revolution, Belli communicates the transformation of women's social role that takes place when they take up arms in an uprising against a dictatorial government. Belli demonstrates the mass awareness of the possibility of martyrdom and the necessity to mourn fallen comrades as a site of memory in the wake of the revolutionary victory.

Belli describes her development of socialist and feminist consciousness in great detail in her memoir, *The Country Under My Skin*. Her novel, *The Inhabited Woman*, published in Spanish in 1988 (*La mujer habitada*), covers a similar process of revolutionary self-understanding in fictionalized form. The novel centers on a character named Lavinia who experiences casual sexism as well as political oppression by the dictatorship, and is eventually recruited by her lover, Felipe, into the national liberation movement (see *The Inhabited* 23, 25, 69). Moreover, her poems express her own distinct perspective on national liberation and women's liberation; the historical and biographical material of the memoir provides the intellectual context for the insights and theses advanced by the poems. *The Country Under My Skin* describes Belli's upbringing, education, and radicalization. Born in Nicaragua to a bourgeois family of Italian immigrants, Belli is relatively privileged and did not need to engage in revolutionary activity to defend herself or to achieve basic subsistence; indeed, she took on risks that she could have easily avoided. In her early adulthood, she married young, had a child, and was educated in advertising in the United States (see *The Country* 15–20).

However, she became involved in a bohemian milieu that estranged her from her husband. This milieu was largely artistic and cultural; she describes their affinity with the hippie culture of North America as well as the novels of the Latin American Boom and other avant-garde tendencies (see 28–33). This cultural and literary awareness led to her familiarity with the second-wave feminism of France, the United States, and Australia; she recalls reading the groundbreaking work of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer (see *The Country* 24).[1] Consulting these sources shows that Greer's work had the

[1] Moving from first-wave feminism struggle for voting rights and participation in electoral politics, second-wave feminism addressed a wide range of topics such as workplace equality, social and

greatest impact on Belli. Greer argues that "female sexuality has been masked and deformed by most observers," because "the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of other sexual beings, men," and that female "sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity" (5). Belli takes on Greer's challenge to rethink the experience of the female body.

Greer and the Feminism of Embodiment and Sexual Difference

A contemporary Australian feminist, Elizabeth Grosz, has distinguished three forms of feminist analysis with regard to the body. She states that some feminists (such as Beauvoir) argue from a perspective of egalitarianism, where the human mind is presented as prior to sexual differentiation. From this point of view, women's physical differences (their capacity for maternity, for example) are basically a hindrance to social equality (see Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 15–16). Some other feminists maintain social constructivism; this outlook views history and culture as fundamental, giving significance to physical differences that have no essential value (see *Volatile Bodies* 16–17). A third group, sexual-difference feminists, argues for the recognition and re-evaluation of the female body; women are understood as distinct in their experiences from men, and sexual-difference feminists advocate for the creative expression of these experiences (see *Volatile Bodies* 17–19). From all three of these embodiment approaches, Grosz categorizes Germaine Greer as an egalitarian feminist, like Beauvoir. In our reading, Greer gives much more significance to the sexed body than Beauvoir and hence moves in the direction of a feminism of sexual difference. In this sense, her famous book, *The Female Eunuch*, presents an early version of sexual-difference feminism (see Grosz, *Space* 50).

Greer argues that women's sexual potential has been repressed and alienated from them. Like many other second-wave feminists, Greer believes that women have been reduced to objects by patriarchal society. However, Greer's response to this is highly sex-positive; she argues that women should not refuse erotic experience, but rather freely assert their distinct sexual desires and achieve recognition and enjoyment on their own terms. Belli's poems and literary work similarly express a deep and radical appreciation of sexual pleasure and heterosexual intimacy. She is critical of masculine attempts to belittle her or to pre-empt her own desires, but she accomplishes a high degree of self-realization and appreciation for her own body. This emphasis on sexuality produced controversy, as more conservative elements of Nicaragua's society regarded her work as "vaginal poetry" or "pornography" (Belli, *The Country* 38). However, her emphasis on passion and sexuality also attracted attention and "glazed eyes" from men (38).

Belli's poem, "And God Made Me Woman," expresses a benediction for the sexed body. Nicaragua is traditionally a very religious culture, and in her

reproductive rights, sexual expression, and challenging traditional gender roles.

memoir, Belli writes about the crucial influence of her mother's Catholicism. However, Belli's mother's understanding of religious femininity was not puritanical; she taught her daughter that the erotic capacity of her body was part of God's creation and His love (see Belli, *The Country* 17–18). Following from this perspective, Belli reinterprets Biblical notions of creation in an affirmative way, arguing that women's anatomical difference is affirmative and creative rather than lacking. The poem affirms:

> God carved into me a workshop for human beings.
> Delicately wove my nerves
> and carefully counted
> and balanced my hormones;
> composed my blood
> and poured it into me […]
> (Belli, *From Eve's Rib* 3)

This is in definite contradiction with feminisms of equality or social constructivism. Belli views her maternal potential as an essential part of her and acknowledges hormonal and anatomical determinants of her experience of the self and the world.[2] These passages reject Simone de Beauvoir's famous thesis in *The Second Sex* (published in 1949), that "one is not born, but becomes, a woman" (301). For Belli, the experience of womanhood has a natural foundation as well as a historical or psychological aspect. She does not see natural embodiment as the enemy of women's liberation, but an ally of it. In subsequent lines, Belli writes:

> And so ideas were born,
> dreams,
> instincts,
> everything that was gently created
> with hammering whispers
> and the drilling motions of love,
> the thousand and one things that make me woman every day […]
> (Belli, From Eve's Rib 3)

In these lines, Belli affirms an emergent and free sense of self. While she understands her experience embedded in a sexed body and the natural history that has produced it, she also reflects on her origin in conscious erotic intentionality; she is interested in the material and carnal nature of her own conception, but also in the role of romantic love in guiding her self-realization and choice of projects in the world. In these lines, she explores a reconciliation with Beauvoir's existentialist perspective; while Belli's understanding of the body is irreducible, she believes that the natural and good production of her own body does

[2] Belli also dedicated poems to themes of women's life cycles on poems such as "Menstruation," "Maternity" and "Birth." For more information, see *From Eve's Rib* (7–11). This emphasis on feminine embodiment and literary expression bears comparison with famous French feminist authors also prominent in the 1970s, such as Hélène Cixous with her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Luce Irigaray and her *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

not impel conformity to pre-given traditional roles and behaviors but opens up the possibility of freedom.

For Belli, this awareness of the female body is not purely hedonistic but has ecological and ethical importance. Her poems describe her body as an expression of nature and of God. In her poem "Metamorphosis," she writes about an experience of her body as botanical: "My eyes have become/pistils in motion/ and purple flowers/flow from my mouth" (*From Eve's Rib* 15). The poem transforms the experience of the body to reveal it as indistinguishable from the ecological world, as fully embedded in the jungle. Indeed, she views the awareness of her body and her ability to share it intimately with others as imbricated with her patriotic understanding of her own nation, in its environmental and cultural dimensions. Regina N. Emmer has identified a common tendency in Nicaraguan thought shared by iconic figures of visual and literary culture, such as Armando Morales and Omar Cabezas, strongly expressed in Belli, toward a pantheistic understanding of nature and the individual's unity with it. Belli's poems, in accordance with the ideas of other Nicaraguans of the revolutionary period, open up the apparent interior selfhood of the individual; self-expression becomes indissociable from the community and the concrete ecology of the homeland.[3] Belli's work mingles themes of eroticism, patriotism, ecology, and mourning. For her, all of these apparently disparate experiences reveal the openness of individual experience; the unity of the mind and the body, and the inseparability of profound personal experiences from larger social and ecological entities ("Nicaragua" understood in its entirety). Belli draws together a traditional Catholic understanding of erotic femininity with revolutionary feminism. This involves a rethinking of religious views that was consonant with the times; Nicaraguan revolutionaries of the 1970s were often affected by liberation theology, a left-wing interpretation of Catholic belief (see Becker 122–125). Liberation theology argues that Christian belief provides an "option for the poor," a commitment to the perspective and advancement of the marginalized and the downtrodden. In Latin America, some versions of liberation theology drew from this spiritual commitment in order to argue that the betterment of the poor would necessarily require a struggle against political dictatorship, US imperialism, and economic exploitation.[4] Belli's writings express a feminist variation of this revolutionary Christianity; she adheres to the conviction that helping the poor is a moral imperative and that a dictatorship with US backing, such as in Nicaragua will require military struggle in order to enact this imperative into a concrete reality; and that, further, women are also an oppressed group who require spiritual and political advancement. This is a general and global viewpoint for her, but she aims to pursue it with an embedded view of local specificity, and this is what

[3] Emmer primarily discusses Morales and Cabezas; this idea is also expressed throughout the work of Ernesto Cardenal; see for example *Cosmic Canticle*, 38–52.

[4] For the Nicaraguan context, the records of Cardenal's discussions with radicalizing peasants in the artistic community of Solentiname are particularly pivotal and representive; see *The Gospel in Solentiname*.

leads her to advocate and illustrate a feminist approach to Nicaraguan revolutionary nationalism.

Many of her poems have a patriotic significance; she expresses a love for the nation of Nicaragua in its natural, concrete, and ecological sediment as well as its cultural, social, and political experience. She identifies her mind and body with the famous mountains and lakes of her country, as well as expressing her deep love and concern for the travails of her people (see *From Eve's Rib* 13, 43). Her approach to embodiment reveals profound bonds to others, extending individual self-interest or self-consciousness. In her writings, this feminine understanding communicates with social and political projects of national emancipation. For this reason, her outlook eventually led to a commitment to decolonization and the socialist revolutionary struggle. In her memoir, Belli writes that she feels two senses of self: one inclined toward the "classic feminine code" of care and nurturance, and the other that yearns for "self-reliance, a public life, mobility, lovers." She believes that she has accomplished this: "Without renouncing my femininity, I think I have also managed to live like a man" (Belli, *The Country* x). These statements could be seen as contradictory, taking into consideration Belli's embrace of women's material differences. These declarations show the binarism and tensions that exist in her own society and how she navigates them. Most importantly, they suggest that Belli's position is feminine, but also, in certain contexts, masculine as habitually understood. What is the masculine aspect? The more masculine aspect of Belli's life and work appears in her political engagement and her willingness to take part in the exigencies of war.

National Liberation and Socialist Feminism

Beauvoir and Greer generally express an individualist notion of liberation (see Beauvoir xxix; Greer 290–297).[5] However, in circumstances of national and class exploitation, the liberation of an individual woman takes on the necessity of collective identification and solidarity with broader revolutionary movements. Historically, Nicaragua has been subordinated to its powerful and rich northern neighbor, the United States. During the Somoza dynasty (1934/37–1979), it functioned as a client state of the US, politically repressive and economically dependent (see Walker and Wade 13–40; La Botz 74–108). Nicaraguan patriots struggled to overthrow the dictatorship of the Somoza family; they came to believe that the method of such a national liberation was best described by Vladimir Lenin and implemented in peripheral nations, particularly Cuba. Women's liberation is an essential principle of the socialist revolution, although the historical record of achievement in this respect is decidedly mixed. In her memoirs, Belli recalls reading classic European Marxist philosophers, along

[5] Greer draws from socialist thought to a degree but generally subscribes to anarchism. Beauvoir's early work expresses pessimism about broad social change, but her later work is more sympathetic to socialist revolution and collective revolution for women, and somewhat more similar to Belli in this regard. See Rowlandson 49–57.

with authors who emphasize decolonization, such as Frantz Fanon and Eduardo Galeano (see Belli, *The Country* 34). Belli eventually joined the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the main revolutionary organization in Nicaragua. The FSLN was founded by Carlos Fonseca, who subscribed to the guerrilla tradition of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, which had accomplished the Cuban revolution of 1959. Fonseca wished to achieve the same goal in Nicaragua by the same method (see Zimmermann 50–87).

In his efforts to replicate the Cuban revolution in Nicaraguan conditions, Fonseca took care to include women and to improve their conditions. His comrades recall that he was particularly concerned about preventing the possibility that women might be abandoned by their partners; he almost required his soldiers to marry their sweethearts. Mathilde Zimmermann describes how his vision of emancipating Nicaragua had a strong gendered dimension; his idea of socialist Nicaragua was a country where women did not need to labor to support their families, neglected by society (his mother raised him alone) (see 35, 97–98). He made an effort to include women in the political and social struggles of the FSLN, including military training and missions. However, the ideology and goals of the FSLN remained guided by men; his concern for women was somewhat paternalistic and did not include a great deal of activity or autonomous suggestions regarding the needs and potential of women in Nicaragua.

Belli became increasingly active in the FSLN in the late 1970s, following Fonseca's death. At this time, the organization was divided into three factions: The *Terceristas* (or Third Tendency), who were urban insurrectionists; the Protracted Popular War Tendency, who tried to operate from military bases in the countryside, following Vietnamese strategies; and the Proletarian tendency, who tried to develop political consciousness in the broad working class (see La Botz 151–158). Belli was initially a member of the *Terceristas*, who advocated a broad coalition of all elements of society opposed to Somoza, social-democratic reforms, and multiparty democracy. This seemingly restrained strategy was politically effective for recruitment for the Third Tendency, although the contrast between its moderate political perspective and the high attrition rates of its actions led to frustration for some of its members, including Belli. As a result of the close-knit social bonds of the revolutionary movement, she was in contact with representatives of the other tendencies as well.[6] In 1978, she left the *Terceristas* because she felt one of their leaders, Humberto Ortega, was insufficiently cautious about the lives of his cadres (see Belli, *The Country* 184). For the last two years prior to the insurrection, she worked on public relations for the Protracted Popular War Tendency, and even undertook weapons training in Cuba (see *The Country* 3, 197). The Sandinistas had a very high attrition rate. Belli had been recruited by Camilo Ortega, Humberto's brother.[7] Camilo and

[6] Belli describes her contacts with the Proletarian and Prolonged People's War tendencies in *The Country Under My Skin;* see 139, 180.

[7] She was recruited as a contact by Camilo Ortega in 1970. For more information, see Belli, *The Country* 34.

many of Belli's other comrades were killed in skirmishes and operations against the dictatorship (see *The Country* 181).

Belli risked her own life and also experienced the deaths of many of the people close to her. For this reason, many of her writings and poems concern the theme of mourning. For example, she wrote an elegiac poem, "To Comandante Marcos," another of the martyred cadres of the FSLN, who was also her lover (see *The Country* 126). She begins with erotic reminiscence:

> I cried furiously seeing you asleep,
> knowing that you were a migrating bird
> flying swiftly through life.
> […]
> when you grabbed danger by the mane
> and I knew you surrounded by ravenous dogs,
> I began to think you were indestructible.

This intimacy is displaced by the finality of death and the mediation of journalism:

> But there it was in the newspaper –
> your photograph looking at me, not seeing me,
> and the absolute feeling of your absence
> rushing within me inconsolably,
> leaving the border of tears far behind,
> pouring into my veins,
> crashing against every corner of my body
> (Belli, From Eve's Rib 27)

Here, Belli combines the themes of national martyrdom with erotic intimacy and the pain of unforgettable loss. Belli's poems become the testimony of her fallen comrades, creating memory and aesthetic force so that the sacrifices of Nicaraguan revolutionaries can maintain purpose and value. However, in her writings following the success of the uprising of 1979, Belli's mourning is balanced with her exaltation at the moment of victory. In "Patria Libre: July 19, 1979," Belli writes:

> we did it, finally,
> we really did.
> So many years believing this against wind and tide,
> believing this day was possible,
> even after the deaths of Ricardo, Pedro, and Carlos
> and so many others they ripped from our side,
> eyes they gouged out,
> without ever blinding us to this day,
> bursting now in our hands
> (From Eve's Rib 31)

From 1979 until the end of the revolutionary period in 1989, Belli served in the Nicaraguan government. First as a media agent; subsequently (from 1979–82), as assistant to her lover, Modesto, which is the nom de guerre of Henry

Ruíz (see Belli, *The Country* 256–257, 264–265). In 1982, she began working at the Media Department at Sandinista headquarters, transferring to the Electoral Commission in 1984 (see *The Country* 293, 313). She felt that the revolutionary state needed to be defended from reaction. However, she became increasingly disillusioned with the Sandinista leadership, which became divorced from the needs of the population as a whole. She writes of the ideals of Sandinismo: "We wanted a new kind of revolution that would be original and open, the product of a tropical, irreverent left-wing movement." However, "with time, the Revolution's stance grew more and more rigid." She argues that authoritarian tendencies could have been countered if it had not been for a costly and bloody war throughout the decade, with Contra forces armed and trained by the United States and its proxies (*The Country* 276).

The Ortega brothers centralized power in their own hands (see *The Country* 311). The state excluded the participation of women and limited the activities of autonomous women's groups (see Kampwirth 19–39). Ordinary Nicaraguans lost their sons to compulsory military conscription, and the government even began to impose austerity on social programs, eroding the initial victories of the revolution (literacy, education, and health care programs) (see Zimmermann 223–224). Opponents to the left of the FSLN confronted them: "You are making us pay the price of a Marxist-Leninist revolution for one that doesn't even qualify as a social democracy" (Belli, *The Country* 324). Before drifting away from the FSLN, Belli married an American journalist, Charlie Castaldi, and worked on the electoral campaign a second time, in 1990 (see *The Country* 353). However, in this campaign, Belli's ideas were ignored. While she proposed a campaign about class consciousness and attention to problems people were facing in their daily lives, the government chose a more jingoistic approach centered on the phrase: "Everything will get better!" The results for Daniel Ortega and the FSLN were disastrous (see Randall 178–179). In 1990, the FSLN was voted out of power. In the ensuing acrimony, Belli and many of the other leading cadres officially left the organization.[8] The party returned to power in 2006, as a more conventional patrimonial state with little remnant of its initial ideas regarding national liberation and women's liberation (see La Botz 317–354). Ortega's current government, which he shares with his first lady Rosario Murillo, has been considered an authoritarian government that has inflicted violence against civilians, particularly during the civil protests of April 2018. The government imprisoned and expelled oppositional figures. In 2023, Belli was one of their victims; she was stripped of her Nicaraguan citizenship, as were hundreds of others (see Peralta).

[8] These included Sergio Ramírez, Ernesto Cardenal, and Dora María Téllez, who founded the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) in 1995. The MRS attempted to democratize the Nicaraguan revolutionary movement and to emulate European social democratic parties;see Henighan 8, 430–431.

Indigenist Currents in the Nicaraguan Revolution

At its origins, the FSLN's notion of national liberation included the affirmation of the Indigenous heritage of the nation and the autonomous cultural traditions of its Indigenous inhabitants. Their prototypical inspiration, Augusto C. Sandino, relied on support from Miskitos and Sumos. In the 1960s, the Sandinistas maintained a base in the Indigenous areas of Masaya (Monimbó) and Léon (Subtiava), as well as in Matagalpa (see Becker 116). In 1974, Jaime Wheelock (the leader of the FSLN's Proletarian tendency) wrote a historical study, *Indigenous Roots of the Anti-Colonial Struggle in Nicaragua* (*Raíces indígenas de la lucha anticolonialista en Nicaragua*). Wheelock and other Sandinistas saw their struggle as not only a question of class exploitation and US imperialism, but also a continuation of a desire for autonomy from colonialism originally led by the Indigenous. After the Sandinista victory in 1979, the Nicaraguan Autonomy Commission declared the country multiethnic (see Becker 118).

In her novel *The Inhabited Woman*, Belli addresses these problems of ethnic difference. Drawing from Wheelock's research, the novel juxtaposes an autobiographical narrative about a middle-class woman, Lavinia, who is drawn into the Nicaraguan revolution alongside a historical fiction about a 17th century Nicaraguan Indigenous woman, Itzá, engaged in resistance against the Spanish conquistadors (see Belli, *The Country* 139; *The Inhabited* 8, 9). Further, within the narrative about contemporary Nicaragua, Belli illustrates class and ethnic differences among Nicaraguan women. Belli demonstrates how Central American women from diverse backgrounds chose to take part in the revolutionary struggle and shared the desire to liberate women's distinct embodied potential from the alienation of exploitative, imperialist power relations. However, Indigenous women of Central America faced adverse circumstances that exceeded those of their European-descendant counterparts.

Despite the states' official anti-racist ideology, the white and mestizo population of the Pacific coast took priority, while the Indigenous and Black people of the Caribbean remained marginalized and exploited. These areas are historically Anglophone; as a result, the population distrusted the Hispanophone government, even if the revolutionary state theoretically affirmed ethnic autonomy (see Becker 117). As Ortega and Murillo centralized their power, the Indigenist tendency of the FSLN was marginalized or expelled. However, the Indigenist tendency of the FSLN presented an intriguing challenge to the traditional notion of a socialist revolution, modelled on the Russian, Cuban, and Chinese examples. In the orthodox conception, revolution is a modernizing force that overcomes cultural superstitions and technological backwardness. In the mid-20th century, revolutionaries usually believed that developing productive forces was the key to national liberation and working-class power; this required industrialization. However, by advocating for the traditional life world of Indigenous people, Belli and others in the FSLN suggested that a different model of socialism might be possible (or even necessary). Ernesto Cardenal, another dissident

Sandinista, expressed skepticism toward a Eurocentric model of development and instead posited that the communal traditions of the Indigenous should operate as the embryo of a new society.[9]

This viewpoint calls into question models of state formation and economic growth, in their orthodox Marxist understanding as well as the dominant Western liberal tradition. Belli and Cardenal suggest that Indigenous communities should not "modernize" in order to assimilate to European standards.[10] In *The Inhabited Woman*, the main point-of-view character, Lavinia, visits an Indigenous neighborhood where she is invited by Lucrecia, a woman of Indigenous ancestry. Initially, Lavinia is struck by the maladies of poverty, underdevelopment, and despair marring the community (see 173). She experiences an intense feeling of "white privilege," encountering the inadequacy of revolutionary rhetoric of popular unity and her own relatively luxurious circumstances (178). However, subsequently, she describes a further awareness of the resilience of the Indigenous community and their effective self-activity, beyond her guidance. She cautions against presenting herself (or the relatively more Europeanized aspects of Nicaraguan society) as an aspirational model, arguing that "nothing good could come" of such a patronizing outlook (180). Throughout the narrative, Belli intersperses recollections of the initial resistance of the first Nicaraguans to Spanish rule, suggesting that this primary conflict continues to impel Nicaragua's history and search for autonomy (see 31). While Wheelock and other Sandinistas advocated the integration of Indigenous history and society with Nicaraguan socialism, Belli's novel goes substantially further in arguing that such communities cannot be simply amalgamated with an apparently superior economic and social program derived from European revolutions (see La Botz 220–223). Similarly, Ernesto Cardenal consistently advocates a deep study and experience of Indigenous forms of knowledge throughout the Americas in order to rethink the economic, social, and political relationship between human community and ecological possibility (see *Cosmic Canticle* 472–475). Belli and Cardenal consider that these societies maintain a more embedded understanding of nature and a greater awareness of the interdependence of the ecosystem; the intertwining of human and non-human life. These affirmations could be seen as a romanticization of Indigenous cultures. Therefore, it is important to expand them by engaging with the particularities, histories, cosmologies, and writings of Indigenous women in the Isthmus. Particularly in the case of Maya communities in Guatemala, feminist and Indigenist socialist ideas are intertwined with ecological frameworks of knowledge. For the K'iche' communities during the revolutionary struggle, the fiercest and most compelling known figure to advocate for Indigenous Central Americans is Rigoberta Menchú.

[9] The basic thesis that Indigenous culture would be crucial for Latin American socialism was first posited, famously, by José Carlos Mariátegui, regarding Incan communities in Peru. Cardenal applies the same thesis to the Central American Indigenous groups (which are primarily Nahua and Maya). For more information, see Becker 118.

[10] This argument is presented throughout Belli's novel *The Inhabited Woman* , which juxtaposes a narrative about Indigenous resilience in the face of Spanish colonialism and discusses the ongoing presence and value of Indigenous Nicaraguans;see 7–9, 180, 203.

Rigoberta Menchú: Mourning and the Communal Desire to Reproduce Life in tandem with the Natural World

I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, published in 1983 and authored by Elizabeth Burgos (*Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*), the memoir of the Guatemalan Maya K'iche' activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, has become a classic in many languages, providing a vivid understanding of the lives of poor Indigenous women and their struggles against state violence.[11] Death and mourning are integral to Menchú's life and writing, since most of her family was killed in the genocidal war that lasted thirty-six years (1960–1996), killing 250,000 civilians.[12] In literature, she has been amply studied through the lens of *testimonio*: a testimonial narrative that has a political role, revealing the experience of voiceless people.

John Beverley describes *testimonio* as "a new form of narrative literature in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular democratic subject in its period of ascendancy" (x). In testimony, the narrator speaks in the name of a community about a situation of urgency; the narrator is usually outside formal education and so requires the support of a lettered interlocutor to transcribe the oral account. Menchú's interlocutor is a Venezuelan anthropologist, Elizabeth Burgos.[13] Menchú's testimony was involved in an enormous controversy in the US academy in the 1990s, since anthropologist David Stoll questioned its veracity. Our reading of Menchú avoids this controversy because the great majority of her narrative has been confirmed, and we understand the cases of ambiguity in terms of poetic license.[14] We view Menchú as a distinct and original thinker in the tradition of Indigenous feminism; in some respects, she provides a window into the collective experience of her people, but she also presents innovative contributions to global socialist feminism through her own autonomous thought and reflection.

Menchú's testimony articulates embodied feminine experiences from an Indigenous point of view; these experiences are sometimes a product of her distinct culture and its epistemology, but are also marked by the violence of a brutal dictatorship, meted out according to ethnic and class hatred. When we talk about Indigenous women's activism, including Mayan activism, there are new studies that bring discussions on transnational Indigenous frameworks for knowledge and history with concepts such as body-territory, relationality,

[11] The book *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* was initially published in Spanish in 1983 and won the Cuban cultural prize Premio Casa de las Américas that year. We refer to the English version: Elizabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Women in Guatemala*.

[12] Detailed information on statistics and the magnitude of war violence and ethnocide against indigenous Guatemalans appear in two major initiatives that contributed to document them: The Catholic Church Interdiocesan Proyect to Recover Historical Memory (REMHI) and the UN's Truth Commission: Commission for Historical Clarification.

[13] For more information on traditional characteristics of *testimonio,* see Beverley 29–44.

[14] For a detailed account of Stoll's debate, see Arias.

community, kinships, and conceptual ideas such as Abya Yala (see Blackwell; Velásquez Nimatuj; Ruckstuhl et. al.). Our aim is then to expand the reading of Menchú's canonical text by considering some of these contemporary feminist discussions, including the role of reproductive labor, community collective service, and multiple dimensions of the body-territory associated with war and ecology. In her memoirs, Menchú exposes her participation in life and death (particularly mourning) through her political organization and contribution to communal work. Her social activity connects her intrinsically to reproductive labor, the natural world, and sharing the individual and communal pain of death. From daily routines, passing on Mayan knowledge, to defending their lands and searching for justice against the state, there is collective resilience and thought produced by Indigenous women. Like Belli, Menchú was aligned with a revolutionary guerrilla organization, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, EGP); this was part of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (UNRG).[15] However, Menchú's origins in Mayan culture give her a more profound root in the pre-Hispanic culture of Central America. We can see Menchú's philosophy in light of what the Mayan K'iche sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul calls "*voluntad de vida*" ("desire to live"). Tzul Tzul describes this as "the social energy that Indigenous women produce that allows them to preserve their memory and defend the land where the dead rest and water is born." She specifies that for the Ixil community, a component of broader Mayan society to which both Menchú and Tzul Tzul belong, "*voluntad de vida* as that which keeps them struggling and living despite all the problems they face" (Tzul Tzul, "Rebuilding" 404).[16]

Work in Community and Reproductive Labor

In the introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala,* Elizabeth Burgos reflects on the process of transcribing Menchú's testimony during a week she spent in Paris. Burgos describes a scene in which Menchú makes tortillas for her. "The first thing Rigoberta did when she got up in the morning was make dough and cook *tortillas* for breakfast; it was a reflex that was thousands of years old," says Burgos (Burgos-Debray and Menchú xvii). In lines that might be read as patronizing, Burgos affirms that the bond and trust between herself as a *mestiza* (ladina) woman and Menchú came from enjoying and sharing the same food.[17] Certainly, there is always camaraderie with food, but Menchú's cooking means sharing her testimony while creating

[15] The UNRG became a party after the end of the civil war.

[16] Tzul Tzul's concept is an homage to Ixil women, a Mayan community who suffered the genocide but had the resilience to send Ríos Montt to trial. For more information, see Tzul Tzul, "Rebuilding".

[17] This scene could also be analyzed through the theoretical ideas of Maya Kaqchiquel anthropologist Aura Estela Cumes Simón who talks about the colonial dynamics of servitude that exist in the relationship between Indigenous women and ladina women in the domestic space; these dynamics include patronizing attitudes held by ladina women toward their domestic assistants. For more information, see Cumes.

community through serving others. This resonates with the notion of communal work, known as *k'axk'ol*, which is rooted in Indigenous Mayan societies, in which domestic and political lives are not fully separated, but one supports the other, and the identity and plenitude of the individual emerge from the multiple through communal connections (see Tzul Tzul, "Sistemas de gobierno" 385–386). In many chapters of Menchú's memoirs, she emphasizes her and her family's being in the world through her community. In her account, Mayan children since their birth not only belong to their mothers but to their community. Her parents participated in cultivating the land and defending it from expropriation, and Menchú herself became very involved as a catechist and political leader. Regarding gender dynamics in communal life, there is a strong role in paternal kinship, but the same *k'axk'ol* opens possibilities for more fluid and equal relationships between Mayan men and women.[18] Rigoberta's mother had a traditional notion of Guatemalan Indigenous womanhood, in some respects, passing her female ancestors' traditions to her family. However, when it came to organizing in the collective struggle, she had a different, more militant and innovative position. *K'axk'ol* allowed Menchú and her mother to eliminate paternalistic dynamics when defending against State violence. Menchú explains the lessons taught by her mother:

> […] she said: "My child, we [women] must organise. It's not something I demand of you because I'm your mother. It's your duty to put into practice what you know. The days of paternalism, of saying 'poor girl, she doesn't know anything,' are over." My mother made no distinction between the men's struggle and the women's struggle. (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 219)

This has an affinity with the traditional revolutionary notion of national liberation to which all Central American socialists of the twentieth century subscribed. However, Menchú's political practice is not only a commitment to revolutionary egalitarianism, because it also draws on autonomous Indigenous cultural values of community and self-sufficiency. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala,* as a decolonial feminist text, is also an account of the multiple forms of women's participation in significant aspects of communal life as a means of fighting the racist political structure in Guatemala. Reproductive labor is crucial to this resistance. Reproductive labor raises an economic question: how can we understand its type of productivity, given that it is outside commodity production controlled by the State or the market? As Carol A. Smith and Sarah A. Radcliffe mention, Indigenous Guatemalans have been affected by the disruption of the State to control their lands and ways of living, but they have also found different approaches to capitalism, besides being integrated into colonial-modern capitalism; they exercise Indigenous practices and knowledges

[18] In her categorization of the system of communal life, Tzul Tzul mentions the role of three institutions: *k'axk'ol* (communal/service work), kinship plots (*tramas de parentesco*) and the Assembly (la *Asamblea*). The kinship plots refer to patrilineal families that have leadership positions in the communal life defending the land. For example, this is the role that Menchú's father had in his village. See Tzul Tzul, "Sistema de gobierno" 385, 386, 393–394.

to rework situations of disadvantage.[19] Indigenous women's reproductive labor is one of these practices in communal life in Guatemala.

Regarding the dynamics behind communal life, Gladys Tzul Tzul indicates that a contemporary Indigenous communal life is not a life-world that is essentialist and closed because it does not want to be contaminated by external forces, but neither is it an archaic structure from the past. It is a malleable form that women and men regulate, govern, and defend from present-day challenges (see Tzul Tzul, "Sistemas de gobierno" 386–387). "Women are not individuals floating freely through time and space, self-made without anyone's help. Rather, we are, and we exist in communal weavings," says Tzul Tzul ("Rebuilding communal life" 406). Using this weaving metaphor, Mayan feminist philosophy also connects with other threads of knowledge, particularly the Italian autonomist-feminist tradition. For example, Silvia Federici emphasizes the continuing brutality of the treatment of women and racialized populations. Tzul Tzul writes about the connection of Indigenous reproductive labors to Federici's ideas. Italian autonomist-feminist thought places domestic collective life at the center of an analysis in which the concrete experiences of daily life are politically charged. This viewpoint makes the places and ways that Indigenous women fight visible (see Tzul Tzul "Mujeres indígenas" 98–99). This perspective represents a modification of the earlier orthodox socialist tradition, because women do not find liberation after the victory of the anti-capitalist revolution; rather, the concrete practices of today, sustaining community through unwaged practice, have their own profound value. This is partly because of the dimension of care and relative de-priority of self-interest, but also because of the deep affinity for women's traditional labor with the reproductive logic of the non-human, ecological world.

Menchú, the Body and the Natural World

Menchú's testimony shows how the racist and political state machine dominates female bodies (labor exploitation, sexual violence, and murder), but also how these bodies have positive resignifications, creating meaningful connections with the Earth. The Earth is the center of Indigenous communal life, and women's fertility is connected with the life of their land and community. Territorial possession, its harvest, and giving birth are intertwined, since they contribute to multiplying life for Menchú's community. Girls learn the lesson to organize and reproduce life on the land and their bodies from an early age. The testimony tells:

> […] girls are valued because they are part of the earth, which gives us maize, beans, plants and everything we live on. The earth is like a mother which multiplies life. So the girl child will multiply the life of our generation and of our ancestors whom we must respect. (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 14)

[19] For more information, see Smith; Radcliffe.

Although many decades apart, Menchú's reflections on the female body as a territory, a place of abundance and exploitation, is an idea that has taken a strong hold today in the concept of body-territory in the work of Guatemalan Maya-xinca activist Lorena Cabnal and shared with other Indigenous communitarian feminists across the region.[20] While the war that Menchú describes in her testimony has ended, nevertheless, there are new mutations of analogous violence that contemporary Maya women face, including feminicide, governmental corruption, narcotraffic, and human trafficking (see Cabnal, "Lorena Cabnal: sanar"). For Cabnal's context, one such mutation is the sexual and gender violence and extractivist mining in her community in Santa María de Xalapán. Because of sexual violence against Indigenous girls and women and territorial violence, Cabnal proposes the idea of defending and reappropriating the body-territory not as separate entities but as a unity. They exist in reciprocity or relationality with one another, and it is important to heal, recuperate, and promote life in the expropriated bodies of women and the land (see Cabnal, "Acercamiento" 23).[21] Returning to Menchú's views, the land is a symbolic site that creates solidarity among Guatemalan women, surpassing race and class. In chapter XXI: "Women and Political Commitment. Rigoberta Renounces Marriage and Motherhood," she reflects on the multiple categories of women in Guatemala: "working class," "peasant," "poor ladino women," "bourgeois women" and "middle-class" and how all of them, especially Indigenous women, have an intimate and dialogical relationship with the Earth (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 220). This is a plurality that Cabnal talks about in which, in the "web of life," there are many different types of women's bodies. She calls them "plural women bodies," and the solidarity and healing among these bodies-territories with the lands-territories are political acts (see "Lorena Cabnal: sanar"). As for Belli, national liberation is not primarily a product of European-descendant people, but neither is it purely an Indigenous project. Indigenous values have the potential to reshape the nation as a whole, in a manner that can include all the people of the country whatever their ethnicity.

It is obvious that Menchús's position is more subaltern, much less privileged than Belli's. For example, Menchú's comments on the lack of sex education in Guatemala, her desire for a partner (at the end of the book), but her sacrifice of this possibility, for her people. This is very different from the more pleasurable experience of the body described by Belli. However, Menchú's body has different intense experiences, drawing from her Indigenous cultural experi-

[20] Communitarian feminism refers to a plurality of Indigenous feminist approaches in the region. One of the most prominent activist and thinkers is Aymaran Julieta Paredes, with the movement Women Creating Community in Bolivia, and Lorena Cabnal in Guatemala, with the creation of Indigenous Women Association of Santa María in the mountain of Xalapán in Guatemala.

[21] The concept of relationality or reciprocity is a philosophical concept of "interdependence and respect among all living things"; the term "brings together the multiple strands of materiality, kinship, corporeality, affect, land/body connection, and multidimensional connectivity coming primarily from Indigenous feminists" (Risling Baldy and Yazzie 2). For more information, see Risling Baldy and Yazzie. For a study on the role of relationality and communitarian feminism in Central and South American poetry written by women, see Argüello and Postigo.

ence of deep affinity with nature. While Belli aims to capture these experiences through poetic imagination, Menchú has a rich cultural vocabulary to recognize identity with nature. These experiences refer not only to the Mayan female stoicism and resilience expressed by Tzul Tzul's concept "desire to live," and Cabnal's ideas of "body-territory", but also the dualism of human/animal body through nahualism. For the Maya, people are born with a nahual, a protective animal spirit that accompanies them over the course of their lives and bonds with their personality. There is an entire chapter on the notion of the nahual in Menchú's testimonies. As Carolyn Fornoff points out, nahual, as a person's constitutive trait and a foundational element of K'iche' identity, is part of a broader worldview that positions the coexistence of humans and animals with a shared ecology.[22] Menchú's accounts of the nahual dialogue with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's description of Amerindian Indigenous worldviews and praxis. Contrary to Western philosophical traditions that emphasize individual souls (or minds) considered as superior to the body and independent from nature, indigenous communities emphasize the multiplicity of bodies, and assert that humans share one soul with different species in a socio-spiritual continuum.[23] In Menchú's testimonies, the animals from her community are also victims of the same violence and suffer from the effects of the Mayan genocide, which gives an expansion of the phenomenon as an ecocide war. She recalls: "They killed our animals. They killed many of our dogs. To us, killing an animal is like killing a person. We care for all the things of the natural world very much, and killing our dogs wounded us very deeply" (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 106).

Mourning and the Communal Work of Death

Menchú's testimonies capture the Mayan approach to death as a process that requires individual and communal preparation. The person who is going to die knows his or her coffin beforehand, transmits knowledge to the most beloved person, and after death, the community participates in the death ceremony and takes care of all expenses (see Burgos-Debray and Menchú 201–202). This idea of the community participating in death is one of the activities under the concept of *k'axk'ol* (communal/service work) mentioned by Tzul Tzul. She describes it as "the communal work for containing pain," and it refers "to all the labor force that is mobilized to organize mourning, funerals, paperwork to rescue bodies in the morgues, to organize the repatriation of migrants who die in the United States" (Tzul Tzul, "Sistemas de gobierno" 390).[24] The concept of death for the Mayans, from an accepted process shared collectively, radically changed when it was confronted by the systematic killings (even to the point of genocide) during the war. It is also the reason why Menchú and other members of her community joined the fight against the State's violence. She explains:

[22] For more information on the definition of nahual, see Fornoff.

[23] For more information, see Viveiros de Castro.

[24] This is our translation, T.A and A.R.

"killing someone: death lived by others…is something we feel very deeply, we feel it in our own flesh…For us, killing is something monstrous. And that's why we feel so angered by all the repression. Even more than that: our dedication to the struggle is a reaction against it, against all the suffering we endure" (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 202–203).

Tzul Tzul describes Mayan women (particularly Ixil) as the frontlines in the difficult work of death, by organizing burials, looking for their deaths, and searching for justice against the war violence done by the State (see Tzul Tzul, "Rebuilding Communal Life" 405). Ixil women organizing themselves to talk about their deaths and testifying against the State is what led former President Efrain Ríos Montt to trial in 2013. Ríos Montt was found guilty of genocide by Judge Yassmín Barrio, but unfortunately, the verdict was thrown out on a technicality because of corruption and impunity (see Grant). Nevertheless, sending to trial to a genocidal president positioned Mayan women as important subjects to rebuild their wounded communities. In Menchú's case, although she mentions in her testimonies that her father was a bigger influence on her political activism than her mother, she acknowledges the strength of her mother in dealing with the pain of death in her family, particularly her siblings. Menchú says: "My father was very tender and always protected me, but it was my mother who coped with the big problems in our family" (Burgos-Debray and Menchú 219).

Conclusion

Belli and Menchú are gifted, extraordinary writers and political thinkers. However, they are not entirely exceptional figures, emerging isolated from their milieu, but rooted in the historical and social experiences of the Central Americans of the period of guerrilla warfare (particularly women). Moreover, they do not only record the experiences of the (largely defeated) national-liberation struggle of the late twentieth century. Rather, they also point forward toward new strategies of twenty-first-century decolonization, defending the land from despoilment and the dispossession of its people by extractivist projects organized by states and multinational corporations. For example, in 2016, Berta Cáceres sacrificed her life in the struggle to protect the Lenca women, men, and the ecology of Honduras. Like Belli and Menchú, Cáceres was inspired by women's traditional familial labor, by Indigenous traditions of care and embeddedness in nature, and by a spirit of courageous defiance of the State. We believe that new feminist and political movements will draw inspiration from the concepts and values elaborated by the distinct practices of Central American socialist feminists that we study. Along these lines, Belli reminds us of the potentiality and creativity of the female body in its intimate, social, and ecological forms, as well as an engagement with Indigenous currents for mestiza and European-descendant women, understanding their cultural limitations, but also expanding their sense of community and solidarity on a wide variety of different fronts. Menchú's experiences and thoughts about communal life and labor, mourning, less anthropocentric approaches to nature, and the possibilities for the female

body-territory, are ideas rethought by contemporary Indigenous intellectuals like Gladys Tzul Tzul and Lorena Cabnal. Both generations of Maya women expose the value of the community and how organization and daily practices, including reproductive labor, made visible as practical and intellectual creative acts, can produce larger tangible changes.

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